

Kidnapping Anna Preview #2

The Kidnapping Anna Trilogy, Volume 1

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To Lindley

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Kidnapping

The crime of unlawfully seizing and carrying away a person by force or Fraud, or seizing and detaining a person against his or her will with an intent to carry that person away at a later time.

In most states, an asportation of a few feet may constitute the separate offense of kidnapping...

West's Encyclopedia of American Law, edition 2.

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Prologue

May 31, 2005

The man woke up for the last time.

A few seconds earlier, he thought he saw home. Trees along the sidewalk. The sun hot enough to make his scalp itch as it cooked the top of his head. He sauntered down the block to the muffled chirp of unidentified birds. Were his earplugs still in place? The bright orange foam was always the first thing he removed when he was done with target practice. He tried to move his arm to check, but it they ignored his request.

His skin felt clammy. His fingers ached. What was that smell?

He walked down the block toward his home as he always did. He had parked his car, his old, deep green Toyota Camry, in the driveway and went for a walk.

He went for a walk. Why?

He saw himself walking, an observer of his life. His tie was loose, his gait sloppy. His thoughts seemed clear, but clear in the way someone felt after a shock, or a sudden deceleration due to a collision, with all their sensory input spilling out, unnoticed, like water being poured into a too-full glass. His eyes felt heavy, the lid muscles relaxed, that gentle smothered feeling.

Was he going to work, or returning? Did he pick up the groceries? If he didn't, he was going to hear it this time.

Sleep. He couldn't wait to get home and take a nap.

A fire suddenly burned in his brain, scorching from the back of his neck, over the top of his head, and down to his eyes. His nerves exploded in a silent scream that only the recently aware could feel, and he could do nothing to stop it.

WAKE UP! YOU'RE IN TROUBLE! WAKE UP!

The sweet smell of ether greeted him. He shook his head and realized that his arms were bound to the arms of the chair he was sitting in. He tried moving his legs. They too were bound. He shook his body with the energy that came from the realization that the darkness surrounding him was from a hood that enveloped his head.

The chair was bolted to the floor.

Adrenaline shot through him, clearing his head, but his vision did not get any clearer. It was a very dark hood. Dark, musty, and sweaty.

What was the last thing he remembered? His thoughts were cloudy. His breath was hot under the heavy cloth.

"Hello?" He swung his head left and right but couldn't discern anything. He heard rustling to his right. "I don't know who you are, but I sure hope you got the right guy."

He yanked his head to the left again when he felt the metal end of a tube push against his right temple.

"You hide very well," a voice that had smoked too many cigarettes responded. His interrogator. "But guys like you always make mistakes. Yes, we've got the right guy." The interrogator took a few steps toward his left. Deliberate. On concrete. "Tell me about Halon."

Oh, God. "Can you give me a hint?" The force of the interrogator's fist hitting his face was excruciating and snapped his head back in the un-moving chair. The dark transformed into stars. His nose felt broken and his brain crackled in response to the exploding pain.

"Halon," Smoky Voice said.

The voice was to his right. No, his left. Sweat slowly crawled down his face. Or was that blood?

“Everyone knows where I am. Agents are going to storm this place in a few minutes...” Another blow hammered his left temple. Stars. Electricity.

“I considered water boarding, but why waste water when duct tape and good old-fashioned persuasion are available?”

Sarcasm. *This guy knows he's got time on his side.* The rustling of Smoky's clothes told him that the man was walking back and forth.

He blinked over and over again in the dark hood. *This is bad. This is bad. This is bad.* He breathed through his mouth. There was too much pain through his nose. “What do you want to know?” Again on the left temple. It was the shoulder rest of a rifle. He smelled gun oil.

“Halon.”

He heard someone move on the opposite side of his interrogator. Two people he would have to get past. His training didn't have much to say when you were in this much trouble.

“How many are you?”

“In here or around the world?” His interrogator turned and took a few steps away from him. He could hear the smile. “Five heavily armed men in the room. The rest don't matter.”

“You sound American.”

“I am.”

“Why are you telling me?”

“You know why.”

He spit in the hood. “Why should I tell you anything?” He turned his head toward Smoky Voice.

“Your family. We promise not to touch them. Even if you don't cooperate.” The rifle butt slammed into the right side of his face and he felt bone cracking. “But you will.” More movement. “Halon.”

“You're a liar. You're all going to jail. You are an embarrassment...” The sound of a gun going off startled him for a split second before his knee exploded and he screamed. The interrogator grabbed the man's hair through the hood and lifted his head, along with his awareness.

“You have a lot of places I can shoot that won’t kill you and only two that will.” His head flopped back down when the interrogator let go. “This isn’t meant to be a long conversation.” The barrel of the gun pressed against his chest at his heart. “That’s one.”

“Doesn’t matter anymore.” He was shivering as he spoke through his teeth. The pain ran through him as if he were a giant exposed nerve ending.

Another shot. He screamed again. His other knee. Shaking. Screaming. He could barely think. The world. Very focused. This room. Pain. Liquid flowing down his legs. Something hit his face...once? Twice? *OH, OH, OH. STOP. OH, FUCK.* Words spilled out of his mouth. Fast. Slow. In no particular order. About Halon. *We don’t know who you are, but we’re getting close.* He didn’t care. His world was only an inch outside the outline of his body. His shoulders sagged. His blinking slowed, along with his capacity to comprehend. *I guess this is when I die.*

The hood was yanked off his head. His eyes closed for a moment in the glare of the bright lights of the concrete-walled room. There were two men in dirty clothes standing to his left and right. He looked down at the shattered remnants of his knees and swung his eyes up to look at the man who must have been interrogating him. On the table behind him was the rifle used to strike his face. In the interrogator’s hand was a Glock with a 12-round magazine protruding from the grip. He placed the barrel of the gun against his head.

“This is the second.”

In that instant, he heard the gun go off and then nothing else.

Part 1 - Carpenter Poole

1: Conspiracy Theory

May 31, 2005

Seventeen-year-old Anna Wodehouse, a junior in high school for just another few weeks, sat at her kitchen table in an immaculate kitchen, in an immaculate house, in a perfectly mediocre neighborhood in Brooklyn. She put her pencil down, sighed, and leaned back in her chair. The cushion sagged a little as she pushed against it, stretching her back and neck. The smell of disinfectant told her that her father must have had a bout of neat while she was out. Her math homework was done and now she was five chapters ahead of Mrs. Moran. She mentally congratulated herself, closed the book, and opened history. There was no way for her to get ahead in history. She was usually three to five chapters ahead of the class, but Mr. Dougherty had his own list of assignments and there was no way for her to do them ahead of time since she didn't know what they were. Pre-calc and physics were a snap; the exercises were right in the book.

History. Reading and waiting and taking notes. History was so boring! There were so many other interesting things to do and the sooner she got her schoolwork done, the sooner she could go do them.

Her neck felt hot, but the rest of her was fine. Her orange t-shirt did a good job of absorbing her sweat, and her jeans felt so comfortable she almost lived in them. Her Converse sneakers felt hot, but she would get rid of them later. She pushed a lock of curly black hair behind her ear

and tugged at the neckline of her t-shirt with her left. The air-conditioner kept the house at a decent temperature, though she was pretty sure she could program the thermostat to be a little more understanding of her preference for cold weather.

Read, read, take notes. Read, read, take notes.

Where was Dad? Her aggravation level rose with her inability to cool down. She had a question about the mobile phone app she was working on and she needed to talk it out. Her dad was annoying, but at least he would listen to her. And she needed to ask him about the class trip. Anna hated class trips, but this one was to the Smithsonian and even though he already told her it was out of the question, she knew she might be able to get him to relent.

It was the Smithsonian! Glamorous Glynnis! Skylab! Maybe they would even see the Pentagon from the highway.

He never let her do anything. School trips, sleepovers, movies with some of the kids from school (well, she didn't like them anyway), but even school-sponsored trips to the movies were off-limits. At least he took her to the planetarium every few months. Ever since they moved to New York, he was a little more lenient. The other places they lived were black and white by comparison.

Maybe she could find a meetup.com group of high schoolers her age who were into computers and science the way she was. She found a blog for the Secret Science Club in Brooklyn, but you had to be at least twenty-one to attend. Four more years! She was counting down the days. Maybe, just maybe, she might give a talk there one day.

In the meantime, there had to be a way for her to sneak in.

The phone rang. The antique on the wall. She answered it just to stop the tinny sound from piercing her eardrum. "You are in so much trouble, Outhouse."

God! Not Jennifer again!

She hated being called Outhouse, but she hated fighting over it more. "What do you want, Banana?" She stopped a sigh before it escaped. Jen-

nifer's Reign of Terror against Anna seemed neverending and getting worse.

"You are in so much trouble."

Heard that part.

"You forgot to feed the animals."

"Oh, go to..." A crash startled her out of her disdain. The front door smashed open and a blur of armed blue figures stormed into the house.

"Police! Don't move!"

Anna put her hands up and dropped the phone, her eyes wide, as two helmeted figures in full tactical gear ran over to her. Each roughly grabbed an arm and dragged her out of the house. *I'm going to kill Jennifer!* The words POLICE and SWAT were in large white letters on their chests and backs. A dark blue blur of other figures went through the hallway, backs against the walls, turning into the doorways. They called out someone's name, but she couldn't make it out. Where was Dad? She wanted to call out to him, but everything was happening so fast. *Daddy!*

The two officers pulled her through the narrow doorframe of her row house into the bright May afternoon sunlight. The air was still a little chilly. Her feet barely touched the ground as the two officers swung her around the various cars being used as barriers to the two police vans that were at ninety-degree angles to each other.

