

# Devil's Windpipe

by Ron Knight, ...

Published: 2014

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## Table of Contents

**Dedication**



**Settings 1 – 130**

⚔ ⚔ ⚔ ⚔ ⚔ ⚔ ⚔ ⚔ ⚔ ⚔

*I dedicate this book to whatever that thing is,  
staring at me while I sleep.*

*"The world is all the richer for having the devil in it,  
so long as we keep our foot upon his neck."  
—William James*

# 1

## **Hillsboro, Oregon Marcus Cane, Hostage Negotiator**

It figures.

Negotiator Marcus Cane had been up all night. He thought about his deceased wife, empty house, and a career that he didn't enjoy anymore. Just as the sun burned through the morning sky he received the call.

About twenty minutes ago a fifteen-year-old boy named Aden Kerr had entered the home of his ex-girlfriend, Madison Sutton, yanked her from the bed and dragged her into the closet. He covered them both with her clothes and held a knife to her neck. Madison's parents heard the scream, went to see what happened, then called 911.

When Marcus arrived on the scene he had a quick meeting with the Senior Tactical Operations Commander and the Situation Commander. Marcus entered the home and hurried upstairs. Inside the hallway were six officers, dressed as if they were about to invade Iraq. Marcus entered the bedroom and made contact with Aden. The closet door remained shut.

Six hours later, Marcus had still been trying to convince Aden to let Madison go. Aden claimed he was upset that Madison broke up with him and he wanted her back. Things like that occurred daily in high school. The idea of breaking up was part of growing up.

Aden didn't see it that way.

Marcus rubbed his tired eyes. It's his job to wear the hostage-taker down, but instead, it seemed like Aden could go on for days while Marcus was about to collapse from exhaustion.

Aden screamed from the closet, "I just want to start over!"

Marcus heard that same plea for the last six hours. "I understand—"

"No! You don't understand! You don't understand shit!"

"Calm down, Aden," Marcus said, feeling like he was losing control of the situation. "Just tell me how I can help." That same question had been asked at least fifty times already.

Marcus heard crying from the closet. He thought it was Madison who had been crying off and on, but the moans were deep. Marcus thought about Aden's father who passed away two years ago. "Aden, do you miss your dad?"

He didn't respond. Aden's crying became hysterical.

Marcus reached down for his whiteboard and marker. He wrote, *Bring me Aden's mother*, then pointed the whiteboard toward the hallway so that the officers could see.

"Just let me go!" Madison screamed.

Marcus stepped toward the closet. "Madison. I need you to stay calm. I know it's hard."

Aden cried out, "Why does everyone hate me!"

Marcus sensed that Aden was at the point where he would either give up, or kill Madison. "Aden, I need you to calm down as well. I'm going to step into the hallway for a moment. Promise me you won't do anything when I'm gone."

"Why are you leaving?" Aden screamed. "No one else better come in the bedroom! I'll kill her!"

"No one else is coming in here." Marcus waited for a moment. He heard muffled sounds of crying, both from Aden and Madison. Marcus didn't want anything to happen in that short time he would be gone, but he felt this was important enough to take the chance.

He hurried to the hallway, then handed a Gatorade by an officer. Marcus drank down half of it and approached Aden's mother; her eyes red and moist with tears. She stepped forward, but the officer held her back. Marcus spoke in a low direct voice. "What kind of relationship did Aden have with his father?"

"He's a good boy," she cried. "Please help everyone see that. He's good."

Marcus leveled his gaze. "For me to help him, I need to you answer my questions and let me get back inside."

She glanced at the floor, then looked up. "Daniel was strict with Aden, but they got along okay."

"When Aden did something wrong, how was he punished?"

Her expression was as if someone just slapped her in the face. "Are you trying to blame all this on my dead husband?"

"Think back to when Aden did something really bad. What did your husband do?"

She swallowed, then softened her gaze. "He would tell Aden what he did wrong, then punish him."

"Did your husband yell at him, or speak in a calm voice?"

"Yell...I guess." She wiped a gush of tears that spilled from her eyes. "He spanked Aden when he was little, but never really hard."

"When your husband was angry, did he swear?"

"I don't understand-"

"Did he curse?" Marcus asked with a hard tone.

"Yes...he swore!" Her voice carried.

Marcus looked at the officer. "I'm finished."

As she was pulled down the hallway, she turned her head and yelled, "Aden! I love you!"

Marcus hurried to the bedroom. "Aden. I'm back."

“Was that my mother?” he asked in a soft voice.

Marcus wondered if Aden’s father were alive, would this have happened. Did Aden think of Madison as just another person that would leave him?

Marcus stood next to the closet. “Aden, you said that you wanted to start over.” Aden didn’t respond. “I have a better idea. Put the knife down, let Madison go, and walk out here.”

“What will happen to me?”

Marcus usually lied at this point, but this situation was different. “I’m going to put handcuffs on you, then take you to jail.”

No response.

“Aden!” Marcus shouted. “Put the fucking knife down and let her go!”

No response.

“Show Madison how much you love her!” Marcus yelled with all the energy that he had remaining. “If you let her go, she’ll live the rest of her life thinking about what you did. Not a day will go by when she won’t think of you. Now put the damn knife down, or I’m coming in there and taking it from you!”

The closet door opened. Madison came running out, into the arms of Marcus. He guided her to the door where she was escorted down the hallway by two officers.

Marcus returned to the closet. “Aden? Are you okay?”

Under a pile of clothes, Aden said, “Don’t come in here.”

Marcus kneeled inside the closet, trying to see how Aden was positioned under the clothes. “Give me the knife.”

“Daddy!” Aden screamed. Marcus tore off the clothes, then was hit in the face with a spurt of blood.

Marcus then yanked the knife from Aden’s neck.

## 2

### ***Raleigh, North Carolina Court Truss, Bodyguard***

It figures.

Court scanned over the packed lecture hall, wondering how many more people could possibly fit inside. Her curly red hair bounced as she made her way through the crowd toward the stage. Court owned a security company that provided bodyguards for anyone that earned over a million dollars a year. Her clients had ranged from politicians, actors, musicians, talk show hosts, radio personalities, and even a famous chef.

However, her clients were not only rich and powerful, they were assholes, which is why they needed protection.

Patrick Dodd, her current client, was backstage waiting to be announced. Recently, Forbes named him one of the top 400 richest men in America. He squeaked on the list at number 398.

His company, Dodd Specialty Vehicles, Corp, manufactured and sold a variety of trucks that ranged from backhoe loaders, dump trucks, sleeper trucks, and

freight carriers. Patrick's company was based in Raleigh, North Carolina, just twenty minutes from Court's home where she lived with her husband, famous author Jon Truss.

She envisioned Jon sitting at the house, drinking a root beer, hammering away at his next masterpiece with the ease of someone writing a birthday card.

Court didn't need this job because they had plenty of money. But she did need to keep occupied while Jon wrote his books. And being a bodyguard was all she knew.

She glanced at her watch and spoke into her mike. "Okay, we have three minutes. The place is full, so keep your eyes open." She had a team of six bodyguards inside the lecture hall, positioned near the stage. Two more were in the audience dressed in plain clothes. Behind stage, four bodyguards stayed by Patrick Dodd at all times. And outside, two bodyguards waited by the bullet proof SUV.

Court stood to the right of the stage gazing at the crowded lecture hall filled with every type of business personality, from students fresh out of college, to seasoned CEO's. It was a fundraising event for homeless families in North Carolina, but the real reason everyone attended was to gain valuable insights from the great Patrick Dodd.

In short, the audience wanted to be rich and believed that Patrick had the magic formula.

"Bring him in," Court said in her mike.

A few seconds later the crowd erupted as Patrick took the stage. It was hard to tell the difference between this being a speaking engagement and a rock concert.

Patrick gave his signature smile, waved to the audience, and took his spot behind the podium. The audience continued cheering for several more minutes. No one wanted to be the first to stop clapping, fearing that Patrick may notice.

In reality, Patrick kept his eyes just above the audience, because of his fear of public speaking, but no one knew.

Except for Court.

Her eyes swept the audience. Everyone was well dressed, with a mixture of both men and women. The front row had been reserved for the elite in North Carolina, along with a few directors of local shelters.

As Patrick began his speech, Court whispered in her mike, "Look at each face. Search for anyone on the watch list."

The *watch list* was made up of Patrick's enemies. She had him provide the list, then made her bodyguard memorize the photos.

For Patrick, his main threats weren't from rival companies, but rather disgruntle people that had been laid off in the last year. Five thousand people lost their jobs when the economy collapsed. The company received a stimulus from the government, which was supposed to be used for growing the business and rehire most of those who lost their job, but Patrick *invested* the money in his executive team. 'I need to keep my leaders happy, or the business will fail.' That of course didn't sit well with anyone, especially the ex-employees.

"*Something is wrong,*" a bodyguard said over the mike.

Court looked at Patrick. He had stopped in the middle of his speech. "Give him a moment," she said in her mike. Once in a while, the stage fright would catch up to

Patrick. He always worked through it by pretending to become emotional in what he had been saying.

*"No, something is seriously wrong," the bodyguard demanded. "His eyes are fixed in the crowd."*

Court glanced at Patrick, then studied the audience. Everyone in the lecture hall had sensed the uncomfortable silence. Patrick cleared his throat, then continued a few sentences in his speech. His eyes fluttered and his voice cracked in the microphone.

Court's eyes continued sweeping across the audience. Was there a rival competitor in attendance? A disgruntled employee that didn't make the top of their watch list?

Patrick struggled to get through his speech, cutting it about twenty minutes short. The audience gave a weak applause. Patrick then introduced the directors of the local shelters and asked that they come on stage. As the four directors made their way up, the crowd gave a standing ovation.

Then, a gun went off.

Court ran on the stage. Patrick had ducked behind the podium. Four more shots echoed through the hall, hitting one of the directors. The other three shots tore into the wood of the podium.

A stampede headed to the exits. The six bodyguards near the stage ran for the shooter. It was a woman, holding two different guns, firing at anyone that came close to her.

Court scooped up Patrick and practically carried him toward the back of the stage. Three more shots rang loud. One of the bullets hit Court in her vest, but that didn't slow her down.

In fifteen seconds, Court had Patrick in the SUV. The driver hit the gas and sped down the alley, then did eighty down a side street.

"Slow down," Court said from the backseat, trying to catch her breath. She looked at Patrick. "Are you okay?"

"What the fuck was that?" he shouted.

Court tore off her vest, seeing the bullet lodged in the side. "Some woman was shooting at you."

Patrick's skin had turned a deep crimson. "I'm not asking what happened, I'm asking what the fuck were you thinking?"

She snapped her eyes at him. "Excuse me?"

"You carried me off stage like a fucking child! I guarantee it will be on YouTube in the next thirty seconds."

Court was absolutely baffled. "I saved your life. Some of my team could be injured right now."

"Who gives a shit." Patrick gazed out the tinted window. "This is fucking disaster."

"Did you know the woman?"

He looked at her. "Yes. Someone I was banging on the side."

"Why didn't she make the watch list?"

"I didn't think she would be a problem."

Court heard enough. "Pull over!" she said to the driver.

Patrick raised his hands. "What are you doing?"

Court tossed the vest on his lap. "Keep that to remind yourself that I took a bullet for you." She opened the door, stepped out, then slammed the door shut as the SUV pulled away.

She called each of her team members to make sure they were okay. Miraculously, none of them had been injured.

Court then called for cab.

### 3

#### ***Jon Truss, Author***

It figures.

Jon had just gotten into a writing grove when he saw on the security camera that Court had arrived home. His office was soundproof and Court wouldn't disturb him, but she looked ticked off. Plus, she was home four hours sooner than expected.

After careful deliberation, Jon decided he'd better make sure Court was okay. He saved his latest novel on the laptop, backed it up on a flash drive, then glanced at the security monitor. Court had already changed into her spandex workout clothes and was in the exercise room, punching the bag.

"Not good," Jon said to himself, walking out of the office. He was one of the few people in the world that wasn't afraid of Court, but even so, he hesitated before entering the exercise room. "So, how was your day?" he asked with a beaming smile.

Court whacked the punching bag with lightning speed. "It sucked. How was your day?"

Jon noticed a round purple bruise on her ribcage. "What happened?"

Court kicked the bag, threw a couple more jabs, then caught her breath. She scooped up a towel, wiped her face, then cracked open a bottle of Propel. "I'm done with the bodyguard business."

"You say that every week."

"No, seriously, I'm finished." She sucked down half the bottle. "These rich assholes want protection, but treat the bodyguards like shit."

"That isn't something you didn't already know."

Court glared at him. "Can you please just pretend to understand what it's like to have a job?"

Jon chuckled. "I'll try."

Court drank the rest of the Propel and tossed the bottle in a recycling bin. "Some woman snuck two guns into the lecture hall, walked right up to the stage, and started shooting."

"Was anyone hurt?"

"A director of a shelter." Court pointed to the bruise. "And me. I took a bullet for that asshole."

"Obviously you had your vest on."

"It still hurts."

"I wouldn't know. But it looks sore."

Court grabbed the towel, wiped her face again, then ran the towel through her curly red hair. "Of course when that woman started shooting, I grabbed Patrick and carried him off stage."

Jon put his hand up. "Wait a second. You carried Patrick Dobb off the stage? Please tell me someone got that on video."

Court narrowed her eyes. "You're missing the point. I took a bullet for Patrick, saved his life, and-"

"Carried him off stage like a scared toddler." Jon laughed. "I'm going to check YouTube." He hurried out of the exercise room and headed back to his office.

Court followed him. "Don't you care that I was shot today?"

"Every career has its dangers." Jon plopped down at his desk and brought up the YouTube website on his laptop.

"Give me a break," Court said, looking over his shoulder. "What kind of dangers do you have?"

"My fingers get a little stiff from typing...sometimes."

Court finally smiled. "You're an asshole."

Jon found three videos. He clicked on the longest one. The video was obviously done with an iPhone. It shook as the crowd ran over each other to exit the lecture hall. The gunshots could be heard, echoing like firecrackers in a garbage can.

The video came into focus. Court scooped up Patrick and carried him to the rear of the stage. She was shot in the process, but didn't slow down. The woman was then tackled by three bodyguards.

Jon replayed the video again, pausing it when Court picked up Patrick. "That is freakin' hilarious. You're carrying one of the richest men in the United States off the stage like a child that wouldn't leave the toy store." He looked back at Court. "Can we print this and hang it on the wall?"

Court closed his laptop, then pushed it to the side. She then sat on top of his desk. "Let's take a vacation."

"Sure. Just as long as I get some writing done. Where do you want to go?"

Court shook her head. "I don't know. Anywhere but here."

Jon's cell phone buzzed on the table next to him. He looked at the caller ID. "It's Marcus Cane."

Court slid off the desk. "Really? I wonder what he wants?"

Jon flipped open the cell. "Hey Marcus, what's up?"

"I need to talk."

"Sure. What's going on?"

"Actually, I'm in your driveway. Do you mind if I come in?"

## 4

A year ago, Jon had written a non-fiction book about hostage negotiators. He interviewed one from each state. All of them had terrific stories, but Marcus Cane was Jon's favorite. Marcus had negotiated a situation with seventy-two employees in a large office building that were held hostage. He saved sixty-four employees and lost eight. His methods almost got him fired, which is exactly why Jon had been intrigued.



They gathered in the living room. Marcus looked every bit of fifty-five, with silver buzzed hair and expression that seemed as if he hadn't slept in weeks. Court handed everyone a longneck Budweiser. They each took a sip, waiting for the other to speak.

"So," Jon said, breaking the silence. "Are you on vacation? Court and I were just thinking of going somewhere ourselves."

"I retired yesterday." Marcus took a swig of beer and didn't speak for a long moment. "Some fifteen-year-old boy held his ex-girlfriend hostage with a knife to her throat. I ended up saving the girl, but the boy..." Marcus took another sip of beer. "The damn kid stabbed himself in the neck."

Jon glanced at Court, then brought his eyes on Marcus. "Of all the negotiators I interviewed for the book, not one saved every person."

Marcus shook his head. "Being a negotiator is like playing catch up. When I get to the scene, the crime has already been going on for at least twenty minutes, sometimes longer. I can't be in a bad mood, or a good mood. I can't be tired. The hostages and the hostage-takers don't give a shit what kind of day I had."

Court put her beer on the coffee table. "It definitely sounds like you need to clear your head. How about you come with us on vacation."

Marcus gave Court a weak smile. "I saw what happened to you today. The video went viral."

Court snatched her beer and took a swig. "Well, except for Jon, everyone has bad days once in a while." She gave Jon a wink.

Marcus placed his beer down and eased up from the sofa. "I want to be ahead of a crime, not running behind it. I want to prevent a horrible situation from happening, rather than trying to play catch up." He looked at Court. "What if we could have stopped that woman from entering the lecture hall and shooting at Patrick Dobb? What if I could have stopped that teenage boy from kidnapping his ex-girlfriend?"

"That all sounds good," Court said. "But it's unrealistic."

"Maybe." He slid back down on the couch, leaned forward, then folded his hands. "The three of us are experts in observing. It also means that we can detect a bad situation, even before it happens." Marcus' eyes rolled up, gazing at Jon and Court. "For example, if we observed employees at a business, we could discover problems before it actually happens. We could walk into a bank and figure out the best ways to rob it, share the information, so the bank can change their security."

Court finished her beer and smiled. "We could stand at a school bus stop and observe how the kids go home. By doing this, we can find ways to make the bus stop safer."

"Exactly," Marcus said with renewed energy. "We have a negotiator, bodyguard, and a bestselling author working together to prevent bad situations before it comes to fruition." He smiled. "What do you think?"

"I'm in," Court said. "I need a career change. It sounds more meaningful than protecting rich assholes."

They looked at Jon. To him, it was obvious that Court wanted to keep herself busy and Marcus was desperate to change his life. "Is this going to be like a real business?" Jon asked. "I became an author so I didn't have to work."

"You can get some great ideas," Court suggested. "Think of it as expanding your imagination while helping others at the same time. We'll do all the work, you write the stories about what we do and sell the books."

Jon looked at Court, then at Marcus. "So, what should we call this new team of superheroes," he asked with a grin. "What will it say on our business card?"

Marcus blurted a suggestion. "Revelation, Inc."

## 5

### ***Lake Montezuma, Arizona***

#### ***Kristy Polston, Mother of Missing Child***

It had been three days since her son disappeared.

Kristy Polston lived in a small town called, Lake Montezuma, located between Flagstaff and Phoenix. Her thirteen-year-old son, Devin, went missing sometime between eleven o'clock p.m. and six o'clock a.m.

Kristy's husband died two years ago in a car accident. He was on his way to pick up Devin from school when a school bus of all things ran a red light and smashed into his truck. The driver of the bus had been texting while doing fifty miles per hour, but luckily the bus was empty and the driver suffered minor injuries.

However, Kristy's husband died on the way to the hospital.

Now, Kristy feared that her son might be gone forever as well.

Although they lived in Arizona, January still became quite cold, especially at night. The temperature had been around twenty-five degrees. Kristy couldn't get rid an image of Devin shivering in the darkness while the predator had his way with him.

The FBI had now become involved. That continued to give her hope, but at the same time, they told her to be realistic about the situation. Three days for a child to be missing was statistically not a promising situation.

Media had been camped outside her home. She heard that the Beaver Creek Inn was filled to capacity, which is where Kristy worked as the assistant manager. The story was on the front page of every national media outlet.

The FBI had asked Kristy if it were possible that Devin ran away. She couldn't think of one good reason that he would. After his father died, Devin had trouble leaving her side. He even asked to be home schooled, but Kristy had been extremely busy at work. The Beaver Creek Inn was popular all year. Paranormal fanatics would stay at the inn, then travel to Devils Windpipe, a valley located ten miles away in the Saguaro Mountain.

In the valley, it is believed that you can hear the devil whispering. And if the devil becomes angry enough, he creates an earthquake to kill all those inside the valley.

The last earthquake was three days ago, at 6:06 in the morning, showing 3.3 on the Richter Scale. Kristy's house shook, plates crashed on the kitchen floor, and pictures fell off the walls. Kristy hurried to Devin's room to make sure he was okay.

He was gone.

Kristy searched the rest of the house, her yard, and the neighborhood. She returned home and called everyone she knew. Then, Kristy called the police.

A young FBI agent named Austin Redman had been assigned to the house. Kristy knew it was a crap assignment for him to be a babysitter. It meant spending every second waiting by her side to make sure nothing happens. The phone line had been monitored by the FBI office in Phoenix. Kristy was pretty much stuck here, cut off from the world, with only Agent Redman to keep her company. They became so close he made her call him Austin.

He had been working on her computer, searching for clues, which is how he spent most of his time. She looked over his shoulder. There was a stack of business cards and letters on the small desk. She noticed Austin had been doing research on Google.

He glanced back at her. "I made coffee. Also, I cut up some fruit and added granola. You should eat."

"You don't have to be my personal servant."

He looked at the screen. "I know. Just trying to keep busy."

She picked up one of the business cards. "Where did you get this?" The card had the name, phone number, and website for a psychic.

"In your mailbox. You have seven offers from psychics to help find your son." He tapped on the keys, doing research on one of the psychics. "They come out of the woodwork."

Kristy dropped the card on the desk. "Can any of them help?"

"No." He turned and locked his eyes on her. "Some offer their services for a fee; others just want a way to increase their book sales. Psychics do more harm than good. That includes Drey Harten." Austin turned back to the computer. "In fact, we have to rule all of them out as suspects once they try to make contact with you."

Kristy shook her head. "Wait a second. Who is Drey Harten?"

"When I was researching the other psychics, I saw that you had pulled up a past article on Drey Harten and clicked on the link."

"I haven't been on this computer since..." A tear spilt from her eye. She became frustrated that the FBI had completely taken over her life, yet nothing seemed to be getting done. "Just forget it."

Kristy went back upstairs to Devin's bedroom, laid on his bed, and began crying into his pillow.

## 6

***Jon Truss, Author***

***Court Truss, Bodyguard***

***Marcus Cane, Former Hostage Negotiator***

"I have a schedule!" Court said, hurrying into the kitchen. Jon and Marcus were sitting in the breakfast nook, eating a bagel and drinking coffee.

"Schedule?" Jon asked. "Already?"

Court pulled up a chair, snatched the rest of his bagel, and shoved it in her mouth. After chewing it down, she said, "I have several schools lined up in Raleigh. We need to get started today and gather information."

Marcus sipped his coffee. "Sounds good."

Jon's cell buzzed. The caller ID showed the name, Bram Ertmas, who was Jon's literary agent. "Hey Bram." Jon stood and walked to the next room. "What's going on? This better be a money call." Jon always teased that Bram should make him more money, but in reality, Bram made him a millionaire.

"I got a great book idea for you."

Jon rolled his eyes. "Everyone seems to have a great book idea for me." Jon thought about the books he would soon be writing for Revelation, Inc., along with his other novel that he had been working on. He had more than enough on his plate.

"I have a paranormal slash kidnapping storyline that's getting tons of publicity. You could knock the book out in a couple of weeks."

"It's not that easy to knock books out."

"I understand, but this one will be huge. It takes place near a valley called, Devils Windpipe. Heck, that could be the title of your book."

"What idiot would title his book, Devils Windpipe?"

"It's catchy."

"I think it sounds stupid."

"Anyway, Devils Windpipe is known for having paranormal activity. People say that they can hear the devil whispering. Also, if the devil becomes angry, he sends an earthquake."

Jon took a few seconds to respond. "Sorry, I was nodding off."

"Don't be a smartass. Listen, a kid went missing in Lake Montezuma three days ago, which is about ten miles from Devils Windpipe. The FBI is on the scene. Every national media outlet is covering the story. This is a great book opportunity."

"It sounds more like you want me to be a journalist, not an author."

"I never pressure you into writing certain books, but this is different."

Actually, Jon had been pressured by Bram on many occasions to write certain books. "I'm already writing my next novel. Plus, Court and Marcus Cane started a business and they need my help."

"Marcus Cane? The negotiator?"

"Yeah."

"What kind of business? Don't they understand you hate to work?"

"I don't think they want me to do that much, just write the stories of what happens."

"Well, you can still do all that, but I really think Devils Windpipe is a national bestseller just waiting to be written by the great Jon Truss."

Jon knew that Bram wasn't going to give up. "Where is Lake Monte-whatever?"

"Lake Montezuma. It's halfway between Flagstaff and Phoenix."

"Arizona? You do realize I live in North Carolina."

"Yeah, and I realize you have a new private jet that I helped you purchase with my awesome literary agent skills."

Jon sighed. Bram had successfully worn him down. "I'll see what I can do."

"Remember," Bram said, "Call the book, Devils Windpipe."

“Whatever.” Jon hung up and shoved the phone in his pocket. He turned, seeing Court and Marcus leaning up against the wall, glaring at him. “How long have you two been listening?”

“Long enough,” Court said. “What did Bram just talk you into doing?”

“A book idea in Arizona.”

“What about our business? We’re starting today.” Courts skin turned the same color as her curly red hair.

“I’ll help you get started, then fly to Arizona. There’s a missing kid that Bram wants me to do a book about. It’s getting national attention.”

Marcus stepped forward. “Our goal is to prevent kids from going missing.”

“I understand.” Jon felt like he was being squeezed by his wife, friend, and agent. At this point, all he wanted to do was head back to his office and write the novel he had been working on, rather than caving into their pressure.

Court softened her gaze. “You know what...We’re trying to push you into doing what *we* want.” She moved toward him and kissed his lips. “I’m sorry. Marcus and I can handle things here. You go to Arizona, then send the plane back for us. We’ll meet you in a week, or so.”

Jon felt a twinge of guilt. “Are you sure?”

“Positive,” she said, giving him another peck on his lips. “I’ll let the twins know that they should pack their bags.”

The twins lived in the guesthouse on the property. Andrew and Ashley Wilcher were abandoned by their parents when they were ten-years-old. It wasn’t for another year and half before someone discovered that they were living on their own. Andrew and Ashley made their own meals, went to school, and somehow paid the bills. (To this day, no one knows where they got the money.) The twins were eventually adopted. When they turned eighteen, they both decided to become bodyguards. Court was the first to hire and train them.

Now twenty-two-years-old, the twins run fifteen miles every other day. They workout in the gym, or do tactical training on the off days. The twins are experts in threat detection, tactical planning and operations, psychological intervention, extracting procedures, stalker detection and prevention, emergency medical training, and anti-paparazzi training.

They each carry a Taser that shoots two small probes into the victim, delivering 50,000 volts for five seconds. The probes can be shot from thirty-five feet away. The Taser’s have a small video camera and equipped with a light beacon located on the handle, which can be seen from five miles away.

Some may wonder why an author needs bodyguards. A great author can manipulate the minds of readers into believing the stories are true. Not a day goes by when some nut-job-reader approaches Jon. In most cases it’s a harmless conversation, but once in a while someone comes after Jon with the intent to kill him.

With the twins by Jon’s side, no one has a chance to harm him.

Kristy gazed out her bedroom window. The media still hadn't given up, airing live reports around the clock. She stepped away from the window, knowing that it would soon be four days since Devin went missing. How long will the media stay here? How long will the FBI search for Devin?

How long before Kristy finally comes to terms that Devin would never come back home.

It was after eleven when she went downstairs. Austin had fallen asleep on the couch, fully dressed with his shoes still on. Kristy wondered if Austin had a family of his own. Was there a wife and kids that wondered when he would be done with this case?

Kristy went to her desk. The business cards and letters that Austin had been sifting through were now in the garbage can. She eased into her chair and fired up the computer.

For the next ten minutes she just sat there, lost in thought. She was going to do research on missing children, but that seemed pointless. She considered watching a few of the updates from the media, but once again, what would be the point?

Kristy glanced at the wastebasket next to the desk, then looked at the screensaver of Devin running to first base, a picture she took last summer.

For some reason, the name *Drey Harten* continued popping in her head.

Austin had mentioned that name like it was poison. She moved the mouse to wake up the computer, then typed in Drey Harten's name inside the Google search. Several stories came up, including a link that was highlighted purple; meaning, someone had researched Drey Harten on this computer. It wasn't Austin, because he mentioned to her that Drey Harten wouldn't be able to help. However someone had already done a search on him.

She clicked on the purple highlighted link. The story was from 1992, when Drey Harten claimed that he would no longer be available for missing person's cases. The photo of Drey was black and white. He looked about thirty at the time. That was twenty years ago.

Kristy clicked on other links, reading stories about how Drey Harten was the only proven psychic to find people that had been abducted. He even found runaways. Article after article discussed his track record of success.

A blog from 1990 was written by Drey himself, discussing how he hired an author to publish a new book that documented his stories. The book was called, *Bring Them Home*, co-authored by Drey Harten and Jon Truss.

The name Jon Truss rang a bell. She remembered stocking his novels in the gift shop at the Beaver Creek Inn.

Kristy did a search on the book, but couldn't find it, not even on Amazon, or on Jon Truss' website. She typed the name of the book in Google Images. The front cover had a photograph of Drey Harten with a serious look. The back cover was filled with testimonials, along with a photo and information about Jon Truss and Drey Harten.

When the book was released in 1990, Jon lived in North Carolina and Drey lived in Colorado, but the cities weren't mentioned.

Kristy suddenly realized that she had been doing research on Drey Harten for the last thirty minutes. But why? She agreed with Austin that a psychic couldn't help find her son.

But Drey Harten seemed credible.

"What's going on?" Austin said from behind.

She turned, heart banging against her chest. "Jesus, you scared the crap out of me."

He glanced at the computer screen. "Don't go down that road."

"What road?"

"You're feeling desperate. That's when parents start trying anything." He wiped his tired eyes. "I may look young, but this is my seventeenth missing children's case. Whenever parents bring in psychics, it compounds the problems."

Kristy stood. "Of those seventeen, how many of those children did the FBI find?"

"Sixteen."

"How many of those children were still alive?"

Austin shied his eyes away. "Twelve."

"I'm coming up on four days since I last spoke to my son." Saying those words aloud caused Kristy's heart to soften. Tears welled up in her eyes. "Besides you, no one has spoken to me about what's being done."

"I can assure you that everything possible is being—"

"I understand that," Kristy said, wiping the tears off her face. "But no one has a single clue. No leads. No assumptions. Not even an idea of what happened."

Austin opened his mouth to speak, but then closed it. He went through this a couple of more times. "Psychics won't find your son."

"You said that I did a search on Drey Harten. But I didn't. I've never heard the name until you mentioned it to me."

"You must have. It was—" Austin's eyes became wide like silver dollars. "Did your son have access to the computer?"

"I let him use it for school and—" She paused, heart thundering, tears warm on her cheeks. "Do you think Devin researched him? Why would he?"

Austin grabbed the cell phone from his pocket and called the special agent in charge, William Brinkman.

Kristy eased back down on the chair. The screen saver on the computer popped up again. She gazed at it, seeing Devin's determination as he ran to first base. Ever since his father died, Devin had that same determined look.

Austin touched Kristy's shoulder. "Drey Harten lives in Timpas, Colorado. A team is heading there now."

Hot tears drizzled from her eyes. "Do you think Devin went there?"

"I don't know. It's worth checking."

More tears spilt from her eyes as she gazed at Austin. "Maybe Devin believed that Drey Harten could find his father." Kristy's words cut into her heart. "Is Drey's current address somewhere on the web?"

"I'm sure it is," Austin said in a soft voice. "Let's not jump to conclusions."

To Kristy, it seemed possible that Devin researched ways to find missing persons and came across Drey Harten's name. Devin became determined to ask Drey to find the one person that was missing in his life.

Kristy leaned forward, crying into her hands. Austin's phone beeped. Kristy shot her head up. "What happened?"

Austin looked at his phone, apparently reading a text message. His eyes rolled up to her. "They searched Drey Harten's home, looked at his phone records, and questioned him. Devin wasn't there and never made contact with Drey."

## 8

***Jon Truss, Author***

***Andrew and Ashley Wilcher, Bodyguards***

Jon's plane landed in Flagstaff. He and the twins took a cab to the nearest GMC dealership, where Jon purchased a black Yukon SUV. It took another couple of hours to reach the Beaver Creek Inn at Lake Montezuma. Ashley went inside, then returned a few minutes later. "They don't have any rooms available."

Andrew made three phone calls, then found a house for rent, located about fifteen minutes away. Ashley drove, while Andrew made arrangements with the landlord over the phone, promising to pay two months' rent if they could stay just a week.

They met the landlord at the three-story home that smelled as if it had been empty for a couple of years. Jon made his way to the top floor, which was a refurnished attic that had been either an office, or someone's bedroom.

While Andrew went grocery shopping, Jon began working. He fired up his laptop and scanned over every story done in the last four days about a missing thirteen-year-old boy named Devin Poulston. His mother, Kristy Poulston, had done several media appearances the first couple of days, but has since stayed inside the home. Her husband had been killed in an accident two years ago when a school bus ran a red light.

Jon shook his head, made notes in the laptop, saved the file, then researched Devils Windpipe. He read about the earthquake four days ago, on January 6<sup>th</sup>, at 6:06 a.m. The paranormal followers had a field day with that, stating, "The devil became angry."

Jon entered Devin Poulston's name in the YouTube search, finding several news stories, but one that caught his attention. The video showed the tail end of what first appeared to be an FBI raid on a house. The agents wore blue windbreakers and none of them had drawn their weapon.

The video went on for another minute, as the agents returned to their vehicles and sped off. Jon played it again, then hit pause. He recognized the home.

"Drey Harten," he said to himself. Jon wondered if Drey had suddenly come out of retirement.

Jon remembered back in 1990 when he was broke and still looking to make it as an author. He sent a letter to Drey Harten, asking if he could write a book about him. Jon didn't expect a reply, but Drey called three weeks later and asked if Jon could write three chapters to get a feeling of how the book would go.



That day, Jon wrote the chapters and mailed them to Drey. Two weeks later, Drey sent all his notes, did an extensive phone interview, and even lined up a local publisher in Colorado.

Eleven months later Jon had his first book published, which sold only a thousand copies. However, the book opened a door for Jon to be picked up by an agent. A year later, he was writing books and earning a living. (As opposed to just writing books and not earning money.)

As for this novel, Bram was right. This had a potential to be a great story. Jon already had tons of background information on Drey Harten, although, they haven't spoken in twenty years. When Drey retired in 1992, he fell off the map. Coincidentally, so did the book he worked on with Jon.

Now, this potential novel included a missing thirteen-year-old boy, a paranormal valley where the devil apparently whispers, and the first earthquake this area had in fifty years.

Jon heard a creak just outside the door. "You can come in," he shouted.

Ashley opened the door. "Sorry, were you writing?"

"Nah, just doing research. What's up?"

"Good news. We don't have to stay in this shit hole. Andrew got us a room at the Beaver Creek Inn."

"I thought they didn't have any rooms available?"

Ashley formed a grin. "It's probably best that you don't know what Andrew did."

Jon laughed, then shut his laptop. "You're right. I don't want to know."

## 9

### ***Court Truss, Bodyguard Marcus Cane, Former Hostage Negotiator***

Inside the minivan, Court used binoculars to view the bus stop. She spoke as Marcus took notes.

"Elementary aged students exited the bus at Marigold and Lily Street at 3:34. Seven of them picked up either by mom, or dad." Court read off the license plates. "Three students walking home. A boy and girl, both African-American. The boy appears to be in second grade, the girl in third, or fourth. A third student, white male, definitely fifth grade. The young boy and girl seemed to be together, the fifth grader is on his own. Three children road their bikes, all boys. My guess is they are in third grade. Everyone dressed in heavy jackets. Most of the students have hat and gloves as well." Court glanced at her watch. "Bus stop clears at 3:38."

Marcus continued making notes, while glancing up to view the area.

Court put the binoculars down and shifted the gear into drive. She watched the three boys on bikes. "All bike riders turned left on Iris Road." Court's eyes swept the area. "Looks like older sister, or babysitter met up with the two African-American children. They turned down Peony Circle."

Marcus looked up. "What about the fifth grader?"

“Still walking.” She pointed at the older boy. He was looking down while he walked. Court pulled over and picked up her binoculars. “He’s texting on his cell phone.”

“Alright,” Marcus said, making another quick note. “Let’s stay on him and get his address. We’ll research the license plates tonight. Then tomorrow we’ll get the addresses for the other kids walking and the bike riders.”

Court put the binoculars down and eased the van forward. She watched as the boy turned down Anemone Way. He kept his head down until he arrived home. Court pulled over and picked up her binoculars as the boy punched in the code at the garage. The door opened and he walked in, then continued texting. Court and Marcus waited. The boy eventually shut the garage door.

Marcus made a few notes. “Did you get the code for the garage?”

“1963,” she said.

“Probably the year that one of his parents was born.”

“Idiotic,” Court said as she turned the mini-van around and headed back to the house.

## 10

### ***Kristy Polston, Mother of Missing Child***

Special FBI Agent in charge William Brinkman sat with Kristy at the kitchen table. He was short, yet muscular, with buzzed silver hair and a gaze made out of pure steel. He dressed in a dark blue suite, white shirt, and blue tie. The entire outfit shined as if this was the first time he had worn it.

“I need to be honest,” Brinkman said. “We’re not any closer to finding Devin. The C.A.R.P. team, which is the Child Abduction Response Plan has worked closely with the local police, brought in every resources, and done an amazing job in a short period of time. We’ve interviewed every kid in the high school, every teacher, and every staff member.” He slid a notebook from his pocket, glanced at it, then placed it on the table. “We’ve had over a thousand leads so far. None of them has given us a single shred of concrete evidence.

“We have experienced hikers leading agents through Saguaro Mountain, including the valley at Devils Windpipe. We had divers search every pond and lake. We have over ten thousand volunteers searching every county within fifty miles of here and searching every trail.

“Officers have checked every bus station, cab company, rental company, and even the seven limousine companies from Phoenix to Flagstaff. Nothing came up suspicious. We have agents reviewing surveillance video in over a hundred gas stations. They are also researching any license plates that they can see on the videos.

“Level one interview’s have been completed at every house in the neighborhood, which includes the searching of each home. We’ve interviewed anyone that frequently visits this part of your neighborhood, including your mail carrier, FedEx and UPS drivers, and others that work within a ten mile radius. We’ve interviewed all register sex offenders within thirty miles. We’ve searched known drug houses,

vacant properties, construction sites, abandon buildings, trailers, and storage lockers.”

The only words Kristy heard from that statement was, *sex offenders, drug houses, and storage lockers.*

Brinkman continued. “The hard drive on your computer has been analyzed by our computer forensics team. Anyone with a television or Internet connection has seen Devin’s picture at least once, but more likely a dozen times.”

Kristy glanced at Brinkman’s notebook. “What are you saying?” She wanted to feel something. Angry. Sad. Helpless. But her emotions had become a hollow pit of nothing.

“I’m just giving you an update.”

“I understand what you have done, but what haven’t you done yet?”

Brinkman raised an eyebrow. “We are doing everything possible. I thought I’d just made that clear.” He slid the notebook back into his pocket. “I’m going to have my team search the house again. I want you to look over Devin’s closet and tell me if anything is missing.”