The neighborhood outside her drab, green vinyl-sided house was a cacophony of squad cars, SWAT vans, ambulances, and black SUVs. The lights and sounds overwhelmed her and she closed her eyes and put her hands on her face as the two officers stopped behind an ambulance. There were people everywhere. Spoke into radios. Took pictures. The neighborhood was out in full force. What did she do? How much trouble was she in?

"Are you alright?" One of the helmets bent down to meet her at eye level.

She leaned against the ambulance and slid down onto the cold polished chrome step. His words were just sounds, phonemes entering her ear, but not translated into anything she could comprehend.

A man in a suit came running over.

“What did I do?” she asked. Her hands trembled, her eyes scanned all around looking for something to latch onto, something to stabilize her. She looked down. The charcoal gray ground. Cars covered in grime. Exhaust fumes from the van’s diesel engines.

“What?” the man in the suit asked.

“This is a mistake. One of the kids from school...” Her head was heavy. The sounds around her muffled. Her eyes darted back and forth. She was in trouble this time. What was she going to tell her father? She would never go on the trip now!

The man in the suit had a file in his hand and had to yell above all the noise. “Who else is in the house with you? Anyone? Do you know this man?” He held out a piece of paper.

Was that a helicopter overhead? *Omigod, those are news choppers.* “What’s going on here?” Anna asked.

“What’s your name?” The wind picked up. The man looked at her.

What did he want?

“What is your name?” he asked again.

“Anna!” She was yelling at the top of her lungs. Her throat was dry. “Anna Wodehouse.”

“Do you live at 1836 76th Street in Brooklyn?”

“You just finished breaking into my house.” *Is this guy kidding?*

“Please, answer the question.”

“Yes, I do.” Her hair fluttered onto her face.

“Do you know this man?” He clutched the folder at the bend to stop the papers from flying away.

She looked at the photo he held in front of her. Why wasn’t he using a tablet? “That’s my father.” Anna wrapped her arms around her chest. Her eyes were starting to tear.

“What’s his name?”

“Marshall...”

“What?”

“Marshall Wodehouse.” Was she betraying him? Was this the moment he was so afraid of? That she used to tease him incessantly about? Conspiracies? Unknown men around every corner? Delusions of grandeur?

The man looked away and waved at someone. “His real name is Arnold Dashman.”

Anna gaped at him. There had to be a way out of here. This couldn’t be happening!

“Anna,” the man put his hand out as if to hold her left arm, but he held it just out of reach, “your father, this man, is wanted for kidnapping.”

She wiped a half-formed tear. The noise was making it hard to think. “I...I have to get back to my homework.” A sob escaped her lips.

“I’m sorry they had to go in there and take you like that, but we were afraid of what he might do if he suspected anything.”

An officer came through the doorway of her one-story violated home. “Clear!”

“You people are crazy! My dad is the most boring person on the planet. He didn’t...” The words stuck in her throat. Her stomach was a mix of anger, fear, and anxiety. She jumped when she felt something on her shoulders. An EMT had just put a blanket on her. She pulled it off and threw it on the asphalt. “Who could he have possibly kidnapped?”

“You, Anna.” He put his hand down. “He kidnapped you.”

Are you kidding me?

She grabbed the folder from his hands and pushed him out of the way. She saw a squad car in front of her. She threw the folder off to the side and jumped onto the hood of the car, and then onto the roof and, as her voice echoed through the streets of her neighborhood, yelled, “Run! Run, Dad! Run!”

2: The Basement

June 1997

"But, Daddy," Anna said, "It's my tenth birthday. There has to be balloons and cake." She used her matter-of-fact voice.

She stood next to the worn wooden dining room table draped with one of the four bright tablecloths she liked so much. The tablecloths were mostly white, but had a bright colored margin with different patterns. This one had a double helix made of pink and white flowers on a green vine. Her father often talked about disposing of them, but Anna always put her foot down. She felt where they ate should be as bright as possible.

He agreed. He didn't often do that, but Anna always thought he was a reasonable man.

The curtains were drawn. It was dinnertime and he didn't like leaving the windows uncovered. Anna wanted them open, but she was a reasonable girl.

"I know," her father said, peering over the rims of his metal frame glasses. He sat at the head of the table staring at the screen of his notebook computer. Still wearing his work clothes (still-buttoned shirt, and dark slacks) he pulled at his chin. "But I just couldn't find any. I went to all the stores and they were all out."

"Daddy, that's impossible." Anna leaned against one of the dark wood dining room chairs. The overhead light cast noonday shadows. She

looked at the centerpiece with its plastic leaves and fruits. The multiple shadows it cast intrigued her.

"What do you mean?" her father asked.

"There are 3 party stores in the area." She crossed her arms. "They have balloons. I called."

He took his glasses off and looked puzzled. "Three?" The glasses went on the table. "And you called them?" He stared at the ceiling, nodded in admiration, and returned his gaze to her. "They were out when I got there."

"And cake?"

"The bakery said they were all out."

"Of birthday cakes? You could have brought a cupcake." She motioned putting an invisible candle on an equally invisible cupcake. "I know we have to watch our budget, but, seriously? We have leftover candles."

"I know, but," he shrugged, "things are tight." He put the glasses on and looked at his screen over the top of the frame. "Did you tell you teacher about the rainbows?"

"That they're made of molecules the size of basketballs and colored in ROY G BIV?" Anna swiveled her hip and rested her right hand on it. "She didn't buy it."

Her father turned and focused his eyes past her. "Hmm." He shrugged. "I'll talk to her about it during the next parent-teacher night."

Not even a cupcake? Anna felt bad, but understood. Things were always tight. Maybe he bought her a new book. They could usually afford that. And he always surprised her with a gift even if it was something simple.

She went to the kitchen to get a glass of milk and wandered aimlessly from corner to corner stopping at the refrigerator. She leaned her head on brushed aluminum surface. She exhaled and a solitary tear fell. Maybe next year.

She heard something fall down the stairs to the basement. She ran to the door and called out, "Dad? Are you alright?"

It was dark.

"I think I hurt my leg," his voice sounded in pain.

Anna ran down. *Oh, no! I hope he's not hurt!*

At the foot of the stairs, the lights turned on.

The basement was filled with balloons of every color imaginable. On the floor. In midair. Floating from the ceiling.

Like basketball-sized molecules in primary colors.

In the middle of the rainbow come to life was a table and on the table was a huge birthday cake that read:

Happy 10th Birthday, Squirrel!

Her face felt flush and her ears hurt from her smile. She blinked over and over as her eyes glazed from tears she didn't want to release, but couldn't help.

"You can take the leftovers to school tomorrow. You can share with your friends," he said.

Friends? Her smile didn't hurt her ears anymore. "Are you my friend?"

"No, Squirrel." He crouched down next to her and cupped her face in his right hand. His skin felt rough on her cheek. "That would be a step down from being your father." He smiled and she hugged him as tightly as she could.

3: Transcript Excerpt Dated May 31, 2005

U.S. Government vs. Arnold Dashman (a.k.a. Marshall Wodehouse)

Interview: Carpenter Poole (a.k.a. Anna Wodehouse)

Dr. Matheson: Tell me about your life prior to the kidnapping.

C. Poole: There was no kidnapping. I remember my life. My earliest memory is of my father holding me.

Dr. Matheson: Do you remember how old you were?

C. Poole: No, but I must have been younger than five. I was cold, and he held me, and I could feel the warmth of his arms and his chest through his coat.

Dr. Matheson: Tell me about your mother.

C. Poole: I don't remember her. Her name was Ingrid.

Dr. Matheson: Yes?

C. Poole: Do you hate me?

Dr. Matheson: I don't understand.

C. Poole: I don't know what to do. What am I supposed to do? Why did this happen?

Dr. Matheson: That man was not your father.

C. Poole: Stop saying that! He is my father. I am not the victim of a kidnapping.

Dr. Matheson: Okay, we'll call him your father if you prefer. Do you know where you are?

A. Matheson: A police station.

Dr. Matheson: For now. We're going to be moving you to an FBI field office, but I wanted to see how you were doing.

C. Poole: I'm sorry, but there's been some kind of mistake. My dad was always worried about something, but I thought it was just work, or me...

Dr. Matheson: Did he ever punish you?

C. Poole: Of course he did.

Dr. Matheson: How?

C. Poole: He wouldn't let me do my homework. Or he made me do the dishes. The worst was...

Dr. Matheson: Yes?

C. Poole: He wouldn't let me watch TV because Billy Johnson tried coming over to visit.

Dr. Matheson: So he kept you isolated.

C. Poole: What do you mean?

Dr. Matheson: He kept you away from people.

C. Poole: No. [silence] I don't like the kids at school.

Dr. Matheson: Why?

C. Poole: Because they don't like me.

Dr. Matheson: Did your father ever hit you?

C. Poole: What?

Dr. Matheson: Ever?

C. Poole: No.

Dr. Matheson: I find that hard to believe.

C. Poole: What? That a man who was afraid of ants and bumblebees and dragonflies wouldn't hurt his daughter?

Dr. Matheson: What was it like at the station house?

C. Poole: With the police?

Dr. Matheson: Yes.

C. Poole: Scary.

Dr. Matheson: What scared you?

C. Poole: All the guns.

Dr. Matheson: Did your father have a gun?

C. Poole: No! He was adamant that I know about guns, but we never had one. No.

Dr. Matheson: Would it surprise you to know that the police found a gun in your house?

C. Poole: We never had guns in the house!

Dr. Matheson: There was a semi-automatic hidden behind a false piece of dry wall.

C. Poole: That wasn't his.

Dr. Matheson: Do you want to know about your real mother and father?

C. Poole: I already have a real mother and father.

Dr. Matheson: A mother?

C. Poole: I told you. She died when I was younger.

Dr. Matheson: How old are you?

C. Poole: Seventeen.

Dr. Matheson: When was your birthday?

C. Poole: In June.

Dr. Matheson: Actually, it's in April.

C. Poole: It's in June.

Dr. Matheson: And your parents are dead.

C. Poole: They are not. Well, he's not. My mom died in a car accident.

Dr. Matheson: Tell me about the car accident.

C. Poole: When I was about two years old. The three of us were in a car accident. My mother died.

Dr. Matheson: Your mother did die in a car accident. Along with your father.

C. Poole: Stop.

Dr. Matheson: You were the only survivor of the crash. Do you know how I know that?

C. Poole: [no response]

Dr. Matheson: Do you want to know your real name?

C. Poole: [no response]

Dr. Matheson: You were abducted at the age of two by Arnold Dashman who raised you as his daughter for the last fifteen years. [flipping of paper]

C. Poole: Stop.

Dr. Matheson: Your aunt and uncle are on their way here. Did you know that you were born in Pennsylvania?

C. Poole: Stop! Stop! Stop! Stop it! My father's name is Marshall Wodehouse! My name is Anna Wodehouse! You kidnapped me! My life is boring and I have no friends, but my father loves me! He would never have done that to anyone!

Dr. Matheson: Your name is Carpenter Poole. You are the child of Harry and Lucy Poole of Littleton, PA. You were born seventeen years ago and had the unfortunate luck to be kidnapped by someone who raised you as his own.

C. Poole: Why would he do that?

Dr. Matheson: We don't know. We were hoping to ask him today, but he seems to have disappeared. Do you know where he is?

C. Poole: [no response]

Dr. Matheson: Carpenter?

C. Poole: [no response]

Dr. Matheson: Carpenter?

C. Poole: My name is Anna Wodehouse. And when my dad comes back, are you guys going to be sorry. He is going to sue you into kingdom come for false arrest, destroying property, wrongful detainment...

Dr. Matheson: You're free to go.

C. Poole: Liar.

Dr. Matheson: Carpenter...Anna, you've been manipulated and lied to for the last fifteen years by a man who was not your father. No matter what he may have done to you.

C. Poole: He never did anything to me except be my father.

Dr. Matheson: It's okay to tell me. I'm not here to judge you or Arnold.

C. Poole: Who's Arnold?

Dr. Matheson: Arnold Dashman, the man who said he was your father.

C. Poole: Marshall. My dad's name is Marshall. And what kind of name is that for a kidnapper? Arnold Dashman? Shouldn't he have sold me off for money or something? This is so stupid.

Dr. Matheson: Maybe. But if your dad really is Marshall Wodehouse then where is he? Why hasn't he come rushing here to tell us what a mistake we've made?

END OF TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT

4: Identity

Anna wasn't quite sure where she was. Once the EMTs in the ambulance certified her unharmed outside her home, she was shunted into an unmarked police car. She peered through the crystal-clear tinted glass as the car made its way through closed off streets, and bridges over water, past abandoned buildings, and homes kept almost as good as new, but none of the visual details remained. Her journey was so much streaming data that her brain decided she didn't need and so disconnected the neural pathway between her eyes and her consciousness.

The car smelled stale like old chicken or dead rat.

Out of the car. Into an elevator.

The two men stood on either side of her speaking in firm tones but not raising their voices.

Walking. A lot of walking. Past offices with glass walls; people on telephones. No one looked up as she passed them in their aggregated fortresses of solitude behind their desks behind their monitors behind their keyboards.

They stopped before a closed, dark wood door and one of the men opened it. Anna entered the plain, nondescript room, but her escorts didn't cross inside with her. One of them mentioned something about something. The cream-colored walls in the room, about the size of her bedroom, were bare except for a cork bulletin board. *That's so much smaller than mine.* At the table was a woman she had met earlier.

Her next thought: *So this is what a real interrogation room looks like.*

A two-way mirror (she was sure of that), a wooden table with two side-by-side gray metal chairs with matching cushioned backs. Anna pursed her lips and sat down in the chair next to Dr. Matheson. Was that her name? They had met earlier, but Anna couldn't remember if it was at the ambulance or in one of the police vans.

Dr. Matheson wore heavy perfume and a dress that was definitely too tight over her pudgy frame. Anna did her best to breathe in while looking away, but she couldn't do it without being rude. Anna hated being rude. Why was everyone else always so rude to her?

"This is your paperwork." Dr. Matheson turned a few pages, took out four sheets, and placed them in front of Anna. The first read: *Child ID DNA Kit* with the name *Carpenter Poole* written in pen in very smooth cursive writing.

"Why isn't this in a computer?" Anna asked.

"It is, but I wanted you to see an almost-original of the paperwork pertaining to you. It was found by your aunt and uncle when they went to your real parents' home." Dr. Matheson moved the second page front and center of Anna. "To make the arrangements for your parents' funeral."

"I already told you, my mother died when I was young..."

"Yes, they both died when you were young. When you got here, we took a quick fingerprint of your index finger, remember?"

Anna nodded.

"We couldn't get a match. The fingerprints of a two year old are harder to match on a seventeen year old. A twenty year old to a ten year old, maybe. But fingerprints change substantially from when you are very young to even marginally older."

"But?"

"Around seventeen years ago, child DNA kits were very popular. Mr. and Mrs. Poole bought this one when you were about a year old. They took swabs of your cheek and a blood sample and a lock of your hair. The

cheek swabs were all we needed.” She slid the papers over to the side and extracted a printout from the folder.

Anna decided that she was going to hate file folders for the rest of her life. Their contents only brought bad news.

“This is the results of the DNA test of Carpenter Poole, who has been missing for fifteen years, and your cheek swab.” Dr. Matheson pointed to the bottom of the page. “The samples are a match.” She gave Anna a sympathetic smile. “I know you don’t want to hear this, but you are Carpenter Poole.”

Anna clenched her hands under the table. “I have to go. Please, I have to go.” The air coming in and out of her nasal passages felt like they did when she got sick: cold and sharp.

“Anna, it’s okay.” Dr. Matheson put her hand on Anna’s shoulder.

Anna shook it off. Her stomach felt tight and her shoulders hurt. Her palms tingled.

“I have to...” Anna started to stand, but not before she threw up on the table and on the paperwork. “I’m...” And then again. And again. She leapt from the chair and continued to vomit.

She stopped and a wave of exhaustion radiated from her chest into her arms and legs. She fell to the floor and landed hard on her butt. *Where’s Dad? Where’s Dad? Oh, why aren’t you here?* She slid herself away from the table toward the wall and into the furthest corner. Dr. Matheson went over to her and Anna cringed. She pulled her legs in and leaned against the wall.

“Anna, please, let me help you...”

“Leave me alone! Leave ME ALONE!” Anna started to shake and tears escaped her clenched eyes. How could this be? Her entire life? Everything she’d ever known? No, that was not possible. Her dad was going to show up and straighten this all out. He did it before when things went wrong in school or when the neighbors blamed her for something she couldn’t possibly have done.

He was there. He was always there.

Where was he? *Dad! I need you! Daddy! WHERE ARE YOU?*

She shivered with no sense of control. She huddled into a ball against the cold wall.

5: Hospital Visit

At the insistence of Dr. Gail Matheson, an ambulance transported Carpenter Poole from the FBI field office to New York Downtown Hospital in lower Manhattan. The hospital, one of the few near the financial district, founded in 1853 as the New York Infirmary for Indigent Women and Children, was one of the leaders in disaster management. During 9/11, while doctors were busy treating the first wave of injured people looking for help, the first tower of the World Trade Center went down with a roaring shock wave that engulfed the area, including the ER at the hospital, with a dust cloud so thick the medical staff couldn't see their hands in front of their faces. They still managed to treat fifteen hundred people and save the lives of thirty-three critical patients.

It was also the closest medical facility to the FBI facility at 26 Federal Plaza.

A New York City Police officer stood outside her room. Anna had never seen the outside of the hospital before and missed seeing it again as the ambulance took her straight to the Emergency Room door where they greeted her with a wheelchair, an escort, and an officer.

"I just threw up. I didn't need to be admitted." Anna was in bed and had an IV of saline solution going into her right arm. This was a day of firsts: she couldn't remember the last time she was in a hospital for any reason. The air was staler than the interrogation room. She confessed to herself that she was feeling a little better from her earlier episode, but she

didn't need to tell them that. The walls were a different shade of beige and the light, which seemed to come from everywhere, made her squint. *Is this entire room designed to annoy patients?*

"It's late. They're not sending you home. You are still a minor and while New York doesn't have explicit emancipation laws, you don't quite fit the criteria for independence in any case." Dr. Matheson crossed her legs. She sat in a wooden chair to Anna's right. "Yet. First, you meet and go with your aunt and uncle and then you can decide what to do next. Maybe emancipation is in your future."

"You can't keep me here against my will without charging me with something," Anna said. *These sheets! Don't they use fabric softener?*

A voice came from the doorway and a middle-aged man came in through the door. "Actually we can. You're a minor and the victim of a crime and you have not yet been released into the custody of your nearest living relatives. If you didn't have any, we might be talking to a judge right now about making you a ward of the state because you are obviously overwrought and need medical attention." He walked up to the bed and looked around. "I would call this medical attention."

"I threw up."

"I know. I'm the Agent in Charge. Special Agent Gavin Gillespie." He extended his hand to her.

She hesitated for a moment and they shook hands.

"I wanted to check up on you and see if there was anything we could do."

"Can you send me home?" Either he wasn't wearing cologne or the hospital smells were overpowering.

"Not yet," he said. His skin was warm and he placed his other hand on top of hers. His touch bothered her, but maybe he could do something.

He grabbed a folding chair that leaned against the wall and opened it up as close to the bed as he could. "How are you feeling?"