“I’ve done that five times already.”

“I’ll need you to do it again.” Brinkman’s eyes locked on her. “Check his dresser. Look for anything out of place. See if there are any shoes missing. His coats. Baseball hat. Anything.”

Kristy stood up. “I know what you are doing. You’re trying to find something to prove he ran away, rather than being abducted.”

Brinkman also stood. He was the same height as Kristy, eyes level on each other. “We need to go over everything, then go over it again. A child in the United States goes missing every forty seconds. We bring back nine out of ten for a reason.”

Kristy raised her hand. “Stop giving me quotes from your website. I also know that missing children that end up dead have been killed in the first two hours. And the ones that aren’t killed in the first couple of hours are murdered within three days.”

“It’s sounds like you don’t want us to keep trying.”

Kristy shook her head and fought back an angry tear. She didn’t want to give him the satisfaction. “You would love it if I just threw my hands up and told you to leave, because you can’t find him.” Kristy’s veins pumped with fury. “You’re starting to believe that Devin will end up in your Not Found category, which could hurt your statistics.”

“That is a false accusation. And to be honest, I think it’s a selfish way to think considering all the people that are looking for your son.”

Kristy wanted to slap him in the face, punch the wall, and throw a chair through a window, but instead, she jogged out of the kitchen, out the door to the cold air, into a sea of flashing cameras that came alive at her presence. She walked up to the yellow tape that surrounded her house, bombarded with questions by the media.

She searched for the nearest camera and said, “Someone took my son, Devin Poulston. Whoever did this, still has him. I’m begging you, please let my son go.” Kristy felt a gush of tears burst from her eyes as if she had been splashed in the

face with a bucket of water. "I beg the FBI, police, and all the volunteers to not give up." Her throat sealed with a lump of sorrow. "Please...help me find my son."

The cameras flashed and questions blared. Kristy turned, crying harder than she ever had in her life, then jogged back inside her home.

## 11

### ***Jon Truss, Author***

Jon stood in front of the television, watching Kristy Poulston's plea for continued help. He clicked it off, walked to the small desk in the hotel room, opened his laptop, and began writing the story called *Devils Windpipe*.

## 12

### ***Kristy Polston, Mother of Missing Child***

Kristy used her cell phone to call her boss. "Ruana, it's me." Kristy knew that Ruana would be in the hotel, especially since she had to take care of things while Kristy had been away.

"Kristy? My God, how are you? I mean. I know that you are..."

"It's okay. I'm hanging in there." Kristy opened her bedroom door to make sure Austin wasn't in the hallway. She then closed the door and spoke into the phone with a low voice. "I need to borrow the company car." Beaver Creek Inn had a white, 2003 Toyota Echo that Ruana purchased so employees could run errands, rather than using their own vehicle. Also, if an employee had car trouble they could borrow the Echo for a couple of days.

"Should I bring it to you?" Ruana asked.

"No. I don't want anyone to know I'm leaving. Someone in the media may see you give me the car and follow me."

"Are you sure you can leave?" Ruana's voice faded. "What if..."

"It's okay. If Devin calls, I have my cell..." Kristy closed her eyes, then took in a deep breath. "It will be fine."

"I'll gas it up. When will you be here?"

"About twenty minutes." Kristy gripped the cell phone. "Ruana."

"Yes?"

"Don't tell anyone."

"I won't. See you in twenty."

Kristy hung up the phone. Her next obstacle was to leave the house without any of the media seeing her. Also, she had to inform the FBI, or it could cause even more problems.

After packing a duffle bag of necessities, she hurried downstairs. Austin was on the couch, this time, dressed in T-shirt and flannel pajama bottoms, sound asleep.

Kristy leaned over and touched his arm. Austin's eyes popped open, then he sat up. "What's wrong?"

"I need to go somewhere. I'll be back tomorrow sometime."

Austin suddenly appeared to be wide-awake. "You can't leave."

She stood tall. "I can't?"

"Well, you can. But I don't think it's a good idea."

"I'm going, so you'd better call Agent Brinkman."

Austin reached down on the floor where his watch and cell phone were. He grabbed the watch and looked at the time. "It's after eleven." He then looked at her. "Can't this wait until morning?"

"I don't want anyone in the media to know I've left. And I especially don't want anyone following me."

Austin rubbed his eyes, seeming more frustrated than tired. "Look, I can't let you leave."

"I'm going." Kristy's voice carried in the dark house. "Get on the phone and call Brinkman so he knows what's going on." She gazed at him for a long moment. "And by the way, I'll need a ride. So get dressed."

Austin shook his head, then snatched it up his cell phone and clothes.

## 13

By the time Austin fought with Brinkman, then dressed, snuck Kristy out of the house to his car, and drove her to the rear entrance of the Beaver Creek Inn, it had been over an hour.

Kristy slung the duffle bag over her shoulder, punched her password into the keypad, then entered the building. Kristy had worked a couple of third shifts a month, but Ruana actually preferred to be the third shift manager. Kristy understood the reason. It was because all the guests were sleeping and no one needed anything. But as the guests woke and started their day, the front desk phone never stopped ringing. However, this time of night, it would be peaceful.

Kristy went to the business office and used one of the computers to pull up Map Quest. She typed in Lake Montezuma, Arizona, then typed the destination, Timpas, Colorado. She hit print, signed off, and grabbed the printout from the copier.

When she turned, a tall, young man stood in the doorway. He raised his hands. "Sorry, didn't mean to startle you."

Kristy had a flash of terrible thoughts race through her mind. "Who are you?"

"I just came down to use the computer. My boss is asleep and I didn't want to wake him."

Kristy glanced at the computer. "Sorry, I didn't mean to yell."

"No problem."

He stepped away from the door and let her pass.

Kristy felt the eyes of the young man on her as she hurried down the hallway to the lobby.

"I was getting worried," Ruana said, standing at the large windows. Ruana was extremely short, with long brown hair. Some of the staff members nicknamed her

gnome, but Kristy always discouraged the employees from saying that about their boss.

Ruana gave Kristy a quick hug. She was so short that her head was just below Kristy's chin. Kristy stepped back. "Thanks for waiting."

"I didn't know if I should call your cell phone or not. The news said that anyone contacting you will be questioned by the FBI."

Kristy sighed. "Do you have the keys?"

Ruana reached into her pocket and handed Kristy a single key. "Where are you going?"

"It's better that you don't know." Kristy looked back, then brought her eyes on Ruana. "Do you know who the tall guy is roaming around? He's like twenty, with short black hair."

Ruana stepped forward and whispered. "He's a bodyguard."

"For who?"

"Jon Truss."

"The author?"

Ruana formed a tired grin. "Yeah. Can you believe it? Jon Truss is staying here." Her emotions then changed as she embraced Kristy with a tight hug. "I've prayed for you and Devin so much." Ruana finally let go, tears streaming from her eyes. "I feel just horrible and wish there was something I can do."

"You're covering my shift and loaning me the car." Kristy gave Ruana a kiss on her forehead. "I couldn't ask anything else from you." Kristy stepped away, sensing that Ruana was going to pull her in for another hug. She needed to get on the road. "I'll be back soon."

Before Ruana could respond, Kristy headed out of the lobby.

## 14

Kristy checked the review mirror every few minutes. No headlights behind her. In fact, as she headed north on I-17, she was the only one on the road. Kristy eased down on the gas, knowing that she had a long drive ahead.

*I-17 to Flagstaff.*

*East on I-40 to New Mexico, continuing to Albuquerque.*

*North on I-25 to Colorado.*

*East on State Road 160, to State Road 350.*

Her mind drifted to the memory of her husband, driving alone, on his way to pick up their son from school. There was nothing odd about the day. Kristy would arrive home from work just as they pulled into the driveway. She would kiss her husband and son. Ask about their day. Then start dinner.

When her husband and son never arrived, Kristy already knew something was wrong. She called Ryan's cell phone, but didn't get an answer. Next, she called Devin's cell, but it went straight to voicemail.

Seconds later, Kristy received a call from the Lake Montezuma Police Department that her husband had been in an accident. No further details were given.

Kristy still had to pick Devin up from school, but the road had been blocked with a detour to go around. Traffic moved at a snail's pace. People were trying to catch a glimpse of the accident down the street. Kristy slammed on her horn, attempting to get the rubbernecks moving.

Devin had been waiting on a bench at the school, listening to his iPod. He noticed her pulling up and hurried to the car, sliding in the front seat. "Where's dad?"

"He's been in an accident." Kristy's voice was shaken and barely audible. "Why didn't you answer your cell phone?"

"I..." He looked at the missed calls. "Sorry. Didn't hear it ringing." Devin clicked on the seatbelt. "Is dad okay?"

"I don't know what's going on."

"Are we going to the hospital?"

"Yes!" Kristy snapped. She immediately felt horrible. "I'm sorry." She eased down on the gas and made it to the hospital a few minutes later.

They hurried into the emergency room and approached the front desk. Kristy recognized the receptionist who she went to high school with. "Hey Bev. My husband—"

"You can go in." Bev's eyes shifted to Devin, then back to Kristy. "The doctor is in Room B, down the hallway on your left."

Kristy held Devin's hand, which was the first time they had held hands since he was in elementary school. Inside Room B was a tall female doctor dressed in green scrubs, looking over a chart. The space where a bed should be was empty. She looked up. "Your son will have to wait outside."

Kristy squeezed Devin's hand. "Just tell us what's going on."

\* \* \* \* \*

As Kristy drove along I-17, she thought about the one sentence that a wife never wants to hear. "I'm sorry, but your husband is dead."

An equally heartbreaking sentence is..."I'm sorry, but we cannot find your son."

## 15

Kristy arrived at Timpas, Colorado in just over ten hours. The morning sun had been hidden by a layer of gray clouds, with a mist of snow blustering from the north.

A sign at the edge of Timpas looked like something from the Old West. It said, *Our Town, Our Laws*.

"That's comforting," Kristy said nervously to herself. She gripped the steering wheel with both hands as the snow thickened and blew across the two-lane road filled with potholes.

Kristy continued forward, wondering if this was actually a town, or just a big piece of deserted land. There were a few houses along the road, but all had *For Sale*, or *Foreclosure* signs.

The gray sky had turned dark and a blizzard knocked the Echo back and forth. She found a wooded building with a broken sign on top that said, Dizzy's. The

tires on the Echo slid as she pulled into the small parking lot. Kristy noticed lights inside. She fought against the blizzard, attempting to open the driver's door. Just as she moved from the car, the wind snapped the door shut.

It seemed the building was a hundred feet away as she trekked forward. Thick chunks of snow smacked her face; the wind kept her off balance, and the pothole-filled parking lot was like an obstacle course.

When she opened the front door a blast of warm air instantly melted the snow on her face, jacket, and pants. She forced the door shut, then took in a few breaths.

"Lost?" a voice said from behind.

Kristy spun around. At first, it appeared that she walked into someone's living room with a stained couch that leaned to one side, dusty television playing a re-run of Sex in the City, and a three hundred pound man sitting in an oversized battered maroon vinyl recliner with the footrest up. He had on a ragged sweater that looked more like a blanket that edged down to his gray sweatpants. On his feet were two pairs of discolored socks.

To her left, she noticed a picnic table, a small area of shelves stocked with various food items, an industrial refrigerator, and an antique cash register at the front counter.

The man spoke again, but didn't move from his position. "You headed to Colorado Springs? There's a storm comin' ya know."

Kristy shook off the wetness and stepped forward. "Is this Timpas?"

"What's left of it." He reached his meaty hand up and pointed backwards. "Be a doll and fetch me a beer, would ya. Get one for yourself."

Actually, Kristy had to pee, but couldn't imagine what the bathroom looked like. She would rather take her chances squatting down outside in the blizzard. "I'm looking for someone named, Drey Harten."

The man ignored her, seeming captivated with Sex in the City. Kristy rolled her eyes, then headed toward the refrigerator, opened it, and saw about fifty cans of Bush beer. She snatched one, slammed the door shut, then noticed to her left a green door with what she assumed was the word restroom, but a few letters had either fallen off, or faded away. RE TRO M.

Kristy returned and handed him the beer. "So, do you know him?"

He cracked the beer open and asked, "Know who?"

"Drey Harten."

He reached for the remote, clicked off the television, then took a long swig of his beer. "You a reporter?"

"No."

"Because Drey had nottin' to do with that missing kid."

Kristy's heart skipped beat, then pumped with force. She decided to take a different approach, because it was obvious the man didn't want to give up Drey's location. "My name is Kristy Poulston." She reached her hand out.

He rolled his eyes up, gripped the beer can, then shook her hand with his meaty fingers. "I'm Dizzy." He pulled his hand back and sipped the beer with a long slurp as if he were eating soup.

"I just need to speak with Drey about something."



"You say your name is Kristy Poulston?" Dizzy stared at the blank television, avoiding all eye contact.

"Yes."

"I saw on the news your son is missin'."

Kristy suddenly felt hot, as if the heater blasted out of control. "Yes, my son Devin went missing four and half days ago."

"Drey ain't findin' missin' kids no more."

"Can you just tell me where he lives?"

"You ain't the first mom come lookin' for his help."

Kristy wiped a glob of sweat that dripped from her forehead. "Can I use your restroom?"

"Yep. It's in the back."

She hurried to the restroom door, went through, thankful that there was another set of doors labeled THEM and US. Kristy assumed THEM was the ladies restroom.

After emptying her painful bladder, she washed up with hot water, staring into the mirror. "What now?" she whispered. Dizzy must be the first person that desperate parents see when entering Timpas. All of them would be denied Drey Harten's location. Why should she be any different?

When Kristy arrived back in the store area, she was surprised that Dizzy actually stood up and wobbled to the front counter. He watched her for a moment and asked, "Did the Fed's just let you leave like that?"

"They're not happy."

"Of course." Dizzy grabbed a beef jerky from a jar and offered it to Kristy. "You hungry?"

Just the site of the long stick of greasy meat caused her stomach to swirl. "No thanks."

Dizzy dropped the jerky back in the jar. "Sorry about not tellin' you were Drey lives. He told me I can't do it no more."

"I understand." She glanced at the window. "I'm going to have a heck of time getting back home."

"Are you sure I can't offer you somethin' to drink, or eat?"

"I'm fine." Kristy knew that Dizzy's offer was sort of a consolation prize, because he felt bad. She actually considered driving in the snow to every house and knocking on the doors. How many people could live here? Fifty? Maybe a hundred?

She watched as Dizzy headed to the window and gazed outside. "It's really comin' down out there."

Kristy sighed. This entire trip had been a bad idea. Now, she would have to drive back to Arizona in the damn...

She thought about Devin. If he was outside, could he survive? Or was he inside? Locked in a cold basement? Suffering? Crying?

A tear spilt from her eye. She wanted to feel an ounce of hope, but couldn't muster up the courage.

"Not many people still live here," Dizzy said, still gazing out the window at the snowstorm. "The best house around is down the street on the right."

Kristy wiped the tears with the back of her hand. "Excuse me?" She was going through a terrible moment in her life while Dizzy spoke like an overweight tour guide about a town that practically doesn't exist anymore.

"That house down the road is all brick." Dizzy still hadn't turned around. "The owner of the brick house has really spent a lot of time and energy on keepin' his place nice."

Kristy blinked the remaining tears away. "I better get on the road."

Dizzy turned and wobbled toward her. "Be careful out there."

Kristy gave him a hug, kissed his chubby cheek, and said, "Thank you so much."

She hurried back outside into the snowstorm, fought to get inside her Echo, then drove down the road to the brick house on the right.

## 16

### ***Kristy Polston, Mother of Missing Child Drey Harten, Psychic***

Kristy flung her duffle bag over her shoulder and fought the elements as she made it to the long brick porch, then rang the doorbell. A man answered with eyes that seemed distant, sad, yet, focused in a way. He had salt-and-pepper hair, matching thin beard, and wore a thick sweater and jeans.

She recognized him from the pictures on the Internet. This was Drey Harten.

"You'd better come in," he said, looking at the snow. "It's really coming down."

Kristy stepped into the quaint home, decorated like a ski lodge. The wood floor shined as if it had just been cleaned. The stone fireplace crackled with a sizeable flame. The living room, dining room, and kitchen could be seen from the doorway. All the furniture was made of wood. The walls had different photographs of snowy mountains.

Kristy dropped her duffle bag on the floor, shook off the wet snow and looked at him. "You don't seem surprised to see me?"

"Dizzy must have felt guilty about telling you where I live, because he just called me to apologize."

"I'm sorry to bother you, but—"

"Let me be as honest and straight forward as possible." A cold draft slid under the door. He narrowed his eyes. "I'm not going to help you. Although, I've been keeping tabs on what's going on, especially after the FBI searched my home, seized my phone records, and questioned me." He softened his gaze. "Look. I'm sorry what happened to your son. But you need to let the FBI handle it. Their success rate is higher than ever."

"It's been over four days," Kristy said. "They seem to be running out of options."

Drey touched her shoulder and guided Kristy to living room. Neither of them sat down, but the fire warmed the area. "After four days it may seem hopeless, but you need to have faith. I'm sure the FBI will find some sort of clue on where your son is. They may even have some ideas, but won't share that information until they are sure."

Kristy felt a wave of emotions seep into her heart. The sleepless nights, long drive, and now rejection was more than she could handle. "Why did you quit?"

He rubbed his forehead with the tips of his fingers. "It's not that I gave up, which is what people tend to think. It's just..." Drey shook his head. "Things don't always work out like parents hope. Not all of the kids I find are alive." Drey's eyes faded into a memory. "And those that I find alive...well...the words vile, disgusting, and appalling do not come close to describing what happens to some of them." He paused, touching her arm. "I'm telling you this, because I don't want you begging me to help. It's not going to happen. You shouldn't have come here."

"But you did find some children unharmed, right?" Kristy heard the desperation in her voice.

"You're not comprehending what I'm saying, are you? I'll let you stay here until the storm passes, but you need to head back home and deal with things."

Kristy squeezed her fists together. "I am dealing with it, which is why I'm here!" She didn't want to lose control, but something snapped inside of her. "I drove ten hours, risked everything, because I am finding every way possible to get him back."

"The FBI had already been here once, which means, my name has come up. If I helped you, which I won't, but if I did, I instantly become a suspect. If I actually find your son, which may, or may not happen, all evidence that I turn over is inadmissible in court. In fact, if I find your son, I will be arrested for kidnapping, along with every other charge they can think of. My involvement could set the real kidnapper free."

"So you do believe my son was kidnapped? The FBI is considering he might have run away, but I know he didn't."

Drey raised his hands. "You're not listening to me. I don't know what happened to your son, and I don't..." He stopped, pulling in a deep breath.

Kristy inched forward. "What were you going to say? That you don't *care*?"

Drey clenched his jaw, grabbed Kristy by the arm, and tugged her to a small office near the bedroom. He then pointed to the wall. "Look at all those pictures!" He shoved her forward. "Go ahead. Look at them."

Kristy moved closer to the wall, staring at pictures of young children, teenagers, and young adults. Their faces...their eyes...gazing back at her. On the desk near the wall, were more photographs, mostly family pictures. "Did you find all of them?"

"Most of them." He stepped forward. "And of those I found, most were either dead, or wished they were dead."

Drey's words were as if he reached into her chest and squeezed her heart until it stopped beating. She turned, brushed by him, then ran to the front door. She lifted her duffle bag and was about to leave, but her body seemed to stop in time. She unzipped the duffle bag, pulled out a framed picture of Devin, then dropped the bag on the floor. She hurried back to the room where Drey remained in the same spot.

Kristy went to the desk, found a pin, then marched to an empty wall that was opposite the other pictures. She slid the photo of Devin from the frame, pinned it up on the wall, then tossed the frame in the corner of the room. It shattered, with glass sliding all the way back to her feet.

"This can be a new wall of memories," Kristy said with harsh tone. Hot tears welled up into her eyes. "It can be a wall of children that you decided not to help."

She ran from the room, to the front door, scooped up her duffle bag, then headed to her car as the snow whipped against her body. She fired up the engine, revved the gas, turned on the windshield wipers, and blasted the heater.

It felt as if Kristy's insides crumbled like icicles shattering on the ground. She leaned her head on the steering wheel, crying, and wondering if the world simply didn't want her family to exist.

A loud bang on the driver's window jolted her up. Drey grabbed the car door handle and opened it. "Come back inside for a moment." The cold wind and snow whipped inside the Echo. "I need to make arrangements for someone to watch the house." Snow built up on Drey's hair and beard. "Plus, we're taking my truck, not this piece of shit."

## 17

***Jon Truss, Author***

***Andrew and Ashley Wilcher, Bodyguards***

Ashley drove the black Yukon. Jon and Andrew sat in the backseat. Ashley glanced in the review mirror. "Where we going?"

Jon opened his laptop. "The corner of Top O The Morning Drive and Beaver Creek Road."

Ashley laughed. "Are you serious? Someone actually named a street *Top O The Morning*?"

"Wish I made it up, but I didn't."

"Okay." Ashley weaved out of the Beaver Creek Inn parking lot.

Andrew faced Jon. "I saw Kristy Poulston last night."

Jon turned his head. "Where?"

"In the business office at the inn. She printed directions."

"Please tell me you went into the computer and checked where she was going."

Andrew grinned. "Of course. Timpas, Colorado."

"Really?" Jon pulled up the notes for his book and began typing. "That's where Drey Harten lives."

"Never heard of him."

Ashley glanced in the review mirror. "He's that psychic from the 90's. You wrote a book about him called, *Bring Them Home*. It only sold a thousand copies, but officially launched your career."

Andrew smacked his sister on the back of the head. "Kiss ass."

Ashley reached back and just missed slapping him with her hand. "Why don't you try reading Jon's Wikipedia page once in a while."

Jon continued typing notes. "Andrew...give me your opinion on why the FBI searched Drey Harten's home, then Kristy Poulston decides to leave here and drive all the way to Colorado."

Andrew took a long moment to think. "Well, maybe Kristy mentioned to the Fed's that she wanted to use a psychic to help find her son. Then the Fed's got pissed and raided Harten's house."

Ashley sighed. "That doesn't make sense. The Fed's had something on Drey Harten first. After the raid, Kristy decided to visit Drey."

Jon typed a few more notes. "I agree with both of you. Kristy went to Colorado to ask Drey for help, but something happened before she decided to do that. It was something bad enough that the Fed's spent man-hours on searching his home and questioning him."

Ashley pulled up to the intersection of Beaver Creek and Top O Morning. She shoved the gear in park and kept the engine and heater running. "Maybe Drey had a suggestion on where to find Devin Poulston. That backfired and Drey became a suspect."

Jon closed his laptop. "Drey has been retired since 92. Plus, he actually has to be on the scene to work. He can't make predictions on a missing Arizona kid from Colorado." Jon stared at the light brush of snow that covered the intersection. A wooden cross had been placed near the sidewalk. There was writing on the cross, but Jon couldn't read the words from the SUV.

Ashley unbuckled and turned in her seat. "What are we doing here?"

"This is where Kristy's husband was killed in a car accident." Jon watched the light turn green. He looked in both directions on Beaver Creek Road, seeing a line of cars coming to a stop. "A school bus ran the light and killed him on impact."

"A school bus?" Ashley turned back around. "What happened to the driver?"

"Never did jail time. Lost his job of course."

Andrew looked at Jon. "Where is the bus driver now?"

Jon handed Andrew the laptop. "Do me a favor. Find out."

## 18

### ***Court Truss, Bodyguard***

### ***Marcus Cane, Former Hostage Negotiator***

Court and Marcus entered the auditorium with a full crowd of parents, elementary children, teachers, and staff.

The principal, Mrs. Lumpur, held a microphone on the stage. "I want to thank everyone for attending this important meeting on child safety. Today, we have two very special guests. Court Truss, who is a professional bodyguard, and Marcus Cane, who is a retired hostage negotiator from the Hillsboro Police Department in Oregon." Mrs. Lumpur waited for Court and Marcus as they walked onto the stage. "Let's give them a nice round of applause!"

Court accepted the microphone from Mrs. Lumpur and addressed the audience. Behind them was a massive screen. Marcus turned on the projector and inserted a flash drive, which had a slideshow titled, Revelation of Safety. Marcus then grabbed the clicker and an extra microphone. Mrs. Lumpur took a seat on the side of the stage.

Court gripped the microphone and spoke in a direct voice. "If Marcus or I wanted to kidnap your children, this is how we would do it."

A collective gasp streamed through the auditorium. Mrs. Lumpur stood up from her chair. "I'm sorry, what did you just say?"

Marcus stepped toward her. "We are going to explain how we can abduct children from this school. And just like the parents of these children, you are part of the problem." He glared at her. "Please sit down."

Mrs. Lumpur's skin turned bright crimson. She glanced at the audience, then eased back down to her chair.

Court: "Let's start with the bus stop on Marigold and Lily Street that arrives at 3:34 and departs at 3:38." Marcus clicked the power point to the next slide, which had a photo of the children coming off the bus. "Jacob Faust is a second grader that walks home with his sister, Sari, who is in fourth grade. They have an older sister named Karima who is a freshman in high school. Karima is supposed to be at the bus stop by 3:34, but instead, she leaves the house on 417 Peony Circle at 3:40."

Marcus clicked to the next slide. "It takes Karima an average time of one minute and twenty-five seconds to make it from the home to the edge of Peony Circle, which is where Jacob and Sari meet up with her. Anthony Tregse, a fifth grader, walks ahead of Jacob and Sari with his eyes down, texting his best friend, Brandon Calver, who is dropped off one stop earlier." Marcus clicked to the next slide.

It was a picture of a black van parked to the side of the road with the door open. They used three children as actors for this demonstration. The character playing Anthony walked with his head down, texting his cell phone. The two characters playing Jacob and Sari were behind Brandon, next to the open door of the van.

Court: "Marcus would let Brandon walk by and allow Jacob and Sari to approach our van. Their older sister, Karima, would just be leaving the house while Marcus abducts the children." Marcus clicked to the next slide, which was a photograph of him grabbing Jacob and Sari. Then Marcus clicked to the next slide, which showed the van door closing. "The van would continue to 437 Anemone Way."

Marcus: "You may think it would be easier to just grab Anthony right away, but Court and I have patience. We know that Karima will arrive at the edge of Peony Circle just seconds after I have abducted her little brother and sister. If I try to grab Anthony, Karima may see me."

Marcus clicked to the next slide, which showed the actor playing Anthony tapping in the garage door code at the actual house, which they did during the day while the parents were at work and real Anthony was at school.

On the next slide, the garage door opened while Anthony-the-actor lowered his head and continued with his texting. The slide after that showed Court in the garage as the van backed into the driveway.

Court: "The code that Anthony just punched in was 1963, which is the year Anthony's father, Carl, was born."

A woman stood in the audience and shouted, "Were you in our home?"

Court saw it was Anthony's mother, Bonnie. "We entered your garage and took these photos."

"Is that legal?" Bonnie screamed. "Can you do that?"

Marcus clicked the next slide, showing Court grabbing Anthony and taking him to the van. In the next slide, she returned to the garage door and punched in the numbers on the key pad. The next slide showed court returned to the van and the garage door closing. The next slide showed an empty driveway with the garage door shut.

"As you can see," Court said. "We illegally entered the home of at 437 Anemone Way, but more importantly, we abducted the young boy that lives there."

Bonnie sat down and made a call on her cell phone.

Marcus: "In less than two minutes we abducted a second grade boy, a fourth grade girl, and a fifth grade boy. We know that Anthony calls his mother when he arrives home. We figure to have about fifteen to twenty minutes before Bonnie finally comes to terms that her son isn't where he is supposed to be. We could have even more time if she spends it calling Anthony's friends to see if he's there."

Court: "Marcus and I will have a third person take Anthony's best friend, Brandon. This way, the parents will think that Anthony and Brandon snuck off to do something. This will buy us about thirty minutes, if not more."

Marcus: "As for Karima, she'll wonder where her little brother and sister have gone. Karima will feel guilty that she wasn't at the bus stop on time, so she'll race up Lily Street and look for them. That will happen just as we leave Anthony's house. We'll pull to the side of the road, grab Karima, and make our way back to Marigold Street and drive the opposite direction that the bus had been going."

Court: "Before anyone realizes that Karima, Anthony, Sari, and Jacob have been abducted, we will be out of Raleigh, heading down one of four different major highways, or three other main roads, going in one of seven possible directions."

Marcus: "In twenty minutes, there are six more possible directions on major highways that we can take, along with an endless amount of roads. In forty minutes, we could be in one of three forests, or maybe a private airport, or one of sixteen rest areas."

Court: "We could have a home in one of the hundreds of surrounding towns, or cities. If the police have not blocked all thirteen possible directions from Raleigh in less than twenty minutes, no one will ever catch us."

Marcus: "And if anyone did catch us, Court and I would have already finished what we needed to do with those children."

Court faced Mrs. Lumpur as Marcus clicked to the next slide, showing a list of names and email addresses. "We have the email addresses of every parent and along with a child's name attached to each email. Which means, we have the location of every child in this school."

Marcus clicked to the next slide, showing a list of license plates. "These are the possible cars that we can steal without anyone knowing for hours. We can drive into the carline, pick up the child, and leave without being questioned." He turned the power off on the projector and looked at the stunned audience. "Court and I do not have special access to personal information, and yet, we have a list of the top fifty best ways to take a child from this school."

Court: "You may tell your children not to speak with strangers, but what exactly do you as a parent consider a stranger? For example, what about the neighbor that walks his dog everyday by your house? You may wave to him as he walks by;

same with your children. But do you really know that person? If not, then should he be classified as a stranger?"

Marcus: "We're not saying to be impolite to people. We're saying that you need to teach your children to be cautious. We need to teach children how to look for people trying to invade their personal space, or attempting to make them do something that they don't want to do. That's much more difficult, but necessary."

Court: "This includes chat-rooms, emails, social networking, and instant messaging. There used to be a time when adults were careful on the Internet. Now, adults have opened up to the world and permitted their children to do the same thing."

Marcus looked at the principal. "On several occasions your teachers have forwarded emails to all the parents, showing the email contacts at the top, along with the child's name connected. I can't even begin to tell you how unsafe that is." Marcus looked at the quiet audience. "It's important that we develop better ways so that children can recognize dangers, before it happens. We also need to provide resources to prevent crimes, before it happens."

Court stood next to Marcus. "We want you to be aware of the dangers, so that no one in this room ever has to know the feeling of calling 911 and saying, 'My child is missing.'"

## 19

***Jon Truss, Author***

***Andrew and Ashley Wilcher, Bodyguards***

Jon knocked on the door to Norman Hertzier's house, located on yet another road with a ridiculous name, Rusty Spurs. Andrew and Ashley stood on either side of Jon.

The door flew open. "What?" Norman shouted. He had a short, round frame, baldhead, and gray eyebrows that bushed out in every direction. He smelled as if his morning started with a twelve pack.

"My name is Jon Truss."

"Who?" Norman eyed Andrew and Ashley. "I'm busy. Get to the point."

"I want to talk about Ryan Poulston."

Norman slammed the door shut.

Andrew looked at Jon. "Do you want me to kick the door open?"

"No," Jon said, leading them off the porch. "I just wanted to get a visual of Norman for my book."

The mist of snow picked up as they entered the Yukon. Ashley fired up the engine. "I didn't realize it snowed in Arizona." She looked in the review mirror. "Where to next?"

Jon opened his laptop. "Take us to Devils Windpipe." He began typing. "I'm told that's a good place to speak with someone evil."



***Kristy Polston, Mother of Missing Child  
Drey Harten, Psychic***

Drey had a 2007, red Ford Ranger truck that had better success in the snowstorm than the crappy Toyota Echo. Kristy adjusted her seatbelt, a little nervous how fast Drey had been driving.

"I'll have to get the car back to my work somehow," she said. Kristy felt the truck fishtail a bit as Drey headed south on I-25.

"I'll arrange for a tow truck get it back to you." Drey only had one hand on the wheel, his foot heavy on the gas, the snow blustering across the highway.

"Should I give you some background information on my son?"

"No. The less I know, the better chance I'll have to clear my head."

Kristy had a sense that Drey didn't want to have a conversation right now, but she needed to keep her mind busy for the next ten hours. "My husband died two years ago—"

"I don't want to know," Drey said, giving her a quick glare. "If you have to talk, then keep the subject off of you and your family."

She took in a deep breath. "Okay...I saw on the Internet that you had a book."

Drey actually cracked a smile. "It didn't sell that many copies. Only a thousand."

"A thousand is good." Kristy felt like she had finally broken the thick exterior shell of Drey Harten because his smile remained. "What was the book called again?"

That was the wrong question. He shifted in his seat, re-gripped the steering wheel, and lost his smile. "It was called Bring Them Home. Jon Truss wrote it for me."

"He's a great author."

"Yeah."

It was Kristy's turn to shift in her seat. "I wonder if the media is still camped out at my home. Maybe they gave up..." Kristy wished she could take that back. The phrase reminded her of the speech she gave to the media. So many people have been kind enough to help. She wanted them to hang on a little longer.

She prayed that her son was using his strong determination to survive. They would deal with any problems he may have when this is over. Kristy just wanted a chance to heal Devin, no matter what he had gone through.

Drey broke the silence. "Who is the FBI agent in charge?"

Kristy's mind had been fogged to the point that she had trouble remembering. "His name is William..." She rubbed her eyes. "William Brinkman."

"Shit."

"You know him?"

"Yeah. He's been an FBI agent since the 80's." Drey glanced at her. "Did he look old?"

"Not really," she admitted. "I would describe him as a silver boulder."

"Sounds about right." Drey chuckled. "Brinkman hates my guts. In fact, he was the one that convinced politicians to make laws against psychics assisting in

missing person cases. When those laws started passing, it's when I decided to quit before I ended up in prison."

Kristy took in a deep breath. "What's it like?"

"What do mean?"

She wasn't sure if Drey would be offended, but her curiosity got the better of her. "When you start looking for the missing person. What kind of images do you see?"

Drey put both hands on the wheel. "It's not like I'm limited to just finding missing people. My...gift...doesn't turn on, or shut off. Images pop in my head, but not like a photograph. It's more like...a feeling, which I have to attach an image too."

"Is that why you stay in Timpas? Because you would go nuts in a populated area?"

He forced a grin. "It's exactly why I stay in Timpas." Drey held the steering wheel with one hand again as they drove by a sign that read, *Welcome to New Mexico!*

"Do you have any feelings or images right now?"

"Of course."

Kristy considered her next question. "Do you want to tell me?"

Drey rubbed the back of his neck. "No...I don't want to tell you."

## 21

***Jon Truss, Author***

***Andrew and Ashley Wilcher, Bodyguards***

The sun appeared as Jon, Andrew, and Ashley hiked up the trail on Saguaro Mountain. A strong, cold wind peeled through the trees, fighting against each step, taking away the brush of snow on the ground.

Andrew pulled out his cell phone and studied the screen. "Devils Windpipe is down there." He pointed to a small valley.

Jon took a moment to catch his breath. Back in Raleigh, the twins kept him exercising every day and even took him on hiking trips. But here, it seemed like Jon couldn't breathe the air as if he traveled to another planet.

"Hang back," Jon said. "I'm going down to the bottom and do some research. I need some space."

Andrew slid the cell phone back in his pocket. "We have to stay within thirty feet of you."

Jon knew that was Court's rule for the twins. "Fine." He marched down the trail that led to the valley while getting his second wind. Already, Jon missed his alone time in his office. He hated others being around him during his creative moments.

About halfway to the valley, Andrew and Ashley hung back. Jon continued forward, retrieving his voice recorder from his jacket. "I'm entering Devils Windpipe," he said into the recorder, then kept it rolling. He didn't expect to hear the devil whispering to him, but maybe he could get some ideas from whatever the recorder picked up.

There was a time when Jon visited a cemetery while carrying a recorder, which picked up sounds of chimes, or small bells that he didn't remember hearing when walking through the cemetery. It gave him chills, which made for terrific writing.

Jon found a large boulder at the bottom of the valley. He climbed on top of it, plopped down, then looked back. Andrew and Ashley had come closer. Both of them were drinking Propel and eating the PB&J's that they packed for lunch.

"Better save me one," Jon said to himself with a grin. Last time they were on a hike, Andrew polished off the sandwiches and forgot to save one for him. Ever since, Ashley always packed an extra one and kept it in her jacket pocket.

Jon took in the scenery. Some trees were bare, but most had a hint of faded green. The morning snow had disappeared, leaving the ground with a hard, frigid surface.

Jon listened as the wind flowed above, crossing the valley from north to south. Jon closed his eyes, becoming lost in the beauty and peacefulness. Nothing seemed evil. Instead, it seemed almost...

"Hello."

Jon popped his eyes open. About ten feet in front of him was a young girl, maybe thirteen, or fourteen, dressed in a sweater with black and white lines running vertically.

"Hey there," Jon said. He noticed a book tucked in her left hand. "This is a great place to read."

She lifted the hardback and showed him. "Recognize this?"

Jon slid off the boulder and smiled. "*Bullet to Bone*. I had fun writing that."

She took a step back. "I'm sure you say that about all your books."

"True." Jon looked around. "Are your parents close by?"

She took another step back. "Why? Are you going to hurt me?"

Jon's eyes snapped in her direction. "Of course not, honey. Why would you think that?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "I...I don't know."

"What's your name?"

"Angel."

"Really? Wow. Nice name." Jon looked around again. Andrew and Ashley stood like statues. There wasn't anyone else in sight. He focused back on Angel. "You're a little young to be reading *Bullet to Bone*. How old are you?"

"Thirteen." She lowered her eyes. "I haven't read it yet. My mom said it was the best book ever."

"Well then." He stepped forward, reaching his hand out. "You can tell your mother I'm in town and tell her I signed her book."

Angel stepped back again. "Everyone knows you are in town."

Jon noticed that Angel kept her distance. He decided not to move any closer. "How does everyone know I'm here?"

Angel shrugged her shoulders again. "I don't know."

Jon thought about the manager at the Beaver Creak Inn. He would bet his last royalty check that she started blabbing to everyone, even though Andrew told her to keep it a secret. "Is your mother in the valley with you?"

"No, my father is back there." Angel pointed behind her.

Jon looked past her. He noticed a figure in the distance, but it was hard to make out. "Does your father know you're talking to me?"

"Yes. He told me to come over here."

Jon reached into his shirt pocket and retrieved a pen. "Should I sign the book for your mom, or do you want to wait for your dad to come here?"

"You can sign it." Angel tossed the book at him. It landed at his feet, kicking up a puff of dirt. Jon leaned down and grabbed the book. He opened it to the second page, scribbled his name, and closed it. "Here you..." Jon dropped the pen, stumbling back with the book still in his hand.

Angel stood with her arms to the side, a small pistol in her left hand. "My mother killed herself because of you." Angel lifted the pistol and squeezed the trigger.

Out of pure reflex, Jon lifted the book and used it as a shield. The bullet exploded through the pages and seared the side of his ribcage.