"Like I shouldn't be talking to you."

“We can always get you a lawyer, but you haven’t been charged with anything.”

“I thought I was a victim?” Anna pushed herself up to relieve the soreness on her butt.

“Are you?”

“No.” Anna tried to cross her arms but was conscious of the plastic IV catheter going into the back of her hand. “But I could still use an attorney.”

“Yes, you can, though I am hoping that for now you don’t.”

“Give me a good reason.” Anna’s shoulders tensed.

“The man who held you for fifteen years, the man you consider your father, is not only wanted for kidnapping, he is also wanted by Interpol, the Department of Homeland Security, and a few other agencies whose initials I’m not allowed to repeat.” He leaned back and the chair squeaked.

“For what?” Anna’s hair, a ponytail held in place with a rubber band, was itchy. She scratched the back of her head but couldn’t reach the spot.

“This is where things get a little mysterious. I’m not allowed to tell you in case you really are just an innocent victim.”

“So my father was an international criminal, probably with terrorist ties, and numerous warrants out for his arrest? And maybe he tortured puppies while I was sleeping. We weren’t hiding. We live in Brooklyn, for Pete’s sake.” Anna fidgeted under her blanket. She wasn’t used to being in bed for so long and her muscles were feeling sore. She pulled the starched sheet back and started to get up.

“Where are you going?” Dr. Matheson said as she stood and held onto Anna’s left arm.

“Nowhere, it seems.” She slipped into a flimsy pair of slippers. She looked at Dr. Matheson and then at the FBI agent. She reached for her back and held her hospital gown closed. “I want to go home. Can I go home? You guys are always looking to cut a deal. Let me go home and I’ll tell you anything you want.”

“That sounds tempting,” he said. “But the fact of the matter is you need to do that anyway.”

“Oh, please. You can send me with escorts. Maybe a few big burly types. You can post one outside my window...”

“If you don’t cooperate, we can keep you from your aunt and uncle.” He crossed his arms.

“That’s fine! I don’t want to go with whoever those people are. They are not my aunt and uncle unless they’re related to my father somehow, but I’m willing to bet they’re related to me in ways I’d rather not discuss.” She felt a little dizzy but stood her ground.

“Anna,” Dr. Matheson was speaking in a low, soothing voice. “Your aunt and uncle deserve to see you...”

“No one deserves to see me except my father. Find him and I’ll pretty much agree to anything.” Anna turned away from her and sat down on her bed, facing the special agent. “And don’t use your Jedi mind tricks on me. You’ll just make me want to throw up again. If I have a nervous breakdown, I’ll sue everybody, take my house back, and go home, like I want to now.” She glared at the agent. “Can’t we just skips those steps?”

“We know he was abusing you.” Gavin leaned forward and looked her in the eyes.

“Are you saying that you want to check if I’m still a virgin? Even my dad would have to get a court order for that.” She turned to Dr. Matheson. “And I thought you were on my side. He’s asking inappropriate questions and probably thinks I have Stockholm syndrome.”

“You do have Stockholm,” she said.

“Oh, this is a nightmare.” She looked at the doorway. So close yet so far. “I just want to go home. Why can’t I go home? I have homework to hand in. Classes to go to. People to hate.” Her eyes were tearing. Why did she always cry at the slightest provocation? “I think it’s my turn to feed the rabbit in lab.”

“They still have live animals in school?” he asked.

Anna stood up. "Yes, but we don't have any rabbits. I'm allergic and I have asthma. I love pets and I can't have any."

Dr. Matheson grabbed Anna's chart at the foot of the bed.

"Allergies? Asthma? They haven't run any specific tests on you, but you don't really show any symptoms of either. Are you sure?"

"You want to give me an apple and see me swell up? Will you send me home then?" What was wrong with these people?

"You're in the top of your class. Teachers are impressed by you. Students are threatened by you. You tear through classes like an adult attending first grade," Agent Gillespie said.

Was he impressed? Maybe she could leverage that.

"Maybe you're smart enough to have figured out what your father," he made air quotes, "was doing and maybe you joined in."

"Why don't you arrest me? I'm tired. I want to get some sleep and go home so I can go to school tomorrow." She sat down. "This bed is so uncomfortable."

"That can be made better or worse. Have you ever been to jail?" The agent leaned back.

"I was hoping to avoid doing that given my new lifelong ambition is to become head of the FBI so I could fire you."

"I will wait for that day with bated breath." He stood. He was only a little taller than Anna. "Anna, or Carpenter, or whatever name you feel like using right now, we're here to help you. You were kidnapped fifteen years ago and we finally found you..."

"As we expertly hid from the world in the wilds of New York City..."

"...and all we want is to know what happened in those intervening years. Where did you live? Who did you know? How were you able to go to school, get a social security card, go to the doctor, to the hospital, without half the world knowing that you were alive and well?"

"I guess Andrew..."

"Arnold," he said.

“..whatever, is smarter than you give him credit for. Fifteen years is a long time. Are you guys that incompetent?” Anna’s defensive posture: poke him with words. Her fist might be next.

“Not usually.” Gavin brought his face closer to Anna. He looked into her eyes.

“You’re creeping me out.” She walked over to the door. “Why is there a cop at my door?”

“We want to keep you safe.”

She walked back and stood in front of him again. “Right, from the man who kidnapped me for fifteen years and punished me for not eating my vegetables by making me watch Oprah. On second thought, keep him there. I don’t really want to watch any more Oprah.”

“I think we’re done here. Get some rest.” Gavin turned toward the door. “I’ll be back tomorrow.”

“Maybe I won’t be.” Anna walked over to him. “Arrest me or let me go home.”

“Get some rest. I’ll be back in the morning with some food. I’ve stayed here before and you don’t want their breakfast.”

Anna swung at him with her fist and he caught her arm at the wrist. He held it an extra second and let go.

“I know you find this hard to believe, but I’m here to help you.”

Dr. Matheson walked out of the room, promising to be back in the morning. Gavin stood there. “I think you know something.

“You’re a straight A student, yet you lived with a man who was obviously not your father for years. You seriously expect me, you expect everyone, to believe that you didn’t spot inconsistencies?”

“You obviously know my family history so you won’t have to ask me much.”

“That’s the problem, Carpenter.”

“Don’t call me that.”

“Why? Don’t like your first name? Reminds me of Karen Carpenter. I’m a big fan. Jesus was a carpenter. Carpentry is a noble profession.” He

crossed his arms and leaned against the doorway. “Your history starts seven years ago when you moved to Brooklyn. What were you and Arnold doing the previous eight years and how did you stay under the radar for so long?”

“How did you find us?”

“I guess it won’t hurt to tell you. An anonymous tip. Someone who obviously cared for you and figured out who you really were,” Gillespie said.

“Are. When I find them, I’ll be sure to thank them personally.” Anna walked back around to the far side of the bed and lay down.

“Good night, Anna. I’ll see you in the morning.”

Anna didn’t reply. *Maybe I’ll die tonight. Maybe I’ll die and this will all be over.*

6: The Most Important Meal of the Day

Anna stood past the threshold of Special Agent Gavin Gillespie's conference room wearing handcuffs. The tall, muscular police officer who stood behind her spun her around. Gavin walked over holding a brown paper bag. "Did you get a good night's sleep?" The officer unlocked the cuffs.

There was a scent of men's cologne. Her father hardly ever wore cologne, but when he did, she always knew. She could detect it from the furthest corner of their secure home.

Date? she would ask.

When I want to talk about my love life, I'll send you a text. And, no, not a date. I don't have time to shower, the man who was no longer her father would reply.

The ratcheting sound of the handcuffs kept her lips in a straight line. She was exhausted from all of the questions running through her mind. Her attempt at an extracurricular jaunt had failed and the robo-cop who was her personal prison guard decided she needed to be humiliated. *Good job, Mr. Officer.*

The FBI guy wore cologne. To impress her, or did he always wear it? Maybe he was trying to impress Dr. Matheson. He had less hair than she remembered from yesterday, but his navy blue suit fit better. The dark color hid his paunch. She wanted to roll her eyes. *Yeab, that's impressive.*

She rubbed her wrists and looked away from Gavin. She wore the same orange t-shirt and jeans as yesterday, refusing to have someone

return to her home to get her a fresh set. Imagining someone going through her things made her stomach queasy. After a few seconds, she tugged at a chair and sat down.

Gavin pushed the bag toward her. "I got you another breakfast burrito. I assume you're still hungry."

Anna put her hands on her lap and stared as though examining the fake wood grain table top.

"I had to throw the first one away. When they told me you'd tried running away, I thought, that's not the Carpenter I know. I bet you she must have gotten a look at the hospital food."

"I want an attorney." She sat back and looked at her lap.

"You understand that you are not being charged with anything?"

"I understand you can go f...frak yourself. I want a lawyer." Anna stood up and walked over to the table at the far end of the room toward the flat screen monitor. Two clone potted plants sat like lumps on either side of it.

He sighed. "Okay." He stared at her. "You know we're the good guys, right? You don't have to talk to me, but we've spent a great deal of time and effort looking for you and all we want are some answers."

"Sorry I'm not grateful for being detained." She pushed a large vase with fake flowers off the table. It shattered into a few dozen large shards, spilling dirt and plastic on the rug. "Oops."

"I didn't like those anyway." Gavin strode over to her. "We can hold you as long as we like. I could send you to Juvenile Detention just for being a smart-ass. Do you know what obstruction of justice is?"

She knocked over another vase.

A voice behind him at the doorway responded. "Yes, it's when someone purposely interferes with the work of an officer of the court." A tall man wearing jeans and a clean and pressed button-down stood holding the door open. "Or something like that."

"And you would be?" Gavin asked.