Angel formed a smile. "I can't believe you are really here. This must be fate." She squeezed the trigger. This time, the bullet missed the book and sunk into his right shoulder. "Bullet to bone," Angel said.

She prepared to take another shot.

## 22

### ***Six minutes earlier.***

Andrew polished off his second PB&J and shoved the wrapper in the backpack. He looked at Jon on the boulder. "I wonder what it would be like to be inside that guy's head for just a couple of minutes."

"Probably a bit scary," Ashley said. She pointed. "There's someone else in the valley."

They watched as a young girl wearing a black and white sweater approached Jon, stopping about ten, or fifteen feet away from him.

Andrew took a step forward. "She's carrying a book."

The girl held the novel up. Jon slid off the boulder and the girl took a step back.

"I guess she's a little shy," Ashley said. "Where the heck are her parents? She couldn't be out here all alone."

"You wouldn't think."

Jon looked back at them.

Ashley moved forward. "Does he want us to come down there?"

"I don't know. Let's see if he looks back again."

Jon stepped forward, reached his hand out, but the girl stepped back again.

"I don't get it," Ashley said. "Does the little shit want the book signed or not?"

Jon and the girl spoke for another few moments. She then pointed behind her.

Andrew chuckled. "I guarantee Jon just asked where her parents are."

"He's not getting any work done. Maybe we should go down there."

"Jon likes talking to fans as much as he likes writing."

"True."

The girl tossed the novel at Jon's feet.

Ashley shook her head. "What a brat."

"Give her a break," Andrew said, smacking his sister on the arm. "The girl is obviously nervous."

Ashley smacked him back. "You have this notion that if you hit me, I won't kick the shit out of you."

Andrew playfully pushed her. "I'd like to see you-"

A gunshot echoed through the valley. Andrew and Ashley drew their Taser's and aimed.

"Shit!" Ashley yelled. The distance monitor read, 47, which meant they were forty-seven feet away. They needed to move closer.

Both of them kept their guns raised, hurried forward, keeping one eye on the distance monitor. Another shot rang through the valley. The bullet hit Jon in his shoulder area, knocking him to the ground. As they hurried forward, Taser's aimed, the distance monitor read, 35.

They both fired their Taser's, discharging four electric probes at the girl, hitting her with a total of 100,000 volts.

The girl fired the gun as she fell backwards, screeching in pain. The bullet went toward the mountain and disappeared. She fell hard to the ground, dropping the gun, shaking with violent convulsions. White foam seeped from her mouth, eyes rolled back in her head, as the probes continued pumping electricity for five more seconds.

"I'll take care of her," Ashley shouted as they approached. "You go to Jon." Ashley kicked the gun away from the girl, but then noticed that she had stopped moving. "Shit!" Ashley dropped to her knees, placed the Taser on the ground, then yanked the four probes from the girl's body. Ashley then started CPR, breathing into the girl's mouth and pumping her chest.

Andrew knelt down by Jon. "Where are you hit?"

"Right shoulder," he groaned. "Left part of my stomach."

Andrew opened Jon's jacket, seeing that his shirt had darkened with blood. Andrew grabbed his cell phone and dialed 911. "I need paramedics and police in Devils Windpipe. Our vehicle is a black Yukon, parked at the 4,300 block of Fremont Road." Andrew glanced at Ashley, who was still giving the girl CPR.

*"What is your name, sir?"*

"Andrew Wilcher. I am a security officer for Jon Truss. He was shot by a teenage girl. We were forced to use our Tasers. My sister is giving the girl CPR. Both the girl and my client are in serious condition."

*"Police and paramedics are on the way. The fire department has dispatched a helicopter."*

Andrew closed his cell phone, stood, placed his Taser on the boulder and flicked on the beacon. He knelt back down and put pressure on Jon's shoulder. "Hang in there."

Jon grunted. His skin turned gray, eyes flickering in pain. "Her father...he's still out there...careful."

Andrew's eyes swept in every direction as he continued pressing his hands on the bullet wound.

The girl coughed, then gasped. Ashley felt a pulse. "Thank God." She looked at her brother. "How's he doing?"

A tear slid down Andrew's cheek as he looked back, still holding onto Jon's arm.

## 23

### ***Kristy Polston, Mother of Missing Child*** ***Drey Harten, Psychic***

Drey maneuvered the truck through a sea of media outlets that stretched two miles from Kristy's home.

"Something must be wrong," Kristy said, hiding her face as pictures flashed.

Drey continued moving at a snail's pace, honking the horn, attempting to reach Kristy's house. "How much farther is it?"

"It's just around the bend on Pony Express Pass."

Drey glanced at her. "What kind of road name is that?"

"Lake Montezuma has the weirdest street names in the country." She saw the crowd of media thicken as they approached her house. "I wonder if they found my son?" Kristy assumed that the FBI would call her cell phone if that happened, unless, Devin was found...dead.

Kristy wiped the thought from her mind.

"I think something else is going on," Drey said. "This isn't just about Devin."

Kristy wondered if Drey was just trying to make her feel better.

An agent put his hand up. Drey hit the brakes and rolled down the window. The agent looked at Drey, then at Kristy. "I guess you're back," he said to her with a mocking tone. He glared at Drey. "Who is this?"

"I'm Drey Harten."

"And that's supposed to mean something to me?"

Kristy leaned over in the seat. "Let us through."

The agent held his glare for a moment, stood tall, and lifted the yellow tape. Drey pulled through and parked. Just as they exited the truck, Agent Brinkman approached. "What the hell are you doing here?" he asked Drey.

Kristy stood between them. "He's with me," she said with an icy stare. The cameras continued to flash. "Let's talk inside." Kristy grabbed her duffle bag and led Drey into the home.

Austin stood in the living room, watching the media on the television. He dressed sharply in a blue suit, blue tie, and white shirt. He opened his mouth to say something, but saw his boss marching behind Kristy and Drey.

Brinkman pointed to the television. "Shut that off."

Austin fumbled with the remote and clicked off the TV. "Do you want me to step outside?"

Brinkman ignored the question, bringing his attention on Drey. "We have enough going on here without you compounding the problems."

Kristy came to Drey's defense. "I brought him here."

"Obviously," Brinkman snapped. "Did Mr. Harten make you aware that if he somehow finds your son, he will become our lead suspect?"

"Yes, he made me aware of that."

"Oh, really?" Brinkman glanced at Drey, then stared at Kristy. "Did he also make you aware that any evidence found by him is inadmissible in court? It means, any evidence of foul play could set the kidnapper free."

"Drey explained that to me with great detail."

Brinkman shook his head, then pointed at Drey. "This is wrong. I hope both of you realize what you're doing."

Drey remained silent as Brinkman stormed out of the room, slamming the door as he left.

Austin reached his hand out. "Mr. Harten, it's a pleasure to meet you."

Drey reluctantly shook his hand. "What's your name?"

"Agent Austin Redman of the FBI." Austin had the expression as if he just met a rock star.

Kristy was surprised by Austin's reaction. She figured that he would have the same opinion as Brinkman. "I had to beg Drey to come here." Kristy wasn't sure why she said that. "I'm assuming there haven't been any new developments in finding my son?"

"No," Austin said, taking a step back.

"Then why has the media doubled since I left?"

"Apparently, it's about Jon Truss."

"Really?" Kristy glanced at Drey. "Is he coming here, or something? Why are the media so interested?"

"He's been shot," Austin said. "A thirteen-year-old girl walked right up to him while he was doing research at Devils Windpipe. The police are still looking for the girl's father."

Kristy waited for Drey to say something, but he kept quiet. "Where's her mother?"

"Committed suicide three months ago," Austin said. "Apparently, that is why the girl and her father wanted Jon Truss dead."

"What was Jon doing in Devils Windpipe?"

"I don't know." Austin paused, considering his next thought. "But Jon Truss' wife called the house phone, requesting that she come and see you."

"For what?"

"She'll only speak with you. There's a contact number on the kitchen table."

Drey finally spoke. "What hotel are the FBI agents staying?"

Austin scrunched his eyebrows. "Some are at the Beaver Creek Inn and some are in the house that's for sale down the block."

"I suggest you pack your things and go to one of those places," Drey said with a stern tone. "Your services are no longer required here."

"I have orders to stay in the home." Austin sounded as if his pride had been severely wounded. "Who do you think you are?"

"Kristy can have anyone in the home that she wants, which includes the FBI. If she asks you to leave, then you must."

Austin looked at Kristy. "I need to be here."

"Not any longer," Kristy said. "If Drey wants you to leave, then I want you to leave."

**Jon Truss, Author**  
**Court Truss, Bodyguard**

Court sat by Jon's hospital bedside, holding the tips of his fingers. He had a tube running into his nostrils, pumping oxygen, and blankets pulled up to his chin. His skin was pasty white, looking weaker than she had ever seen him.

"Hey," Jon whispered. His eyes fell shut. Court had watched him do that over the last eight hours since his surgery. His eyes would open, he would speak, then as if the exertion was too much, he fell back unconscious.

Court thought about her conversation with the FBI. She had called the home of Kristy Poulton, expecting that she would answer. Instead, an FBI agent answered the phone and questioned her for several minutes.

"I said, 'hey,' Jon repeated.

Court looked down, noticing Jon's glossy eyes staring at her. She leaned forward, tears instantly running down her cheeks. "I'm sorry, honey. I thought..." She smiled, as the tears slid around the corner of her mouth. "Never mind. How are you feeling?"

"Tired."

"Are you in any pain?"

"No...not really." He squeezed her hand. "Don't blame them."

Court used her other hand to wipe the tears away. "Don't blame who?"

"The twins." Jon gave her a weary smile. "I'm betting you chewed them out pretty good."

"I want to find new bodyguards."

"No. They're fine."

"The twins should always be within thirty feet of you. No matter what."

"I told them to hang back."

"It doesn't matter. They should have stayed in range. Plus, they let a stranger walk right up to you and—"

"She was just a teenager," Jon gave a weak cough, closed his eyes for a moment, then looked at Court. "No one could have seen that coming."

"That's what they are paid for."

"They saved my life."

"After you were shot...twice."

Jon gave her hand a firm squeeze. "Stop arguing with me. The twins are staying."

Court pulled in a deep breath. "I'm sorry. You're right, I shouldn't be arguing with you."

Jon let his eyes fall shut. "Did police charge them with anything?"

"No. Thankfully, most of the incident had been recorded on their Taser cameras."

"Good. They are heroes, not criminals."

"You don't have to stick up for them anymore. They can stay."

Jon still had his eyes closed while he smiled. "Even in my condition, I can still wear people down."



"Yes you can," Court said. She leaned over and kissed his sweltering forehead. "Get some rest."

Jon peeled his eyes open and looked at her. "Did they find the girl's father?"

"No. But they think he's still somewhere on Saguaro Mountain."

"What about Marcus?"

"He's in the waiting room."

Jon opened and closed his eyes, appearing to fight the exhaustion so he would stay awake. "When did the girl's mother kill herself?"

"That wasn't your fault."

"I know." Jon cleared his throat. "When did it happen?"

"Three months ago."

The heart monitor began beeping at a faster pace. "Did she kill herself like my character in *Bullet to Bone*?"

"No," Court said with a stern voice. "It's wasn't your fault."

"How did she kill herself?" Jon swallowed as the beeping screamed from the monitor. "The girl said that it was fate that I was in town." He rolled his head to the side, looking at Court. "How did her mother kill herself?" he asked again.

Court squeezed Jon's hand. "She hung herself from a tree at Devils Windpipe."

## 25

### ***Kristy Polston, Mother of Missing Child*** ***Drey Harten, Psychic***

Drey retrieved from his duffle bag a set of *Baoding Balls*, or as he calls them, *Chinese Meditation Balls*. He looked at Kristy. "Stay behind me. Do not speak unless I ask you a question. Keep your answers short and to the point."

"Okay," Kristy muttered. She felt her heart rate increase, veins pumping with anticipation. She wasn't sure what to expect.

Drey took in a few deep breaths, then rotated the meditation balls in the palm of his hand, creating a pleasant chime. This went on for several minutes before he opened his eyes and began walking, still moving the meditation balls in his hand.

Kristy followed him to the front door. Drey said, "You keep this locked."

She wasn't sure if that was a question, or statement. She decided to keep quiet and wait to see what he did next.

Drey moved to the other end of the house, inside the small kitchen. He looked at the door. "This isn't locked."

"Of course not, because—"

"Shh..." Drey gave her a hard glare. "Only speak when I ask you a question." He closed his eyes, rotating the chiming meditation balls, taking in deep breaths. "This door isn't always locked at night."

Kristy wanted to protest, but kept her mouth shut. Every night, she checked to make sure the kitchen door was locked.

Drey moved to the window as the chime played hypnotic music in his hand. He continued looking at something in the yard.

Kristy stepped forward, bravely peeking over his shoulder. The yard had a large patch of grass with several items that Kristy had told Devin to pick up many times; baseball bat, Frisbee, large playground ball, and a Nerf toy gun. The police and Feds didn't confiscate Devin's mess. Everything was in the exact same place.

In the rear portion of the yard was a shed that Ryan built. It also doubled as Devin's fort. She remembered the day Ryan constructed it, with Devin by his side. The weather was a balmy hundred degree's without a cloud in the sky. The two of them ate lunch out there, then dinner, working until the job had been completed.

That evening, Ryan and Devin fell asleep in the living room watching a baseball game. Kristy remembered sitting in a chair, looking at her husband and son, completely exhausted, yet, proud smirks on their faces.

Drey moved, breaking Kristy from her memory. He didn't look at her while he walked from the kitchen, rotating the meditation balls in his hand. "Did you know that Devin snuck out at night and sat in the shed?"

Kristy stayed close behind Drey as he walked up the stairs. "No he didn't."

Drey glanced back at her. "Yes...he did." Drey continued up the stairs to the bedroom. His eyes swept across the room. "Were you on the bed?"

Kristy had an image of her crying into the pillow. "Yes."

Drey leaned down, moving the chimes close to his ear, studying the floor. To Kristy's surprise, Drey laid all the way down, keeping his elbow on the floor while rotating the meditation balls. He moved his head to one side, then the other. "What did Devin wear to bed?"

"T-shirt and shorts."

"Underwear?"

"Of course."

"Socks?"

"No...I don't think so."

Drey closed his eyes and remained on the floor, moving the meditation balls in his hand, listening to the soothing chime. "A jacket is missing from under the bed." Kristy went to kneel down to look, but Drey yelled, "Don't! Just stand there." Kristy stood back up, fingers trembling. Drey pulled in a deep breath. "Diamonds...no...that's not it..." He moved the chimes closer to his ear. "Baseball...baseball diamond...no...that's not it..." Drey squeezed his eyes even tighter, quickening the rotation of the meditation balls. The chimes came alive as they turned into the sound of church bells. "Arizona Diamondbacks." Drey popped his eyes open and stood. "Did Devin have an Arizona Diamondbacks windbreaker?"

"Yes. But he hasn't worn it since..." Her mouth went dry, heart banging against her chest. "Since his father died."

"It's not here," Drey said, locking his eyes on Kristy. "I'm sensing a disruption in your son's life before he went missing."

Tears drizzled down her face. "What does that mean?"

Drey looked around the room. "I'm not sure. I need to keep thinking. Meanwhile, tell Agent Brinkman that you did another search in Devin's bedroom and discovered that his Arizona Diamondbacks windbreaker is missing. Don't say that it was under the bed. Just tell him that you forgot about it, because Devin hadn't

worn in it..." He paused, looking at Kristy. "How long ago was it that your husband died?"

Kristy wiped the tears on her wet face, but more flowed from her eyes. "It's been two years."

"How much has Devin grown in those two years?"

"I don't know..." She couldn't put a single thought together, plagued by the renewed heartache of her dead husband, along with the horrific nightmare of her son disappearing. "Devin's grown a lot...I guess."

"Could he still fit in that jacket?"

Kristy plopped down on the bed, crying into her hands. "I don't know! He never cleans his room! Never picks up anything! The backyard is a mess! His closet is a disaster! Why couldn't he pick up after himself? He never does!"

Kristy removed her hands from her wet face, seeing that Drey had left the bedroom and she was alone with her misery.

## 26

***Jon Truss, Author***

***Court Truss, Bodyguard***

***Marcus Cane, Former Hostage Negotiator***

A detective had finished taking a full statement from Jon while he remained in the hospital bed. This was actually the second time he had been questioned, but this seemed more detailed.

"Did they find the father?" Jon asked.

"Not yet." The detective had been standing during the interview and now shifted side-to-side as if trying to come up with another question to ask. "Your bodyguards claimed not to see anyone else."

"I suppose that's possible."

The detective shifted his weight to the other foot. "But you remember seeing him?"

"The girl pointed him out, but I didn't get a good look at him."

"What was he wearing?"

"I'm not sure."

"Are you even sure there was a male standing there, or were you going by what the girl told you?"

"I..." A twinge of pain pulsed through his shoulder. "I can't be sure if the figure was male, or female."

"Maybe you saw a shadow, or something?"

With Jon's imagination, he wondered if most everything he sees is a shadow...*or something*. "What's going to happen to the girl?"

"Probably be sentenced to a detention facility."

"That's a shame. Isn't there another option?"

The detective shook his head. "She almost killed you?"

"Yeah, but she obviously was having difficulty in dealing with her mother's death. Or maybe, her father convinced her to shoot me. Who knows?"

"Well, it's not for me to decide." The detective shifted his weight again.

"Do you want to sit down?"

"Actually, I need a favor."

"I'll try. What is it?"

He flipped his notebook to a blank page. "My wife is a big fan. Can I get your autograph?"

"Sure." Jon took the notebook and pen from the detective. "What's her name?"

"Lisa. She has read all of your books."

Jon glared at him. "Yeah? What about you?"

His face turned a bright pink. "Um...I don't read that much...but..."

Jon laughed. "I'm just messing with you." He scribbled his generic note, *Thanks Lisa for being a fan...Jon Truss*. "Here you go."

The detective took the pen, then handled the notebook as if it just turned to gold. "I appreciate you doing that for me. Her birthday is coming up. Maybe I can put your note in a frame and give it to her as a present."

*Cheap bastard*, Jon thought. "Well, is there anything else?"

"That's it."

As he left, Marcus came in, holding a brown paper bag. "So, how did your interview go?"

"I made everything up and told the detective some fictitious story."

"Nice," Marcus said, understanding Jon's sarcastic humor. "I was thinking that you need to write more like Stephen King."

"Really? Why would you say that?"

Marcus slid a hardback of *Bullet to Bone* from the paper bag. The book had a hole in the middle. "If you wrote longer books, maybe that bullet wouldn't have made it through."

Jon laughed. "Good point."

Marcus smiled and slid Jon's novel back into the bag. Court entered the room, carrying two Styrofoam cups. "Well, it seems like everyone is in a good mood today." She handed Marcus one of the cups. "Did you tell him the Stephen King joke?"

"Yep. He took it well."

Jon raised his hand. "Where's my coffee?"

Court took a long sip from her cup. "Not until you're better."

"I'm feeling alright."

"The doctor says another couple of days."

"Out of the question. I'm going nuts in here."

Marcus eased down in a chair. "The media has tripled in the area. Between the missing kid and you being shot, the entire country is focused on this town."

Jon pulled in a deep breath. "I want to ask you both something. Do you want to help find Devin Poulston?"

Court placed her coffee down on a small table and looked at Jon. "FBI and police are looking for him. From what I saw on the news, they have no idea what happened."

"Which is exactly why I think we should help."

Marcus finished his coffee. "Did you know that your old buddy, Drey Harten, has been hired by Kristy Poulston?"

Jon glanced at Court. "Yeah, I know."

"If Drey can't find that kid, no one will."

"I still want to try."

Marcus formed a grin. "There are no clues. No ideas on what happened to Devin...sounds like a promising case. I'll give it shot."

Jon looked at Court. "Well, what about you?"

"Sure. But not until the doctor clears you to leave. Until then, I want you to rest."

"I need to get back to writing."

"Not until you're out of here," Court said with a stern tone.

"How did your school visit go?"

Court smiled. "They hated us."

"Perfect. That means you really grabbed their attention."

Marcus patted Court on the back. "You have no idea..."

## 27

### ***Kristy Polston, Mother of Missing Child***

### ***Drey Harten, Psychic***

Kristy saw Drey at the kitchen table, eating a bowl of beef soup. "Hope you don't mind," he said. "I got hungry."

"I'm surprised you found something." She hadn't gone shopping in over a week.

"There's more simmering in the pot."

"Nah. Save it for you. I'm sure you'll be hungry again later."

"When was the last time you ate?"

"I don't know."

"Slept?"

Kristy rubbed her eyes. "I doze off here and there."

Drey took another spoonful and sipped. "You need your strength."

Kristy plopped down on a chair next to him. "I told Agent Brinkman about the missing jacket."

"What did he say?"

"Not much. He made a note of it."

"Did you tell him anything else?"

"No."

Drey spooned the bottom of the bowl and finished the soup. "Did you mention that Devin sneaks out at night and goes to the shed?"

"Of course not." Kristy felt a twinge of anger. "I just can't believe that is true."

Drey pushed the empty bowl to side. "Did your son love his father?"

"Yes."

"Do you think that your son misses him?"

A tear spilt from her eye. "They built that shed together. Are you thinking that Devin went out there at night just to be with his father?"

"Yes."

Kristy leaned back in her chair. "Tell me the truth. Are you sensing that Devin ran away?"

Drey gently touched her hand. "I'm trying to find an image of what happened, but my thoughts are conflicting. One moment I'm thinking that he went searching for his father, but at the same time, I'm thinking that he was forced to leave."

That did not ease Kristy's sorrow. "Was anyone in the house the night he disappeared?"

"I don't think so. But I can't help feeling another presence."

"Like a ghost?"

Drey pulled his hand away from her. "Actually, I don't believe in ghosts."

She wiped away another tear that slid down her cheek. "Will you be able to find him?"

"That's one thing I know for sure. Eventually, I will find him."

Drey's cell phone buzzed. He looked down, eyes narrowing on the phone.

"What's wrong?"

"I just received a text message from an Ashley Wilcher."

"Who is she?"

"She claims to be Jon Truss' bodyguard." The cell phone buzzed again. Drey read the new text message. "Apparently, Jon Truss wants to help you find Devin."

"Isn't he in the hospital?"

"Yeah." Drey placed his cell on the table and looked at Kristy. "According to this text, Jon is checking himself out of the hospital tomorrow. He's then coming straight over."

Kristy didn't know how to feel about that. "Really? Do think that's a good idea?"

"Jon's bringing with him three bodyguards and a retired hostage negotiator." Drey smiled. "I think it's worth a shot."

## 28

### ***Jon Truss, Author Court Truss, Bodyguard***

Court returned to the hospital room. "I have about fifteen minutes before visiting hours are over."

"Did Ashley get a hold of Kristy?" Jon asked.

"I had her text Drey instead. That way the Fed's won't know we're coming."

"That was a good idea."

"I know." She smiled and sat next to him. "Are you sure you'll be able to leave tomorrow?"

"I can prove it."

"How?"

Jon grabbed her hand and shoved it under the blankets. He then forced her hand under his gown and on his cock. "I'm extremely horny."

She glanced back at the open hospital door, then looked at Jon, keeping her voice low. "What if a nurse comes in?"

Jon forced her to fingers to squeeze. "Actually, I'm begging you."

“Well, if you’re begging me,” she said with a grin. “Then what choice do I have?” Court slid her hand up and down with a firm grip. She watched Jon close his eyes, cheeks flushing, soft pants coming from his slightly opened mouth.

Court glanced back, then continued pumping her hand up and down. Jon’s breathing became heavy. His cock felt thick in her fingers. She used aggressive movements, squeezing with a tight grasp.

Jon arched back and grunted. Court felt the veins pulsate, followed by a gush of warm fluids that seeped through her fingers.

She leaned over and kissed his sweaty forehead. “Feeling better?”

Jon smiled. “Much better. Thank you.”

Court hurried to the sink as a nurse came inside the room. “So, how’s everyone doing?”

“I’m doing great,” Jon said with a slick grin.

Court washed her hands, then dried off with a towel. “My husband needs clean sheets, sponged off, and a good night’s rest.”

The nurse took Jon’s pulse. “I can arrange that.” She did another check of Jon’s pulse. “Your heartbeat is a little fast. How you feeling?”

“Perfect,” Jon said.

The nurse looked at her watch. “I’m sorry, Mrs. Truss, visiting hours have ended.” The nurse glanced at the door. “I can let you stay a few more minutes if you want.”

“Nah, I’ll get going.” She leaned down, kissed Jon on the lips, then whispered in his ear, “Have fun with your sponge bath.”

## 29

***Jon Truss, Author***

***Court Truss, Bodyguard***

***Marcus Cane, Former Hostage Negotiator***

***Andrew and Ashley Wilcher, Bodyguards***

Ashley drove the Yukon. Marcus sat in front. Court and Jon in the middle. Andrew in the very back.

Jon answered his ringing cell phone. “Well it’s about time you called me. I was wondering when I would hear from my agent.”

Bram chuckled. “Court told me that you needed to rest.”

“Yeah, yeah. How are things?”

“Well, your book sales are skyrocketing.”

“Really? Maybe I should get shot at least once every few months.”

“I don’t think so.” Bram paused. “How are you feeling? Court tells me that you’re being released from the hospital today.”

“Actually, I’m heading to the hotel right now. And I’m feeling okay. I just want to get back to work.”

“I hear ya. Were you able to start your new novel...*Devils Windpipe*?”

“Somewhat. But I have some great notes, especially my experience being shot in *Devils Windpipe*.”

"You should mention that in your book."

"I planned on it."

"Nice." Bram sighed. "Well, I'm glad you're doing alright. However, if you died, I'm guessing your book sales would explode."

"Maybe next time."

"I just thought of something. Make sure you get on television, do some interviews, and play to the media while they are still in town."

"Nah."

"What?"

"I'm here to write a story. If I play to the media, it would seem tacky."

"One of the reasons I sent you there is because of all the media attention this is getting."

Ashley pulled into the Beaver Creek parking lot. Jon suddenly felt tired. "Listen, we're at the hotel. I'll talk to you soon."

"Remember, authors write books and promote."

Jon slid out of the SUV. "Yeah, and we occasionally read. What's your point?"

"Don't let this opportunity slip by you. Not many authors get a chance to write a story and be part of it at the same time."

Jon followed the group into the hotel. "Okay. I promise to squeeze in an interview here and there. I'll also jump in front of a camera once in a while and wave my arms to make sure I have their attention."

"Sounds great. Thank you."

"See ya." Jon slid the phone into his pocket.

Court held his hand. "What's the problem?"

"Agents. Publishers. Promoting."

"All things you hate, yet you need."

Jon kissed her on the cheek. "Thanks for reminding—"

"Excuse me," someone said from behind. "Mr. Truss!"

Jon turned. Andrew and Ashley practically shoved Court aside and stood by him. Even Marcus stopped in his tracks and spun around.

Standing in the lobby was a lanky man with a body that seemed to have a small curve. His head leaned back, stomach forward, and legs shaped like a bow. His nose came to a sharp point and eyes sunk into his face. He dressed in tight jeans that looked stiff, along with a bright orange sweater tucked into his pants.

He pulled a rusted wagon forward. Inside the wagon was a large pile of books.

Jon pushed the twins away so that they weren't right on top of him. "What can I do for you?"

"My name is Erni Saguaro. I'm a big fan of your writing."

Jon pointed to the wagon. "I can see that."

"Actually, my wife really loved all your novels. She read them over and over. She always told my daughter to keep an eye out in the stores for any new books that you released."

"That's nice to hear."

Marcus approached the man. "What did you say your name was?"

"Erni Saguaro." He kept his sunken eyes on Jon.

Marcus asked, "What is your daughter's name?"

Erni breathing became heavy. "Angel."



Before Marcus could react, Ashley and Andrew tackled Erni, knocking over the wagon full of books.

Court grabbed her cell phone and called the police.

## 30

**Jon Truss, Author**  
**Court Truss, Bodyguard**

Two cruisers arrived in quick fashion. The police officers handcuffed Erni Saguaro and dragged him from the hotel. The police also took his wagon full of books.

Andrew somehow swindled two more rooms. He and his sister took one, Marcus the other, leaving Court and Jon in the third room.

Court changed her clothes and saw Jon on the bed with the laptop and his voice recorder. "I'll leave you alone to write."

"Wait." Jon patted the bed. "Sit down and listen to this."

"What?"

Jon placed the laptop on the end table. "Just come here."

Court crawled into the bed, resting her head on his chest. "What did you record?"

"Angel shooting me while I was at Devils Windpipe." Jon thought about the names, Angel and Devil. He had a rare moment with both of them.

Court sat up. "Did you let the police hear this?"

"No." Jon turned the volume all the way up on the recorder and hit play.

"*Better save me one.*" Jon remembered saying that to Andrew, referring to the PB&J. Perhaps a better line would have been, "*You better save me.*"

The wind flowed into the recorder with a strange sound that not even Jon could explain. It wasn't wind, or music, yet, seemed like a combination of both. He grabbed his laptop and pulled up the notes for his new novel, *Devils Windpipe*.

"What sound is that?" Court asked, pressing PAUSE on the recorder.

"Not sure. How would you describe it?"

"You're the author."

Jon thought about it for a moment. "I'll go with metallic sounds, from some sort of distant windpipe instrument."

Court pressed PLAY.

Jon's footsteps could be heard as he descended into the valley, followed by a crunch of rocks. Jon remembered taking a seat on the boulder. More faint sounds could be heard.

*Breathing.*

*Distant metallic windpipe music.*

"Hello." Angel had arrived.

"*Hey there.*" Jon remember looking at the book tucked underneath her arm.

"*This is a great place to read.*"

"Recognize this?"

Court pressed PAUSE. "What were the twins doing?"

"Watching."

"They didn't come closer?"

"The girl looked harmless." Jon snatched the recorder. "Stop hitting pause and let me listen to this." He pressed PLAY.

There was a sound of Jon sliding off the boulder. *"Bullet to Bone. I had fun writing that."*

*"I'm sure you say that about all your books."*

*"True."* Jon had looked around. *"Are your parents close by?"*

*"Why? Are you going to hurt me?"*

Court looked at Jon. "What did she mean?"

"Quiet," Jon snapped.

*"Of course not, honey. Why would you think that?"*

*"I...I don't know."*

*"What's your name?"*

*"Angel."*

*"Really? Wow. Nice name."* A longer pause. *"You're a little young to be reading Bullet to Bone. How old are you?"*

*"Thirteen. I haven't read it yet. My mom said it was the best book ever."*

Court pressed PAUSE. "Where the hell were the twins during this long conversation?"

"If you press pause again, I'm going to have the twins drag you out of this room. Now shut up and listen." Jon pressed PLAY.

*"Well then. You can tell your mother I'm in town and tell her I signed her book."*

*"Everyone knows you are in town."*

*"How does everyone know I'm here?"*

*"I don't know."*

*"Is your mother in the valley with you?"*

*"No, my father is back there."*

Court asked, "Did you see him?"

"Not really. Shut up."

*"Does your father know you are talking to me?"*

*"Yes. He told me to come over here."*

Court pressed PAUSE. "The police need to hear this. It sounds like the father convinced her to shoot you."

Jon took this moment to type in a few notes, then pressed PLAY.

*"Should I sign the book for your mom, or do you want to wait for your dad to come here?"*

*"You can sign it."* There was a loud thump.

Jon whispered to Court, "Angel tossed the book at my feet."

"Did-"

"Quiet."

There was a faint sound of Jon picking up the book. *"Here you..."*

Footsteps.

*"My mother killed herself because of you."*

A loud pop echoed into the recorder, followed by Jon grunting.

*"I can't believe you're really here. This must be fate."*

Jon cringed as the second shot vibrated the recorder. He could actually hear the bullet sinking into his shoulder.

*Buzz.*

*Gunshot.*

*Angel screeching.*

*Thud from a body falling to the ground.*

*"I'll take care of her," Ashley shouted. "You go to Jon."*

*Scuffling noises.*

*"Shit!" (Ashley's voice.)*

*"Where are you hit?" Andrew asked.*

*"Right shoulder," Jon groaned. "Left part of my stomach."*

*Zipper from duffle bag.*

*"I need paramedics," Andrew said, talking on his cell phone. "and police in Devils Windpipe. Our vehicle is a black Yukon, parked at the 4,300 block of Fremont Road." Pause. "Andrew Wilcher. I am a security officer for Jon Truss. He was shot by a teenage girl. We were forced to use our Tasers. My sister is giving the girl CPR. Both the girl and my client are in serious condition."*

*Sounds of movement.*

*"Hang in there," Andrew said to Jon.*

*"Her father..." Jon groaned. "He's still out there...careful."*

*The girl coughed, then gasped.*

*"Thank God," Ashley said. "How's he doing?"*

*Distant sound of a helicopter.*

*End of recording.*

Court placed her head down on Jon's chest and hugged him. "Oh God..." She broke down and started crying.

Jon rubbed her back and kissed her on the head. "It's alright. I'm here."

Court sat up, wiping the tears from her face. "It sounded like the twins did everything they could."

"Yeah." Jon heaved a sigh, gazing at his laptop. "Too bad I can't write powerful scenes like that. My books would really sell."

## 31

***Jon Truss, Author***

***Court Truss, Bodyguard***

***Marcus Cane, Former Hostage Negotiator***

***Kristy Polston, Mother of Missing Child***

***Drey Harten, Psychic***

***Andrew and Ashley Wilcher, Bodyguards***

Cameras flashed when the black Yukon eased down the street towards Kristy Poulston's home. Kristy was outside, speaking with two men with FBI windbreakers. They glared at the Yukon, then waved them through and pointed to the driveway.

An eruption of cameras flashed as Jon, Court, Marcus, and the twins, shook hands with Kristy and entered the home.

Drey had been standing in the living room waiting for them. He greeted Jon first. "It's been awhile."

Jon noticed the bits of gray that appeared since he saw Drey last. "How long has it been?"

"About twenty years," Drey said, patting Jon on the shoulder.

The rest of the group introduced themselves, then gathered at the dining room table.

Kristy: "Drey tells me that you might be able to help find Devin?"

Court: "Actually, Drey is the best. We're just here to support him."

Drey: "The answers aren't coming to me as of yet. I have a bunch of images jumbled in my brain."

Marcus: "Do the Feds have any leads or clues to what happened?"

Kristy: "Nothing." Her voice shook a bit. "It's like Devin vanished."

Court: "Is the theory an abduction, or does it appear that he ran away?"

Kristy: "No one knows."

Marcus: "Is anything missing? Clothes? Shoes?"

Drey: "An Arizona Diamondbacks jacket. It's been under the bed since..." Drey glanced at Kristy. "Since his father died."

Court: "Had Devin and his father gone to the Diamondbacks game together?"

Kristy could only shake her head, 'yes.'

Court looked at Drey. "What images have you seen?"

Drey: "It's strange. I see a mixture of Devin leaving on his own, but also someone involved with his disappearance. In addition, I believe that Devin had been sneaking out at night to the shed in the backyard. Devin and his father built the shed together."

Marcus: "I'm assuming the FBI checked the computers and cell phones to make sure Devin had not been talking to a predator?"

Kristy: "They did." She pulled in a deep breath. "I think Devin researched psychics and came across information on Drey." Kristy swallowed, then took in a few deep breaths. "I can't be sure though."

Marcus: "The best way we can help is to come up with a logical theory on what happened."

Everyone looked at Jon.

Court said to him, "If this was your book and Devin was a character in your story, how would you make him disappear without a trace of clues?"

Jon rubbed the top of his head, taking a moment to think...

## 32

### ***Jon began telling a story.***

Devin waited for his mother to lay down in her bedroom and doze off while watching late night television. The sound of Jay Leno would mask Devin's bare

footsteps as he walked down the hallway, down the stairs, and outside to the backyard.

The Arizona nights were cool this time of year, but Devin enjoyed the fresh air. He jogged through the darkness to the shed, creaked the door open, and went inside.

Nothing had been changed in the shed; Devin made sure of that. He wanted the tools in the same place as his father had them before he died. The two shovels—one pointed and one square—both hung on the wall. The Duct tape, yardstick, measuring tape, flashlight, and jar of nails remained in the exact same position on the small shelf.

Devin crouched down in the corner. Some nights the moon found its way into the shed, cracking through the darkness. Other nights, like tonight, the shed was pitch black.

After Devin's father died in that car wreck, the shed kept his father's aroma for a couple of months. Then, the smell of his father had been replaced by mildew and the staleness of nothing being moved. Devin treated the shed like a time capsule, but understood that nothing could prevent time from changing what we love.

When the door opened, Devin thought that it was his mother. She could have woken, checked on him, and realized that he wasn't in the bedroom. Then after searching the house, she would look in the shed.

The figure stood in the doorway, much larger than Devin's mother. It was a male, with a deep, unsettling voice. "You've been coming out here every night since your father died."

Devin felt a small bit of urine dampen his underwear. "Who are you?" If the figure moved closer, Devin would scream.

The person remained in the doorway, consumed by darkness. "My name is Ryan."

Devin's fingers trembled. "That was my father's name."

"It's just a coincidence. Many people are named Ryan." He still didn't move. "I take long walks at night. It's peaceful and helps me clear my head." Ryan paused. His features remained hidden like a silhouette. "I noticed you going to the shed."

"You can see me from the sidewalk?"

"Yes." Ryan leaned against the frame of the doorway. "Every night at the same time I take my walk, you're heading to this shed." Pause. "I know what happened to your father."

Devin wasn't surprised by that. The whole town knew about the accident five minutes after it happened. "I need to get back inside." His voice squeaked in fear, as a bit more urine slid down his inner thigh.

Ryan stood tall. "If you ever want to speak with your father, just let me know."

Devin opened his mouth to ask what Ryan meant, but he turned and walked away.

That next evening, Devin gazed at the clock and anxiously waited for his mother to fall asleep. He had been thinking about Ryan all day. There was something terrifying, yet intriguing about him. Devin didn't know everyone in town, but he did know most of the neighborhood. Maybe Ryan was from a different neighborhood and liked to take longer walks than most people?

Devin slid from the bed and took his familiar path down the stairs, then outside to the backyard. The night seemed colder, but the moon's illumination gave plenty of light...even in the shed.

As always Devin crouched down, gazing at the objects inside the shed, but he kept the door open, expecting the visitor to return. And this time, Devin heard the footsteps on the hard ground.

"Hello, Devin," Ryan said from the doorway. "It's a beautiful night."

Devin didn't want to be frightened, but for some reason, his heart banged like a warning alarm had just gone off. "Hello," was the only word he could mutter.

"Have you thought about what I said?"

"About speaking to my father?"

"Yes."

"How can I do that?"

"I'm sure you know all about Devil's Windpipe."

Devin first heard the folklore when he was in third grade about how the devil can whisper in the valley at Saguaro Mountain. But what did that have to do with his father? "I'm not sure what you mean?"

Ryan shifted; his body taking up the entire doorframe. The moon shown across his face, but the features remained hidden behind lines of shadows. "Do you know about heaven and hell?"