“My name is Ray Stoddard and if you ask my niece another question without her legal guardian present, that would be me or my wife, I’ll not only sue your ass, I’ll kick it.” The room was silent, as everyone stood frozen by his words.

“Well,” Anna said, “gotta go.”

####

The elevator door closed behind Anna, and Ray and Marcie Stoddard. Anna unhooked her arm from Ray and retreated to the furthest corner of the compartment as soon as the doors shut. Ray was a head taller than her and Marcie was the picture of a dutiful wife. Marcie had followed them both and started gently crying before the elevator arrived. Anna felt Ray’s gaze.

Anna couldn’t maintain eye contact. “Why is she crying?” She scrutinized Marcie. She was about Anna’s height and wore a floral print dress that was tight around her waist. “Why are you crying?”

Marcie pulled a tissue out of her tan purse. It had multiple exterior pockets and wasn’t very big. She pulled the tissue from an inside compartment. “I’m sorry.” She sniffled a little. “You look just like your mother.”

Anna took a step back and hit the wall. “I don’t like either of you. I mean, I’m grateful you came in there and saved me. They were threatening to arrest me, but I just want to go home.”

Marcie sobbed and put her hand to her mouth.

“Where’s home?” Ray asked. It was morning, but he already had stubble on his face. His salt and pepper hair was thin but covered the top of his sunburned head.

“Brooklyn.”

“You should come with us.”

“I don’t want to seem ungrateful...”

“But you will.”

Anna blinked back a tear. “I just want to see my dad.”

“Where is he?”

“If I knew that, would I be threatened with imprisonment?”

“They can’t arrest you. At worst, they could put you in a foster home. Even New York isn’t that stupid.”

“Oh, just try them.” The doors opened and they stepped out. They walked out of the building in silence. Once outside Anna walked away from them.

“And where are you going, young lady?” Ray seemed to be doing all the talking.

“I told you. Home.”

“You can at least give your aunt a hug. We’ve come a long way for you.”

“And as I’ve said, I’m very grateful...”

Marcie eyes filled with sadness. The same eyes Anna saw in the mirror some mornings. The mornings when she looked at her dad and didn’t see her eyes, or her smile, or any similarities, in his face.

Their behaviors matched: they were both workaholics. Was that genetic or environmental?

Agent Gavin was right. There were a lot of little things that just didn’t add up.

Dad? Am I adopted?

Don’t be silly, Squirrel. You look just like your mother.

She walked over to Marcie, gave her an awkward embrace, and then turned to Ray and did the same.

Marcie held the tissue to her mouth and looked away.

“Okay, well, thanks for getting me out,” Anna said. “I guess I’ll be in touch.” Anna wasn’t sure what else to say.

“Why don’t you let us give you a ride?”

“The subway is faster, and,” Anna glanced away and then back at Ray, “you don’t know the way.”

“My cell has GPS. Just because we’re from Pennsylvania...”

“No, no, I get it.”

“If you really want to stay in that house all by yourself, that’s fine. We respect your decision.” He put his arm around his wife. “But you don’t seem in a position to be by yourself as of yet and we can either stay here with you for the next few days or take you back to our home and try to help you pull your life back together. You’ve had a rough few days.”

“My life is fine, thank you.” Anna bristled at the thought of them in her home.

“And I can respect that, too. You’re family. But you might need some help.”

Anna felt pain in her chest. Help? Who did he think he was? She didn’t need his help. She would figure this out.

But looking at them made her sad.

Her boring life had just gotten worse.

No. She was not giving up without a fight. Her dad was coming back. He had never left her alone for more than a day or so for work. He always came back.

Always.

“We can bring you back as often as you like. I’m sure the school would understand. Your friends certainly would. I’m sure that an attractive girl like you probably doesn’t think about homework much, but we can help, and, well, we’d love to have you stay with us.” He hugged Marcie a little tighter. “You’re free to move out whenever you like. We don’t have much, but we can probably help you find a place in a few months.”

####

Anna sat in the back seat of her new uncle and aunt’s green car, staring out the rear passenger window at the passing lampposts. They seemed like bars that were too far apart. While there was no new car smell, it felt comfortable. She didn’t like it. Her life wasn’t over.

Her father would come back. He never left her before and he wouldn’t start now. Even the few times when he wasn’t there she just knew he was around.

He always came back. He would always come back.
He will. I know he will.

2006

2007

2008

2009

2010

2011

2012

7: Graduation Day

May 14, 2012

The sky was a deep summer blue and there were almost no clouds. The air was clear, the humidity low, the grass a lush green, and the trees full.

It was a perfect day for graduation. Franklin Field at the University of Pennsylvania overflowed with the yearly mass of humanity there for their commencement ceremony, graduates spread out from the goalpost to the forty-yard line. Dark gowns proliferated with a swath of yellow and blue and red depending on what sash a graduate or faculty member was wearing. The Astroturf was crispy and hot.

The only shadows came from the overhanging bleachers of the U-shaped stadium where thousands of parents sat and still only took up a small percentage of the seats around and behind the graduates. The soon-to-be-ex-college students sat on beige metal chairs with textured plastic backs on which they leaned back and felt the give of experience. The ground staff had covered the football field with the grandstand and the chairs in record time and would put it all away in record time as soon as they received the okay to erase their work until the next ephemeral event.

Anna Wodehouse, soon to be twenty-four years old, was in among the graduates, under duress, and gave up paying attention to the ceremony speeches as soon as they started.

This is why smart phones were invented.

With earbuds in place, the ceremony was just so much white noise. She was thirsty, anxious, and bored. Those went unnoticed. What mattered was the knot in her stomach.

She was graduating. Her birthday was in another month. Her reason for getting up in the morning was about to change.

And it was seven years.

The woman to her right, Holly Myers, elbowed her to get her attention.

“You’re bored.”

“What?” Anna pulled out her right earbud after tapping her cell phone screen.

“What are you listening to?”

“The Steve Jobs commencement. Stanford. 2005,” Anna said.

“It should have been you giving the valedictorian.”

“I’m too shy.” She stuck the earbud back and tapped her phone. Steve Jobs continued.

When I was seventeen, I read a quote that went something like: “If you live each day as if it was your last, someday you’ll most certainly be right.”

Holly nudged her again.

“What?”

“You should have given the valedictorian.”

“Oh, Holly, I would never have done it. You know I just want to be ignored.”

“You’ll never be ignored.”

Anna’s eyes opened. That was something her father, no, Arnold whoever-the-hell, that jerk she didn’t care about, that idiot she hated, told her once. She felt a knot in her throat. Questions, conjectures, recriminations, pain, loss, hope all swirled in her brain and she pushed them down where they belonged. Especially hope. Years and years of hope.

“That’s not true,” Anna said, “and I am going to prove it. I am going to get the most non-descript job I can and lead the most boring life possible...”

“With a major in Math and Poly-Sci, and a minor in accounting and who-the-hell-knows-what-else, I’m not really sure you can cut it at Mac-Donald’s,” Holly said.

“I have an offer in cable. And my second major is Computer Science. I just happen to have enough Poly-Sci credits.”

“Snore.” Holly motioned with her head off to the left. “I think I see that reporter again. The one you almost tossed off the roof.”

“I did not almost toss him off the roof.”

“Between Tae Kwon Do and all that gun training I’m surprised anyone talks to you. But I think I see him.”

Please let her be wrong! Anna turned. She gave a low groan.

“Why is he here?” Anna asked.

“One guess.” Anna might actually have to toss him off the roof this time. He had been sending her email incessantly during her exams and she made it very clear that she was not interested.

She stuck the earbud back in.

No one wants to die. Even people who want to go to heaven don't want to die to get there. And yet death is the destination we all share. No one has ever escaped it. And that is as it should be...

She pulled the earbud out. She had listened to Jobs’ speech numerous times, but this time felt different.

“You okay?” Holly asked.

“Yeah.” She scanned the stands. “I’m fine.”

####

The dark blue caps flew in the air. Anna held hers and almost let it join the others, but she hugged it instead. When all the other caps had fallen, she counted a beat and then threw her cap up as high as she could muster. A lone blue square twirling in the air.

####

Anna gave Holly a hug and promised to stay in touch. She was pretty sure that would never happen, but why stop lying now? While Holly had been a good friend, she and Anna traveled in different circles. Or more accurately, Anna didn't have a circle.

She did her best not to touch the crowd of students that were fighting their way to the stands while she scanned the faces of the fathers and brothers and uncles and grandfathers. *This would have been easier if I had set up the facial recognition software like I wanted to.* She had been working at a feverish pace to finish the project, but there were times when she didn't have the energy. Did she really think she'd get a hit?

A familiar outline went behind a group of people. Anna made her way through the crowd. Where did he go? He was a little older, but...

She looked back and forth, her hair twirling around her face. She ran and caught up. A whisper left her lips. "Dad?" She touched his shoulder. "Anna!" Her aunt's voice was clear and happy.

The man turned.

Not him.

Anna apologized and spun toward the familiar voice. Her aunt and uncle stopped just short of slamming into her and lifted her off the ground with smiles that were the widest of all the people she knew. They were the only people she knew.

"Hi," Anna said. She did her best not to look away, and remembered to smile.

Her aunt's eyes shone in the bright sunshine and a tear trailed across her cheek, leaving a mark in the light dusting of makeup. She hugged her again.

Uncle Ray squeezed her left arm. "Well, young lady. The only thing left is a doctorate and I would be afraid to ask in what."

Stop looking around. "Thanks," Anna said. *He's not here.*

"Your parents would have been so proud," Aunt Marcie said. She pursed her lips. "And your father, too."

Anna glared at her and then felt guilty. "Don't. I don't care."

“Carpenter!” The reporter she had been trying to avoid appeared out of nowhere.

“Let’s go,” Anna said to her uncle.

“Wait,” the reporter said. “I just wanted to congratulate you. You’re almost legendary in these parts. Your grades are unbelievable.” He put up his hands. “I haven’t seen your transcript. I just hear things.”

“Please, just leave me alone.”

Another voice came from behind her. “Carpenter, there you are, can we just ask you a couple of questions?” It was a female reporter, dragging along a camera crew and microphone.

“No, please...” She turned and there was another camera. And another. What was going on? Voices were shouting at her. Blades sliced the air above her. Helicopters.

“How have you been doing since you were rescued seven years ago?”

“Have you thrown yourself into your studies because of your psychic trauma?”

“Do you give thanks to Almighty God for having saved you from that monster?”

“Do you have anything to say to the kidnapper?”

She turned to the face that exhaled that last question. She grabbed the microphone from his hand and looked at him, not into the camera, and said, “I hate him. He brought me nothing but misery and pain. I hope he rots in hell and that he never knows happiness ever again.” She threw the microphone to the floor and walked away from the surging group of journalists who continued to follow and hurl questions at her.

####

As they approached the car, Uncle Ray unlocked the doors with his key fob and held her door open. Just before she entered the car, she collided with him and held him tight. The warmth of her breath doubly-heated her cheeks. “I am so lucky to have you and Aunt Marcie.”

Where's Dad? Why won't he come back? She let him go and entered the car.

Uncle Ray closed the door with a firm push. They all sat in silence. Uncle Ray glanced at Aunt Marcie who didn't look back. He started the car.

"It's okay. I don't care that he wasn't there. I don't." She started to sob. "I don't." She covered her face as the car sped away.

8: A Widow, a Child, and a Dead Friend

June 1, 2012

Terrell Garrison felt awkward sitting in the love seat next to Darlene Kirby.

He'd driven up north on the Taconic State Parkway that Friday morning, dressed in jeans, a green polo shirt, and black sneakers, grateful to be going against traffic. His trip would be long enough without the added aggravation of a traffic jam. The road, which had been resurfaced, was smooth with the occasional bump as the earth made sure the drivers wouldn't forget who was really in charge. The foliage and dynamite-blasted rocky hills did their best to transform the city feel of the Bronx and Southern Westchester into the long-forgotten rural feel that was New York at the turn of the century when construction started on the Taconic back in 1925.

The turn of the century. History fascinated Terrell, but not for the last few years. Time took on a different dimension a few years ago. He looked at the passing trees and couldn't remember anything about them. While his knowledge of botany was rudimentary, he prided himself on learning what he could as he discovered the history of an area and simple facts about trees was something that he enjoyed. Walking through a state park or through a local historic area was as appealing as a good brandy

or a good cigar (something he indulged on occasion). He had to know more. There was always more.

Now they were just trees. Blown-through rock formations. Trash on the side of the road.

When he reached for his water bottle in the holder to his right he found that it was empty. He cursed the lack of rest stops.

The blue sky had the morning fuzziness of blue felt and the lack of clouds to match. He knew it was going to be a scorcher even before he got to Del's house.

Darlene's house. Today was the day that belonged to the life insurance company.

When he woke up this morning, he thought for sure that he wouldn't feel the way he always did at this time of year.

When Del Kirby disappeared.

Muscle memory delivered him to his destination. Did he remember the packages? Of course he did. He had wanted to put them in the trunk of his car the night before, but he also knew he lived in the Bronx. He placed them against his front door instead so he wouldn't forget.

Terrell wanted to visit more often, and promised himself he would, but somehow the year always got away from him.

Another year had got away from him since Del went missing.

Now sitting close to Darlene, he could smell her Obsession. She wore a plain dress that looked like it was form-fitted for her. She was elegant. "How have you been doing? Really?" he asked.

"I'm good. Del Jr. turned eight a few weeks ago." She examined the glass-topped coffee table. "We missed you."

He heard running upstairs and smiled. Del Jr. was overflowing with energy even for an eight year old. Eight!

"How are things at the Bureau?"

The living room was exactly as he remembered it from last year. Just enough furniture to feel lived in. A lot of photographs. Pictures of Darlene with Del Jr.. Del Jr. with Terrell. Del Jr., when he was just born, with

his father, Del Sr. Photos of Del Sr. and Terrell, graduating from college together. Graduating for Quantico. The person who was always there for Terrell during the years when things weren't so good. The friend who made sure Terrell never forgot there was more to life than just catching bad guys.

The house smelled fresh. Alive. Not the home of someone who had passed. He hated euphemisms. Dead.

"How many years has it been now?" he asked.

"You're one to ask. You know."

"Seven," he said. "Seven years."

"Now," Darlene leaned forward, "he's legally dead. Will you accept that?"

"No." It was Terrell's turn to look away. "I know in my head that Del is gone, but there's just something..." His eyes unfocused. All he saw were colors and shapes.

"Have you found anything?" She crossed her legs and held onto her knee with her right hand. "I know you're still looking."

"Nothing." Terrell's cheeks grew warm from the embarrassment. He reached over the side of the love seat, to the bag he'd brought with him. "I thought maybe Del Jr. could use some more building blocks..."

Darlene took the bag from him. She still wore her wedding ring. "Thank you."

Bounding down the stairs came a small bolt of lightning in the form of a boy. He jumped up and hugged Terrell.

"Hi, Uncle Terrell!" He let Terrell go and started to run around the couch with his arms extended out. An airplane. A less-than-three-foot airplane.

"Stop running." Darlene held her hand out to him. "Stop running. Your Uncle Terrell brought you a birthday present." The plane changed direction and landed on his mother's lap. He wore miniature gym pants that were baggy the way well-worn clothes get baggy. His t-shirt was green and had a comic book superhero on it. She pulled the boxes out of

the bag. One box of pirate figures. Another box of aliens. Another larger box with an aircraft carrier. The little boy's eyes lit up with each successive reveal.

Terrell's chest get tight. *This is my best friend's son. Del, if you could just see your son.*

In a flash, the boy once again became an airplane and took off for parts unknown, the boxes left behind for a later time. Terrell remembered those days.

"I don't want you to do that again." Darlene stood up. Even at five foot four she was an imposing presence.

"Do what?"

"Spend that kind of money on Del. I know you're single, but you don't make that much at the Bureau. You have to start saving for your turn."

"Oh, you can't deny little Del the opportunity to get presents from his absentee uncle." Terrell smiled. His cheeks felt sore. He got up and towered over her, so he stepped back slightly.

"Yes I can." She took a step toward him. "You're a good man, Terrell, but you have got to let go of this. Del is dead."

"And I'm going to find out what happened to him and who did it."

"Are you any closer?" she asked.

He pursed his lips.

"Are you?" she asked again.

"No, not yet."

"You need to stop coming here. Del Jr. loves when you come over. I love when you come over, but this is not good for you."

"I am capable of figuring out what is good and not good for me..."

"No, you're not!" She stopped for a moment and lowered her voice. "I know what you're going to do after this. I know where you're going."

"I want to know. I have to know." Terrell walked around the love seat, touching the curve of the couch. The flower pattern felt rough.

"And you think I don't. You've shut down your life over him."

"I know what I'm doing."

"Get out."

"What?" Terrell looked at her determined face.

"Get out. Being here is part of the problem. If you can't let go of Del's memory then you can at least let go of us."

"But what if that day never comes?" What if that day never *ever* comes?

"I stopped waiting years ago. Del was not a runaway. He was not some irresponsible father who decided to use his job as a way of disappearing and absolving himself from the people he loved." Darlene's eyes watered, but not a tear ran down her cheek. "He was not a suicide. He was murdered." She walked over to the door. "Get out."

Terrell walked behind her. "What are you doing?"

"Tough love, baby." She swung the door open. "Don't let it hit you on the way out."

He grabbed the door and slammed it shut. "I decide when I'll let go of my friend's memory. I decide! You had him for two years. I had him for nine. Nine years! From high school, Darlene! From high school. He convinced me to join the FBI."

"I've heard this before."

"And I was your best man."

"I was there. Get out. Go visit other dead people." She started to open the door and he pushed it closed. She opened it again and he closed it. Again.

She slapped him.

Terrell blinked. He felt the tears in his eyes, but they weren't from her wake-up call. *He was my family and some bastard took him away.* He swallowed. He hugged her and she resisted at first and then hugged him back. After a few seconds, she pulled away but stayed in his arms. When was it going to feel better?

"Marry me."

"How many times are you going to ask me that?" She looked amused.

“Until you say yes.”

“I don’t want to be a pity wife.” She pulled his arms away but held on to his hands. “You don’t love me. I’m just your last connection to him.” She kissed him on the cheek with the softest of lips.

The woman Del had chosen and who had chosen Del. Was he waiting? Waiting for what? For Del to return and be the brother Terrell never had? Del was his brother. Even when events conspired to keep them apart they always found time. He remembered...

Darlene turned away from him and headed into the house. “Don’t come back. I stopped waiting. Find who killed him and do what you need to do to them if that will make you feel better.”

He wondered what he would do the day, oh, if that day ever came! Would he have the courage, the anger, to take another human being’s life if he knew for sure that person had killed Del?

He knew the answer. That was what he was waiting for.

Darlene walked away from him. “Show yourself out.”

9: Woodlawn

Terrell sat on his canvas and plastic folding chair with Del's case file opened on his lap surrounded by the dead. In the midst of the beautifully manicured lawn, the *chick-chick-chick* of sprinklers watered the lush, green grass. He flipped through the worn pages and knew that he would have to print the file's contents again. Soon. The last time was six months ago and the condition of the files were a testament to his inattention to paper abuse.