"Kind of."

"Well, your father is in hell."

The words cut into Devin's chest. He pushed his foot against the floor and slid deeper into the corner. "What are you talking about?"

"Your father did something terrible. When he died, he was sent to hell."

The veins in Devin's body pumped so hard, his fingers and toes began to twitch. "What did he do that was so terrible?"

"I could tell you, but it might be best if your father told you himself." Ryan shifted again. "Also, there's a way to help your father get to heaven, but he is the only one that knows the secret. And only his son can help him."

Devin swallowed, taking several quick breaths. "How can I help him?"

"Go to Devil's Windpipe and sit on the large bolder. Wait for your father to speak your name. Then, he'll tell you everything you need to know."

Once again before Devin could respond, Ryan disappeared into the night.

## 34

Marcus: "That makes sense. The bad guy would gain Devin's trust."

Kristy: "But..." She wiped a tear away with the back of her hand. "Why wouldn't he..." She couldn't finish her sentence.

Court: "Why wouldn't he just take Devin that first night, or even the second night? It's a valid question. The bad guy was alone with Devin. No one would know until the next morning."

Marcus: "Devin would go to Devil's Windpipe on his own. All signs of him being missing would lead to Devin running away. There wouldn't be any evidence showing otherwise, which is the case here."

Court: "What about shoe prints by the shed?"

Marcus: "I doubt there were any. The ground is hard as a rock. And how many police and FBI walked around in the backyard?"

Kristy: "I just cannot believe that Devin would fall for something like that. He's a smart kid."

Marcus glanced around the room, perhaps waiting for someone else to give Kristy the explanation. When no one spoke, he did it himself. "Kids in middle school and high school are curious. That alone would tempt Devin. But then there's the added grief of how Devin feels about his father. Also, there's a chance that Devin feels guilty about his father's death."

Kristy wiped away more tears. "But it wasn't Devin's fault. He knows that."

Marcus: "His father was killed on the way to pick Devin up from school. Devin may have felt some responsibility. And if there was a way that Devin could make things right, he would jump at the chance."

Kristy looked at Jon. "That story you just told. Is it what you really think happened?"

Jon: "It's a theory based on what I would do if I was writing this story."

Kristy then looked at Drey. "Can you go to the shed? Maybe you can see something?"

Drey stood. "I'll give it shot."

The group followed him outside, including the twins. Cameras flashed from the portion of the street that could be seen from the shed. Drey held the two meditation balls in the palm of his hand, then twirled them in his fingers. He closed his eyes as the chimes played their soothing tune.

Everyone remained quiet, but the clicks of cameras could be heard from a distance along with reporters going live, giving a play-by-play on this latest development.

Drey whispered to himself. "School...no, that's not it. School bus...no, that's not it."

"Excuse me," a voice shouted from the side of the yard. Everyone turned, seeing Agent Brinkman marching towards them. "What the hell is going on?"

Drey opened his eyes. "Damn it. I was getting close."

Kristy became furious and practically ran towards Brinkman. "What's wrong with you?"

Brinkman looked at the group, then met his steel eyes on Kristy. "I'm here to inform you that I am leaving."

"The FBI is giving up?"

"No. I'm needed elsewhere. CARP will handle the case."

"CARP? What does that stand for?"

Marcus answered the question. "Child Abduction Response Plan."

Brinkman kept his eyes on Kristy. “Before I go, there’s a reality that you need to grasp. None of these people are here to help you. They want to use you for their own popularity.”

Kristy stepped away from Brinkman, towards the group. “That’s not true.”

“Really?” Brinkman inched forward. “Jon Truss was sent here by his literary agent.” He looked at Jon. “I had an enlightening chat with Bram Ertmas.”

Court: “You called him?”

“Yes, because I was curious why a bestselling author would fly across the country to this small town.” Brinkman looked at Kristy. “And did you know that Court and Marcus have started a company called, Revelation Inc.? That’s the reason they are here, to build up their business.” He glanced at Drey. “And then there’s the ever popular Drey Harten, who has come out of retirement to help. Perhaps he sees another book deal in the near future, written by Jon Truss of course.”

Kristy’s eyes swept the area. She looked at the twins, Jon, Court, Marcus, and Drey. She looked at her house, then at the media fighting each other to get a decent picture of them in the backyard.

Finally, her eyes fell on Brinkman. “Just go. If I have to find my son on my own, then that is exactly what I’ll do.”

Brinkman kept an unbreakable gaze on her, attempting one more time to make his point to Kristy. “Think about the people standing next to you. A fiction author. Hostage negotiator. Bodyguards. A psychic. They have the ability and power to manipulate just about anyone...which gives them credibility in the eyes of the devil.”

## 35

***Jon Truss, Author***

***Court Truss, Bodyguard***

***Marcus Cane, Former Hostage Negotiator***

***Drey Harten, Psychic***

***Ashley Wilcher, Bodyguard***

Ashley drove the Yukon. Inside were Jon, Court, Marcus, and Drey. Court told Kristy to stay home and had Andrew stay with her. The media swarmed around the Yukon, which is exactly why Court did not want Kristy with them.

After fighting through the crowd, Ashley drove to the corner of Top O The Morning Drive and Beaver Creek Road, where the bus killed Ryan Poulston. They exited the Yukon, noticing that some of the media had followed them. There wasn’t much Jon and the others could do about it, although, Ashley glared at them with the large Taser in her hand. No one had the guts to come any closer.

The Arizona air warmed a bit too about forty degrees. The sun danced in and out of clouds, creating quick moving shadows on the street.

Drey went to work, closing his eyes and rotating the meditation balls in his hand. It took several minutes before he spoke. “Bus...no, that’s not it. School...no,



that's not it. Driver..." Drey mumbled the same word. Driver.... Driver..." He opened his eyes. "That's all I can see right now."

Court: "Did Devin ever take the school bus home?"

No one responded.

Court: "What happened to the school bus driver? Was he suspended?"

Jon: "Lost his job."

Court snapped her eyes in his direction. "How do you know?"

Jon: "I researched him. Plus, I went to his house."

This caught both Drey and Marcus' attention. Court asked, "Why did you go to his house?"

Jon shrugged his shoulders. "I just wanted to see what the guy looks like so it would make my novel more authentic."

Court: "But you hate authentic writing?"

Drey: "Maybe you have the same feeling as I have; that the bus driver has something to do with the disappearance of Devin Poulston."

They hurried to the Yukon. Jon tapped Ashley on the shoulder. "What was the address of that bus driver?"

"I can't remember," Ashley said, wrenching the steering wheel. "But I remember what his house looks like on Rusty Spurs Road."

Marcus: "Rusty Spurs Road? Who made up the street names here?"

Ashley snickered. "A bunch of people must have been smoking a bit too much weed during the street name meeting."

Court: "What's the bus driver's name?"

Jon: "Norman...something."

Ashely: "Norman Hertzier."

Court looked out the rear window. "We need to lose the media."

"No problem." Ashley pressed her foot all the way down on the peddle and sped the Yukon up to eighty. She swerved through the maze of streets, easily losing the morons that attempted to follow.

Minutes later, she came to a screeching halt at Norman Hertzier's home. When they exited the vehicle, Court put her hand up. "Everyone slow down. Let's think about this for a moment before we go banging on his door."

Marcus: "I agree. If Norman was the mysterious person that showed up at the shed like Jon suggested, then we need to be careful of how we handle this."

Drey closed his eyes and rotated the meditation balls in the palm of his hand. "Give me a minute," he whispered.

No one spoke. No one moved.

A minute went by, then another.

The chime from the balls seemed to float into the air and travel along the road. In the distance, other chimes could be heard from the neighborhood as if joining in the song.

Suddenly, Drey opened his eyes. "I saw Norman alone with Devin."

Court marched toward the house. "That's all I need to know."

Court banged on the door. "Norman! Open up!"

No one answered.

Marcus touched Court on the arm. "We need to get those CARP people over here; let them handle this."

Court glared at him. "What proof do we have?"

"If we call them, they'll at least check it out. They don't have any other leads."

Court sighed. "You're right." She banged her fist on the door one more time, walked off the porch, then called Andrew on her cell phone.

He answered on the first ring. "What's up?"

"I need you to find out who is in charge for Kristy's case. I'm sure they have a contact number."

"They're here."

Court froze. "What?"

Andrew lowered his voice. "Some woman named Jordan Hensch is talking to Kristy in the living room. There are other people with her. I think one of them is the mayor."

"What are they talking about?"

"They want to move Kristy to an undisclosed location."

"Bullshit!" Court yelled. "They want to get her away from us!"

"What do you want me to do?" Andrew asked, seeming impervious to Court's screaming.

"When they are done talking, give Jordan Hensch my number."

"Will do."

Court flipped her phone shut and noticed everyone staring at her. "Some people from CARP are in the house talking to Kristy. They want to move her to an undisclosed location. Andrew thinks the mayor is talking to her as well."

Marcus: "It's probably because the media is blocking the street. And whenever Kristy leaves, or one of us leaves, they follow, which causes traffic problems."

Court's cell phone rang. "Hello?"

"This is Jordan Hensch, of the FBI. I was told that you called."

"Are you the one heading up CARP?"

"Yes. What is your full name and how can I help you?"

"My name is Courtney Truss." She hated the sound of her real first name. "I'm at 3216 Rusty Spurs Road. I have reason to believe that Norman Hertzler had something to do with Devin Poulston's disappearance."

"And what led you to that reasoning?"

Court paused, looking at Drey. "Well, it's a hunch."

"Excuse me?"

"A hunch."

"What led you that hunch?"

Court couldn't tell the truth about Drey's discovery, because the evidence obtained based on Drey's abilities could actually free Norman Hertzler. "Let's just say that you received an anonymous tip and that you had to investigate."

"I'm not in the business of lying."

Court scrambled for a solution. "Then...come and get me for questioning."

"Oh don't worry. We will."

Two black SUV's arrived three minutes later with flashing blue lights. Eight men climbed out, along with a tall woman with a full head of silver hair, dressed in a black business suit. The woman's eyes bounced from Court to Ashley. "Which one of you is Courtney Truss?"

"Call me Court," she said, holding out her hand.

Jordan shook with a firm grip. "Call me Ms. Hench." She held onto Court's hand for a moment, eyes locked on her. "I understand that you have been assisting Kristy Poulston."

Court withdrew her hand. "Yes. Is that against the law?"

"Is there enough intelligence between you and the others to know that trampling on evidence can cause problems solving crimes?"

"We didn't trample."

"Did you go to the door of this house?"

Court suddenly felt a bit intimidated by the woman. "Yes, I went to the door, but—"

"My point exactly." She moved away from Court and stood in front of Drey. "I'm assuming you're the reason we are gathered here?"

Drey didn't back down an inch. "If you didn't take me seriously, you wouldn't have come here."

"Don't flatter yourself. We have to follow up with all leads."

Drey formed a grin. "And this seems to be the only credible lead you've had so far."

Jordan Hench kept her eyes level on Drey for a long moment, then turned and waved for her team to follow. She banged on the door several times, then made a phone call.

Over the next few minutes no one moved, all waiting for Jordan's phone to ring. When it did, she answered, spoke to someone for a few seconds, then looked at her phone. "Okay," she said to her team. "I just received the warrant." Jordan instructed four of them to go around back and three of them to stay with her. She also had one of the CARP boy's stay with the group in the front yard.

Court asked Marcus, "How did they get the warrant so fast?"

Marcus: "In a neighborhood that a child went missing, the police or Feds can request an immediate warrant for any house, or building."

Court: "I guess that's a good thing."

Drey whispered in Court's ear. "Prepare yourself."

She stepped closer to him and kept her voice low, not wanting the CARP Agent to hear. "Prepare for what?"

At that moment, Jordan Hench came storming out the door, down the porch, and headed toward the group. "We found Norman Hertzler hanging in the basement." Jordan paused to clear her throat. "We also found a baseball jacket near his body."

Drey stepped forward. "Does it say, Arizona Diamondbacks?"

"How did..." Jordan looked away for a moment as a police cruiser came barreling down the street with flashers on. Seconds later, another cruiser chirped

the siren, followed by another. She leveled her eyes on Drey. "We may have to arrest you on suspicion. You aren't planning on going anywhere, are you?"

Drey didn't protest. "Don't worry. I'm not going to leave until this is over."

## 38

***Jon Truss, Author***

***Kristy Polston, Mother of Missing Child***

***Drey Harten, Psychic***

***Andrew and Ashley Wilcher, Bodyguards***

Ashley dropped Court and Marcus off at the hotel, then took Jon and Drey to Kristy's house to pick up Andrew. While they were there, Jordan Hench delivered the horrific news that they believe Norman Hertzler killed himself and most likely had abducted Devin.

"Is my son dead?" Kristy screamed. Thick tears drained from her eyes. "Just tell me! Is he dead!"

Jordan put her hand on Kristy's shoulder. "We don't know for sure. I have a forensics team at Norman's house." Jordan glared at Jon, then the others. "All of you can leave. This is a private matter."

Drey pointed at Kristy. "She's the only one that can make us-"

"Just go!" Kristy shouted. "All of you! Leave!"

Drey grabbed his duffle bag. Jordan gave him an icy glare and said, "Mr. Harten. Don't leave town until I clear you."

He clutched the duffle bag and walked with Jon and the twins to the Yukon. Cameras flashed while Ashley drove down the street, beeping her horn for everyone to move.

When they made it through, Jon grabbed the door handle and groaned, "Ashley...pull over."

Ashley swerved to the side of the road and barely stopped when Jon leaped from the SUV and vomited. He then dropped to one knee, breathing hard.

Drey knelt next to him. "I want you to stand up." He helped Jon to his feet. "Listen to me. Devin is still alive."

Jon snapped his eyes at Drey. "What?"

Ashley and Andrew joined them.

Drey said with conviction, "He's still alive. I could sense it when we left Norman's house. I could also sense it when Kristy began shouting."

Andrew handed Jon a napkin. "Do you have any idea where to look?" Jon asked, wiping his mouth.

"Not yet," Drey said. "But the point is, we need to keep trying."

"Did you see another image?"

Drey pulled in a deep breath. "I saw a spirit, or something evil."

"Was it Norman?"

"No. Although, I believe Norman still had something to do with it." Drey took in another deep breath. "But there was someone else. I saw hatred. Disgust. Wickedness. Fear. And yet went along with this person."

Jon tossed the napkin on the dirt. "And you think it was a spirit of some sort? It was something that Devin believed in?"

"Yes."

"Maybe Devin thought his father contacted him?"

"No, it wasn't his father. The spirit, or ghost, or whatever was made of pure, unforgiving evil."

Andrew stepped forward. "Maybe you saw an angel."

Drey looked at him. "Angels are good, not evil."

Ashley moved next to her brother. "Except for one angel...the devil."

Jon put his hand up. "Stop right there. We aren't going down this road, believing that the devil abducted Devin Poulston."

Drey: "I don't think that's what the twins are saying."

Ashley: "Andrew and I are thinking that Angel Saguario, the girl that shot you, had something to do with Devin's disappearance. They were the same age and could have been friends."

Jon rubbed the back of his neck, then said, "Andrew...find out where she's being held."

## 39

***Jon Truss, Author***

***Court Truss, Bodyguard***

***Marcus Cane, Former Hostage Negotiator***

***Andrew and Ashley Wilcher, Bodyguards***

At the Beaver Creek Inn, Jon updated Court and Marcus. They gathered in a small dining room on the first floor, drank coffee, waiting for Andrew.

A half hour later, Andrew came jogging in. "Well, I have an update."

Court: "Spill it."

Andrew: "We now have the top floor to ourselves."

Jon: "How did you swing that?"

Andrew: "With my charm."

Marcus: "That's great, but what information do you have about Angel?"

Andrew: "Her father was released last night and won't be investigated any further."

Court: "You're shitting me? That's just great," she said with heavy sarcasm.

Jon: "I don't get it. The guy convinced his daughter to shoot me and they let him go?"

Andrew: "There's something going on, because the police cleared Mr. Saguario of any wrong doing. In fact, I heard that the police even apologized to him."

Jon: "I saw him at Devils Windpipe!"

Andrew: "But..."

Jon: "But what?"

Andrew: "You're not really sure what you saw."

Jon: "What excuse did Mr. Saguario give for being here at the hotel with a wagon full of my books?"

Andrew: "He wanted your autograph."

Jon: "For all those books? Yeah right. He was coming here to finish what his daughter attempted."

Andrew: "When Ashley and I tackled Mr. Saguario in the hotel lobby, we searched him. He didn't have any weapons."

Court interceded. "What about Angel?"

Andrew: "It's strange. I can't get any information on her."

Marcus: "What does that mean?"

Andrew: "She's not at the police station, or hospital. Maybe they sent her away to Phoenix, or Flagstaff. There's not even a court date on record for her."

Marcus: "Why hasn't Jon received a subpoena? For that matter, why haven't you, or Ashley? All of you are witnesses."

Andrew: "I have no idea."

Drey: "Maybe everything is being held up with Angel, because no one knows where she is."

Everyone looked at Drey. Court asked, "They wouldn't just let her go."

Drey: "Who said anything about letting her go? Maybe Angel got away from them. What happened after she was arrested? They didn't leave her in a jail cell. They probably got a room for her at the hospital with an officer to watch her."

Marcus: "But according to law, all minors have to appear before a judge immediately after their arrest."

Andrew: "Maybe it had something to do with her mother being dead and her father locked up. It could have delayed things."

Court: "Wouldn't she be assigned a lawyer?"

Marcus: "She would still need a parent to appear with her before a judge. So the whole thing must have been put on hold."

Jon: "So where the hell is she?"

Once again, every looked at Drey. He said, "I've been trying to tell all of you that no one knows where she is. I can sense that Angel escaped."

Jon: "I just had a thought. What if Angel is going to wherever Devin is?"

Drey: "Then maybe instead of looking for Devin, we should be focusing on looking for Angel."

## 40

***Jon Truss, Author***

***Andrew and Ashley Wilcher, Bodyguards***

They split up into teams.

Marcus and Court would gather as much information as they could at the local police. Also, they would try again to speak with Kristy. If possible, they needed to patch things up with Jordan Hench, because she's now leading the investigation. However, they weren't getting their hopes up on any of those goals. They would also go to Erni Saguario's home and question him.

Drey wanted to be on his own. All of the distractions had given him mixed messages and it was difficult for him to concentrate. He felt that by being alone, he

would gain information at a quicker rate. There was also a possibility that he could still be arrested, because he led everyone to Norman Hertzler's home. The Fed's won't take into consideration Drey's psychic abilities, so the other option was that Drey supposedly knew all along that Norman had something to do with Devin's disappearance. That would make Drey an accomplice.

The twins would stay with Jon of course. His job was to continue writing the story as he saw it, while attempting to figure out what happened. Jon had two quick thoughts to discuss with the twins.

He spoke to Ashley first. "Erni Saguaro has the same name as Saguaro Mountain, where Devils Windpipe is located."

"There's no way that mountain is named after his family. That's just a coincidence."

"I agree. But what if Erni convinced his daughter that they had a special bond to the mountain."

"Actually, that's a possibility. You should write that in your book, even if it's not true."

"I already did." He smiled. "And thanks for giving me writing suggestions."

She gave him a playful punch. "Any time."

Jon looked at Andrew. "Now, let's deal with you."

"What does that mean?" Andrew asked.

"I've been thinking about how you managed to get us rooms at the hotel, even though the entire town is filled with media."

A slight glow formed on Andrew's cheeks. "What are you implying?"

Ashley stared at her brother. "How did you convince the hotel manager to give us the entire upper floor when there are only six of us?"

"I don't like the way you two are looking at me."

"Getting a little defensive?" Ashley joked.

"No...I'm...just..."

Jon stepped forward, eyes locked on Andrew. "What's the manager's name?"

"Ruana Kelly."

Ashley moved closer to her brother. "She's cute." Ashley formed a grin. "But kind of short for a tall guy like you."

Andrew turned bright red. "Okay, stop with the interrogation! I'm screwing her!"

Jon wrapped his arm around Ashley and smiled. "That's what we thought. Now go tell your girlfriend that we need fresh towels in the bathroom."

## 41

***Court Truss, Bodyguard***

***Marcus Cane, Former Hostage Negotiator***

Marcus rapped on the door to Erni Saguaro's house. Court stood next to him as darkness engulfed the neighborhood.

Erni swung open the door. "What do you want?"

Marcus inched forward. "We need to speak with your daughter. Where is she?"

"Huh?"

The midsection of Erni's body stuck out like someone had pressed their knee into his back. His long nose angled to his mouth and eyes sunk deep into the sockets.

Court: "Have the police kept your daughter locked up all this time? Can they legally do that? She's not an adult."

Erni blinked several times. "I'm not sure what you are doing here."

Marcus: "Do the police really have your daughter? Or was she sent somewhere else?"

Erni shoved his hands into his faded jeans. "That doesn't make sense."

Court: "What do mean that doesn't make sense?"

"You're confusing me."

Court: "Did you convince your daughter to shoot my husband?"

Erni's twisted his hands inside of the pockets. "No."

Marcus: "Why hasn't your daughter gone before a judge?"

"Huh?"

"She's a minor. Which means a judge has to review her case immediately."

"My daughter isn't going in front of any judge."

Marcus raised an eyebrow. "Are you sure about that?"

"I..." He stepped back. "I don't know."

Court tugged on Marcus' arm. "Let's go. This is a waste of time."

Surprisingly, Erni didn't shut the door. Instead, he remained standing in the doorway, eyes sunk into his head, body angled like a 'c', hands still twisting in his pockets.

They returned to the green minivan that they had rented and climbed inside; Marcus behind the wheel, Court in the passenger's seat.

"He hasn't moved," Court said. "What the hell is he looking at?"

Marcus fired up the engine. "He's making sure that we leave."

"Do you think his daughter is inside?"

"That would be my guess." Marcus shifted the gear into drive and did a U-turn. "I just can't imagine the police letting Erni Saguario off the hook. Also, if his daughter really did escape, then they should be watching the house."

Court looked around. "Maybe they are?"

"Nah. We'd see them. Or they would have appeared from the bushes and questioned us." Marcus slowed the minivan down. "We're missing something. There is more to Erni and Angel Saguario than what we know."

"I have an idea. There's a library I saw somewhere..."

"Camp Verde Library," Marcus said. "You want to go there?"

"Yeah. Jon always said that ten minutes in a library can answer just about any question that you have."

"And what exactly is the question?"

Court looked at him. "Why are Erni and Angel Saguario nut cases?"

## 42

"Library closes in fifteen minutes," a woman said as Court and Marcus entered.



Court glanced at her watch, seeing it was 6:44 p.m. She then took a quick look around the tiny library, not seeing anyone but the woman who told them they had fifteen minutes. Court approached her. "Hello, my name is Court. This is Marcus."

"Are you reporters?" the woman asked.

Court faked a laugh. "Oh, God no. Who would trust a journalist?"

The woman narrowed her eyes. "I used to be a journalist for the Beaver Beacon."

"Oh," Court mumbled. She looked at the woman's nametag: *Alice Gottschalk, Adult Services*. "Your last name is Gottschalk?"

"I've heard every joke, so save it." Alice formed a sarcastic grin. "Is there something I can help you with, because we're about to close and I have some things to do."

Marcus interjected. "Yes, ma'am. I'm sure you are aware that Jon Truss is in town doing research for his next novel."

Alice's face lit up as if she were a child that had just been told that there would be extra presents this year for Christmas. "I love Jon Truss! Do you work for him?"

"We are his assistants," Marcus said.

Court knew why Marcus lied. If he introduced her as Jon's wife, then Alice would go back to being an ex-journalist-librarian that was counting the minutes to go home.

Alice had a massive smile. "Does Jon Truss want to visit our library?"

Court loved how people always used his full name. It was never just Jon, or Mr. Truss. It was always, *Jon Truss*. "He would like to make a donation."

"That is wonderful!" Alice said. "But will he come here in person? I would love to get his autograph." She blushed. "And...well...we could get his picture to hang on the wall near his section."

Marcus smiled. "You have a Jon Truss section?"

"Of course." Alice glanced at the clock. "Well, is there anything else? I really do have to get some things done before I lock up."

Court glanced at Marcus, wondering if he was going to drop the bomb, or did he want her to do it?

Marcus nudged Court on the arm. "Go ahead, ask her."

Alice smiled. "Ask me what? Does Jon Truss need me to do something?"

Court took in a quick breath. "Um...what do you know about the Saguaro's?"

Alice's face went from a cute blush, to wide-eyed terror in just a split second. "Why do you ask? Is this for Jon Truss's new book?"

"It is."

Alice looked at the clock. "I can sit down with him when he stops by. Is he coming tomorrow?"

"Yes," Court said. "He can stop by tomorrow. But if there's something you can tell me about the Saguaro's right now, it would sure help with his book."

Alice's eyes bounced to Marcus, then back to Court. "What do you want to know?"

"Why did the mother hang herself at Devils Windpipe? Was it because of Jon's book?"

"Oh goodness, no! Why would anyone hang themselves after reading his wonderful novels?"

"Then why did she hang herself?"

Alice's eyes became distant. For a long moment, she was lost in her dreadful thoughts.

Marcus reached his hand out and gently touched her arm. "Alice. Are you okay?"

A tear spilt down her cheek. "It was just so horrible. I had to do the story for the newspaper. I quit right after that and began working here." Alice stared at Court. "Mila Saguario had a great job as a hiking guide. She was fit, happy, and never had a bad thing to say about anyone." Alice paused, gazing at the floor. "Her daughter looked like a younger twin of Mila."

"You mean, Angel?"

Alice wiped the tears from her cheeks. "Yes. Mila and Angel were two peas in a pod."

"I'm guessing Angel took it hard when her mother died."

Alice's eyes snapped to attention. "What are you talking about?"

"Well, I'm assuming you heard that Angel tried to kill my hus...I mean, Jon Truss."

"I heard about it, but you're mistaken on who the girl was."

"What do you mean?"

"Angel Saguario hung herself right next to her mother." Alice looked at Marcus, then Court. "Didn't you know that?"

## 43

Court drove the minivan as Marcus called a friend at the Hillsboro Police Department in Oregon. They had just arrived at the Beaver Creak Inn when Marcus flipped his phone shut.

"My buddy confirmed it. Angel Saguario and her mother, Mila Saguario, both hung themselves in Devils Windpipe two years ago."

Court parked and cut off the engine. "Then who was the girl that shot Jon?"

"No idea."

They both climbed out of the minivan and stood near a light, located next to the lobby entrance. "Whoever the girl was, claimed to be Angel Saguario. But at the hospital, or police station, they discovered the girl's true identity."

Marcus shook his head, agreeing. "Which is also why the police let Ernie Saguario go, because he obviously didn't send his daughter to murder Jon."

"I guess that kind of explains why Ernie was so confused. I still think the guy is psycho."

"Whoever the girl was that shot Jon, was probably sent back to where she lives. Which means, she could be just about anywhere. Her court appearance will be kept secret, so there's no way to trace it."

"But don't they need Jon's testimony? Or the twins?"

"Not necessarily. When a minor goes in front of a judge, no one is in the courtroom except the parents and a lawyer. There's not a prosecutor, or jury, or anything. It's all kept private so that the minor is protected."

Court rubbed the exhaustion from her eyes. "We need to find her."

"Why would she claim to be Angel Saguario? That is totally insane."

"I couldn't agree more." Court gazed into the parking lot, not seeing the Yukon. "Jon swears that he saw someone else in that valley."

"Maybe it was Norman Hertzler? Drey felt like he was connected."

"How did Devin's jacket end up at Norman's house? Why did Norman kill himself?"

"Everyone assumes that Norman is guilty," Marcus said. "With Devin's jacket at the scene, that's a pretty clear indication that he had something to do with this."

"Unless someone killed Norman and placed the jacket near his body."

Marcus scratched his head. "I don't know. That..." He paused, thinking about the possibility. "That would mean someone else is involved."

"Let's not say anything to Drey just yet. I want him to find some answers without us putting more of the unknown into his head."

"Drey was right about Angel...actually, he was right about the girl that committed suicide and the girl that claimed to be Angel."

Court looked at Marcus. "What do you mean?"

"One Angel hung herself. The other Angel is somewhere in an undisclosed location."

Court remembered what Drey had said. *'I've been trying to tell all of you that no one knows where she is. I can sense that Angel escaped.'*

Drey was absolutely correct. One Angel escaped Lake Montezuma...the other Angel escaped life.

## 44

**Jon Truss, Author**

**Andrew and Ashley Wilcher, Bodyguards**

Ashley whispered to her brother. "This place gives me the creeps."

Andrew held a flashlight, but it did very little to show the path leading down to Devils Windpipe which had been consumed by darkness. "Well, that's what we get for protecting an author that writes psychological thrillers."

Jon was about ten feet ahead of them, also holding a flashlight. "I can hear you both." He laughed to himself. Actually, this place was creepy during the day. But at night, it was downright horrifying. Still, Jon's intuition led him back to where he had almost lost his life. Most authors simply write about shootings and attempted murders.

Jon had the privilege to experience it.

Ashley yelled from behind, "How much farther are we going?"

"Until I get to that boulder."

Andrew's voice appeared next. "Do you mean the same boulder where some girl shot you?"

Jon smiled and whispered to himself. "That's the one." He saw the boulder up ahead. "Okay, I'm here." Jon heard his voice echo through the valley. "You two hang back."

Ashley yelled, "Are you fucking nuts!" She jogged up to Jon. "We're not leaving you alone again, especially in the dark."

Andrew moved his flashlight around the area. "Someone could be twenty feet away and we wouldn't know it."

Jon sat on the boulder and pulled the voice recorder from his pocket. "You're both invading my workspace." He faked a harsh tone, not expecting the twins to buy it. "Get away from me."

Andrew said, "But Court told us to—"

"My wife is overprotective. Just hang back thirty feet." He looked at them. "Shut your flashlights off and be quite."

The twins looked at each other, then conceded. Both moved back, but it was only twenty feet. Jon watched as they pulled out their Tasers and sat next to a tree.

They disappeared when Andrew turned off the flashlight.

Jon zipped up his jacket. The temperature dipped into the thirties, although it felt colder. He turned on the recorder and then turned off the flashlight.

The best place for an author is alone in the dark. It's where authors find inspiration. The average person couldn't see anything in the dark, but authors can see plenty of images and feel every kind of emotion.

The added benefit was that he could sit in the same spot where he had almost been killed. He had a vivid image of the girl approaching, wearing a sweater with black and white stripes.

Jon had once seen a similar image near his bed in the middle of the night. He popped his eyes open. Standing next to him was a young girl, about the same age as Angel, staring at him. She had a pale face and wore the same black and white sweater. Even her long black hair was the same.

He told Court about it, but that was so long ago she probably forgot. Also, Jon had imagined plenty of things next to his bed. He could write an entire book on the ghosts that stare at people while they sleep.

A light gust of cool wind brushed through Jon's hair. He couldn't wait to get back to the hotel and write down the words that were processing in his imagination. At this moment, Jon was living inside his own book.

"Mr. Truss?" a voice whispered. It was a young girl.

The same girl.

Angel.

Jon's heart pumped so hard he wondered if the twins could actually hear the panic that echoed from his soul. He opened his mouth to speak, but the terror that he felt gripped his...

Windpipe.

He heard Angel step closer. A breeze appeared in the darkness, creating that same metallic music in the valley. Angel crawled on the rock and sat next to him.

This was real. Not his imagination.

Angel moved closer to him. "I'm here with you again." Her voice was soft, yet moved with ease to his ears like a warm breath. "Why do you think we keep coming back here?"

"I don't know," Jon said. He reached for the flashlight, but instead, found Angel's cold hand.

"You shouldn't turn that light on us. It would ruin everything." Angel entwined their fingers. "You live on the other end of the country, yet you came here. And I almost killed you in this exact spot, yet here you are."

Jon opened his mouth to call the twins, but once again, he couldn't speak.

Angel squeezed his hand. "I'm just like you. I can't seem to stay away from here. I hung myself two years ago next to my mother. Then I came back, just for you."

Jon attempted to move his hand away, but she tugged it back.

"My heart came alive when the bullets left the gun. Then your bodyguards zapped me and dragged my spirit back to the grave."

Jon breathed in the frigid air. "Why are you here?" His voice barely audible.

"Perhaps a better question is why are we here?"

"I'm...thinking about my story."

"So am I..."

Angel held his hand, then raised it, pressing the fingers against her cold lips. She held her kiss for what seemed an eternity. She placed his hand on the bolder, released her fingers, and slid away.

Jon didn't move. Angel's voice appeared directly in front of him. "You know what I am..." Her lips brushed against his. Jon felt a bead of sweat drizzle down the side of his face. "You've researched me," Angel whispered. "A young girl with pale skin, wearing a striped black and white sweater."

Angel pressed her lips against his, then moved away, floating with the cold wind.

Jon pulled in a quick breath. He felt the presence of Angel disappear as if he had been trapped in a closet and suddenly the door flew open.

Jon had indeed researched the young girl with pale skin, black hair, wearing a black and white sweater.

To his horror, Jon discovered that she was the devil.

*"Darkness covered everything, blacker than a hundred midnights."*

—James Weldon Johnson

## 45

***Jon Truss, Author***

***Court Truss, Bodyguard***

***Andrew and Ashley Wilcher, Bodyguards***

Jon and the twins reached the end of the path, which led to General Cooks Trail where the Yukon was parked. Jon hadn't told the twins about his latest encounter with Angel. In fact, he hadn't spoken a word since leaving the valley.

Behind the Yukon was a red Ford Ranger truck.

Andrew said, "That's Drey's truck."

Jon looked inside, not seeing Drey. A hint of panic flowed through Jon's veins and prickled his skin. Drey's intuition must have led him to Devils Windpipe, which is exactly where Angel was at the moment.

Drey had made it clear that he didn't want anyone to contact him, but this seemed different. Jon grabbed his cell phone and called.

Straight to voicemail. *"This is Drey Harten. Leave a message."*

Jon shoved the phone back into his pocket and pointed to the Yukon. "Let's go."

During the drive back to the hotel, no one spoke. The twins knew enough about Jon that they shouldn't say a word when he appeared to be lost in thought.

Ashley barley made it to the parking spot when Jon opened the door and stepped out of the Yukon. Andrew hurried to the front of Jon and Ashley caught up from behind.

Jon still didn't say a word, marching through the lobby, ignoring Ruana Kelly at the front desk saying, "Good evening Mr. Truss."

They took the stairs, then Jon went into this room, leaving the twins in the hallway.

Court was in a chair, legs propped up on a nearby desk, television on the eleven o'clock local news. "Hey. Where have you been?"

"Working."

"You don't work."

Jon glared at her. "You know what I mean."

She kept her feet propped, giving him a smile. "You seem a bit on edge."

"I just have to get some writing done."

"We have the entire floor to ourselves. Pick one of the remaining seven rooms that are available."

Jon grabbed his laptop. "I'll be back later."

"Wait!" Court dropped her feet down and sprung from the chair. "I need a favor."

"Now?"

"Tomorrow."

Jon looked at the television. *"Bestselling author Jon Truss will be visiting the Camp Verde Library at noon tomorrow. He'll be speaking and making a large donation, so everyone at Lake Montezuma should stop by the library and show your support. Meanwhile, you'll have a chance to get an autograph from one of the most popular author's on the planet."*

Jon shut off the TV. "Is that your favor?"

"Yes," Court said, kissing his cheek. "There's a good reason that-"

"Tell me later." He clutched his laptop and headed to the door.

"But I have to tell you something about Angel Saguaro."

"Later," he repeated.

"Is everything okay?"

"I just want to get some writing done." He went into the hallway before Court responded.

Walking toward him was Ashley. "You going out?"

"No. Looking for a room to write."

She thumbed behind her. "Pick any of those seven rooms. They're all open."

"Thanks. You and Andrew can get some rest." He walked by her, stomping toward the farthest room.

Jon flicked on the lamp, placed his laptop on the desk, and powered it up. He slid into the chair while retrieving the voice recorder from his pocket.

After gazing out the window for the next thirty minutes, staring at the orange glow of lights in the parking lot, Jon finally turned to his laptop and began writing.

His fingers banged on the keys with determination, which turned into anger. All he could think about was that he did nothing while Angel stood right next to him. Why didn't he call for the twins?

Jon shook his head, banging away on the keys. The voice recorder sat close on the desk. Every once in a while he would glance at it. Then after two hours of writing *Devils Windpipe*, he finally pressed PLAY and listened.

*Gust of wind.*

*Faint steps walking toward him.*

"Mr. Truss?" The voice was a bit distorted from the wind gust. Jon felt the same emotions creep back as if he was still sitting on that boulder. Heart pumping so loud, he could hear the drumming.

The wind blew, creating that same metallic music in the valley, followed by the sound of Angel crawling on the rock and sitting by him.

*She moved closer.*

*"I'm here with you again. Why do you think we keep coming back here?"*

*"I don't know."*

*His hand, touching Angel's hand.*

*"You shouldn't turn that light on us. It would ruin everything." Angel sliding her fingers and gripping his hand. "You live on the other end of the country, yet you came here. And I almost killed you in this exact spot, yet here you are. I'm just like you. I can't seem to stay away from here. I hung myself two years ago next to my mother. Then I came back, just for you. My heart came alive when the bullets left the gun. Then your bodyguards zapped me and dragged my spirit back to the grave."*

*"Why are you here?" His voice barely audible.*

*"Perhaps a better question is why are we here?"*

*"I'm...thinking about my story."*

*"So am I..."*

*She kissed his hand.*

*Released her fingers.*

*Slid off the boulder.*

*Angel's voice appeared. "You know what I am..." Her lips brushed against his. "You've researched me," Angel whispered. "A young girl with pale skin, wearing a striped black and white sweater."*

*Angel pressed her lips against his, then moved away.*

Jon pressed STOP on the voice recorder, then replayed it several more times. Afterwards, he wrote more of his novel. His fingers banged so hard on the keys that he wondered if any of them would be damaged after he finished.

An hour later Jon slammed the laptop shut, deleted the voice recorder, then marched to the door.

The hallway had a sensation of being in the middle of the night. There was something about the dim glow, or the eerie quietness. Court, Marcus, and the twins were most likely in a deep slumber, dreaming about the day when they could leave this place.

Jon stopped at the room where Drey was staying. He thought about knocking on the door to see if Drey returned from Devils Windpipe. Also, Jon wanted to know if he received a visit from Angel.

Jon stood for a long moment, then decided to head back to his own room, entering the darkness.

Court flicked on the lamp next to her, head poking from the blankets. "What time is it?" Her voice soft, eyes remained closed.

The anger continued to pump in Jon's veins. Something about his visit with Angel stirred up emotions that he never felt before.

*Fury.*

*Rage.*

Then, another emotion fought its way into his subconscious.

*Lust.*

Jon was angry with himself because he had become aroused by Angel's tempting voice, soft touch, and the cold, pure lips of a teenager. This infuriated him, because the emotions that he felt were immoral and wrong.