This was the third neighborhood he'd known growing up. The first, in a torn-up ghetto where a building fire forced them to move, was the furthest from his memory. The second, in the Bronxdale projects across the street from the local parochial school, was where he learned to hate petty thievery (*Dad, they took my bike!*), violence brought on by fragile emotions, and the inability of local cops to do anything. Having been with the Bureau for so many years, he had a better understanding of the pressures brought to bear on people, especially the police, but he never developed the patience to deal with them.

The third neighborhood was here: a few blocks from the Woodlawn Cemetery where he commuted to and from college, and he did his best to ignore how much his parents loved where they lived. The area seemed to cycle between getting better and getting worse and Terrell, who couldn't understand his parents' fascination, grew tired of it. The neighborhood felt like sunburned skin, or an ill-fitting sweaty suit. He vowed

to move away the first chance he got (the smells alone drove him crazy), but he moved back in with them during the last years of their lives as his father was diagnosed with prostate cancer and his mother died soon after.

He looked up, but the bright sunlight was too much for his eyes. He put on his aviator-frame sunglasses, and from his perch on the south end of Woodlawn Cemetery on 211 Street and Hull Avenue in the Bronx, he could see his car. He never liked this spot and argued with his parents when they told him they had picked out a burial plot, and where it was located. This was their neighborhood, their home, and they wanted to stay. The price was also reasonable since they purchased it before they needed it (at least as reasonable as you can get buying real estate in New York). Terrell wasn't happy, but they were happy, and Terrell was never happy anyway.

A gray Corolla went by. He caught the first few letters of the license plate. He hadn't seen it before so he would store it away. His version of the license plate game he used to play when he was a kid. Five cars had gone by since he arrived and he mostly remembered them. A black Mustang. A red Camaro. A green Camry. Number six: gray Corolla. DSM-something-or-other.

Every so often he would look up at the single tombstone before him and he would direct a question to his parents. *What would we be doing right now if you hadn't died, Mom? Would you be ordering out? Cooking up a storm?* He took off his sunglasses and flipped over another page. Another photograph. Another interview. He was thirsty. The flimsy shade of the trees to his right were not enough to subdue the glare but enough for him to read.

Names. Dates. Interviews. He had combed through them over and over. Endlessly. Something would jump out at him. He was sure of it. His brain hadn't failed him yet. *Will I go out like you, Dad? In your sleep? Or like Mom, of a broken heart? On second thought, no chance of a broken heart.*

The skin on his neck was hot. A gap in the shade targeted him.

Another car. Number seven. Red Scion. Personalized. B1t3 m3. He shook his head. *Bite Me*. Personalized plates were a waste of money, but they made surveillance easier. Unbelievable how many suspects who tried to stay under the radar personalized their license plates.

Another interview. Another undercover report. Money laundering. Funds going to a construction company for work done surreptitiously. Every time he read the interview, his bullshit detector went off. Why pay for construction work no one would know about? A secret gift? Idiocy. Hidden location to do hand-offs? A meth lab? A quiet place to cut coke or eliminate competition? The report didn't state where the work was done, or who paid for it, just that it was completed and more contractors were waiting in line to do more work. The flow of money never seemed to stop.

Easy: do it in plain sight. That was how H.H. Holmes had done it in Chicago at the turn of the twentieth century when he paid different contractors to build his house of horrors. Terrell was used to telling new agents about cases like that one to show how easy it was to commit certain crimes that looked difficult to perform, but were actually quite easy:

Holmes had all kinds of chutes leading to the basement where he used to send the bodies of his victims after he murdered them. In addition, they built soundproof rooms that could only be opened from the outside that had gas pumped into them to render the victim unconscious.

All built by public contractors because they didn't know that he was constantly firing the work crews and no one saw the big picture. The house was designed to feed the incinerator.

And Holmes always fed it because he was always hungry.

Another car. Number eight: a gray Corolla. DSM-something. He blinked. No, that was number six. He took a good look at the passing vehicle. Yep, same one as before. Perfect body. Corner bent on the license plate. Must be looking for a parking space. Or lost. He would keep an eye on it.

Another transcript. He had gotten the names of a few of the construction workers. All interviewed by the Bureau. One of them died recently. What did Del find out? What connection had he made?

He was getting tired. The visit with Darlene did not go well and her reaction this year caught him by surprise. He didn't know what to do anymore. He knew Del loved her, and she was a wonderful woman, but the whole relationship thing was beyond him. If she ever dated anyone, he would run a full background check on the guy and let him know that he was not welcome if he seemed the least bit questionable. Even with her demand that he not return, he knew that he would keep checking up on her and Del Jr. if for no other reason than to make himself feel better. *I won't leave them alone, Del. Don't worry.*

He realized that at some point he was going to have to stop talking to people who weren't there, but he was good with it. One day he would feel a sense of closure and then move on. That day was not today.

Something glinted in a window over to his right. He turned his head left to give the appearance of looking the other way. Was there someone surveilling him? Probably a window being closed. The heat was starting to get a bit much. Almost time to go.

His inconsistent monthly visits to Woodlawn Cemetery was just another part of his routine. Darlene was right; some of his best friends were dead and he made it a point to visit them all in the normal course of his life.

The window. There was no way to look through it. Too high up and too bright.

More paperwork. The heat didn't bother him that much. Much to do and he didn't want to hang out in a diner or other public venue when he could be here. With the people he knew.

He walked the long way around to his car. He could have jumped the fence, but he didn't want to give onlookers the wrong idea. With the chair properly folded and stashed in its carry bag, he headed toward the entrance of the cemetery at 233 Street and Webster Avenue where he had

the car parked along the web of roads that snaked their way through the Woodlawn property.

Gray Corolla. DSM-1667. Two men sat in the vehicle. Not doing very much and today Terrell was feeling paranoid. Maybe the heat.

“Good afternoon, gentlemen.” Terrell approached the vehicle and peered in. Middle-aged men. Not particularly muscular, but being armed would take care of that.

“Hello.”

“I couldn’t help but notice that you were circling the cemetery. Sure is hard to find a parking spot, isn’t it?” He peered up and down the private road. It was almost empty.

“Yes, you’re right.” Russian accent. They all laughed at the joke. “We were just looking for a good spot to stop and rest for a few moments before finishing our drive.”

“Well, this is certainly a good spot for that.” Terrell glanced around and then back at the men. Pastel blue button-down shirt. White t-shirt. Probably Dockers pants. Driver had shaved. So did the passenger. “Where you driving to?”

“Oh, probably Manhattan. You know. To pick up girls.” More laughing.

“Yeah. Well, you have a good day. Now I can tell my buddies at work how I met two guys from the Russian mafia on their way to the city to pick up girls.” They all laughed. He stood up still looking at the men, and then turned and walked away.

10: The Package

Anna walked into the imposing glass structure of the Comcast Innovation and Technology Center, at 1800 Arch Street, the newest and tallest building in Philadelphia, hoping no one would recognize her.

She decided to use a fake name just in case. When the reception security asked her for ID, she pretended to have forgotten it at home. Long drive. She couldn't reschedule. They understood and called upstairs to confirm.

They took her picture, printed out a guest pass, and pointed her toward one of the numerous banks of elevators.

The ride up was unnerving. Shiny buttons. Shiny walls. She felt the glare through her skin.

She gave the receptionist her name and sat down to wait. She crossed her legs and pulled at the dark skirt Aunt Marcie said would be perfect for a job interview. The white blouse felt comfortable, though Anna pulled at it to keep the fabric from bunching up behind her as she leaned back in the red bench seat.

"Ms. Powell?" the receptionist asked.

Anna looked up from the fashion magazine she pretended to read and stood up.

"Please come with me."

####

The interview office was small, but cold. Anna hugged herself and rubbed her arms to keep the circulation going. *So much for the short-sleeved blouse.* The desk was a U-shaped monster that took up most of the room, yet the man sitting behind it had almost nothing on its surface. A single PC with a dual-monitor set-up dominated the area to his left and a coffee cup sat to his right. The dim overhead lights made the white walls look more tan. *What I would give to have this much desk space.*

The man was overweight, but Anna thought he held it well. Not much of a double chin. Clean-shaven. Nice suit. Nice tie. Wedding ring.

No photos. Maybe he didn't have kids.

They exchanged pleasantries.

This is a waste of time.

Wait. What did he say?

"Why would you want a position as an intern?" He placed the paper copy of her resume on the desk in front of him.

His eyes were making her uncomfortable. She had seen that look before.

It was the look of incomprehension.

"I think I would be effective. There are a number of things that need to be done and I know that I can support the people who make things happen here."

"No," he said. He flipped through her paperwork. "You misunderstand me. Why would someone like you even apply here?"

She sighed to herself. "The university told me that the position wasn't filled. Is that the problem? Was there a class I should have taken? I only took five classes in broadcasting. Wasn't that enough?" she asked.

"No. I mean, yes, that's plenty. It's just that," he placed his hands on the stack of paper that represented her background, "what could you possibly learn here?"

"I can help you get organized."

"You're going to be throwing away trash." He raised his eyebrows.

"I can write. I do amazing research."

He leaned back. "You're going to make copies."

"One of my independent studies was helping children in Africa learn how to develop critical thinking skills so they could participate in their government."

"You're going to be delivering coffee."

"I really need this job. My aunt and uncle need me to start bringing home some money. They've been so good to me. I...I just want to help. There must be something I can do here."

"It's a non-paying position for the next three months and if they like you, they'll offer you a position at minimum wage." He slid her resume back to her. "You should apply as a quant at Goldman. You'd be making six figures Day One. You'll be running the place in a couple of years."

####

She sat at the lip of the fountain outside the building gritting her teeth. *Acting stupid shouldn't be this hard.* She would have to apply for something that didn't need her transcript even with her fake name. A name that was close enough to her real one so she would recognize it when someone called out to her, but not close enough that anyone would put the pieces together.