"Jon? What's the matter?"

He looked at Court. Her eyes open, full of concern.

Jon threw off the blankets, grabbed Court by the arms, and flipped her over. He ripped down her pajama bottoms and panties. He pulled down his pants and underwear, then took a firm hold on her hips from behind, and thrust himself inside of her.

Court reached back to push him off. "Jon, what the fuck is wrong with you?"

He smacked her hand away and continued pumping with all the strength he had. He grabbed the back of her curly red hair, took in a handful, and yanked her head back.

"Stop!" Court pleaded.

Jon kept going, ignoring her, well aware that he was raping his own wife.

He continued holding her hair with his left hand and digging the fingers of his right hand into her ass. Jon slammed his cock into her, tugging the hair, thumping with quick, hard thrusts.

"Please...stop..."

Sweat slid down his face. He let go of her hair, using both hands to slam her body back and forth, using quick, violent thrusts.

"Jon..."

His cock exploded with an unsatisfying orgasm. His grip loosened for just a moment. Court slid her body to the side, turned, and punched him in the stomach.

The air blew from Jon's lungs. He fell to the floor, gasping, feeling the room slip away.

Court ripped off her pajama top, knelt on the floor while straddling her thighs on him, forcing her pussy down on his swollen cock. "You want to fuck like that?"



She smacked him across the face. "You want to treat me like some fucking whore!" Court raised her hand and brought it down with such a vicious whack on his cheek, Jon almost lost consciousness.

She thrust her hips, reached back with her hands on the floor, humping Jon until he was completely hard again.

He sat up, pulled her close, and shoved his tongue in her mouth. Jon then released, catching his breath, as Court glided with a slower motion.

Both of them moaned, kissed, and let their anger seep away as sweat formed on their glistening skin. Jon licked her breasts, worked his way up to her throat, kissing her cheek, then finding her welcoming, inflamed lips.

He felt a sudden wetness from Court. She rolled her eyes back, moaned, then fell forward, wrapping her arms around him.

Jon wanted to say he was sorry, but never found the words.

## 47

### ***Drey Harten, Psychic***

Drey used the flashlight to find his way through the valley. The process took triple the amount of time. He had been in some dark places before, but Devils Windpipe seemed as if the night had been wrapped with a black cloak.

He rotated the meditation balls in his fingers. The chime matched a strange metallic wind that flowed in the treetops. Each path that he took seemed to call him by name. In his mind, Drey was now following two people. A woman and young girl about ten, or eleven years old. The woman carried a brown wicker picnic basket with a red bow.

When Drey pointed the flashlight, the woman and girl suddenly disappeared. He rotated the meditation balls, flicked off the flashlight, and watched as the woman and girl came back to life like a vision, walking along the path. They talked, but Drey couldn't hear what they were saying. Their pleasant voices muffled by the chimes in his hand, along with the metallic song that played in the distance of Devils Windpipe.

They continued down another path, then another, seeming to know the maze as if this were their neighborhood. Drey stumbled on rocks and various holes in the dirt. The temperature cooled and a gust of wind slid under his coat, touching his skin like icy fingernails.

Another path. Then another.

Drey began to wheeze. The long hike stole his strength as the joints in his knees screamed with pain. There had been a time twenty years ago when looking for a missing person consisted of long walks through neighborhoods, farmlands, and trails such as this. But he had aged over the years while hiding in his Colorado home like a fugitive.

The hike continued off a path, toward a thick set of trees. Drey's muscles pinched together. His mouth ached for water. How long had he been in this valley? Two hours? Five hours? He looked up, unable to see the sky.

Even the meditation balls in his hand started to feel like they were filled with two pounds of lead. The chimes became inconsistent, yet the metallic music from above continued with an eerie tune.

The woman and girl finally stopped at the base of a tree. The woman opened the picnic basket and retrieved two strands of rope. They both laughed as if the rope was one of those snakes in a can of tricks.

Drey rotated the meditation balls, attempting to catch his breath. He shivered from the cold, but still had a stream of sweat running down his face and back.

"Up you go," the woman said to the girl.

With the ease of a chimpanzee, the girl climbed the tree with the rope around her shoulder. She held onto the trunk while tossing the first rope over a thick branch. She then did the same with the other rope, then climbed back down.

"Awesome job, honey!" the woman said. She gave the girl a hug and kissed her cheek. "Are you ready?"

"Yep," the girl said with excitement.

Drey moved the balls in his hand, attempting to focus on the chime. He watched as the woman and girl secured one end of the ropes to the trunk, then form a noose with the other end.

The woman examined the ropes. "I'm not sure if we did it right?"

The girl looked up. "We'll have to climb the tree and jump off."

"But how are we going to wrap it around our necks?"

The girl thought about it for a second. "Here, watch me." She scurried up the tree, pulled one of the ropes close to her, then slid the noose over her neck. She looked down. "Are you watching?"

"Yes," the woman said. "Give it a try."

The girl leaped forward, then shot downward. The rope snapped tight around her neck, sending her back to the tree and slamming her body against the trunk. The rope spun her in a circle, twisted around the neck, instantly turning her face a deep crimson, then bluish-purple.

"You're doing great," the woman yelled from below. "Are you dying?"

The girl twitched, clutching at the rope, then attempted to pull herself free. Her eyes bulged with thick tears down her inflamed cheeks. Her fingers reached blindly out and dug into the bark.

A gush of foam spilt from her mouth, then her body went limp.

Drey continued shifting the meditation balls in the palm of his hand. He gazed with horror at the dead girl as a gust of wind bounced her off the tree several times.

He then looked at the woman. She had begun to climb up the tree, but slipped and fell hard to the ground. "Shit!"

After a moment to catch her breath, she made another attempt. This time, she made it up the tree, reached out, and snagged the rope that hung next to the girl. She slid on the noose and eyed the ground like a diver about to jump into the pool.

Drey squeezed his fist together, stopping the chimes.

He had seen enough.

Then, a voice appeared behind him. "I can't believe you are really here."

Drey didn't turn. He dropped the flashlight to the ground, then shoved the meditation balls in his pocket. "You're not really Angel, are you?"

"I'm kind of an Angel," the girl said. He could hear her stepping closer. "It's so great that you came all the way out here to see me."

Drey felt her fingers touch his back. He still couldn't turn around. Even if he did, it's so dark that he wouldn't be able to see her. "Where did they take you after you shot Jon Truss?"

Angel moved to his side, reaching her hand under his jacket, lifting his shirt, then touching his stomach with her chilly fingers. "I went to the hospital. Then they took me back home."

Drey wanted to push her icy fingers away, but couldn't muster the willpower. "Where is your home? Where are you really from?"

"Truth or Consequences."

Drey cringed at the name of the town. He knew it well.

## 48

### ***June, 1999.***

The knock on his door in Timpas, Colorado was like so many others. The only time anyone came to his home was when people needed his help to find someone.

This particular knock in June of 1999 had not been a mother pleading for him to find her missing daughter, or son. It was an FBI Agent named Rita Horton. She was about thirty-five, attractive, dressed in a New York Yankees T-shirt and jeans.

"Can I help you?" Drey asked.

She flipped open her FBI credentials, let him take a quick glance, then returned the wallet to her back pocket. "I'm not here," she said. "Can we agree on that?"

Drey sighed. The FBI and police never wanted to admit that they came to him for help. It pissed him off, because those same organizations were the ones that supported laws to deter psychics from being involved with missing person cases. After the laws were passed he had retired, but it seemed like detectives, Feds, and distraught parents needed him more than ever.

"I'm not here either." Drey was about to close the door when she put her foot in the doorway.

"My name is Rita Horton—"

"I saw your name already on your I.D." He thought about how close their last names were. *Harten* and *Horton*.

She gave him a slight grin. "I didn't think you looked."

"Well, I did." Drey lowered his head for a moment, then moved to the side. "Come inside." Drey attempted to ask people to leave, but he caved every time. Deep down, he couldn't ignore anyone. "Who's missing?" he asked her.

"Can we sit?"

Drey pointed to the dining room table. "I suppose you want something to drink as well." His visitors always asked to sit and for something to drink while they built up the confidence to ask him for help.

"It's ninety degrees outside, so yes, I'm thirsty." She slid into a chair. "And it wasn't easy finding your place."

Drey laughed. "Yeah right. All you Feds say the same thing. It's just a coincidence that you keep showing up on my doorstep." He went into the kitchen and opened the fridge, speaking so she could hear him. "Mothers and fathers from all over the country find me in this shit town with less than two hundred people." He grabbed a pitcher of lemonade, slammed the door shut, snagged a glass and returned to the dining room.

Rita took the pitcher and glass from him and poured it herself. "I know you're pissed off at the world, but—"

"Yeah, I'm a pissed off that people go missing and I'm pissed off that I can't really do anything about it." He dropped down into a chair, noticing that he was being more hostile than normal. Maybe it was because he found her so damn attractive. "I'm mostly pissed that I can't seem to live in peace."

Rita took a sip of her lemonade. "I'm not here as an FBI agent."

"Of course not."

Her expression softened. "You don't understand. This is personal."

"Then why did you show me your I.D.?"

"Because..." Rita cleared her throat and chugged down the lemonade. "I needed to get inside your door."

Drey drummed his fingers on the table. He couldn't help feeling foolish about his hard act. "Did someone go missing that you know?"

"I only know their names."

He noticed the plural in names. "How many?"

Rita's eyes became glossed with tears. "Sixty."

## 49

Drey waited until she regained her composure. "Are you talking about what happened at Truth or Consequences, New Mexico?"

"Yes."

"Were you one of the hundred agents that searched the property?"

"Yes."

He thought about the arrest of David Parker Ray who was nicknamed the Toy-Box Killer, because he spent \$100,000 renovating a mobile home in Truth or Consequences, New Mexico, turning it into a torture chamber. David Parker Ray would lure women back to the mobile home where he had whips, chains, pulleys, straps, clamps, syringes, and a leg spreader bar. Also in the 'Toy-Box' was a malicious combination of sex toys, saws, and surgical blades.

Mounted above the gynecologist table was a mirror attached to the ceiling so the victims could see what he was doing. He would also record the torturing and show it to the women if they were still alive.

David Ray Parker had been so obsessed that he created his own diagrams, which demonstrated the most productive methods to torture and brutalize the women. He even made his own electronic generator for another option to afflict pain.

He drugged the women with an amnesia agent made of sodium pentothol and phenobarbital, hoping that they would think it was a bad dream. However, that never seemed to work.

A woman escaped from the Toy-Box while David was at work, which eventually led to his arrest.

As the FBI investigated, they believed that David murdered sixty women. A hundred agents searched the property, but never found a single body.

"You want me to find those missing women," Drey said. "What makes you think I can handle seeing their remains?"

"I'm sure you have seen some gruesome—"

"Don't," he snapped. "I don't need a recap."

"I'm sorry." Rita quickly wiped a tear that escaped from her eye. "No one knows that I'm here. With one phone call, you could get me fired."

"I wouldn't do that," Drey assured her. "No more than I would do that for any of the other detectives, or Fed's that secretly came to me for help. But you know that if I find those bodies, the evidence is inadmissible in court. I could end up being responsible for letting that sick bastard loose."

Rita locked her eyes on Drey. "If we don't find those bodies, he may not get what he deserves."

Drey had heard that same speech since he started in the 80's about every kidnapper. It was when the police, Feds, or parents became desperate. "Are you sure that all of those sixty people are dead?"

"Excuse me?"

"I saw on the news that some of the victims were found alive, but they were too embarrassed to tell the police. One woman actually begged the police to investigate him, but they never followed through."

"They're dead. We have proof."

Drey rubbed the back of his neck, staring at her empty glass of lemonade. "The videos."

"Yes."

He pulled in a deep breath. "I suppose the Feds have looked all over Truth or Consequences. There aren't many places to hide sixty bodies. That means he took them somewhere else."

"Should I drive you to the scene later tonight? You can start there."

"No. That place is still crawling with media, not to mention your co-workers. I don't want anyone seeing us together." He stood up, left the room, then returned with a map.

Rita narrowed her eyes. "Are you serious?"

"Sometimes I can get a feeling. It's worth a shot." He pulled the meditation balls from his pocket and began rotating them in his hand. The chime seemed louder than normal. He gazed at the map of New Mexico, concentrating on the small town of Truth or Consequences.

His eyes drifted to the right, noticing Roswell. "No...that's not it." It took several minutes before he could get Roswell from his vision. "White Sands Missile Range..." That area wasn't open to the public, which would make the perfect hiding spot. However, Drey didn't feel that was the place.

He continued rotating the meditation balls, eyes moving along the state of New Mexico, hoping for a hint, or just a feeling. "White Sands Space Harbor...no, that's not it. White Sands airport...White Sands Monument." Drey was breathing heavy. "No...that's not it."

He squeezed his eyes closed, envisioning the map, waiting for a name to pop in his head. "Silver City," he whispered. "No...that's not it." Drey rotated the meditation balls, eyes still closed. Different colors formed in his mind.

Yellow.

Red.

Brown.

Red.

Brown.

"No...that's not it." His veins pumped with frustration. He could feel the location, but couldn't see it. "Black..." Drey slowed the motion of the meditation balls. "Black Mountain...no...that's not it."

Drey was getting closer. He could almost see the women buried in the forsaken ground. Maybe it was the White Sands Missile Range? "No...that's not it."

*Red.*

*Brown.*

*Black.*

*Black Rock.*

*Black Zuni.*

Drey opened his eyes. He placed the meditation balls in his pocket and wiped his sweaty palm on his jeans.

Rita leaned forward. "Did you see something? Do you know where the bodies are?"

Drey looked at the map. "Black Rock Zuni Indian Reservation."

## 50

Rita shook Drey's hand, then pulled him in for a hug and a peck on the cheek. Without saying a word, tears flooded her eyes and she hurried away.

Drey watched the news updates on David Parker Ray over the next few months. Not once did they mention the discovery of over sixty bodies at the Black Rock Zuni Indian Reservation.

Eventually, David Parker Ray was sentenced 224 years in prison. He died of a heart attack in 2002, never being truly punished for the torture and pain that he caused. Drey always felt that the devil met David Parker Ray in hell and tortured him in unimaginable ways.

In the spring of 2004, Rita Horton made another unannounced visit. She had quit the FBI and became a private investigator for women clients.

"No men clients?" Drey asked. His heart fluttered at the sight of Rita. The ageing of five years complimented her even more.

"Just women," Rita said. "I specialize in doing background checks on new boyfriends." Her gaze became like steel. "I never want another bastard like David Parker Ray to exist again."

Drey knew how hard it was to get into the FBI, so for Rita to leave and start her own private investigator business, her passion could not be questioned.

"I don't have any lemonade." He had been standing there like an idiot, trying to think of something to say.

Rita stepped closer and gently kissed him on the lips. "I don't have to be psychic to know that you have feelings for me."

"That's funny, because I'm a psychic and I have no idea how you feel about me."

Rita wrapped her arms around him. Her body soft. Eyes glimmering with love. Fingers warm on the back of his neck. "I'm setting up my office in New York. I'm going to hire at least one private investigator in every state."

"But no men."

Her face moved closer, just inches away from him. "No men clients," she said. "I'll have plenty of men investigators." She paused. "I can't ask you to come with me, but I wish that you could. I don't want to ever put you into the same position that I did five years ago."

Drey cocked his head and pressed his lips against hers. He never wanted to stop, because if he did, it would be the last time he ever kissed her again.

When she pulled away and stepped back, tears rimmed under her eyes. "If you want to come with me..." She looked away, not able to finish her sentence.

Drey knew that Rita would be tempted to ask for his help with each of her new cases. It seemed that she also understood how difficult it was for Drey to use his gift and that he craved privacy as most people craved a normal, happy life.

"I wish that I could see our future." He felt a tear drizzle down his face. "Maybe something will drastically change in our lives and we can be together."

Rita swallowed, then shook her head. "That will be my prayer every single day until that happens." She pulled in a deep breath, then turned and headed for the door.

Drey cleared his throat. "Did the FBI ever find those sixty bodies? Were they at the Indian Reservation?"

Rita placed her hand on the door. "I read a report that eighty-one bodies had been discovered."

"They found eighty-one bodies there?"

"Yes." Rita turned the knob and opened the door. "But the FBI kept it a secret."

She went out the door, didn't look at Drey, then closed the door behind her.

Just like that, the only woman that Drey ever fell in love with, Rita Horton, walked out of his life just as fast as she entered it.

## 51

### ***Devils Windpipe***

"How did you escape?" Drey asked Angel. "And how did you get from New Mexico to Arizona?"

No reply.

Drey didn't feel the icy touch of her fingers anymore. At some point when she mentioned the town, Truth or Consequences, he went into a daze and Angel must have disappeared into the valley.

The sun cut into the morning and shined through the trees like a strobe light. Drey studied the tree ahead of him, recalling the vision of a girl and woman hanging themselves.

"Mila Saguaro," he said to himself. That was the mother's name. The girl was her daughter, Angel Saguaro.

He turned his head, eyes sweeping in every direction. So then who was the girl that whispered to him in the dark, then disappear with the ease of a ghost?

Drey felt a twinge of pain in his knees. He also felt a combination of joy and sadness concerning the memory of Rita Horton.

As he walked back along the path, attempting to figure out the maze and leave the valley, Drey thought about Rita. Only in sappy movies and romance novels did two people in love find their way back to each other. Drey's story was different. He never saw Rita again, nor did he try to research how she had been doing in New York.

Subconsciously, Drey had pulled the meditation balls from his pocket and had been rotating them for the last hour. He easily found his way down the correct paths, made it out of Devils Windpipe, then down the Saguaro Mountain to his truck that was parked on Fremont Road.

Next to his truck was a Yavapai County Sheriffs SUV. An officer spoke on his shoulder radio, then approached him. "Are you Drey Harten?"

Drey already knew what was about to happen. He placed his hands on the hood of the SUV. "Let's get this over with."

## 52

The officer that placed him in the cell was actually a nice guy. He allowed Drey to have as much Dasani water that he could suck down. The officer then brought Drey a full breakfast of pancakes, bacon, scrambled eggs, and plenty of coffee. They chatted for about twenty minutes, discussing all the excitement in town. Drey then dozed off until he was taken to a room for questioning.

He assumed that Jordan Hench would appear in the small room, but instead it was an older gentleman, bald and overweight, dressed in a gray blazer with a blue T-shirt underneath, gray slacks, and Nike cross trainers. "Good morning, I'm Detective Caplan, Arizona State Bureau of Investigations." He slid into a chair and plopped a notebook and pen on the table. "I cover small town investigations for homicides."

Drey's heart skipped a beat. "Did they find Devin Poulston's body?"

Caplan scrunched his bushy gray eyebrows, then made a quick note on the pad. Drey looked down at the note. *Drey Harten: "Did they find Devin Poulston's body?"*

Caplan looked up. "Kristy Poulston informed the people at CARP that she thinks her son researched you on the Internet before his disappearance."

"Is that a question, or a statement?"



"Statement. Here's the question. Did Devin Poulston make any kind of contact with you?"

"No."

"Phone call?"

"No."

"Email? Letter? Sticky note on your door?"

Drey heaved a sigh. "I understand the word, contact. The answer is no."

"Do you have any information on why Devin Poulston's jacket was found at 3216 Rusty Spurs Road, home of Norman Hertzler?"

"Well..."

Caplan glared at Drey and shifted his head back and forth, indicating that Drey should say, 'no.'

Drey suddenly realized that this wasn't an interrogation. The police have to clear Drey as a witness and show that he had nothing to do with finding evidence, and that his claims of being a psychic were not used at any point. This way, all evidence would be admissible in court.

"I do not know anything about a jacket and had no involvement with anything that occurred with Norman Hertzler, or his home."

Caplan made a quick note. "While you were inside the home with Kristy Poulston, did you lend assistance to finding her son?"

"No."

"Do you have any information, knowledge, or even an idea of what happened to Devin Poulston, or where he is?"

"No."

"Are you involved with the Devin Poulston case in any way?"

"No."

"Do you claim to have psychic abilities that could offer assistance in the Devin Poulston case?"

Drey paused. Not once in his life had he denied being a psychic; not even when he first discovered his abilities as a teenager. "I am not..." Drey cleared his throat, then revised his statement. "I have not, and will not offer assistance in the Devin Poulston case, or anything related."

"Thank you for your time." Caplan stood. "You are free to go."

Drey stood and shook Caplan's hand. "Thanks for going easy on me."

"No problem." Caplan leaned close and whispered. "I have a copy of *Bring Them Home* in my car. Would be kind enough to sign it for me?"

"Where in the world did you find a copy?"

"Amazon still carries it." Caplan kept his voice low. "Actually, it rose up to the top one hundred list. Not bad for a book that has collected dust for the last fifteen years, or so."

Drey couldn't believe it. All this media attention, combined with him resurfacing, must have caught the attention of people around the world and breathed life into his book.

Drey opened the door for Caplan and gave him a pat on the back. "I'll sign that book for you, if you give me a ride back to my truck."

"Sure," Caplan said as they walked along the corridor. "But the ride will be short." He grinned. "They towed your truck here."

***Jon Truss, Author***  
***Court Truss, Bodyguard***

Jon showered and dressed in a dark blue, long sleeve shirt and black slacks. After sliding on his shoes and doing one more check in the mirror, he shut the bathroom light off, seeing Court ready by the door.

She spoke to him for the first time this morning. "Do you want to talk about what happened last night?"

"Not really."

Court looked at him for a long moment. "You know that I'll do just about anything in bed, but even I have my limits."

"I understand."

"And..."

"What?"

She put her hands up. "I'm assuming that you want to apologize at some point before we leave?"

"I'm sorry," he said without much conviction. "Can we please get this over with?"

Court glanced at her watch. "Everything starts at noon. We have a few minutes before-" Her cell phone rang. "Hello?" Pause. "You're shitting me?" Court put the phone on speaker. "Drey, I have Jon with me. Say that again."

"I was arrested this morning. Everything is fine, they let me go."

"Did they just want to clear you?" Court asked.

"Yes...but there's something else."

"What?"

"I...I saw Angel last night."

Jon felt an instant pang in his chest. "Did she speak to you?"

"Yes."

Court: "Drey...Marcus and I discovered last night that Angel Saguario hung herself the same time that her mother did."

"I know." Pause. "This other girl, who we can still call Angel, is from a small town in New Mexico called, Truth or Consequences."

"Do you still think that this Angel girl had something to do with Devin's disappearance?"

"Yes."

Jon: "What did Angel say to you?"

"She couldn't believe that we met in Devils Windpipe. Also, she admitted escaping after she was brought back to her home in New Mexico."

Jon: "Did anything else happen with her?"

"What do you mean?"

Jon cringed, feeling Court's eyes on him. "I'm just wondering if she...attacked you or something?"

"No. But she does scare the shit out of me, if that counts."

Court: "Do you have any idea who her parents are, or where she lives in that town of Truth or Consequences?"

"No."

"Then Marcus and I will work on that."

"What about Kristy Poulston?"

"I still haven't approached her. But she does have my number, if she wants us back."

Drey sighed through the phone. "I'm almost at the hotel."

"We're just about to leave. Jon has to be at the Camp Verde Library at noon."

"What for?"

Court glanced at Jon. "It's a long story. Will you be here when we get back?"

"I'm not leaving town, if that's what you mean. I'll catch some shuteye and get back to work."

"Do you want one of twins for help?"

"No. I want to be alone. See ya."

Court slipped the cell back into her pocket. "Well, you ready?"

Jon stepped forward and kissed her on the lips, then embraced her in a loving hug. "I'm sorry about last night."

## 54

***Jon Truss, Author***

***Court Truss, Bodyguard***

***Marcus Cane, Former Hostage Negotiator***

***Andrew and Ashley Wilcher, Bodyguards***

Ashley drove the Yukon, Marcus in the passenger's seat, Court and Jon in the back, Andrew stuck in the far rear.

Jon's cell phone buzzed. "Hey Bram. Is this a money call?"

"Actually, it is. *Bring Them Home* cracked the top one hundred on Amazon."

"Really?"

"Yep. I told you this trip would be worth a lot of money."

"Yeah right. What else is going on?"

"I heard you're doing an appearance at the Camp Verde Library."

"We're on the way. How in God's name did you find that out?"

"Some woman that works at the library, Alice Gottschalk, has been on the local news this morning and it was picked up by Fox."

"Why? It's just a library visit."

"You're donating a hundred thousand dollars. That's more than just a visit."

"What!" Jon looked at Court. "We're donating a hundred grand?"

Court's eyes became wide. "Um...I made the arrangements this morning when we weren't speaking." She then gave him a cocky grin. "Sorry, Mr. Bestseller."

Ashley looked in the review mirror and smiled, while Marcus chuckled in the front seat.

Jon ignored them. "Well, you know my feelings about libraries. Spend ten minutes there and-

"Yeah I know, spend ten minutes in a library and find the answer to just about any question. Save your quotes for Facebook and Twitter. I have better things to do."

Jon laughed while staring out the tinted window. A massive crowd had formed in the parking lot of the library, including all the media outlets that are covering the Devin Poulston case. "We're here. I have to go."

"Wait. There's one more thing I have to discuss with you."

"Make it quick."

"How is *Devils Windpipe* going?"

"I'm working on chapter 54."

"Really? Damn you're fast. How are the bullet wounds?"

"Painful, but healing."

"Keep the twins close to you."

"Yes, dad."

"And finish *Devils Windpipe*. The whole world is tuned into Lake Montezuma right now."

"It will be done when I get done."

"What does that mean?"

"It means this..." Jon clicked the END button and shut off the power.

Ashley beeped her horn, fighting through the crowd and media. "There must be five thousand people here."

Jon gazed out the window. "This is going to be a long day..."

## 55

***Drey Harten, Psychic***

***Rita Horton, Private Detective***

Drey laid in the hotel bed at the Beaver Creek Inn, exhausted, feeling the pain seep from his hair to his toes, knees screaming for help, and his back thumping as if someone attempted to shove a cinder block next to his spine.

Despite all that he couldn't sleep. The memories of Rita Horton stayed with him since he thought about her at *Devils Windpipe*.

Drey practically crawled off the bed, then used his iPhone to do a Google search on Rita Horton. His fingers trembled as if he had been jacked up on caffeine.

Rita had a Facebook page. Her picture looked stunning. How was it possible for a woman to become more attractive with each passing year? Her relationship status said, *complicated*.

He clicked on a link to her website and dialed the contact number.

"Rita Horton Investigators, New York Office; this is Gretta, how may I direct your call?"

Drey cleared his throat, feeling like a high school boy calling a girl, but having to speak with her mother first. "Is Rita available?"

"Ms. Horton is in a meeting. May I take a message?"

He debated. "Sure. I guess. My name is Drey Harten."

"Oh God..."

Drey gripped the phone. "What's wrong?"

"When I first started working here, Rita gave me specific instructions that if a Drey Harten ever calls, I'm to interrupt her immediately. Ms. Horton even wrote a sticky note to remind me and stuck it on top of the phone."

"Wow. How long has that note been sitting there?"

"Ten years."

"Well then. I suppose you better patch me through."

Gretta snickered. "Hold on a second."

Rita's voice appeared. "Well, well. He finally calls."

Drey's heart thudded against his chest. He prayed that his voice would not squeak. "The phone works both ways."

"I see that you have come out of retirement."

"Not really."

"Oh yeah? Then why is your picture in the news every day?"

"I'm helping...but not really...I..." Drey banged his fist on the bed, not wanting to sound like an idiot. "Okay, you got me. I've crawled out of my hole and trying to find that missing boy."

"You have quite a team there. Jon Truss, bestselling author. His wife, Court Truss, who's a famous bodyguard. Marcus Cane, ex-hostage negotiator. And you...the renowned psychic, Drey Harten."

"We also have a set of kick ass twins who double as bodyguards. It's a good team, but we still haven't found Devin Poulston." Drey moved the phone away so she wouldn't hear him clear his throat. "We could really use an ex-FBI agent that started her own investigation business."

"I'm sure you could."

Drey didn't know what that meant. "Actually, I could use your help with something."

"Name it."

"It's about Truth or Consequences."

"Oh..." Rita's breathing could be heard through the phone. "What about it?"

"Did you hear about the girl that attempted to kill Jon Truss?"

"Of course. People are still talking about it."

"I need the girl's name and address, including her parents address."

"Well I can't find that on the Internet, because her name wasn't released to the media. What does this have to do with Truth or Consequences?"

"She's from there."

"How...how did you know that?"

Drey couldn't tell Rita that some girl posing as Angel walked up to him in the middle of the night in Devils Windpipe, fondled him, then admitted that she was from Truth or Consequences.

Then again...

"The girl had claimed to be Angel Saguario, from Lake Montezuma, Arizona. She was taken to a hospital and transported back home. Then later, when I was in a valley called, Devils Windpipe, she walked up to me in the middle of the night and fondled me, then admitted that she was from Truth or Consequences. Before I could do anything, she took off."

"There's no way you told the police that story."

"No. And I'd appreciate it if you kept that between us."

"Of course. You kept a big secret for me."

Drey's heart panged with the memory. "So, do you think you can help?"

"I'm not sure. I can have one of my investigators in New Mexico do some digging. I'll have him get back to you."

Drey gripped the cell phone. "I'd rather you get back to me, if that is okay."

"Sure."

*Long, awkward pause.*

Drey cleared his throat and said, "Well, do you need my number?"

"Gretta wrote it down from the Caller ID."

"Oh...okay...I'll speak with you soon."

"I'll be in touch."

"Cool...I mean..." *Idiot!* "That sounds great."

"I have to get back to my meeting."

"Oh yeah...sorry to keep you so long."

"It's not a problem."

"I'll talk to you later then."

"Goodbye Drey."

"Bye."

He pressed END on the button and tossed his cell phone on the bed. "My God...I'm a moron."

## 56

### ***Kristy Polston, Mother of Missing Child***

### ***Drey Harten, Psychic***

Kristy walked into the lobby at the Beaver Creek Inn with a few straggling reporters following her. Amy, a seventeen-year-old employee of the inn, gave Kristy a nervous wave.

Kristy approached the desk, listening to cameras clicking behind her. "Is Ruana in?"

Amy glanced over Kristy's shoulder. "Ms. Kelly is in her office."

"Thanks." Kristy turned and glared at the reporters. "This girl at the front desk is only seventeen, so if you plan on taking more photos, you'll need to call her parents and their lawyer."

That was enough to scare them off.

Kristy smiled at Amy then headed back to the office.

"Kristy!" Ruana sprung from her chair and stumbled by the desk to give Kristy a hug. Her expression softened. "Any word on Devin?"

"Nothing." Kristy took in a deep breath. "I need to come back to work."

"Why? There's no pressure."

Kristy saw the exhaustion in Ruana's eyes. "I appreciate you covering for me, but I'm draining my savings to pay the bills." Kristy took in another quick breath.

"Plus, I'm going nuts in the house."

"Are you sure?"

Kristy forced a tired grin. "I'm sure." She pulled Ruana closer and kissed the top of her head. "I'm not giving up."

"I know." Tears welled up in Ruana's eyes. "I think it's a good idea for you to come back. If you need to leave any time, then do it."

Kristy took a moment to gather her emotions. "Did you get the car back?"

"Oh yeah. It arrived two days ago."

"Good." Kristy looked around the office. "You can go home. Get some sleep and I'll see you later this afternoon."

"Promise to call me if you need anything."

Kristy hugged her again. "I promise."

She watched as Ruana collected her things, then scooted away. Kristy glanced at the computer screen, noticing that Ruana had been working on the schedule.

"You coming back?" a voice said from the doorway.

Kristy spun her head around. "How did you know I was here?"

Drey stepped into the office. "I was in my room, staring out the window into the parking lot and saw a trail of vulture reporters following you into the hotel."

Kristy plopped down on the chair. "I need to distract myself. That's why I'm here."

"Makes sense." Drey sat in the chair across from the desk. "I'm not going to leave here until I find him."

Kristy lifted her head, attempting to keep the tears away. She was so damn tired, depressed, and couldn't erase the horrific images of Devin from her mind. "I'm not giving up either. And I know Devin is out there, still fighting to come home." She looked at Drey. "He's still alive. I know he is."

"I pray that he is."

"No, that's not good enough. I need you to believe that Devin is still alive."

Drey shifted in his chair. "What has Jordan Hench been saying?"

"Nothing much. Normal updates."

"Does she still want you to move to an undisclosed location?"

"Yes, but she admitted that the mayor and police want that. She said I didn't have to go anywhere."

"What does she think about you going back to work?"

"She agreed it would be best." Kristy locked her eyes on Drey. "And let me say it again, that me being here doesn't mean I'm giving up."

"You don't have to convince me, or anyone else of that. You do what's best and tell everyone who has a problem to kiss your ass."

Kristy cracked a weak smile. "I wish." She pointed to the computer. "I better finish up this schedule."

"That's fine. I just wanted to give you an update."

"Really? Did you..." She swallowed, taking in a few breaths. "Actually, what's going on?"

"I may be going to New Mexico to speak with the parents of that girl who shot Jon Truss."

"Do you still think she had something to do with Devin?"

"Yes."

"I heard on the news that she claimed to be Angel Saguaro."

"Yeah. Police figured it out and took her home to New Mexico. She escaped."

Kristy rolled her chair back. "Should I go with you? Maybe Devin..." She paused, blinking back the tears. "Maybe Devin is there."

"It won't be necessary. I don't even know the girl's name yet, or where she lives."

Kristy sensed that there was something that Drey wasn't telling her, but she decided not to press him. After all, he was doing everything he could to help her. "Okay. Just let me know if you find anything."

"Don't tell Jordan Hensch about New Mexico. If I find something, I'll figure out a way to send her the information without disrupting the investigation."

"Do you think the Feds are looking for that Angel girl, or whatever her name is?"

"No. But the police are."

"So Jordan doesn't have any idea that this girl maybe be involved."

Drey stood. "If I find any evidence to prove that, I'll share it with you and Jordan Hensch. There's also another investigator named Detective Caplan who's working on your son's case."

"Why did they need him?"

"The police station is small here and do not have an investigator on the payroll. In cases like these, they'll request a detective from the State Bureau of Investigations."

"Is Jordan Hensch still in charge?"

"Yes. Caplan is just representing the local police. I wanted to let you know, because you'll probably meet him. He's a pretty nice guy."

"When did you meet him?"

Drey smiled. "After I got arrested."

## 57

***Jon Truss, Author***

***Court Truss, Bodyguard***

***Marcus Cane, Former Hostage Negotiator***

***Andrew and Ashley Wilcher, Bodyguards***

It was late in the afternoon when Jon finished signing over 6,000 autographs and did several interviews. When Jon and the others piled into the Yukon, Marcus said, "I can't believe you hung in there so long."

Jon chuckled. "Nice compliment coming from a guy that spends twenty hours talking to hostage takers."

"Touché." Marcus turned in his seat. "Drey called."

Court: "What did he want?"

Marcus: "Two things. First, Kristy came back to work."

Jon: "I think that's a good idea. There's nothing more she can do cooped up in that house."

Marcus: "Also, Drey is working with someone to get Angel's identity and address."

Court: "Who is helping him get that information?"

Marcus: "I don't know. He didn't say."



Jon: "Ashley, stop somewhere so we can get something to eat. Then we'll head back to the hotel and change, then take us to Saguaro Mountain."

Court: "What do you want to go there for?"

Jon: "I want to see if Angel shows up again."

Court: "What do you mean?"

Jon debated having this conversation, but it needed to be done if he was going to help find Devin. "Angel approached me last night when I was in Devils Windpipe."

"What! When? Why didn't you say anything?"

"I don't know." Jon diverted his eyes. "Something was strange about the whole thing."

"Where were the twins?"

"I had my flashlight off. They didn't see anything."

Court turned and glared back at Andrew, who looked absolutely terrified. She then shot a glare at Ashley, who kept glancing in the review mirror. Finally, Court's eyes fell on Jon. "Did she talk to you?"

"Yes."

"And the twins didn't hear anything? How far back were they?"

"Would you calm down."

"No, I won't fucking calm down! The twins could have grabbed her."

"And then what?"

"They could have beat the truth out of her!"

Marcus turned in his seat. "Jon...I don't mean to jump on Court's bandwagon, but she has a point. Remember that the police are looking for her."

"I'm aware." Jon still didn't regret telling the truth. "This girl has some sort of voice...it's strange."

Court calmed down. "What do you mean?"

"It's like her voice is hypnotic." Jon looked at Court. "Everything about her is pure evil. I'm not surprised that she escaped from the police."

Marcus remained turned in his seat, facing them. "If that's true, then it may confirm our suspicion that she led Devin somewhere."

Andrew spoke from the far rear seat. "Is there any place in Devils Windpipe for her to hide?"

Court: "I'm sure every inch of that valley was checked when the police and volunteer hikers searched for Devin."

Ashley pulled into a parking lot of a Denny's, just outside of town. "How is Angel getting into Devils Windpipe so easily? The hike is brutal. Also, she's been there twice now when Jon was there." Ashley cut off the engine and they exited the Yukon. Ashley then asked, "How is that possible?"

Marcus stopped, turning his head, looking in every direction. He then gazed at the group. "There's only one logical explanation...somehow, she's following Jon."

The sunlight lasted while Jon, Court, Marcus, and the twins made their way down the trail into Devils Windpipe. Once they arrived, darkness consumed the area.

Court flicked on a flashlight. "What's that noise? It sounds like someone is playing music."

Jon had heard that eerie music enough to know that it was just the wind swirling through the valley and churned around the mountain. "You'll have to leave me alone for awhile," Jon said, sliding onto the boulder.

Court held out her flashlight and turned in a slow, circular motion. "All right. Let's form a perimeter around this spot. I'll go north, Marcus south, Andrew east, and Ashley west. Stay within thirty feet."

Jon waited as the beams of light moved through the darkness in four different directions. Then the four of them shut off their flashlights at the same time. Jon pulled out his recorder.

Twenty minutes went by, then an hour. He kept anticipating the voice of Angel to appear next to him. Her touch would control him, but he would fight to yell for help. The twins would arrive first, flashlights bouncing, Tasers blasting into the young girl. Court would arrive next, followed by Marcus. They would drag the girl back to the Yukon, interrogate her, and call the police.

Another half hour pasted. Jon slid off the rock and stretched in the darkness. He now believed that Angel sensed a trap and would not arrive tonight.

"Okay," Jon yelled. His voiced echoed through the valley. "That's enough for tonight."

*That's enough for tonight.*

Three flashlights appeared and bounced toward him. The beams were bright, temporarily blinding him.

Ashley: "Well, it was worth a shot."

Jon shut off his recorder. "Yeah. I guess it was."

Andrew: "Let's head back. This place gives me the creeps."

Marcus turned his flashlight to the north. "Where's Court?"

The twins spun around, pointing their flashlights in every direction.

Jon yelled, "Court! Where are you?"

*Court! Where are you?*

Andrew: "We need to split up."

Marcus: "No. We need to stay together."