How did Superman do it? He just put on glasses.

Spiderman delivered pizza and sold his photos.

What could Anna do? She could teach programming. Math from introductory to advanced. Tae Kwon Do. Organic Chemistry. This was painful. She finally made it to the exit of academia, and the entrance to real life, and she was unemployable. Why? *Because I'm over-qualified, and my face...*

A woman holding a little girl's hand stopped and stared at her. "Excuse me, but were you on the evening news last night? Are you that girl that was kidnapped years ago?"

"No, I'm not, and I wasn't." She felt her anger rush through her stomach and into her throat and then disappear, leaving a hollow emptiness.

“That happens to me all the time.” She tried to chuckle, but a burst of air escaped her lips. She pushed her black hair behind her ear. “I hate that I look like that stupid girl. My name is Carpenter.”

####

Anna bolted through the door of the Stoddard’s house and went straight to her bedroom.

She gave them a half-hearted greeting, climbed the stairs, and closed the door, doing her best not to slam it. The twenty-year-old home barely creaked. Uncle Ray had monitored its construction and made sure that it had enough insulation to keep their heating bill low along with the sound between rooms. The walls of her room were painted a powder blue with a lacy trim along the top that Anna had convinced them to remove, but she changed her mind at the last moment.

She paced on the clean hardwood floor, considered hiding under the sheets of her queen-size bed, and instead sat down in the cushioned wooden chair in the corner near the window. The window she climbed out of numerous times, thinking she could make good her escape.

She always came back.

Someone knocked on the door. It was so soft it had to be Aunt Marcie.

####

“So the job wasn’t a good fit?”

“That building is populated by morons passing for mobile brains. They call that an innovation center? All they care about is distributing mindless programming in new and novel ways for more and more money to people who understand less and less about what they’re watching while their mirror neurons give them the warm and fuzzy feeling that they could drive a truck through ice-covered roads or cook like a master chef or be someone they’re not. They’re so lost and alone that they don’t

even realize that their lives are slipping away while they feel superior because they can answer every twentieth question on *Jeopardy* from the comfort of their easy chair that was made by underpaid workers in China or the Philippines who can at least do higher-order math.”

Aunt Marcie sat on the bed in front of Anna, listening to the verbal onslaught. Her lips gave a slight upward turn. “Can I get you some tea?”

“No. I don’t deserve any tea. I failed today.” Anna folded her hands on her lap. “How did I do that? Aunt Marcie, how did I do that?”

“Would you like me to tell you why? Or would you rather open the box that came for you?”

“Did it have any oily stains on it?”

“No.”

“It could be a bomb.”

“It doesn’t seem big enough, but I don’t know that much about explosives.” Aunt Marcie took her glasses off. That was a bad sign. She was near-sighted most of the time. “You’re trying too hard.”

“How can I...”

“You are so wound up that everyone knows you’re better than they are as soon as you walk in the room. You’re tall, you’re beautiful, you’re intelligent. And you haven’t a clue.” She put her glasses back on, stood, and walked to the wooden door that had seen better days. “Come down in a few minutes. I’ll have your favorite tea ready for you.”

“Stop being nice to me. I’m a college graduate. I drink beer now.”

Aunt Marcie smiled and walked out, closing the door behind her. Anna didn’t do gratitude well, but she’d learned living with the Stoddards for the last few years. She felt that somehow she didn’t deserve them. They were part of a life from another time stream and she’d crossed over into a world with aunts, uncles, cousins. To say the Stoddards had relatives was an understatement. Uncle Ray had five brothers and sisters and Marcie had a younger sister who recently widowed. All had multiple children. The wilds of Pennsylvania were different than the wilds of New York. It was warmer there.

####

The box was on her bed. Waiting. Anna looked it over. Aunt Marcie was right: no oil stains. It could still be a bomb, but she decided to chance it. She picked it up and twirled it in her hands. No forwarding address. The printed label had her old name: Anna Wodehouse. The address was correct.

No cancelled postage. “Uncle Ray!”

She heard his voice through the door. It carried from downstairs. “I hear yelling.”

“How long has the box been here?”

“I found it on the steps when I went for my walk this morning.”

“Thank you!”

The box was dropped off on the doorstep by someone who wasn’t the mail carrier. A messenger?

Anna put the box down, sat down in her updated Aeron chair, and turned to the monitor attached to her tablet. She played back the video feed outside the door of the house. She had set up the video monitoring system years ago on a lark. It was the kind of thing she learned to do in her younger days when there was so much to do and discover.

Now, it was just something to do.

There wasn’t much to rewind as her system only activated when the picture changed. No need for external motion sensors.

Uncle Ray and Aunt Marcie leaving the house in reverse.

Uncle Ray and Aunt Marcie arriving at the house in reverse.

Uncle Ray. Coming in. Going out.

Aunt Marcie. Going out. Coming in.

Some kid catching the newspaper when it jumped from their lawn and over the fence.

The morning sun went down and it got dark. Her cameras switched to green when the low-light imaging kicked in. When did this package arrive?

A car drove in reverse and stopped across the street. A man got out and walked in reverse to her doorstep. The cameras cut from one shot to another automatically based on distance to the door. She didn't see his face until he turned around to pick up the package.

Anna jumped. He was wearing a mask. She rewound to where the car left the frame.

Play. The time stamp read 3:42:20 a.m. Anna felt creeped out. Someone was at her house at 3:42 in the morning. This morning.

The car pulled up. The first camera to activate was at street level. She didn't know cars that well, but she would be able to look it up. The next camera tried to take a picture of the license plate, but there was none to be found at the front of the car. *Must be from New York.*

The driver got out, walked through the fence, and up the walk. He was carrying the box. Camera two and then camera three and four all cut in succession as he got closer and closer. The mask was either plastic, vinyl, or leather. It covered everything except for a slit for his eyes to see through. Anna couldn't make out what his eyes looked like or what color they were or the color of his skin, though she was sure he was white.

He looked around, and put the box down. He stood at attention for a moment and then turned, looking directly into the camera.

And waved.

He knew where the camera was!

She almost called out for Uncle Ray and then stopped herself.

What if?

What if the box was from her father? Hope jumped from her head to her heart and she threw herself on the bed and grabbed it. Only he would have known that she would have a security system installed to record everyone coming and going. Her nails were short and the box was sealed in wide paper tape that had threads running through it. She opened a drawer in her bureau, pulled out a pair of scissors, and carefully cut the box open. *Mustn't damage the contents.*

Maybe it was a graduation present. Or an airline ticket. Maybe it would be a note begging her forgiveness for leaving her alone all these years. *Oh, Dad, I knew you would come back.*

She opened it. The box was empty except for a photo, a thumb drive, and a note.

She unfolded the note.

Don't take this to the authorities.

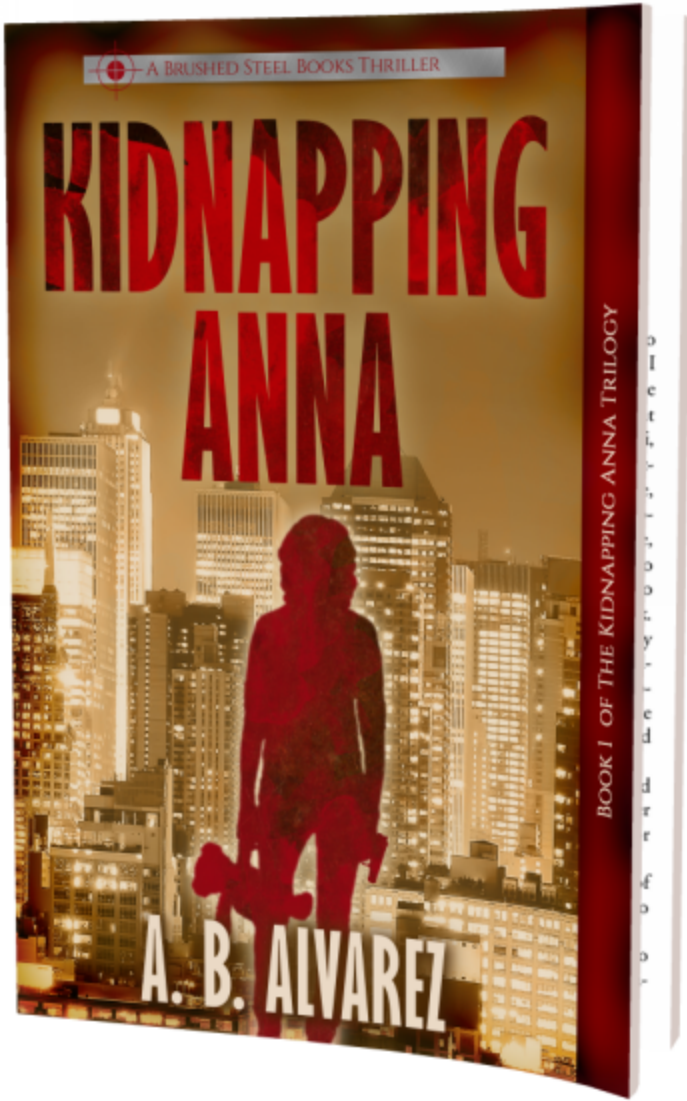
She looked at the photo. High quality paper and high-end ink. High-resolution photo, probably from a cell phone. There were a number of people in the picture. Walking toward the camera, behind the people who were being photographed, was a man. She brought her hand to her mouth. *It's him.* Her shoulders tightened. Someone else found him. And that someone else found her. Why?

She read the note again. *Don't take this to the authorities.*

Right.

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About the Author

A.B. Alvarez lives in New York. He doesn't have any cats, dogs, ferrets, or other pets. He does, however, have a daughter whom he did not kidnap.

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