Jon's eyes swept along the beams of light that cut into the darkness. He wanted her to appear, out of breath, claiming that she wandered too far away.

Ashley took Jon by the arm. "We need to get you out of here."

Jon yanked his arm back. "No. We can't leave her."

Marcus: "Ashley's right. We need to get you to a safe place."

Jon didn't want to accept the notion of leaving his wife. "Court!"

*Court!*

They waited for another half hour, then headed back up the path, leaving Court and Devils Windpipe behind.

***Court Truss, Bodyguard***

After Court shut off her flashlight, she heard footsteps from behind. It could have been an animal of some sort, but deep down, Court knew that Angel had approached.

With cautious steps, Court followed the shuffling feet, now convinced that the teenager had approached in the darkness.

Hot pain seared through her skull. Court wobbled for a second, seeing tiny lights flash, then the world slipping away.

\* \* \* \* \*

When she opened her eyes, her skull bounced, feet dragged, and tips of her fingers slid along the hard ground. Court blinked several times, feeling nauseous. She attempted to turn her head, but to no avail.

Court realized that she was in a wagon.

Trees whipped by as she slid downward, almost falling to the ground. Whoever had her, was heading up the mountain.

*Court! Where are you?*

The voice was distant, but she recognized her husband. How long had she been unconscious? Why couldn't she move?

"Angel..." Court mumbled. "Can you hear me?"

"Yes," the girl said, continuing to pull her up the mountain. "Do you need to pee or something?"

Court didn't understand the strange question, until she felt the wetness between her legs. Sometime after being knocked out, Court must have urinated, which certainly pleased Angel.

*Court!*

The voice of Jon had become so distant, she could barely hear him. Still, Court sensed the fear and panic that Jon must be feeling right now.

"Where are..." Court squinted, as a flash of pain burned through her skull. She just wanted to roll off the wagon, throw up, and pass out until Jon and the others found her. She lifted her hands into the wagon, but could not find the strength to pull her knees up. "Where..." Once again, the pain in her skull took away her voice.

"Are you trying to ask where we are going?"

Court swallowed, head still bouncing in the wagon. "Yes."

"We're going to hell," Angel said. "That's where I take bad people."

***Jon Truss, Author***  
***Marcus Cane, Former Hostage Negotiator***  
***Andrew and Ashley Wilcher, Bodyguards***

When they arrived back at the Yukon, Marcus called the police. An officer arrived shortly after, who looked about fifty pounds overweight with a belly that hung over his gun belt. His face seemed flushed with anger.

"I'm Officer Filman, of the Yavapai County Sheriff's Department." He took a moment to catch his breath. Obviously, the walk from his SUV to their Yukon was too much for him. "You called in a missing person?"

Marcus shook the meaty hand of the officer. "Yes. We lost one of our companions during a hike. Her name is—"

"You were hiking in the dark?"

"Yes."

"What on earth for?"

Marcus pointed at Jon. "We were doing research for his next book."

Filman looked at Jon. "Ah yes. The rich bestselling author that graced our small community with his presence. Tell me, did you find that missing kid why you were hiking in the dark?"

Marcus answered for Jon. "Anyway, our companion is Court Truss, Jon's wife. She has curly red hair..." Marcus stopped. "I don't mean to tell you what to do, but shouldn't you be writing this down?"

Filman glared at Marcus. "How long has she been missing?"

"A little over three hours."

"There's not much we can do tonight. I'll organize a search party soon as the sun comes up. Meantime, if she suddenly appears, please call the Yavapai County Sheriffs."

Marcus sighed, then shook Filman's hand. "Thank you, officer. We appreciate all your help. Have a good night."

Filman looked over the group, then turned and wobbled back to his SUV, fired up the engine, and sped off.

Marcus opened the Yukon door. "Do we keep extra supplies in here?"

Andrew stepped forward. "Of course. Are we going back to look for her?"

Marcus grabbed a backpack and slung it over his shoulder. "Your damn right we are."

***Drey Harten, Psychic***  
***Rita Horton, Private Detective***

Drey popped his eyes open. His cell phone chirped next to him on the nightstand. He grabbed it and looked at the Caller ID. "Rita..." He glanced at the clock. "It's four o'clock in the morning."

"I'm sorry. Should I call back later?"

Drey knocked the covers off and practically launched himself from the bed. "Of course not." He rubbed the corner of his eyes. "What's going on?"

"My investigator in New Mexico found the name of the girl, her father, and an address."

Drey walked to the bathroom. He glanced at the toilet, then decided to wait. "What's her name?"

"Cherub Fetterman."

Drey held the cell phone away, turned on the cold water, splashed his face, shut the water off, towed off, then pressed the cell to his ear. "You still there?"

"I'm here. What are you doing?"

"Trying to wake up." Drey went back into the room and flicked the light on. "What's her father's name?"

"Jean Fetterman. The address is 617 Pine Avenue."

Drey made a quick note on the hotel stationary. "I really appreciate your help."

"There's more."

Drey slid into a chair and inched it closer to the desk. "Tell me."

"In 1999, Jean's wife, Brooke Fetterman, was murdered by David Parker Ray."

"Oh Jesus..." Drey rubbed his eyes again. "This just keeps on getting better."

"Jean reported his wife missing. Then after David Parker Ray was arrested and his Toy-Box had been searched, there was conclusive evidence that Brooke Fetterman had been tortured and killed."

"The tapes."

"Unfortunately, yes. But like the other eighty-one victims, their families had been notified about the death, but the body never recovered, because..."

"The Feds never disclosed what they found at the Indian Reservation."

"Correct."

"What was the deal with Jean's daughter?"

"Jean reported Cherub missing. A day later, she was in Arizona shooting Jon Truss."

"How did Cherub get to Arizona?"

"No one knows. Apparently, she hadn't said a word after the incident."

"What about when Cherub was transferred back to New Mexico? How did she escape?"

"She was dropped off at her home and placed in the custody of her father. The next morning he was supposed to take her to court and appear in front of a judge, but she disappeared. Jean reported Cherub missing again, but she has yet to be found."

Drey suddenly felt an icy hand touch the back of his neck. He dropped the phone and spun around.

No one was there.

Breathing heavy, he reached down and snatched the cell phone back up. "You there?"

"Yeah...what happened?"

"The phone slipped from my hand." Drey looked around the room, still feeling the presence of someone. "I guess I'll be heading to New Mexico."

"I need to ask you something."

"Go ahead."

"What would you think about me flying to Arizona and meeting up with you? I haven't been away from work since I started the business ten years ago."

The chills on Drey's skin disappeared. He cleared his throat, attempting to keep his emotions under control. "I think that would be great. When can you be here?"

"I'm in the lobby at the Beaver Creek Inn. Do you want to come down and get me?"

Drey was already out the door, jogging down the hallway.

## 62

They drove in Drey's Ford Ranger truck. He called and left messages on the cell phones of Jon, Court, Marcus, and the twins. "They must all be sleeping," he said to Rita. He gave her a quick glance. "You look terrific."

"You look like you've been in a cave for twenty years," Rita joked. "Don't you go outside?"

"Not since I...well...retired." He gripped the steering wheel. "Why are you so chipper? You must not have gotten much sleep in the last couple of days."

"My adrenaline is pumping."

"Because you are on a case?"

"No." She touched his arm. "Because you finally called me."

Drey took her hand, lifted it, and gave each finger a peck. "What's it like living in New York."

"Thrilling."

He let out nervous chuckle, not knowing if she was serious. "What about...you know...guys?"

"Are you asking if I ignored dating for the last ten years while waiting anxiously by the phone for you to call?"

Drey smiled. "Something like that."

"Well, I kept my relationships limited to women."

Drey looked at her, then brought his eyes back on the road. "Really? Is it because you hate men?"

"Every man except you."

Drey continued holding her hand. "I noticed that your Facebook relationship status said, *complicated*."

"Were you stalking me?"

"Nah...just getting your phone number."

"And what if my status said, *married*? Would you have still called?"

Drey thought about that. He really didn't know. "Sure...I guess."

"What about you? Any women in the town of Timpas that lit your fire?"

"Have you been stalking me as well?"

"Nah...just keeping tabs."

Drey formed a grin, not feeling a bit tired for six o'clock in the morning. "Timpas is eighty-seven percent men. The women that do live there aren't really my type. Plus, I wouldn't have made a great companion, because I stay inside like a hermit."

"If I got you signed up on Facebook, what are you going to put as your relationship status?"

"*Complicated.*" He smiled, noticing a rim of sunlight pushing the night away, signifying the start of their long morning. "We should be there in about ten more hours."

"We need food and coffee."

"That sounds good." Drey squeezed her hand. "Just remember that there is someone really important we need to find other than Cherub Fetterman."

Rita sighed. "We need to find Devin Poulston."

Drey glanced at her. "You read my mind."

## 63

***Jon Truss, Author***

***Marcus Cane, Former Hostage Negotiator***

***Ashley Wilcher, Bodyguard***

When the sun made its first presence in the valley, the cell phone signal had been disrupted for some reason. Marcus figured that the signals came and went without any logical reasoning. It was just part of being in the mountains.

He sent Andrew back to the Yukon where he should be able to pick up a cell phone signal and update the police that they had yet to find Court. Marcus instructed Andrew that they would meet at the boulder in an hour.

Jon hurried along each path with Ashley at his side and Marcus in tow. The paths split many times in different directions, creating a maze along Saguaro Mountain. Jon kept telling himself that Court was strong. She's the most durable woman on the planet. She'll fight endlessly to stay alive.

As time slipped, so did Jon's faith.

A helicopter thundered in the distance. Marcus jogged up to Jon and Ashley. "We better turn back. Andrew will meet us at the boulder with the police and hikers."

"No," Jon said. "You go back. Ashley and I will keep moving forward."

"That's not a good idea. We need to stay together as much as possible. We're not even sure what happened to Court, which makes this all the more dangerous."

Jon had been running on pure adrenaline for the last half-hour. It would only be a matter of time before the fumes in his body fizzled out. "I can't turn back." He wiped a glob of sweat from his forehead. "Just meet up with Andrew and the others. I have to keep moving forward."

Marcus looked back, as if considering what to do. "I'd rather you come with me."

Ashley retrieved a map from her backpack. "We'll meet you in three hours at the Horseshoe Dam." She shoved the map inside her backpack and zipped it up. "If we

haven't found her by then, we'll cross over together and search the other side of the mountain and the wilderness in that area."

Marcus gave Ashley a nervous pat on the shoulder. "Okay. I'll see you in three hours at Horseshoe Dam." Marcus turned and headed in the direction that they had just come from.

Ashley retrieved two water bottles from her backpack. "We need to stay hydrated."

"No," Jon snapped. "If Court doesn't have any water, then neither will I."

"That's very noble of you, but we're no good to her if we collapse." She shoved the water in his hands. "Drink up."

Jon twisted off the cap and sucked down the water. They moved forward along the winding path, hoping to see Court around each bend or hear her voice.

But the only thing they heard was the wind in the trees, which provided its evil tune.

## 64

**Jon Truss, Author**

**Ashley Wilcher, Bodyguard**

They arrived at Horseshoe Dam in just over three hours.

No one was there.

Jon sat on the concrete dam that doubled as a bridge, then wiped the sweat from his face, attempting to catch his breath. "Maybe we missed them?"

Ashley glanced at her watch. "Impossible. They would have waited, or at least left someone behind in case we showed."

Jon scanned the area. He looked over the side of the dam into the cold water, then into the wilderness that was attached to the other side of Saguaro Mountain. "Let's give them fifteen more minutes, then move on."

Ashley sat next to him, unzipped her backpack, and retrieved two more bottles of water. "This is all I have left."

"Then let's just split one."

She returned one of the bottles to the backpack, twisted the lid on the other and drank half. "Here you go," she said, handing him the bottle.

Jon sucked down the rest of it and tossed the empty bottle in her backpack. "Where the hell are they? We don't know this area for shit and still got here on time. Andrew and Marcus are with experienced hikers."

"Holy shit!"

Jon turned, seeing Ashley holding her cell phone. "What?"

"I have a signal." She looked at him. "Who should I call first?"

"Try reaching Marcus, then Andrew."

"Okay." She scrolled down her contact list and hit the name, *Negotiator*.

No answer.

Next, she pressed the name, *Idiot*.

No answer.

Jon heaved a sigh. "Try Court's phone."



Ashley pressed the name, Shirley Temple.

No answer.

"Should I try Marcus and Andrew again? If they don't answer, I can leave a voicemail just in case they get a signal on the way here."

Jon wiped away another layer of sweat from his face. The morning air was cool, but he felt overheated. "See if you can get a hold of someone at the Yavapai Sheriff's office. I haven't heard a helicopter since we left Marcus."

Ashley did a Google search, located the number, then dialed.

"Yavapai County Sheriff's Office, this is Crystal. How may I direct your call?"

"My name is Ashley Wilcher. We spoke to an Officer Filman last night about a friend of ours that went missing and-"

"Officer Filman is not on duty at the moment."

"Terrific. But I'm not calling about his schedule."

"What can I do for you ma'am?"

"My brother Andrew called the sheriff's office about four hours ago concerning a missing person."

"Which sheriff's office did he call?"

"Is there more than one?"

"Not in town...no."

"Then I'm guessing he called the Yavapai office."

"About a missing person?"

"Yes." Ashley shook her head. "He met up with officers and hikers, then met with another friend of ours, Marcus Cane in the valley at Saguaro's Mountain."

"Are you referring to Devils Windpipe?"

"Yes. They were supposed to meet at Horseshoe Dam."

"Which officers were supposed to meet you?"

"I don't know," Ashley snapped. "Can you get a hold of them?"

"Get a hold of whom?"

"The fucking officers that met up with my brother!"

"Ma'am, will you please calm down. I'm trying to assist you."

"It doesn't sound like it."

"I am also the dispatcher and can assure you that no one has contacted this office about a missing person. Further more, I am looking at the location of all six of our on-duty officers and none of them are anywhere near Saguaro Mountain."

Ashley held the phone down and whispered to Jon. "Andrew never got a hold of the police."

Jon stood. "What happened? Where is he? Where's Marcus?"

Crystal spoke on the phone. "Ma'am. Are you there?"

"Yes," Ashley said. "I'm officially reporting to you that a woman in our party name Court Truss went missing last night. She was last seen at Devils Windpipe."

"What were you doing there at night?"

"Research," Ashley snapped. "We called your office last night and Officer Filman responded. He told us to update the sheriff's office in the morning and they would send a search party."

"No one updated me this morning on any of this."

Ashley rubbed her forehead, taking in deep breath. "So this morning, we separated. My brother is missing as well."

"His name?"

"Andrew Wilcher."

"Anyone else missing?" Her voice sounded a bit condescending.

"Yes. Marcus Cane."

"What are the ages and descriptions of these people?"

Ashley stood, then kicked the concrete dam. "Is there anyone else I can speak with?"

"Sure. Where would you like me to direct your call?"

"To someone authorized in sending a search party to Saguaro Mountain."

"I am authorized to dispatch officers and volunteers. Would you like to continue? I need the ages and descriptions of those that are missing, along with the exact timeline on when this happened. I'll also need-"

Ashley pressed END on her phone. "What a bitch," she said to herself.

"I'm guessing you couldn't get anywhere?"

"No."

"Damn it. What the fuck is going on?"

"Wait a second," Ashley said, gazing at her phone. "I have a voicemail." She pressed speaker, then clicked on the message.

*"Hey Ashley, this is Drey. I'm headed to New Mexico. I can't get a hold of anyone. I'll call back when I get a chance."*

Ashley cleared the message. "I wonder if he found out where Angel lives?"

Jon looked around. "He must have."

"What do you want to do?"

"Keep moving," Jon said. "It's all that we can do right now."

## 65

***Drey Harten, Psychic***

***Rita Horton, Private Detective***

It was four o'clock when Drey parked in front of 617 Pine Avenue. The home was small, maybe only a thousand square feet. It sat close to the sidewalk, giving a view of the chipped paint and rusted gutters.

"Are you packing?" Drey asked Rita as they approached the door.

"I don't have a gun, if that is what you are asking me."

"How about a Taser?"

"No." She looked at him. "Are you sensing that something may go wrong?"

Drey knocked on the door. "Nope...just asking."

"Bullshit," she whispered. "Should we leave?"

Before he could answer, the door flew open.

The man had the expression of someone that aged because of an illness, or extremely stressful job. His skin was sunburned on the top of his balding head, along with his cheeks and portions of his arms, probably when he searched endlessly for his daughter.

"Mr. Fetterman?" Drey asked.

"Yes."

"My name is Drey Harten." He hoped that Jean would recognize the name, but that didn't happen. "This is Rita Horton."

"Are you police?"

"No, sir. I'm—"

"Are you married?"

"Excuse me?"

"Same last name."

"No, sir. My last name is *Harten*. Rita's last name is *Horton*."

"Are you selling me something?"

"No, sir. We—"

"Are you reporters?"

Rita decided to give it a shot. "Mr. Fetterman. We need to speak with you about your daughter."

His shoulders slumped like a kid that just been scolded by his parents. "Hold on a second." He closed the door and locked it.

"Oh boy..." Rita said. "We may have goofed."

"What do you mean?"

"Perhaps Mr. Fetterman thinks we kidnapped his daughter and we are here to make ransom demands."

Drey knocked on the door again while speaking to Rita. "If he calls the police, we're screwed." Drey knocked again, causing rust to fall from the hinges. "Mr. Fetterman. We're here to help. Please come to the door."

Rita took a quick glance at the street. "We better get out of here before a cop shows up."

The door flew open. Jean had a cordless phone in his hand. "Come in."

Drey gave Rita a nervous look and walked inside. The home appeared even smaller with the windows covered with black bed sheets, blocking any outside light into tiny living room. The kitchen was straight ahead, which consisted of a counter, stove, and fridge, all clearly rusted and stained. A small dining area to the right had a rusted card table and four matching chairs. The bathroom was tucked in the hallway with the door propped open. The hallway led to the right and left, probably to the bedrooms.

"Please, sit down." Jean pointed to a loveseat, covered with a stained bed sheet.

Drey and Rita sat, both feeling like that needed to wash their bodies with bleach to get rid of the germs. Rita waited for Jean to sit. A puff of dust sprouted as he plopped down on a recliner. "Did you call the police?" Rita asked.

"No," Jean said. "I just wanted to tidy up a bit."

Drey did a quick examination of the living room, noticing crumbs on the floor, old magazines and newspapers stacked along the wall, and the smell of mildew roaming in the air. "May I call you Jean?"

"Yes." He placed the phone on his lap. "I hope my daughter calls me soon."

"Do you know where she went?"

"To find her mother."

Drey looked at Rita, then at Jean. "Excuse me?"

"Brooke died thirteen years ago," Jean explained. "She..." He paused, eyes becoming distant. "She disappeared a month after Cherub was born."

Rita clasped her hands and leaned forward. "Did the police search the cemetery for your daughter?"

"I don't know. It doesn't matter. My wife's body was never found. I couldn't afford a funeral anyway."

"Jean...Do you have any idea where your daughter is?"

His eyes remained distant. "My wife was killed by a man named David Parker Ray. His full name had been uttered by reporter's like that animal deserved respect."

Rita cleared her throat, attempting to snap Jean from his memories. It didn't work. Jean continued.

"Reporters called his torture chamber a Toy-Box. What kind of sick people would name his place Toy-Box, where women were raped and brutalized?"

Drey shifted on the couch. "Jean. Perhaps we should—"

"That animal invested a hundred thousand dollars on sex toys, surgical instruments, saws, and other equipment to torture women. He would strap them into a chair and use a tool that spreads their legs. He would video tape himself fucking them and then cutting them to pieces."

"Jean!" Rita shouted. "Look at me."

His eyes rolled in her direction, tears draining from his eyes. "What do you know about my daughter? Why are you here?"

"We want to find her."

"Then go...find her."

"It's not that simple. She—"

"Is looking for her mother," Jean snapped. "I have already explained that. Cherub believes that Brooke is still alive, because they never found the body."

Drey was becoming nauseous from the moldy smell. "Does Cherub know anyone in Arizona?"

Jean shook his head. "I went over all this with the police." His eyes narrowed. "What are you? Kid-finding specialists?"

"No sir. I'm..." Drey hesitated. "Rita here is a private investigator."

"Do you want money?"

"No."

"Fame?"

"I'm not sure what you're getting at?"

"I recognize you from TV. You're the psychic that's in Lake Monte-something. The reporters are saying that you're trying to be famous again."

Rita interceded. "How would your daughter get to Arizona?"

"The police already asked me that."

"And what was your answer?"

"I don't know how she got there."

"Does she know anyone in Arizona?"

"The police asked me that also."

Rita heaved a sigh. "I'm sure they did. What was your response?"

"Cherub has friends all over the world. She knows many kids."

"Kids?"

"Yes. Kids that lost a parent and trying to locate them."

Drey inched forward. "Do you mean like a club, or something?"

“Yes.”

“How does she contact the other kids? The Internet?”

“No. By mail. She gets letters just about every day.” Jean’s voice rose with each word. “I spent all my money on postage, hoping that my daughter will use the letters she writes as therapy, because I can’t afford to send her for treatments. I can’t give her anything, just like I couldn’t afford to give my wife nothing, which is why she had an affair with some fucking monster!”

Drey stood, pulling Rita up with him. “Do you have any of those letters that she received? Or did you give them to the police?”

Jean fumbled with the phone and stared at the floor. “I burned them.”

“Burned them?”

“Yes.”

Drey led Rita to the door. “Thank you for your time.”

Jean sprung from his chair. “I thought you were going to help find Cherub? Or is she not as good as that precious Devin Poulston that you’re trying to find?”

Drey and Rita turned, staring at Jean. Rita asked, “Do you know where Devin Poulston is?”

“Fuck you,” Jean snapped, then clutched the phone. “He’s probably looking for his father that died in a crash.”

Drey cocked his head. “What do you know about that?”

Jean pointed to the door. “Get out.”

## 66

Drey parked down the street at an abandon building. “Do you believe that Jean burned those letters?”

“Not a chance,” Rita said. “He’s lying.”

“I agree.” Drey stared at the building ahead. Rusty stains ran down from the roof like tears. The windows were boarded up and gang-like symbols spray-painted on the walls.

“What are you thinking about?”

“We need to get those letters. If even one of them is from Devin Poulston, we’ll have proof that Cherub had a connection.”

“But how the hell is she getting to Arizona?”

Drey looked at her. “I don’t know, but I think you used the correct word.”

“What word?”

He looked forward again. “Hell.”

\* \* \* \* \*

They waited an hour, then walked back down Pine Avenue to the Fetterman home. There was no way of telling if Jean left, because it didn’t appear he had a vehicle. Also, the house didn’t have a garage, or even a driveway, and there wasn’t a car parked in the street.

Drey took the meditation balls from his pocket. “Maybe I can see something,” he told Rita.

She didn't respond. Instead, she watched as he rotated the meditation balls in his hand, creating a soft chime. He gazed down Pine Avenue, then looked in the opposite direction.

"We're in the wrong spot," Drey blurted out.

"Of course we are. Jean probably has the letters hidden in the house."

"No." Drey tugged on Rita's arm. "The letters aren't here."

They hurried back to the truck. Rita was about to get in, but Drey kept moving. "In there," he said, pointing to the building. "It's probably why I parked here in the first place."

Rita jogged up to him. "Are you sure?"

He gave her a tired smile. "I'm never sure."

They continued to the building, then searched for a way in. All the doors had been locked with chains. The windows covered with wood.

Rita tugged on Drey's arm. "I have an idea." She led him to a metal ladder connected to the building. She climbed up first, followed by Drey.

When they arrived at the roof, Rita continued leading the way until they found an air duct that had been smashed open. She kicked off a loose piece of concrete, then looked inside. "We can jump."

"Huh?"

Rita looked back at him. "Jump."

"How far?"

"About six feet." She lowered her head to get a better view inside the dark hole. "Maybe eight feet."

"How will we get out?"

"The same way everyone else does."

Drey shook his head. "Yeah...how?"

"I thought you said the letters are inside?"

"I did."

"Well, then somehow kids are getting into the building, then getting back out. I'm sure we'll find a way. Plus, I'll bet Jean has been hiding things in here from the police." Rita lowered herself into the hole. "Well, here I go."

"Wait!" Drey went to grab her.

Rita had already let go and disappeared into the darkness.

## 67

### ***Court Truss, Bodyguard***

Court peeled her eyes open, attempting to suck in a breath, but tasting something that reminded her of glue. She twisted her naked body, realizing that her mouth had duct tape, and her hands were bound to the side of a...

Gynecologist table.

Her feet had been strapped to the table, spread apart with a bar that pinched into her knees. Above her, a mirror was mounted to the ceiling. On the floor were her clothes.

Court jerked her legs, then arms, but couldn't break free. Her eyes darted around the room.

Small table with a syringe and surgical tools.

Whips, two types of saws, chains, and leather straps hung from the ceiling.

Six different types of dildos leaning against the wall, lined up according to size.

In the corner, a generator with two electric wires sliced at the edges.

A set of Winnie the Pooh curtains had been tied back on the window, allowing the remains of sunlight into the room.

There were other items as well.

Monopoly game.

Deck of cards.

Naked Barbie dolls.

Matchbox cars.

Frisbee.

Empty bags of chips and candy wrappers.

Court screamed through the duct tape, but barely made a sound. Hot tears drained from her eyes. She jerked her arms and legs with all the strength she could muster, but could not even shake the table. Her toes and fingers were numb. Skull throbbing in pain. Veins pumping with horror.

Her tear-filled eyes swept across the room again. An image of her being raped and tortured flashed in her mind. What was Angel about to do? Where was she?

Court then noticed something in the mirror. Words on her forehead, written with red paint. She strained her eyes, attempting to make out what it said.

*Toy-Box.*

## 68

***Jon Truss, Author***

***Ashley Wilcher, Bodyguard***

Ashley studied the map. "East Verde River is about a mile ahead. From there, it will be a twenty mile hike to the city of Payson." She shoved the map in her backpack. "It's getting dark."

Jon propped himself against a tree, not wanting to sit, because he wouldn't be able to stand back up. His feet and legs ached with sharp, piercing waves of pain. His mouth and throat dry, because they finished the last water bottle about an hour ago.

"Let's go up that trail, then head to the river. Maybe we can get another cell phone signal. I won't make it to Payson." Jon looked at Ashley. "Does that sound like an idea?"

Ashley didn't seem to be listening. Her eyes locked on something. "What is that?"

Jon looked in the same direction. "I don't see..." Suddenly he noticed something tucked into a cluster of trees and brush. "It's a small cabin."

"Maybe it's an emergency shelter," Ashley said with a burst of excitement. "Let's go."

Jon trudged behind her, attempting to keep up. He prayed that there was an emergency radio. Even a few bottles of water would do.

Ashley arrived before he did. She looked into the window. "It's kind of dark, but..." She stumbled back, then hurried around to other side. "Jon! Stay where you are!"

He abruptly stopped, eyes moving, seeing nothing but a thick dense of trees, shrubs, and large rocks.

Ashley's voice appeared again. "Jon! Jon!"

He forced his legs to move, hopping over a rock, then plowing his way to the small cabin. He noticed Winnie the Pooh curtains in the window. He moved forward, finding the open door and went inside.

Ashley was on the floor, holding Court in her lap like a child. Court sobbed, hugging Ashley.

Jon couldn't move. He couldn't go to her. The cabin was dark, but he could see the items inside.

Examination table with a mirror mounted above it.

Surgical blades.

Syringe.

Whips, straps, chains, and saws hanging from the ceiling.

Dildos leaning up against the wall.

In contrast to the evil, other items in the room were childlike.

A board game and a deck of cards.

Dolls, Matchbox cars, and a Frisbee.

Empty chip bags and candy wrappers littered the floor.

"Jon..." Court whispered, still lying on Ashley's lap.

Jon blinked several times, then looked at his wife. He saw the words *Toy-Box* smeared on her forehead, written with red paint. He hurried to her and dropped to his knees. A burst of tears sprayed from his eyes, followed by a deep groan of sadness. He leaned forward, holding both her and Ashley, crying, wishing to God that they never left Raleigh, North Carolina.

## 69

***Drey Harten, Psychic***

***Rita Horton, Private Detective***

Rita piled up a stack of large wooden crates. "Okay," she yelled. "Give it a shot."

"I'll break my damn neck," Drey shouted from above. "You can't be serious."

"Do you want to find those letters or not?"

She could hear Drey sigh all the way from the hole in the roof. "Alright. I'm coming." He lowered his foot down, pointing the tip of his shoe until he touched the upper crate. "Is this thing sturdy?"

"Of course," Rita said, crossing her fingers.

Drey placed his weight down on one foot, then slid the other foot down. He examined the next level and rested his shoe on the edge. Suddenly the crates wobbled. Drey looked like a circus performer trying to keep his balance on a ball



that rolled across the arena. The crates tumbled, sending Drey in the air. He collided with Rita, crashing hard to the floor.

Drey rolled off her. "Jesus. Are you okay?"

Rita remained on her back. "Maybe those crates weren't so sturdy after all." She laughed. "I'm okay. Help me up."

Drey stood, pulling her up with him. He then looked around. "We forgot a flashlight. I have one in the glove compartment." He formed a slick grin. "Why don't you go back and get it?"

She gave him a playful punch. "Nice try."

They walked along the upper floor, noticing that this used to be the office area. However, all the walls, doors, and windows had been removed. Now, it resembled more of a concrete loft that looked over an abandon warehouse. Everything below had been hollowed out, leaving just the outer walls.

"Come on." Drey led Rita to a set of rusted metal stairs, which led down to the lower level.

"Don't you need your meditation balls?" Rita asked.

"The place is empty. It wouldn't do any..." He noticed empty beer bottles cluttered around the floor, along with crumpled chip bags, candy wrappers, and empty cans of energy drinks.

"What's the matter?"

"There is something about this garbage. It's wrong."

"Of course it's wrong. The freakin' kids have destroyed this place. I'm sure there are roaches and other gross things that I don't want to come across. And it smells like a toilet in here."

"It's not that," Drey said. He retrieved the meditation balls from his pocket and rotated them in his hand, then walked forward with cautious steps. Rita stayed near Drey, but gave him space to think.

Drey moved through the dark building, eyeing the garbage on the floor. "Kids...no, that's not it." He continued forward while rotating the meditation balls. "Chips...candy...no, that's not it." His eyes cut through the darkness, envisioning two thirteen-year-olds. But they weren't here. Instead, they were in a much smaller area. "House...trapped...no, that's not it." There was something about the chip bags and candy wrappers that stood out like flares going off. "Cabin...small." Drey stopped and closed his eyes. "Horseshoe...no, that's not it. Wilderness. Mountain. Cabin. Cabin. Cabin." Drey opened his eyes. "I can see them."

Rita stepped forward. "Who?"

"Devin Poulston and Cherub Fetterman. They were together."

"Here?"

"No...in a small cabin-like structure on Saguaro Mountain." Drey opened his phone. "I need to call Jon."

Voicemail.

Drey dialed Court.

Voicemail.

He dialed Marcus.

Voicemail.

"Damn it!" Drey yelled. His voice bounced off the walls and carried through the hollow building. He tried calling Andrew.

Voicemail.

He dialed Ashley. "Hello?"

Drey's squeezed the cell phone. "Ashley. What's going on? I can't get a hold of anyone."

She sniffled, taking a long moment to speak. "Court was kidnapped."

"My God. When?"

"Last night. We just found her." Ashley's voice was clearly shaken. "She's going to be okay."

"Does she know who kidnapped her?"

Rita leaned close. "What's going on?"

Drey put the phone on speaker. Ashley sniffled again. "Angel took her."

"Her name isn't Angel," Drey said. "Her name is Cherub Fetterman." He paused. "How did a thirteen-year-old kidnap Court?"

"There's something...evil about that girl. She...I can't explain it."

Drey understood exactly what Ashley was talking about. He knew firsthand how influential and deceptive Cherub was. "Where's Jon?"

"He's in a helicopter with Court."

"Where is your brother?"

*Sniffle.* "I don't know. He's been missing since this morning."

Drey shook his head. "What about Marcus?"

"Missing."

"Where are you?"

"I'm waiting for the FBI at some remote place on Saguaro Mountain."

"Describe it to me."

"It's a small cabin. I think they used to keep it here for emergencies, in case a hiker was injured or something. There's a radio inside, which is how I was able to call for help."

"What else is inside?"

Ashley took another long moment to answer. "It's...full of..."

"Take a deep breath. Just tell me what's in the cabin."

"An examination chair."

Drey looked at Rita. "Like from a hospital?"

"More like a gynecologist table."

Rita put her hand over her mouth.

Drey fought to stay calm. "What else?"

"Whips. Saws. Surgical blades. Chains. Straps. Dildos. Even a generator used for torturing."

Drey couldn't believe what he was hearing. He looked at Rita again, seeing the glimmer of tears forming in her eyes. "Is there a mirror over the examination table?"

*Long pause.* "Yes. How did-"

"What else? Did you find empty chip bags and candy wrappers?"

"Yes. Also a board game, cards, and other things for kids to play with."

"Did you find any letters?"

"Just two words."

"I mean letters that go in the mail."

"Oh. No, there weren't any of those."

Drey kept his eyes on Rita. "Actually, what were you talking about? You said something about two words?"

"Yes. Written on Court's forehead."

"What did it say?"

"It said, *Toy-Box*."

## 70

Drey told Ashley he would call her back when he returned to Arizona.

Rita wiped the tears from her eyes. "There's a psychotic David Parker Ray copycat. We need to notify the police."

"They'll figure it out when the FBI gets to that cabin." Drey took her arm and led her forward. The building became a pit of darkness as night arrived. "We need to look for those letters."

"Do you think that Devin Poulston and Cherub Fetterman were in that cabin together?"

"I'm sure of it," Drey said, accidentally kicking a beer bottle. It went tumbling forward and smashed into a wall. "I clearly envisioned them inside, along with everything around the cabin."

"Then...where are they?"

He looked at her. "I'm seeing Devin's blood on the examination table." Drey's voice began to quiver. "I'm seeing a knife digging into his skin." He squeezed Rita's arm. "It's the reason I stopped doing this. I'll have to live with those images the rest of my life."

Rita held his hand as they continued forward, stepping on broken pieces of glass. "Are you going to tell the police?"

"No. If I tell them, the evidence in the cabin would become inadmissible. I'm sure the FBI will get a forensics team out there."

"But it's in a remote spot. That could take days, even weeks."

Drey yanked his arm away from her. "What do you expect me to do? Tell Kristy Poulston that her son had been tortured and murdered. She'll spend the rest of her days wondering how this could have happened and trying to figure out what she could have done differently. You want me to be the person that destroys her soul? Because I've done that too many times." Drey rubbed the back of his neck, attempting to lower his voice. "Too many fucking times."

"I'm sorry," Rita said, attempting to touch his arm. "It's the reason I never called you all those years."

Drey glared at her. "What are you talking about?"

Once again, Rita's eyes gleamed with tears, glittering in the darkness. "If I had trouble locating a woman, or trying to find a mother's child that her ex-husband kidnapped, I would have turned to you for help. You always found who you were looking for. That kind of gift I would have selfishly abused in order to help others. But no one could possibly understand what you see. It is not fair to put you in that position."

Drey pulled her close, feeling the wetness on her cheeks. "I just wish this could have been different. But deep down, I knew that Devin Poulston would never come

home again. I ignored those emotions, even though it was so clear to me. I wanted to truly help Kristy Poulston find her son.”

“I know,” Rita said, still hugging him. “It’s not your fault.”

Drey kissed her on the head, then stepped back. He looked down, barely able to see the glass on the floor. “Wait a second.” He grabbed her hand. “Come on.”

“What do you see?”

“Breadcrumbs.” Drey tugged her forward, both of them crunching the glass below their shoes. They arrived at the far corner of the building. A large chunk of glass from the beer bottle pointed to a shirt box on the floor. Drey already knew what was inside before he picked it up.

It was full of letters.

## 71

A crash sounded from above. They looked up to the loft area. Shadows lowered down from the hole in the ceiling like ghosts. Three. Four. Then five more appeared.

One of the shadows walked close to the edge of the loft and yelled, “Who the fuck is parked outside? This isn’t a place to get a blowjob, or get your freak on.” He waited for an answer. “Show yourself assholes!”

Rita whispered. “Not...good.”

“Who are they?” Drey asked, keeping his voice low.

“If I had to guess, I would say they are the artists that spray painted the building.”

Drey clutched the shirt box. “Do you mean gang members?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“Shit.”

The shadow person on the loft barked out instructions to his buddies, but Drey and Rita could only hear the soft echo of his voice. The shadow then faced the empty pit from above. “The only way out of here is the roof. Which means, we’ll find your ass in the next two minutes. You need to show yourself, or suffer a great deal of pain.”

Drey forced a joke. “He seems educated for a gang leader.”

“Most are these days,” Rita said. She bent down and picked up a chunk of broken glass. “Let’s go.”

“Where?”

“Find a place to—”

“I can hear you...” the shadow bellowed. “One man. One woman. I wonder what you two have been doing? Are you dressed? Did the man shove his pecker back into his pants? Does the woman still have her tits hanging from her open shirt? I sure hope so. We’re going to have some fun.”

The glass broke under their feet. Drey could sense the other shadows getting closer. He held the shirt box under one arm while holding one of the meditation balls in his other hand.

“Mmmm...” the shadow said from above. “I can’t wait for all of us to fuck that bitch. Who’s first?”

"I am!" a voice shouted from the darkness. More shadows yelled the same thing. They were spread across the empty building, closing in.

Rita whispered, "Over here."

Drey moved along side of her, as his head turned in every direction. He could almost smell the beer breath from one of the shadows.

"Gotcha!" a shadow yelled. He grabbed Drey's arm, then kneed him in the stomach. The wind blew from Drey's lungs as he clutched the shirt box and the meditation ball. The shadow went to knee him again, but this time, his knee hit Drey's pocket, which had the other ball. Rita swung the piece of glass in her hand, swiping it across the shadow's chin. The shadow screamed in pain, "You fucking bitch!"

Drey swung with the ball in his hand, feeling his knuckles crack against the man's skull.

More shadows ran toward them, stumbling over garbage and fighting through the darkness. The shadow on the loft started to laugh, enjoying himself from the cheap seats.

Drey and Rita hurried toward the nearest door. Drey used his foot and kicked with all the force he had.

It didn't budge.

The shadow above yelled, "We're going to have a fucking great time tonight!"

Drey kicked the door again, but nothing happened.

A shadow appeared from the darkness, followed by another. Drey swung at the first one with the ball in hand, connecting square on the nose. Rita swiped the second one with her piece of glass, but then screamed, holding her hand.

Her palm sliced open, spurting blood.

The shadow above yelled, "Maybe we'll fuck you both in the ass. Or maybe we'll fuck every hole at the same time."

Drey swung two more times, hitting both of the wounded gang members. Rita screamed again, turned, then kicked the door.

It busted from the hinges, then fell open.

Drey followed her out the door, shoving the meditation ball in his pocket, then retrieving his keys. They opened the door, seeing two younger gang thugs running in their direction.

Drey fired up the engine, shoved the gear in drive, then slammed on the gas. He drove straight toward the thugs, watching as both dived out of the way, although, the truck hit someone in the leg, or arm.

Rita opened the glove compartment and grabbed a handful of napkins. She pressed the napkins on her hand, instantly soaking them with blood.

Drey glanced at her. "How bad is it?"

"Just keep driving."

"Where's the nearest hospital?"

"Sierra Vista Hospital. It's..." Rita bent forward, holding her hand. "Damn it! I can't remember."

Drey looked for a main road. He turned left on Oak Street and hit the gas. "Does anything look familiar?" Drey knew it had been over decade since she last had been in this town. He considered stopping for directions, but it looked like the entire area was filled with more gang bangers.

"East Ninth!" Rita yelled pointing a bloody finger. "Turn left!"

Drey yanked the wheel and headed down East Ninth, seeing the blue hospital sign pointing the way. "Hang in there."

"I am," Rita said, pressing her bloody hands together with the napkins shoved in-between. She looked at him, then the seat. "Where are the letters?"

"I threw them-"

"Threw them where!"

Drey pulled into the emergency entrance. "Calm down. I threw them in the backseat."

Rita turned around and looked. "Thank goodness. Fax those to my office in New York. Then call and talk to Gretta. Tell her to have the team examine the letters."

Drey reached back, grabbed the shirt box, then opened the door, slid out, slammed the door shut, and hurried around to assist Rita out of the truck. "It's after seven. Will someone be at your office?" They entered the emergency room.

"Gretta has the lines forward to her cell phone, so we can take calls any time, day, or night."

They approached the front desk. The nurse looked up and asked, "Can I help you?"

Rita raised her bloody hand. "Yeah...you can help me."

## 72

While Rita was being taken care of, Drey asked the desk nurse if he could use their fax machine. She directed him to the hospital business center, where he had to pay four dollars a page.

There were thirty-three letters.

After faxing them, he called Gretta. "Rita had me send some faxes to the office."

"Does she want me to run back and get them?"

Drey couldn't tell if she was perturbed, or being professional. "I know it's after hours, but-"

"There's no such thing as after hours. So just tell me who you are and what Rita wants me to do."

"Oh...sorry. This is Drey Harten, I'm..."

"You're what?"

Drey could sense her smiling. "You're fishing for information about me, aren't you?"

"Busted." She laughed. "So, are you Rita's long lost boyfriend, or what?"

"No...I'm..." He decided to use a quote from Facebook. "It's *complicated*."

"What are the faxes?" she asked, suddenly back in professional mode.

"Some letters that we need researched."

"Then I'm assuming Rita wants the investigators to head into the office."

"Um...yeah, I think that's what she said."

"Where is she?"

"Well, we were in this building and...never mind. Just have someone look at those letters and call her later with an update."

"Will do."

"Thanks."

"One more thing," Gretta said.

"Yes?"

"Why did Rita have me put that sticky note up on my computer for ten years?"

"Because..." Drey couldn't find the words. "I told you...it's complicated." He hung up before Gretta responded with more questions. He then dialed Kristy Poulston's number.

*"This is Kristy, please leave a message."* The voice on the recording sounded chipper. It was amazing how parents sounded before their child went missing. Drey knew that Kristy would never get that pleasant tone back again.

"Hey Kristy, this is Drey. Give me a call when you get a chance."

Drey returned to the waiting room with the shirt box of letters. The amount of people had doubled inside. It must be that kind of night.

"Excuse me," a tall, black officer said to Drey. "Is that your truck outside?"

"Yes."

"It's parked in a patient loading and unloading zone. I assume that you brought someone here?"

"Yes. Drey looked past the officer's shoulder. "I can move it."

"That might not work."

"Why?"

"You have four flat tires."

If Drey wasn't so tired, he would have laughed to himself. The gang members must have dropped off their wounded buddies here and saw the truck. "Can you tow it?"

The officer formed a large grin. "That we can do."

## 73

Drey helped himself to the complimentary coffee and plopped down in a chair between a mother with a screaming baby and a man in a mechanics uniform with a greasy rag around his thumb. The baby reeked like it needed changed and the mechanic reeked...well...the smell was the same as the baby.

Drey flipped over the lid on the shirt box. Unfortunately, none of the envelopes were inside so that Drey could research the return addresses. He looked at the top letter.

*Dear Cherub:*

*You don't have to listen to the rumors and hype. Or let others brand you with a stereotype. You don't need clothes, or shoes, or a car. Just believe in yourself and who you are. My father died and I know that if I keep searching, I will find him alive, and by my side.*

*Emily Adams*

Drey flipped through the letters, reading a portion of each.

*Dear Cherub:*

*One of my teachers once asked my class what our favorite memory was. Some described prestigious awards; others described winning a tournament. My answer, however, invited giggles. Why? Because I felt the best when I first learned to ride a bike at thirteen. That is when my mother taught me. It was Christmas day and the bike was a present. My mother was frustrated with me, because I kept wobbling. But soon, I learned to ride. Then, she passed away a week later on New Year's Day.*

*Someone told me that I could find her. I didn't believe at first, but once I started to have faith, I was shown the way. You can do the same! Hang in there!*

*Love and Hug's,  
Esther Young*

*Dear Cherub:*

*I thank my dad every day for the sacrifices he made for our family. I still have a picture on my dresser of my dad and me. It is okay to look at, but it's better to see my dad in person, even though he is dead.*

*I hope you find your mother soon. Let me know. I can't wait to read your next letter.*

*Your Friend,  
Peter Lim*

The letters were all pretty much the same. They started off talking about a dead mother, or father, then discussed how seeing them is better, or saying that Cherub could find her mother if she tried.

What Drey really noticed is that the letters appeared to be from teenagers, but had the feel of an adult writing them, attempting to sound like a teen. It happens all the time on the Internet, or with text messages on cell phones that child abductors use to entice a teenager's curiosity and lure them away.

But this felt like Drey had been thrown back to the 80's and 90's, before teens had access to such things. Back then, teens didn't sign into chat rooms, or provide personal information on Facebook. Instead, teens were taken from the streets or from their homes while their parents worked.

Pen pals were the big thing back then. It also provided a way for an adult to pretend being a girl, or boy in high school. Letters would be sent back and forth from an address of an empty home. The child abductor would pick up the mail and write back to the teens, letting them know how much they want to see them.

Child abductors would use letters similar to the ones sent to Cherub in order to entice poor children that lost a parent. These children didn't have iPhones or laptops. Instead, they wrote letters like kids used to do.

Drey now had the feeling that all these letters sent to Cherub were from the same person. Whoever it was, changed their handwriting, wrote with different pens, switched to their non-writing hand to make it look more childlike. The person could also have an accomplice, or several accomplices, all changing the handwriting. Thousands of letters could be sent to kids like Cherub...and Devin.

Jean Fetterman hid the letters from the police. But why? Or did he just lie about burning them so that Cherub wouldn't lose her precious letters? Maybe he



told Cherub to hide them in that building, even though there was a risk of her being raped by gang members.

Drey had another thought. Did Kristy Poulston know that her son was writing letters, while thinking he was talking to other teens that lost a parent?

No...of course not. She would have said something. Drey knew there was a big difference between a person like Kristy Poulston and Jean Fetterman. Drey also knew that he needed proof that Devin actually received and wrote letters. As of right now, it was all a hunch.

Unfortunately, his hunches were always correct.

## 74

"You ready?"

Drey opened his eyes, realizing that he drifted off to sleep. Half the waiting room emptied out, including the mother and baby, along with the hurt mechanic.

He stood, grabbing the shirt box. "How many stitches?"

"Eight." She formed a grin. "And some great painkillers, along with a prescription to get more."

"Glad to hear it." Drey tucked the shirt box under his arm as they walked outside.

"Where did you park?"

Drey had completely forgotten what happened. "Oh yeah. I had the truck towed."

"Why?"

"All four tires had been slashed while I was in here with you."

"Oh. Do you think the thugs dropped off their hurt friends, saw your truck, then slashed your tires?"

"That's exactly what I think." Drey breathed in the fresh air. "Well, we can get a hotel room for the night. I'll call a cab."

"That's fine, but I have one request."

"What?"

Rita gave him a tired grin. "Please get us out of Truth or Consequences."

Drey wrapped his arm around her. "I totally agree."

They remained outside and sat on the bench, enjoying the crisp air. He called information, got the number of a cab company and a hotel in the next town, then made arrangements.

Rita placed her head on Drey's shoulder. "Where are we heading next?"

"Elephant Butte."

She giggled, now in a painkiller daze. "I knew you were going to pick that town."

## 75

The cab dropped them off at the Elephant Butte Inn and Spa, which was the only place to stay. That was fine by them, because they wouldn't expect any gang thugs to stop by for spa treatment.

Drey gave the cabdriver \$200 for the \$171 fee. Rita had dozed on the way and needed him to guide her into the lobby while carrying the shirt box of letters. He paid for a room and helped Rita inside the room. She dropped to the bed, eyes shut, legs hanging over the side. Drey slipped off her shoes and gave her a shove, pushing her all the way on the bed.

Her cell phone rang. She instinctively reached into her pocket, eyes still shut, then handed it to Drey. "Get that thing away from me..." She dozed back off.

Drey looked at the number, seeing it was Kenny. "Hey there Kenny."

"Who is this?"

"Drey Harten."

"Oh, the long lost boyfriend."

Drey went into the bathroom and closed the door so he wouldn't disturb Rita. "Are you one of Rita's investigators?"

"Yeah. Is she around?"

"Sleeping."

"She never sleeps."

Drey debated on telling the truth, deciding it would take too long. "I think she's been up for a few days. She just collapsed on the bed."

"On the bed, huh."

Drey squeezed the phone. "Can you just please tell me what you found out about the letters?"

"Sure...they're not real."

"Meaning?"

"Someone stole the writing from the book, Chicken Soup for the Soul, the teen version. Whoever wrote these letters used some of the book, then added their own twist about finding a parent."

Drey wasn't surprised. "What about the handwriting?"

"What about it?"

"Do you think it's from the same person?"

"No one told me to analyze the handwriting. I can burn through the night and see what I come up with."

Drey pulled in a quick breath. "No, that won't be necessary. Just give me your best guess right now. Do you think one person wrote those letters?"

"Rita doesn't like us guessing. If she needs me to analyze them, I will." Kenny paused. "We get paid very well. It's not a problem."

Drey was starting to get that feeling. Gretta had the same chipper attitude, as if they were paid a hundred bucks an hour. "I'm going get some sleep, so tomorrow sometime will do just fine. Don't stay up all night working on it."

"It's not a problem. Tell me what you want."

"Work on it tomorrow morning."

"Will do. Anything else?"

"Have you heard anything about two adults going missing at Lake Montezuma?"

"No, but I can contact the investigator in...where is Lake Monte-whatever?"

"Arizona. It's okay. You don't have to call anyone."

"It's not a problem."

"No, it's okay."

"Anything else?"

Drey decided he'd better get off the phone before Rita realizes that her employees are trying hard to work overtime. "That's it. Talk to you tomorrow."

"Are you going to bed with Rita?"

Drey smiled. "Don't be a smartass." He hung up the phone, then debated his next move.

That's when he heard his phone ringing. Drey jogged back into the room, seeing his cell on the shirt box.

Rita was now under the blankets. She rolled over, then groaned, "Will you please toss the cell phones outside."

Drey chuckled and scooped up his phone. He lost his smile, seeing that it was Kristy Poulston calling.

## 76

"Hey there Kristy."

"Did you hear what happened to Court? It's all over the news."

"Yeah, I heard." Drey pushed away the images of Devin inside the cabin. "Any news on Marcus, or Andrew?"

"What do you mean? Did something happen to them?"

Drey thought that their disappearances had not been made public yet. He returned to the bathroom and shut the door. "How are you holding up?"

"I'm the same. Are you in New Mexico?"

"Yes."

"Did you find anything out about Devin?"

Drey cringed. "Maybe." He regretted saying that and hoped Kristy didn't hear him.

"Did you say, 'maybe?'"

"Do you know if Devin had a pen pal of some sorts?"

"No. And I haven't even heard that term since I was in college."

"What about a club. Did he join anything outside of school? Like maybe a club for grieving children to write to each other?"

"Of course not. Wouldn't I have mentioned that already?"

Drey felt like Kristy's patience would hold together for only so long. "I can't be sure, but I think Devin may have been writing letters to someone, thinking that he was writing to other teens that lost a parent."

"Impossible. I would have known. I check the mail before he gets home from school."

Drey thought about Kristy denying that Devin snuck out in the middle of the night to the shed in the backyard. She was wrong about that and she might be wrong about this as well. "Maybe you could search his room and look for-"

"His room has been searched a dozen times by me, the police, and FBI." Kristy was breathy heavy. "And don't forget, you were in his room as well."

"And I discovered a jacket missing after you claimed that nothing was missing of his." Once again, Drey regretted saying that. He never used to speak this way to parents. "I'm sorry. I didn't—"

"It's okay." Kristy's voice sounded as if she started crying. "You're just trying to help and I can't think straight."

"It's not a problem. Look in his room for letters written to him. In fact, search the entire house. Then, think of somewhere he may have hidden..." Drey had a flashing image appear. It was strong, vivid, and crystal-clear. "I want you to go into the backyard and look in the shed. Tear that damn thing apart if you have to."

## 77

### ***Kristy Polston, Mother of Missing Child***

Kristy jogged to the shed outside, ignoring a few reporters that remained in the street overnight. At least half had left town; not because they lost interest, but because there was nowhere to stay. The reporters and crew slept in their news vans, or drove each day to the nearest hotel. Sometimes, that meant driving to Phoenix, or Flagstaff.

When Kristy opened the shed door, she envisioned the story that Jon Truss had told about someone meeting Devin each night, growing attached to him. A burning rage flowed into Kristy's veins. How well did she even know Devin? She always believed that other high school kids kept secrets from their parents, but not her son. They had become close over the last two years. He wouldn't leave her side.

Her eyes swept to the items in the shed. It was difficult to see in the dark, but nothing appeared to be any different since the last time she was in here.

Two shovels, one pointed and one square, both hung on the wall.

Duct tape, yardstick, measuring tape, flashlight, and jar of nails remained in the exact same position on the small shelf.

She stepped inside and studied the wood floor that buckled in the center. She imagined Devin sitting along the wall, thinking about his father. Every night he sat here, searching for answers.

Searching for his father.

Kristy leaned against the wall and lowered herself down. Her eyes wandered across the shed, trying to envision Devin in this spot.

Alone. In the darkness of this smelly shed. Lost in his most precious thoughts.

This was a waste of time. She stood, feeling the rage return. Everything in this shed had once been a fond memory of her husband and son who worked all day together on this project.

Kristy snatched the flashlight and attempted to turn it on. When it didn't work, she tossed it out the door. She then grabbed the duct tape and threw out the door, followed by the jar of nails, yardstick, and measuring tape.

Then, Kristy shoved her foot down on the buckled wood, snapping it into pieces. She kicked the wall with all her force, knocking the shovels off the hooks. In a frenzy, she continued kicking the walls, demolishing the shed until the wood cracked and the ceiling fell on top of her.

She pushed the roof off her and threw the pieces into the yard as cameras flashed into the night from the street. "Go away!" she screamed.

Kristy jumped on a wall that fell to the ground and smashed her leg through the center, cutting her ankle. She snapped more pieces of wood in half, wanting the shed to be nothing more than a pile of broken memories.

A gust of wind blew through the night, as if the ghost of her husband was begging her to stop. Papers flew up from a portion of the collapsed roof.

*Papers.*

Kristy grabbed one that had been carried by the wind. She scurried around the yard snatching each of the papers, collecting them before the wind blew them away.

Inside the broken portion of the roof, she dug her hand in and yanked the rest of the papers.

After catching her breath, she hurried back inside the house and flicked on the kitchen light. Her eyes scanned over each piece of paper, seeing her son's name...

*Dear Devin:*

*Hey Devin:*

*Yo Devin:*

Kristy read each one. All had the same theme. A child had lost a parent and then claimed that there was a way to visit the dead.

*Visit the dead.*

Kristy called Jordan Hensch at CARP.

## 78

***Jon Truss, Author***

***Court Truss, Bodyguard***

***Ashley Wilcher, Bodyguard***

***Detective Caplan, Investigator***

Jon had fallen asleep next to Court's hospital bed when someone tapped on his shoulder. "Excuse me, Mr. Truss."

He peeled his eyes open, seeing a portly older gentleman dressed in a blue blazer with a blue T-shirt and gray slacks. Jon then noticed the man wearing Nike cross trainers. "Can I help you?" Jon asked, clearing his throat.

The man kept his voice low. "I didn't want to disturb your wife while she is resting. Can you come with me for a moment?"

"Sure." Jon glanced at his watch, seeing that it was already eight in the morning. It took a moment to gather his surroundings.

*Hospital room.*

*Payson, Arizona.*

He looked at Court, gave her a kiss on the cheek, then stood up and walked out of the room with the man.

Ashley was in the hallway, sitting in a chair. "Should I wait here?"

Jon put his finger up. "Hold on a second." He faced the man. "What can I do for you?"

He flashed his credentials. "My name is Detective Caplan, Arizona State Bureau of Investigations. I just need a moment of your time. There's an office we can speak in privately on the next floor down." He looked at Ashley. "This concerns you as well."

Ashley stood, following Jon and Caplan to the stairwell, down one floor, then into an office. A pot of coffee had already been brewing. Caplan poured three cups and they sat at the table.

Caplan pushed two of the Styrofoam cups over to Jon and Ashley. "I won't make either of you repeat the statement that you gave to the FBI and Agent Jordan Hench. She updated me with a full report. I'm usually called when a small town has a serious crime like a homicide, or kidnapping."

Jon took sip of the coffee, feeling his senses come back alive. "In my novel, *Bullet to Bone*, I wrote about Detective Gideon Thomas at the North Carolina State Bureau of Investigations. Do you know him?" Jon wasn't sure why he brought that up. Perhaps he wanted to flaunt his knowledge.

"I know Gideon," Caplan said. "Good man, great detective."

Jon glanced at Ashley, seeing the mixture of exhaustion and anxiousness in her face. He then looked at Caplan. "Any news on Andrew or Marcus?"

"Nothing so far. I brought in a team of thirty officers from Phoenix and ten hikers to comb the Saguaro Mountain, especially Devils Windpipe."

Ashley pushed her coffee away. "Maybe if that had been done sooner, we wouldn't be in this mess."

Caplan gave her a kind look. "I'm sure you're right." He sipped his coffee then pulled a small notebook and pen from his inner jacket pocket. "The FBI has a forensics team at the cabin where Court had been discovered."

"Yes...she was discovered by us," Ashley said. "It seems like we're the only ones doing anything."

Caplan forced a sympathetic grin. "It probably seems like that." He studied his notebook for a moment. "I work closely with the FBI on cases when necessary, so I've pretty much seen it all. What I can tell you is the disappearance of your brother Andrew, along with Marcus Cane and even Devin Poulston are the strangest and most difficult crimes I've ever come across. It's like they vanished without a scrap of clues."

Jon finished his coffee and tossed the empty cup in a garbage can. "So you're admitting that all these disappearances are crime related?"

Caplan raised his bushy gray eyebrows. "As opposed to what?"

"That they just ran away."

"I've never insinuated that."

Ashley: "What Jon is trying to say is that the Feds are handling this like Devin simply took off. Also, no one came to help Jon's wife, or my brother, or our friend Marcus until Jon and I almost died searching for them."

Caplan: "You have to understand the position that the FBI and CARP have been in this past week. No clues. No hints of what happened. No witnesses have come forth. Now suddenly we have a kidnapped woman found in a cabin that's setup like a torture chamber and two men have disappeared."

Jon: "Do you think that what happened to Court, along with Devin, Andrew, and Marcus are all related."

Caplan: "I would bet my pension on that hunch."

Ashley: "Maybe teenagers did it? There were kid's games in that cabin and the words *Toy-Box* written on Court."

Caplan: "No teenager did all this. We're looking for one or more adults." Caplan picked up his cup, then placed it back down. "Do you know what *Toy-Box* refers too?"

Jon already knew. When they arrived at the hospital and Court had been stabilized, Jon researched *Toy-Box* and found something disturbing. "It refers to the torture chamber that David Parker Ray built in a town called Truth or Consequences, New Mexico."

Ashley: "Is he still alive? Maybe he-"

Jon: "He was arrested in 1999 and died a few years later of a heart attack. The torture chamber that the FBI discovered is exactly like the cabin we found Court in at Saguaro Mountain." He paused. "With the exception of the games and other kid's toys."

Ashley: "Then there's a copycat...except..."

Caplan: "Whoever is doing this, doesn't just go after women. Kids have been taken to that cabin."

Ashley: "What about Cherub Fetterman?"

Caplan closed his notebook and folded his hands on the table. "Yes, let's talk about Cherub Fetterman. Do you honestly believe that she has the ability to turn that cabin into a torture chamber? She is thirteen-years-old."

Jon: "Have the police got any leads on where she is?"

Caplan: "No."

Ashley: "Cherub is here! Can't you understand that?"

Caplan: "Certainly I understand that. And I believe that Court thinks that a young girl kidnapped her. But what seems more likely, is that the girl had help. And from what you've told the FBI about your brother, it wouldn't be easy to subdue him. He's probably trained better than I am to fight off an attack. Plus, he's in much better shape."

Ashley ignored Caplan's flattering remarks. "Regardless, Drey Harten believes-"

Caplan put his hand up. "Please do not bring Drey Harten into the conversation. The mere fact that he's mixed up in this forces us by law to make him a suspect."

Jon: "What do you need from us?"

Caplan: "Honestly?"

Jon: "Of course. Tell me what you want."

Caplan: "It would be best if you went back home and convinced Drey Harten to do the same."

Ashley slapped her hand on the table, spilling over her coffee. "I'm not leaving until my brother, Marcus, and Devin are found."

Caplan: "I would be thinking the same thing if I were in your position. But has your attempt to find Devin Poulston been productive or caused more problems?"

Ashley: "Excuse me, but—"

Caplan: "Your brother and friend are missing. Jon's wife had been abducted. And it's possible that whoever did that was on the way back to the shed to rape, torture, and kill her. Someone knows that you're involved and wants to send a clear message that you need to walk away."

Ashley's eyes flooded with tears. "I just can't leave my brother..." She closed her mouth, gazing at the spilled coffee.

Caplan looked at Jon. "I saw on the news that you're writing a new book called *Devils Windpipe*."

"Yes." Jon placed his hand on Ashley's shoulder, then looked at Caplan. "What does that have to do with what's going on?"

"Nothing," Caplan said. "Or maybe it has everything to do with what has happened. But a few questions pop into my mind. Do you think your novel is worth dying for? Is it worth losing your wife over? Your friend?" He stared at Ashley. "Was any of your efforts worth it up until now?"

## 79

***Drey Harten, Psychic***

***Rita Horton, Private Detective***

"What's that?" Rita asked.

Drey was in a chair, eating, with the television on a low volume. "It's a damn good cheeseburger."

Rita looked at the clock. "It's nine in the morning."

"I ordered it last night."

She flung off the blankets and sat up. "Did you get me one?"

He pointed at the little fridge. "It's in there. Just use the microwave to heat it up."

Drey polished off his cheeseburger. "How's your hand?"

"Hurts." Rita looked at the television. "What's going on?"

"Court Truss was kidnapped and taken to a cabin that resembles the Toy-Box."

Rita sprung from the bed. "Are you shitting me?"

"Wish I was." Drey wiped his hands with a napkin. "Jon and Ashley found her at a remote spot in Saguaro Mountain. Andrew and Marcus are missing. The Feds think they were taken while in Devils Windpipe. The media is swarming Lake Montezuma, along with paranormal nuts that are claiming Devils Windpipe is snatching people away."

"This is crazy...how long was I asleep?"

Drey looked up at her. "There's more." He shut off the television and stood. "Kenny got back to me last night."

"Why didn't you wake me?"

"You were out of it."

"What did he say?"



"The letters are from a teen version of Chicken for the Soup book. The words had been changed, making it look like a teenager had lost his or her parent and found a way to visit them."

"I'll have Kenny analyze the handwriting to see if it was from the same person."

"He's working on that right now."

"Oh..." Rita looked around the room, then brought her eyes on Drey. "Did Kenny or Gretta ask about who you are?"

"They tried."

"Did they succeed? They can be very persuasive."

"I stammered under their brutal interrogation." Drey forced a tired grin. "I couldn't really tell them what we are, because I'm not sure yet."

She placed her bandaged hand on his shoulder and kissed his lips. "I suppose we'll find out soon enough."

"I hope so, because I'm tired of saying it's complicated."

Rita smiled. "I agree." She gave him another quick kiss and headed toward the small fridge. "I guess I'm eating a cheeseburger for breakfast."

"Well, hurry up," Drey said in a much more serious tone. "We need to get back to Lake Montezuma...Kristy, Jon, and the others need our help."

## 80

***Jon Truss, Author***

***Court Truss, Bodyguard***

***Ashley Wilcher, Bodyguard***

***Detective Caplan, Investigator***

Jon walked next to Court as she was being wheeled down the corridor by a male nurse. Ashley had been waiting outside with Detective Caplan, who agreed to give them a lift back to the Yukon, which was still parked on Fremont Road next to Saguaro Mountain.

Jon cringed when his cell phone rang and the Caller ID said, Bram. "Is this a money call?" Jon asked his agent.

"Always," Bram said. "How is Court? Publisher's Weekly said she's being released from the hospital."

"Why would PW be covering Court's medical condition?"

"Because she is your wife. How is she doing?"

Jon glanced down at her. "She's okay."

Court looked up at Jon. "Is that Bram?"

"Yes."

"Tell him to get a life."

Jon smiled. "Did you hear that?"

"Yeah," Bram said. "It's good that she's feeling better. I can't believe what happened. How's the book coming?"

"Is that all you're thinking about?"

"Of course not. I'm just asking."

"Well, I've been a little busy. Do you know that Andrew and Marcus are missing?"

Court gave Jon a tired look, but didn't say anything.

"Of course I know," Bram said. "The media flocked back into Lake Montezuma. There's more cameras in that small town than LA."

"Great," Jon said as they walked outside.

A reporter stuck a microphone in his face, with the cameraman stepping in front of Jon. "How is your wife? Why were you at Devils Windpipe? Is there paranormal activity there? Did you hear the devil whispering to you?"

Ashley pushed the reporter and cameraman away, opened the door to Caplan's unmarked police cruiser, and waited as Jon climbed in. "I need to go," Jon said to Bram.

The reporter yelled, "Wait! May I interview your wife?"

Jon watched as Ashley assisted Court into the car. When Ashley climbed inside, Caplan shoved the gear into drive and stepped on the gas, practically running over the reporter.

"You there?" Bram asked.

"Yeah, I'm here," Jon said. "We are headed back to Lake Montezuma."

"What about the book? How much longer?"

"I don't know," Jon snapped. All literary agents were the same. *Push. Push. Push.* "Would you stop pressuring me?"

"Sorry about that. It's just that the publisher is already making big plans. I need a timetable to negotiate a deal."

"I have no clue."

"Just give me your best guess."

"Listen..." Jon looked at everyone in the car. All had the same worn expressions. "After we find Andrew and Marcus, I'm thinking about heading back to Raleigh. I can finish the book from there."

"That sounds fine by me, but remember the media opportunities are in Lake Montezuma."

"Which is a perfect reason for me to head back to North Carolina so I can write in peace."

"Do you need me there?"

"In Arizona?"

"Yeah, I can hop on a plane."

"Why?"

"Because I want you to know that I actually care. Let me help."

"That won't be necessary."

"I'm coming. See you in six hours, or so."

"Bram..." Jon squeezed the phone. "Bram!"

He hung up.

Court leaned towards him. "What's going on?"

"Bram wants to come here and help."

"Good," Court said. "Maybe Bram will realize the hell we are going through."

No one spoke another word.

***Marcus Cane, Former Hostage Negotiator***  
***Andrew Wilcher, Bodyguard***

The area was hazed in red. Andrew and Marcus could see a vision of each other, but not able to focus. It was difficult to understand if the dreamlike images were real. A foreign, evil substance pumped through their veins. Perhaps a drug of some sort. Whatever it was, it had control over their minds. Thoughts. Even their movements.

Andrew made a valiant attempt to stand up, but his head swirled and sent him back to the dirt floor.

*Dirt floor.*

*Dirt.*

They were outside.

Marcus watched Andrew. His body seemed to float, twirl, then fly downward and land on the ground.

Another image appeared. It hovered over them while carrying two books. Marcus and Andrew studied the new arrival through the red haze. She was a teenager.

No, she was an Angel. But not the kind that protects and loves. Instead, this Angel was vile and sinister. She moved through the red haze as if floating, sitting next to them and opening the first book.

Marcus spoke, but his words drifted to some far place where no one could hear him.

“Shhh...,” the girl hissed. “I am—”

“The devil...” Andrew said. As he spoke, foam drizzled from his mouth. His eyes rolled back, possessed by the evil drug that polluted his body.

“Do not speak. My name is Cherub.”

Marcus rolled to his side. “I...I’m having trouble breathing.” He squirmed in the dirt like an animal trapped in metal claws. “My...heart...it...”

“Shhh...” Cherub said, placing one of the books down next to her, then opening the other one. “Just relax.” Her voice drifted inside their heads and joined the nauseating drug in their veins. “Lay still and just listen to the wind blow in the night. Can you hear its song?”

Marcus and Andrew heard the chime of the wind that had a celestial tone. The music seemed far away, yet, it was right above them.

Cherub read from her book. “To insure our sense of mystery...” Her voice faded like the wind as Cherub continued to read, yet whispered in their ear. “We need a sense of evil, which sees the devil as a real spirit, to name himself with his specific personality for every occasion.” Cherub looked up from her book. “Flannery O’Connor said that to me.”

Andrew rolled to his side. “Please, help us...”

“Shhh...just listen.” Cherub looked back down at her book. “A man named Randall Terry had once said, ‘I believe that there is a devil...’”

Marcus clutched his chest. “I...I can’t breathe.”

“Yes you can,” Cherub whispered. “Here’s Satan’s agenda...First, he doesn’t want anyone having kids. Secondly, if they do conceive, he wants them killed. If

they're not killed through abortion, he wants them neglected or abused, physically, emotionally, sexually. Barring that, he wants to get them into some godless curriculum or setting, where their minds are filled with pollution."

Cherub's eyes peered through the red haze. Both Marcus and Andrew stared at her from the ground. Marcus began shivering. Andrew's skin became moist with sweat.

A long moment passed as Cherub looked at them. "Do you understand why the world shouldn't have children? The devil wants to kill them. And if somehow the children manage to escape the grasp of evil, more punishments await them; neglect, abuse." Red tears slid from Cherub's crimson eyes. "The children are abused physically, emotionally, and sexually. Their minds filled with pollution." Cherub squeezed the open book, pressing her fingers into the pages. "If those children grow up, they will receive a punishment that mere words could not describe."

Marcus curled into a ball, keeping his eyes on Cherub. "What is...happening to me?"

"Shhh...hear the words of Mark Twain." Cherub's crimson eyes lowered. "We may not pay Satan reverence, for that would be indiscreet, but we can at least respect his talents." Cherub rolled her eyes back up. "That means you shouldn't worship Satan, because that would be unwise and a lack of judgment. However, you should admire the idea of Satan. The world needs an occurrence of evil so that we may pledge a resolution to subdue the unsettled phantom that emerges at our bedside."

## 82

Cherub placed down the first book, then picked up the other. "I'm sure the bible has answers for the both of you." Cherub opened the book, fingers pressing into the pages. She began reading as the red haze and the chime of the wind swallowed Marcus and Andrew. "Jesus is tempted by the devil for forty days in the desert. When the devil finished, he left Jesus alone for a little while." Cherub looked at Marcus and Andrew. "Keep in mind that Jesus was led to that desert by the Holy Spirit, not by the devil. Why would God lead His son to evil? It doesn't make sense."

Andrew made another attempt to sit up. Cherub stood and kicked him in the chest. "Stay put," Cherub said, sitting back down. She flicked through the pages of the bible. "Let's see. What else can I find?" Her crimson eyes lit up. "Here we go. The bible says that the armor of God will help you stand up to the devil's tricks." Cherub glared at them. "Have you ever tried to put on armor? It takes forever. By that time, the devil has already tricked you."

Marcus coughed, still in the fetal position. "I'm thirsty..." he moaned. "I need water..."

Cherub ignored him, flipping the pages of the bible. "It says here that you shouldn't have pride, or else the devil will trap you. I guess no one should be proud of anything they do in life."

Andrew closed his eyes and spoke. "Mature in faith and you will not swell up with pride like the devil."

Cherub snapped her eyes up. "What are you babbling about?"

Andrew cleared his throat, keeping his eyes shut. "That's what the bible really says."

"Okay smartass." Cherub flipped to another page. "Tell me what this means. Since the children are people of flesh and blood, Jesus became like them so that through his death, he might destroy the devil who has the power over death." Cherub looked at Andrew. "Did you hear those words? Jesus might destroy the devil. Also, it says the devil has power over death!"

Andrew once again cleared his throat. "For it is clear that Jesus does not help the angels...He helps us instead."

Cherub flipped to another page. "The devil roams like a roaring lion ready to pounce!"

"Be firm in your faith and resist the devil."

Cherub tore through the pages of the bible, searching for another passage. "Whoever continues to sin, belongs to the devil!"

Andrew kept his eyes closed. "The Son of God appeared so He could destroy what the devil has done."

"The bible says that both God and the devil have children. Whoever does good things, is a child of God. Whoever does wrong things, is a child of the devil." Cherub tapped her finger on the page. "It says that right here! How can anyone be perfect? No one is perfect! Which means, everyone does wrong things! It means that all of us are the devil's children!"

"First John, chapter three, verse seven..." Andrew took in a deep breath, squeezing his eyes so they would remain shut. "Let know one deceive you, my children."

Cherub ripped several pages and tossed them into the red haze. "Here in the book of Jude it says that even the angel Michael would not dare condemn the devil!"

"Michael also says in that same chapter, 'The Lord rebuke you.'"

Cherub ripped the page she just read, crumpled it into a ball, then tossed it on the ground. "Revelation chapter twenty, verse seven, 'Satan will be set loose from his prison!'"

"In chapter ten, the bible says that Satan will be thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur, and he will be tormented both day and night...forever and ever."

Cherub threw the bible at Andrew, then stormed off saying, "We'll just see about that."

Drey and Rita took a cab back to Truth or Consequences, picked up the truck that had four new tires, paid the tow fee and tire replacement bill, which totaled two grand. They drove back to Lake Montezuma, arriving at 10:00 p.m. During the trip, Kenny called, stating that the letters were written by at least two people.

Then later during their drive, Kristy Poulston called and said that she found letters written to Devin in the shed and turned them over to Jordan Hensch at CARP.

When Drey and Rita entered the lobby at the Beaver Creek Inn, the tiny manager, Ruana, had been behind the desk. "They're in the conference room," she said without emotion. "You're supposed to go in there."

"Thank you," Drey said, holding Rita's hand and leading her to the conference room. In Drey's other hand, he carried the shirt box full of letters.

Jon, Court, and Ashley were sitting in chairs, gazing at the news on the television. A reporter discussed Devin Poulston, Marcus Cain, and Andrew Wilcher. Paranormal groups complained about the trails to Devils Windpipe being closed while the search for Devin, Marcus, and Andrew continued. There was speculation that the FBI feared that more disappearances might occur at Devils Windpipe, but that is purely speculation.

The reporter also discussed how the wife of Jon Truss had been kidnapped and taken to a remote cabin on Saguaro Mountain. There are reports that the shed had looked exactly like the Toy-Box, which had been created by David Parker Ray back in the late 90's. The reporter discussed the copycat theory, then finally talked about the flood of media and paranormal groups in the small town of Lake Montezuma.

Jon, Court, and Ashley glanced at Drey and Rita, but only Jon spoke. "It's good to have you back." He looked at Rita. "Who's this?"

Drey led Rita to a seat. "This is Rita Horton."

"She your wife or something?"

Court and Ashley turned in their chairs, now more interested. Drey placed the shirt box on the table and sat down. "Her last name is *Horton*. My last name is *Harten*."

Court used the remote to turn down the television. She then looked at Rita. "What happened to your hand?"

"Gang fight," Rita said with a grin. "It seems spending time with Drey can be a tad bit dangerous."

Jon: "Spending time with any of us is a tad bit dangerous."

Ashley stood up and left the room.

Drey: "I guess there's no word on Andrew, or Marcus?"

Court: "No." She looked at the shirt box. "What's that?"

Drey: "Letters written to Cherub Fetterman, appearing to be from other teens that lost a parent. All the letters finish by telling Cherub how it's possible to visit with a dead parent."

Court: "Sounds like a predator trying to bait Cherub."

Rita: "That's exactly what these letters are. Although, my investigator informed us that the letters were written by at least two people and the words stolen from the teen version of *Chicken Soup of the Soul*."

Jon: "What kind of investigator are you?"

Rita: "I run my own shop."

Drey: "That's downplaying it. She has an office in New York and investigators in every state."

Court: "So...how do you know each other?"

Drey glanced at Rita: "We met back in 1999. Rita was an FBI agent at the time."

Jon: "Did you help her find someone?"

Rita: "That's classified."

Jon: "No it's not. Unless you went to him without the FBI knowing."

Rita: "That's exactly what I did."

Drey: "Rita, you can trust Jon and Court. They're good people...and they're friends of mine."

Rita: "I had a role in the Toy-Box killer investigation. My job, along with a hundred other agents was to search his property, then the entire town of Truth or Consequences for bodies that David Parker Ray had brutally tortured and murdered."

Jon: "I suppose this got personal for you. I know that the bodies weren't recovered, so you must have approached Drey and asked for his help."

Rita: "Yes."

Court: "Were any of the bodies ever recovered?"

Rita: "Nothing was made public."

Jon's eyes bounced from Rita to Drey. "So nothing was made public, but I'll bet Drey figured out where the bodies were. Why didn't you inform the FBI?"

Rita: "I did."

Jon: "Let me guess. They wanted to keep it quiet. How come?"

Rita: "I don't know, but I retired from the FBI and opened my own business."

Court: "I admire your passion. The world needs more of you."

Rita: "And less evil."

Court: "Amen."

## 84

Detective Caplan walked in the conference room, wearing his blue blazer, slacks, and crosser trainer tennis shoes. "Good evening, everyone." He looked at Jon. "I need to ask you a favor."

Jon twirled his chair so that it faced Caplan. "Let me guess. You want me to autograph a book for you."

"I'm not much of a reader."

"Is it for your wife?"

"No, she died four years ago."

"Well," Jon said. "I have two feet and somehow managed to shove both of them into my mouth."

"No worries. The manager of the hotel, Ruana, said I could speak to you about something."

"What's up?"

"I live in Glendale, which is a long haul back and forth to here, so I've been staying with a Yavapai officer at his house. I could really use some privacy, but all the rooms are booked in town."

"We have plenty on our floor," Jon said.

"That's what I've been told. Can you spare one?"

"Of course. When you get off the elevator, turn right and choose any of the rooms at the end of the hallway."

"I really appreciate that." He looked at the group. "How are things going in here?"

"We're holding up," Jon said.

Caplan's phone rang. "Excuse me a second." He walked out the door while answering.

Drey pointed to the shirt box. "Should I give him these letters?"

Rita: "If they came from you, then a savvy lawyer could have them dismissed as evidence because of your background." Rita thought for a moment. "Maybe I should give them to Detective Caplan."

Drey: "Where are you going to say that you found them?"

Rita: "I'll tell the truth."

Drey: "What if they asked why you held them so long?"

Rita smiled. "I'll tell the truth."

Court chuckled. "She's good."

Drey shook his head. "Too good."

Caplan returned to the room with a sour expression. "I just received word that the FBI recovered evidence in the Toy-Box cabin."

Everyone stood, then Jon asked, "Can you tell us?"

Caplan pulled in a deep breath. "It will be all over the eleven o'clock news, so yes, I can tell you. They found bloodstains on the examination chair, which matches Devin Poulston. Also, Devin's fingerprints are on the chair and on several other items in the cabin. They also found the clothes that Devin had apparently been wearing the night he went missing. The clothes were buried about fifty yards from the cabin with dried bloodstains on them. No sign of the body yet, but the Feds are treating this as a homicide now."

Court placed her hand over her mouth as a gush of tears spilled down her cheeks.

Jon cleared his throat several times. "What about Cherub Fetterman? Did they find any evidence that she was in the cabin?"

"Yes, and there were bloodstains from her as well on the chair, and on the clothes that she had been wearing, which were buried next to Devin's clothes."

Rita asked, "What about suspects? There has to be something. Hair samples, fingerprints...anything?"

"There is," Caplan said. "Norman Hertzier's fingerprints are all over the place."

Jon looked at Drey. "Which explains why Devin's jacket was in Norman's basement. And it also shows that Norman felt guilty, or knew he would be caught, so he killed himself."

Court wiped the tears, attempting to regain her composure. "What about Andrew and Marcus? Any word on their location?"



“Not as of yet,” Caplan said, eyeing the group. “I just ask that you do not call Kristy Poulston until she has been informed of the situation. Jordan Hensch is on her way to the house now.”

Rita grabbed the shirt box from the table and handed it to Detective Caplan. “These are letters written to Cherub Fetterman. You may be able to match the handwriting to Norman Herzler.”

Caplan slightly opened the box and looked inside. “Where did you find these?”

Rita told the truth, leaving out the part where Drey led them to the location.

## 85

### ***Kristy Polston, Mother of Missing Child***

Kristy popped her eyes open, realizing that she fell asleep on the couch and the doorbell had been ringing. She stood up and peeked out the curtain to make sure it wasn't a reporter.

She opened the door. “Come on in.”

Agent Jordan Hensch walked in, closed the door behind her, and retrieved her iPhone. “Unfortunately, I have to show you something.” Jordan paused, gazing at Kristy. “This is going to be difficult, but-”

Kristy's lips and fingers began to shake. “No!” She fell to her knees, crying hard, breathing heavy. “Oh God!” She curled on the floor, placing her hands over her face. “I can't do this! Oh, God! Devin! Devin!”

## 86

***Jon Truss, Author***

***Court Truss, Bodyguard***

***Ashley Wilcher, Bodyguard***

***Detective Caplan, Investigator***

Jon popped his eyes open, lying on the bed next to Court.

Someone was banging on the door. “Mr. Truss! Mrs. Truss!”

Court slid off the bed, dressed in a long T-shirt. Jon rubbed his eyes and forced himself up. He had on his usual night outfit of T-shirt and boxers. He stumbled toward the pounding knock, but Court arrived first and answered the door.

Detective Caplan was fully dressed in his blazer, slacks, and cross trainers. “Marcus and Andrew have been found,” he said with excitement. “They are being transported to the hospital.”

Jon had been dreaming just a moment ago about walking in the darkness at Devil's Windpipe. Trees had started falling all around him and cracking over rocks. That's when he awoke to the loud knocking on the door.

Court kept the door open, but slipped on a pair of jeans. “Are they okay?”

"I'm told that they were given some sort of drug that causes hallucinations. Andrew is recovering well, but Marcus is having some troubles."

Jon slid a pair of slacks over his boxers. "Where were they found?"

"Next to a large boulder at Devils Windpipe."

Jon froze. "How is that possible? Wasn't that area searched?"

"Yes, it was searched a few times."

A door opened in the hallway. Ashley pushed by Caplan, into Jon and Court's room. She was fully dressed and seeming wide-awake. "Are you two coming?"

"Yes," Jon said. "Give us a second."

"I'll meet you downstairs in the parking lot." Ashley hurried off.

Caplan stepped away from the door. "I'm heading over to the hospital as well. I'll meet you there."

"Thank you," Court said, shutting the door. She ripped off her T-shirt and put on a bra and fresh shirt, then worked on her socks and shoes. "Thank God," she said, tying the laces. "I say we wait until Marcus and Andrew are stabilized, then get the hell out of this place."

Jon put on a long black coat, staring into the mirror. He wasn't planning on leaving.

## 87

Jon and Court were able to visit Andrew a few hours later. Ashley stayed by his bedside, while they checked on Marcus' condition.

Detective Caplan walked out of the room. "He's been stabilized. In fact, I was able to ask him a few questions."

Jon breathed a sigh of relief. "That's great news." He lowered his voice. "What happened to them? Andrew wouldn't talk about it."

"They don't remember much," Caplan said. "Something about being in a red haze while a teenage girl read from books. Marcus recalled Andrew and the girl getting into a religious argument over the devil."

"I'm going in," Court said, hurrying into the hospital room.

Jon touched Caplan's arm and led him to an empty room. "Is the girl, Cherub Fetterman?"

"They couldn't make out her face because of the drugs that were put into them. However, I do believe that Cherub was the girl."

"What about the blood found at the Toy-Box cabin and the bloody clothes? Aren't the Feds looking for her dead body?"

"They are, but if Andrew and Marcus can positively ID Cherub as the girl that was with them, that means she's still alive." Caplan stared at Jon. "Which means..."

Jon's mouth opened and closed several times before he could speak. "If Cherub Fetterman is alive, despite what was found at the crime scene, then it's possible that Devin Poulston is still alive."

Caplan glanced into the hallway. "Keep that between us. I'm staying on this case and will continue searching for both Devin and Cherub. The forensic team found Devin and Cherub's fingerprints in the basement of Norman Hertzler's

house, but no blood. That means that Norman took those poor kids to the small cabin, probably abused them, then tortured them.” Caplan locked his eyes on Jon. “I really think that you and the others should leave. Court, Marcus, and Andrew are lucky to be alive. Heck, you, Ashley, and Drey are lucky to be alive. Don’t mess with fate. It’s a fight that you will eventually lose.”

## 88

Jon received a text message from his agent. *“I’m in the lobby at the hospital. Meet me in the cafeteria.”*

Jon stepped into Marcus’ room and saw that he was sleeping. He whispered to Court, “Bram is downstairs. Do you want some coffee, or something?”

“No.” Court kissed him on the cheek. “Take your time. I’ll be here.”

Jon hurried to the elevator, went to the first floor, practically jogged to the cafeteria, seeing Bram at a table near the windows with two coffees. His short brown hair was fashionably styled for five o’clock in the morning and he was dressed sharply in a black suit.

Jon slid into the seat across from Bram. “Did you take the redeye from New York?”

“My plane got delayed because of a lightning storm. Once I finally arrived in Flagstaff, I had trouble finding a rental car. But here I am.”

Jon picked up his coffee and took a healthy sip. “Yes, here you are.”

“How’s Marcus and Andrew?”

“Andrew is fine. Marcus is still recovering.”

“I heard on the radio that Devin, along with some other girl named Cherub Fetterman were both murdered. The suspect is some Norman guy, who was the bus driver that killed Devin’s father.” Bram shook his head. “That fucking guy kills a father on the way to pick his son up from school, then kidnaps the son and tortures and kills him. What kind of fucked up world is this?”

Jon looked around, seeing the cafeteria starting to get busy as a new day quickly approached. “Why are you here?” Jon asked, staring at Bram. “You went through a lot of trouble to see me.”

“I’m concerned.”

“Bullshit. What do you really want?”

Bram picked up his coffee, then placed it back down without taking a sip. “It’s the publisher.”

“What about them?”

“They want you back to work.”

“I am working. What the hell do they think I’m doing here?”

Bram leveled his eyes with Jon. “What are you doing here?”

“Writing a damn novel called, *Devils Windpipe*, which you convinced me to do. You also told me to stay here and flaunt myself to the media, which I did.”

“And now, it’s time for you to head back to Raleigh, finish the book, and get ready for the London Book Conference this spring where you will be the guest of honor.”

“I can’t think about that right now.”

Bram's eyes instantly became wide like two silver dollars. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"I have things to finish here."

"No you don't. Devin Poulston is dead. Marcus and Andrew have been found. You're done here. Time to move on."

Jon noticed a few people looking in their direction. He kept his voice low. "What's really going on? Why are you pushing me to leave?"

"It's the publisher. They don't want you here anymore."

Jon finally understood. "They're afraid that their meal ticket will get hurt, or even killed."

"Something like that," Bram admitted. "I'm not supposed to leave here without you."

Jon pulled in a deep breath, trying to stay calm. "You tell those assholes that I'm staying. If they don't like, they can get rid of me." Jon stood up. "I'll be picked up by another publisher before dinner."

Bram also stood, walking with Jon to the exit. "Let's not get too dramatic. They're concerned about you, that's all."

"I'm staying," Jon said with all the conviction he could muster. "If you want to stay and baby-sit, go ahead."

They arrived in the lobby. Bram rubbed the back of his neck, probably searching for some words of wisdom. "I'm heading to LA to do some networking while I'm on this side of the country. How about you just take a quick break and come with me. It would be good to clear your head. We can bring Court."

"I'm staying," Jon said, walking toward the elevator. He pressed the button, then took the cell phone from his pocket while feeling the eyes of Bram staring at him. As the elevator door opened, Jon sent a quick text message to Bram, attempting a different approach to get through his thick skull. The text was simple.

*"Leave me the fuck alone."*

## 89

***Jon Truss, Author***

***Court Truss, Bodyguard***

***Marcus Cane, Former Hostage Negotiator***

***Drey Harten, Psychic***

***Rita Horton, Private Detective***

***Andrew and Ashley Wilcher, Bodyguards***

Andrew had been released from the hospital the next day; Marcus the day after that. Everyone attended the memorial service for Devin Poulston, including the national media and people from all over Arizona. Kristy's sister flew in from Montreal with her husband and three girls. Also, several friends that grew up with Kristy surprised her with a visit.

All this happened in just a few days. Afterwards, life had to move on.

Jon met with Court, the twins, Marcus, Drey, and Rita inside the conference room at the hotel.

"I came here," Jon said, "to write a novel. That's the easy part of what I do for a living. I had decided to help Kristy Poulston, which became one of the most difficult things I've ever done." His eyes swept across the room, making sure to look at each person. "All of us wanted to help Kristy Poulston, but we failed." His voice rose to an angry pitch. "We have some of the brightest people in the world sitting in this room. An author. Three bodyguards. Hostage negotiator. Psychic. And a private investigator who formally worked for the FBI. If anyone were desperate for help, we should be more than enough."

Court: "It's not like we didn't try. Sometimes problems cannot be solved."

Jon: "I do not accept that theory. The media is packing up and leaving town. Even the paranormal freaks have seen enough. The show is over. Nothing to see anymore." Jon paused while holding his gaze on the others. "But Kristy Poulston is left behind to deal with this on her own. We promised her that we would help."

Marcus: "The fact remains, Devin Poulston was led astray by two people; Cherub Fetterman and Norman Hertzier."

Rita: "Is that a fact? Is there concrete evidence that Norman Hertzier had something to do with this?"

Marcus: "Sure there is. Devin's jacket was found at the feet of Norman as he hung from the basement rafters. Fingerprints of Norman at the Toy-Box cabin."

Rita: "That is some compelling evidence, but I wouldn't call that a slam dunk."

Marcus: "You used to work for the FBI, correct?"

Rita: "Yes."

Marcus: "And now you own a private investigation business, correct?"

Rita: "Yes. What does that have to do with anything?"

Marcus: "You left the FBI, because you didn't feel the system worked. So you went on your own to save the world."

Rita: "How do you know all that?"

Marcus: "Because I did the exact same thing." Marcus looked over the group. "All of us, one way or another, veered from our original path. In this case, we wanted to save Devin Poulston. But what if he's dead? Does that mean we failed? Yes, it does. Can we do anything about it? I think the best way to help the *Devin Poulston's* of the world is to make sure it doesn't happen to anyone else."

Rita: "That's great, in theory. But as a former hostage negotiator, you of all people should know that we cannot stop every crime before it happens. It doesn't mean we can't do better and maybe help a few people, but this is an imperfect world with an evil that roams without mercy and does not rest. There's only so much we can do."

Ashley: "It sounds like we need a place to start."

Andrew: "Actually, it sounds more like we need to finish what we started."

Jon: "I agree. Let's finish what we came here to do. Help Kristy Poulston."

Marcus: "Help her with what? Her son is dead. We can't change that."

Court: "Is he dead?"

Marcus: "Do you actually want to find the body?"

Court: "Yes...I do."

Jon: "Detective Caplan is sticking around to tie in all the evidence with Norman Hertzier. Also, I think he's looking for one more person."

Ashley: "Detective Caplan doesn't believe that Cherub Fetterman could have abducted Andrew and Marcus by herself." She looked at her brother, then Marcus. "And frankly, I find that hard to believe myself."

Andrew: "And since Norman Hertzier is dead, that means there's someone still out there."

Marcus: "Okay, now I can see more of purpose. We need to locate whoever kidnapped Andrew and me."

Court: "And we need to find Devin and Cherub. If they are both dead, then we'll have to accept that. But we need to know for sure."

Everyone looked at Drey, who had not spoken a word. Jon asked him, "You have been quiet. What are you thinking about?"

Drey's eyes moved to each person. "I'm thinking that we said enough." He stood, forming a confident grin. "Let's get back to work."

## 90

As the group exited the conference room, they were surprised by Kristy inside the lobby. She had on a polo shirt with a Beaver Creak Inn logo and a gold nametag with Assistant Manager engraved.

"What's going on?" she asked them.

Court approached Kristy and gave her a hug. Court then looked at her with determined eyes. "We made a decision...we're going to kick some ass."

## 91

The day remained a bit on the cool side for Arizona with temperatures in the upper thirties, although the sun reigned in a perfect blue sky.

Drey walked the neighborhood, using the meditation balls. This was Marcus' idea. They needed to get away from Kristy's house and the theories that surrounded Devin's disappearance. It was time to look at other possibilities that no one had thought of yet.

And when all else fails, put the psychic on point.

They decided to stay together as a group. They would think as a team, each with their own perspective. Nothing would be out of the realm of possibility. Every idea would be discussed. All theories would be tested and retested.

Display. Illustrate. Prove. Gain Knowledge by using their gifts and talents. Extend into the divine and supernatural if needed.

*Revelation.*

Drey waved the group closer. He saw an image. Something moving along the neighborhood with evil intentions.

He rotated the meditation balls in his hand, listening to the chimes. The group stayed close, but no one said a word.

Drey took a step forward, gazing at the street. "Flames...no, that's not it. Bubbles..." He closed his eyes, drifting to that place where he could search for answers. "No...that's not it." Drey rotated the meditation balls, feeling the pressure in the palm of his hand while his fingers moved like pistons inside an engine. "Xbox...puppy...no, that's not it."

There was a sudden gust of wind, causing his eyes to pop open. He stared at the street, seeing an image float by. He watched it move directly past him. "Black flames. Red flames. Orange flames."

Drey walked across the street, then turned around. He looked at the group, then back to the street. "Orange, yellow, and green bubbles."

He returned to the other side. "A white van with those decorations." He continued rotating the meditation balls, gazing into the street. His eyes moved to where everyone had been standing, but they had been replaced by an image of a twelve-year-old girl.

It was Cherub.

Drey wiped the questions that formed into his mind. *Why is she here? How did she get here?*

Drey gazed at the sidewalk. He envisioned the date and spoke so the others could hear him. "November 17th, 2011. It was little over a year ago. Cherub is walking on the sidewalk. A white van slows down. A window opens. The man speaks."

*Would you like to see my puppy? He is inside.*

"Cherub isn't fooled. She continues walking as the van moves forward."

*I have an Xbox at home. What do you think about playing some games with me? It would be fun.*

"Cherub shakes her head no, then begins to jog. She noticed the colored flames on the side of the van as it stays with her."

*Where are you going? Talk to me for a second.*

"Cherub realizes that she needs to head back where she had just come from. She turns and runs in a full sprint. The van spins around and chases her."

*I'm going to get you!*

"Tears spray from Cherub's eyes. She notices that the other side of the white van has orange, yellow, and green bubbles."

*I want you! You can't get away from me!*

"Cherub runs up a driveway and screams, 'Devin! Help!' The van hits the brakes, stops for a second, then peels away. Devin comes running from the shed, carrying an aluminum baseball bat. Cherub runs past him, heading toward the shed while yelling, 'Someone is after me!'

"Devin glances back, watching as Cherub goes inside the shed and slams the door shut. He marches forward, gripping the baseball bat. The white van approaches and rolls to a slow stop. The man smiles at Devin, then hits the gas and takes off."

Back at the hotel, Andrew used his laptop to research the incident while everyone gathered in the conference room for lunch.

"There's actually a story about it in the local newspaper," Andrew said. "It was written by that librarian, Alice Gottschalk. She discusses the incident, which is exactly the same as Drey told it. The girl's name had been withheld. Police never found the van and never really had any leads." Andrew looked up from the laptop. "It happened last year, on November 17th, just like Drey said."

Rita: "The police should have a report given by Cherub Fetterman. Maybe they discussed how she was here from New Mexico. Also, it proves that she knew Devin Poulston."

Marcus: "Does it say anything in the article about the girl going to Devin's house?"

Andrew looked over the article again. "It just says that she ran to a friend's house."

Court: "Obviously after the guy left, he painted the van so the police wouldn't find him."

Ashley: "Also, he had to be from another town. Most likely he had been driving around, searching for a victim."

Drey: "He's from another town, but it didn't feel like a random act, or a chance meeting. I think the predator had been watching Cherub for some time and waited for the right moment. I'm also not sure he painted his van."

Rita: "I'm surprised that he didn't just grab her."

Court: "He must have thought that she would be dumb enough to just go inside his van."

Marcus: "I think it's strange that he used the puppy story on her, then asked her to play a video game with him. That's something a predator would do from the 80's, or 90's."

Ashley: "Then that would make sense why he used letters to lure Cherub, then Devin. This guy had been stuck in the past."

Rita: "I'll bet this wasn't his first rodeo. He had been successful before using those tricks. Also, he prey's on the poorer kids who don't have puppies or video games."

Court: "If Drey is right, which I have no doubt that he is, the guy researched Cherub and Devin, then discovered they both lost a parent. He decided to go that route."

Andrew: "But I don't understand why he waited a year. Is the guy really that patient?"

Marcus: "Yes and no. I think he got his hooks into Cherub right away. Then later, used her to get to Devin."

Rita: "Let's assume that the predator sent letters to Cherub, got her being friendly with him, then used her to send letters to Devin while planning the day to take Devin."



Drey: "Or lead him away, just like Jon said in his story about what he thought happened. I think Cherub visited Devin every night in the shed, then eventually convinced him to run away and visit his father. When they arrived, the only person there was the predator."

Ashley: "Wouldn't Kristy eventually see the letters in the mail?"

Rita: "Not if Cherub was dropping them off herself when she met Devin in the shed."

Court: "Okay, then there are several questions that we need answered. Where was Cherub staying in Lake Montezuma? Who was she staying with? Why didn't her father report her missing? And how is Norman Hertzier tied into all this?"

Andrew: "Maybe Norman was the guy in the white van?"

Marcus: "No way. This is a small town. Everyone would have known that Norman drives a white van with flames and bubbles. We're looking for someone else. But Court is right, how did Norman get mixed up in all this?"

Court looked at Jon. "Okay, it's your turn. If this were your book, who would be the predator? Where did he come from? How did Cherub get back and forth from New Mexico and Arizona? What role did Norman Hertzier play in all this? Why didn't Cherub's father report her missing? And where was Cherub staying in Lake Montezuma?"

Jon let out a nervous chuckle. "Jeez. Is that it?"

Drey: "There's one more thing...What is really going on at Devils Windpipe?"

## 93

### ***Jon gathered his thoughts, then told the story.***

It was about a year an ago when Norman Herzier drove to Las Vegas. He had not worked since being fired from his bus driver job and just now received his license back. Norman attempted to look on the bright side. He could have been charged with vehicular homicide. But after the judge reviewed the case and looked at all the evidence, it was just a bad accident that took a life.

Still, Norman had his license revoked, paid a \$5,000 fine, and lost his job in the school system.

Perhaps the worst thing to come out of the accident was the public humiliation. If Norman had enough money, he would have sold his house and moved to the other side of the country. But he needed the last of his retirement money to survive until he could find another job.

In some ways, it would have better if he just went to prison for a year.

His retirement account had just over \$17,000. It wasn't much, but he had planned on building it over the next twenty years. Instead, he took a huge tax penalty and pulled the funds, then used it to survive until he found another way to make money.

It didn't take long for the bills to pile up and the bank account to dwindle. He had \$762 remaining. Norman decided that luck had not been on his side while he rotted in Lake Montezuma. He needed a place where his luck could change.

Vegas.

Norman filled up the gas tank and drove to Sin City, arriving in about four hours. He had only been there once before, but that was when he turned twenty-one. Three other friends took him to Vegas for his birthday. They got plastered and Norman actually won five hundred bucks on a slot machine.

That night, he approached a prostitute. Unfortunately, five hundred wasn't enough for sex. Instead, she danced naked for him, let him kiss her wherever he wanted, then finished by giving him the best blowjob he'd ever had.

To this day, Norman never had such a great sexual experience.

Driving down the Vegas Strip gave him renewed strength. The lights and ambiance was like sucking down vitamins and caffeine at the same time. Norman already believed that his rotten fucking life would be transformed into a life that he deserved. He envisioned raking in a ton of money, selling his house, and informing everyone in Lake Montezuma that they could fuck off.

And speaking of fucking, his cock already swelled, anticipating a few hours with a hot looking prostitute. He may even get two or three and have a sex party.

Unfortunately, the opposite happened. It took about fifteen minutes for Norman to lose every penny that he had brought with him. That's when fate decided to step into Norman's life and take over, because he clearly wasn't doing a good job of managing his own existence.

"Excuse me," a man said as Norman headed back to his beater of a car.

He turned, seeing a short, scrawny man with a sunburn bald head. Next to him was a cute girl, maybe ten, or twelve years old. "What can I do for you?" Norman heard his own voice, sounding like a man who just lost everything. He was already trying to come up with the best way to kill himself.

"My car broke down and my daughter and I are stranded." The man paused, then pointed to the license plate. "I noticed that you are from Rimrock County in Arizona. If you're heading back, could you give us ride to Flagstaff? It's on the way to where you're going."

Norman glanced at the girl, then looked at the man who quite possibly seemed to be more desperate than he was. "You live in Flagstaff?"

"Actually, we live in Truth or Consequences, New Mexico. We'll have to figure out what to do once we get to Flagstaff, but at least we'll be closer to home."

"What about getting your car fixed?"

The man sighed. "We can't afford that. Plus, I'm not sure if they have parts for a 1970 Plymouth Cuda." The man sighed again. "I totally understand why you don't want to help." He grabbed his daughter's hand. "We'll try to find someone else."

Norman stepped forward. "Wait. It's not a problem. I'm just out of money and not sure if I'll even have enough gas to get back home."

The man reached into his pocket and pulled out a crumpled ten-dollar bill, two fives, and six ones. "I'll give you everything I have. My daughter needs something to eat, but we can stop at a McDonald's and get her a small coke and hamburger. But everything else I have will be yours."

Norman shook the man's hand. "You have a deal. What's your name?"

"I'm Jean Fetterman...this is my daughter, Cherub."

They made it to Ash Fork, Arizona before the gas light came on. They were still about forty miles away from Flagstaff. Norman had another hundred miles or so to get back to Lake Montezuma. Jean and his daughter Cherub still had a long way before they even reached the New Mexico border, much less getting to the middle of the state to where they lived.

"Now what?" Norman asked. "We're out of money."

"They have a Wal-Mart," Jean said. "Maybe we can..." He paused, looked at Norman, then stared out the window.

Norman glanced in the backseat. Cherub had dozed off about an hour ago. He looked at Jean. "What were you going to say?"

"Never mind."

The car sputtered, signifying that the gas tank was about to become dry. "I'll take any suggestions at this point. Just tell me."

Jean looked at him. "I think it's time we consider stealing some money. I don't see any other solution."

Norman gripped the steering wheel. "Maybe we could steal some food, but there's no way we'll be able to steal any money."

Jean pointed. "Pull in over there."

Norman cranked the wheel and pulled into the parking lot of Desoto's Beauty, Barber, and Gift Shop, which was a small building that had a fresh coat of white paint and red trim. The car sputtered once more, then the engine cut off. Norman glided into a spot and shoved the gear into park. "Well, we come as far as we can go." If Norman had a gun right now, he would put the barrel into his mouth and pull the fucking trigger. He wondered if he could steal a gun and bullets from Wal-Mart? He just needed a few seconds to load it and blast a bullet into his brain.

"Daddy..." a voice said from behind. "Where are we?"

Jean turned around. "We're in a town called Ash Fork."

"Sounds weird."

Jean forced a smile. "Yeah, it does sound kind of weird."

"I'm thirsty. And hungry."

Norman saw Jean fighting back the tears. This damn world could not give anyone a fucking chance to live.

Jean looked out the window. "What the hell are we going to do?"

"We need cash," Norman said. Desperation turned into anger, which gave him the courage to do just about anything. "But since we don't have a get-a-way car, we need a plan to steal some money without anyone knowing."

Cherub opened the door. "I can get money. Stay here."

Norman watched as Cherub hurried into the beauty-barber-gift-store. "What is she going to do?" Norman asked.

"Get us some money."

Norman snapped his eyes in Jean's direction. "How does she plan on doing that?"

Jean continued gazing out the window. "Just give her a chance. She's good."

"Good at what?" Norman was breathing heavy. "Has she done this before?"

"Yes." Jean's eyes became hard. "This life has given us no other option."

Norman totally agreed, but still couldn't imagine what Cherub was doing inside that store.

About ten minutes later she walked out of the building, jogged to the car, and slid into the backseat. "I got forty bucks," she said with excitement. "And they called someone to bring us a gas can and fill the tank. He should be here any minute."

Norman shifted in his seat and faced Cherub. "How in the world did you do that? Who was in there? What did you say?"

The grin on Cherub's young face could only be described as malicious. Her eyes locked on Norman. "What does any of that matter? We have money and gas is on the way."

"I'm just..." Norman's heart gripped with fear. Something about Cherub felt wrong.

A tow truck pulled into the parking lot. A man slid out, reached into the back of the truck, and retrieved a large red gas can.

While Norman opened the door, he saw Cherub's sinful eyes in the review mirror.

## 95

After the gas tank had been filled and Norman thanked the kind man who called himself Nacho, they drove to the Hi-Line Motel, which was about the same size of the Beauty, Barber, and Gift Shop. Jean asked the motel manager, a weathered old woman with deep brown skin, if she could show them a room before they paid any money.

Cherub hid in the car until her father, Norman, and the old woman left the office. She then hurried inside, knowing that the door would be unlocked. After all, only the devil would steal money from an old woman that ran a crappy motel in a small town.

A cashbox behind the counter had a roll of singles, fives, and tens, but Cherub was not after that loose change. She moved through an open doorway, getting a whiff of cigarette smoke. Inside was an office that doubled as a makeshift living room. There was a small desk cluttered with receipts and other documents, including a warning from a fire marshal. In the corner of the room was a twelve-inch TV, rocking chair, and a table with a pack of Camel's, pink Bic lighter, and an ashtray full of cigarette butts. A single window provided a bit of light, exposing the dust and lingering smoke. And for some reason, the office-slash-living room felt like it was ninety degrees.

Cherub opened the desk, finding more receipts, crumpled letters, and an empty box of raisins.

She took a quick look in the small lobby, not seeing anyone. Her father must be keeping the old woman busy by asking about the history of Ash Fork. The old woman would talk about that for hours.

There didn't seem to be another hiding place for the money, so Cherub could only assume that the woman stayed in one of the rooms here at the motel. Cherub eased back to lobby and hurried outside, thankful to breathe the fresh air and be

away from the stale cigarette smoke. She saw an open door, but that is where her father, Norman, and the old woman were talking.

Cherub moved her eyes along the row of doors that had chipped paint and rusty hinges. The building was shaped like an L. She hurried down the next row of doors, finding one with a cat sleeping in front of it.

"There it is," Cherub said with a pleased grin. She jogged to the door, kicked the cat away, and opened it, blasted by a cloud of smoke.

"Hey honey," a voice shouted from somewhere. "We're out of toilet paper. Go get some from one of the other rooms."

Cherub adjusted her eyes, not wanting to turn on a light. The room looked somewhat like her own house. Full of crap and smelled like mildew.

"Honey? You still there? I need a roll of toilet paper."

Cherub noticed a closed door. The old woman's husband must be sitting in the bathroom, taking a crap. She hurried across the room, tiptoeing past the dirty clothes on the floor. She opened all the dresser drawers, searching for another cash box. Each drawer squeaked as she opened it.

"Honey! What the hell are you doing? I need toilet paper!"

Cherub's eyes swept across the room. Could the money actually be hidden under the mattress? Cherub flipped over the mattress, knocking over a lamp. It hit the floor, but did not break.

"Are you looking for toilet paper? Or do I need to wipe my ass with a washcloth and look for it myself?"

Cherub was about to leave, when she discovered her prize inside the box springs. She reached down, opened the rusty cashbox, and grabbed the three rolls of money. She flipped the mattress back over and returned the lamp to its dusty spot on the nightstand. On the way out the door she kicked the cat again, then hurried back to the car.

Norman was already in the driver's seat. Her father wasn't there.

"Where's dad?" she asked, climbing into the passenger's seat.

"He's still chatting with the old lady." Norman looked at her hand. "How much did you get?"

"I don't know. But it should be plenty."

Norman tapped on the horn. "Your dad can sure talk some shit. That old lady loves him." He looked at Cherub. "How old are you?"

"Twelve."

"I would have guessed fifteen, or sixteen." He reached over and took one of the wads of cash from her hand. "There must be a grand here, maybe more." He gently placed the roll of cash on her lap, then rubbed the back of her hand. "Good job."

Cherub stared at Norman, noticing the way he was looking at her. She had seen that look plenty of times in Truth or Consequences. Her dad's so-called friends would stop by, get drunk, and flirt with her. Her dad was a fucking coward and never said a word.

One time, she had been trapped in the bathroom by a drunk, horny friend of her dad's. He closed the door and touched her breast, then ran his grimy finger down between her legs.

It was then that Cherub discovered that by squeezing a man's balls and twisting with violent force, they'll never touch her again.

Just as Cherub was about to teach Norman that same lesson, her father arrived back at the car and slid into the backseat. "Are we good?"

Cherub glanced at Norman, then looked at her dad. "Yeah, we're good. Let's go."

## 96

Once they reached Flagstaff, Norman asked Jean if they wanted to stay with him for a while in Lake Montezuma. Cherub wasn't surprised.

Norman had become obsessed with her.

That's how fast her father's friends became infatuated. They didn't care how old she was, or what laws they would break by screwing her. They were horny sick bastards that only saw a piece of ass that they couldn't get from women their own age. Some of the men actually thought that she liked them.

Of course, it was all in their polluted minds.

Jean made a decision. "Well, we don't have anything to go home too. I think that sounds like a great idea."

"What about mom?" Cherub asked. "What if she's waiting for us?"

Norman pulled over near the onramp of I-17 South, which would lead them straight to Lake Montezuma. He turned around, looking at Jean. "Are you divorced or something?"

"No, it's nothing like that."

"I don't have a cell phone. We can call her when we arrive at my place."

Jean's eyes drifted to Cherub. "That won't be necessary."

"Well, should I find a car rental place so you can go back home, or should I head south?"

Cherub spun around in her seat. "We need to go home! Mom wasn't in Las Vegas like we thought. She could have come back by now. We can't stop looking."

"Honey..." Jean's skin became mottled with red patches of embarrassment. "Mom's not going to be home. She wasn't going to be in Las Vegas. The only reason we went there is so I can prove that to you."

Norman shifted in his seat. "I don't understand. Did she leave you, or something?"

"No!" Cherub screamed. "She's home! I can feel it!"

Jean rubbed away several tears that escaped his eyes. "My wife was killed in 1999," he said to Norman. "The FBI never found the body, so Cherub thinks—"

"I hate you!" she screamed, then opened the door, sprung from the car, and began running along the onramp with angry tears wetting her face.

Jean opened the door and chased after her as Norman eased the car forward with both passenger side doors still open.

Cherub turned, smacking her father in the face and chest, her hands swinging with wild motions. "She's just lost! She's coming back! Why can't you believe that!"

Jean pulled Cherub in and hugged her, then led her back to the car. "I want to believe that, honey." Jean kept her close, kissing the top of her burning forehead. "But you need to understand that someone took mommy away. She's never coming back. If you keep looking, you'll be disappointed the rest of your life."

Cherub refused to listen to her father, even though he had been right. She would be disappointed, each and every day.

But sooner or later that disappointment would turn into something else. It would produce hate, which turned into anger...which later became evil.

## 97

Cherub listened to her father and Norman complain about how their lives turned out so shitty. Norman had once been a school bus driver, which Cherub thought was disgusting in itself. She wondered how many times he flirted with girls on the bus, or inadvertently brushed up against them.

One day, Norman had been running late. He sped down the road while driving the bus, on the way to the high school while texting someone a very important message. Cherub could tell that Norman had been lying. He was probably texting a girl from school.

Ryan Poulston was on his way to pick up his son, Devin, at the high school. Norman ran a red light, smashed into Ryan's vehicle, instantly killing him.

As for Norman, he walked away without a scratch, which he bragged about.

Norman was fired, fined, and had his license taken away. Cherub wondered why he didn't get into more trouble for killing someone, especially since Norman admitted that he had been speeding and texting.

Cherub also wondered how the boy, Devin Poulston, felt on that day. He would be waiting for his father at school. The carline would eventually end. All the students would be picked up, except for him. Maybe Devin had a cell phone and tried to call his father, but wouldn't get an answer. Eventually, his mother would pick him up and have to tell Devin the horrible news.

Cherub understood what it was like to be told a parent had been killed. When she was ten, her father explained what happened to her mother. He discussed how an FBI agent told him that she had been murdered. The FBI agent also explained that they never recovered the body. Cherub didn't understand how they could be so sure that her mother was dead, when they did not even find her. The FBI talked about some video tape, but Cherub didn't think that proved anything.

Over the years, Cherub had come to realize that her mother probably left, because they were so poor. Who would want to live like that?

Cherub began making signs and hanging them up around town. She also agreed to drive with her father to Lake Montezuma, where they could stay with daddy's new best friend, Norman-the-Pervert.

That's when she ran into Devin Poulston.

He was her age. Cute. And a bit shy, which she really liked. All the boys in Truth or Consequences came on too strong. They tried to kiss her, touch her, and even attempted to get her clothes off.

Devin was different. He asked her questions like, "What is your favorite color?"

"What is your favorite thing to eat?"

"What do you want to be when you grow up?"

"If you could go anywhere in the world, where would you go?"

Devin snuck out every night and sat inside the shed. He asked Cherub to meet him. Of course, Cherub agreed, because she didn't want to sleep in the same house as Norman.

Whenever Cherub and her father went back home, she missed Devin so much her heart ached. She just wanted to be with him. Night and day, the agony of not seeing him caused Cherub to take desperate actions. She stole money to pay local gang members to borrow a car for the trips to Lake Montezuma. She didn't want to keep stealing, but the other choice was to have sex with the gangs so she could borrow the car, and that wasn't an option.

As Cherub and her father made the trips to Norman's house, she had the idea to start writing letters to herself...and to Devin.

## 98

The letter writing started out innocently enough. She would make up the stories and the name of other teens that sent the letters. She showed her dad, but he would never comment, except for once in a while he would say, "No one can visit a dead parent. You shouldn't believe those letters."

That's when the strangest thing happened. Cherub actually started to believe in what she wrote. She also believed that the letters came from other teens, even though she had been writing them herself.

When they visited Norman in Lake Montezuma, Cherub would write letters to Devin while pretending to be someone else. She left the letters in the shed before he came out at night. When she visited him, they would discuss the stories and how the teens could visit their dead parents. The icing on the cake was that Devin lived on Pony Express Pass. He took that as a sign.

Maybe it was?

Cherub used the teen version of the Chicken Soup for the Soul books for guidance. She changed up the writing, used different pens, switched hands when writing, pressed harder, or wrote with light strokes. She became these fictional teens, wanting with all her heart to visit a place where she could see her mother, no matter if she was alive, or had been murdered.

With each letter, Devin wanted to see his father.

Now, it was time for Cherub to find a place that they could go.

She looked on a map and found a valley called Devils Windpipe located in Saguaro Mountain. During the day, she explored the valley and the mountain region. She discovered a small cabin hidden in a thick area of trees and brush.

It was perfect.

Cherub had done research on the David Parker Ray victims. She read about the sex toys and other torture devices that he used on the women. It was hard to believe that her mother had gone through such pain. But maybe she escaped? Cherub read about a woman that escaped and actually got David Parker Ray arrested. Also, several other women had been inside his Toy-Box and lived, but never came forward until the FBI found them.

If other women escaped and kept it a secret, then it was possible that Cherub's mother did the same thing. After all, why would her mother go back home? What



was there for her? Nothing but a rotting house and a broke husband with perverted friends.

A better question was, *Why did her mother secretly meet David Parker Ray at his Toy-Box?* The answer to that question was simple...because her mother wanted a different life.

Most twelve and thirteen year olds do not understand what sex toys are, but Cherub had grown up in a town that didn't live by normal human standards, nor did they keep inappropriate ideas away from teens.

It became Cherub's mission to set up her new cabin like the Toy-Box. But she would need help.

Cherub was about to do the most repulsive thing in the world.

## 99

While on a trip to Lake Montezuma and visiting with Norman, Cherub approached her dad and yelled, "I'm staying here! You go back home if you want."

"You're not staying here alone with Norman!"

"Why not?" She gave her father a sly grin. "Is there something you're afraid of him doing to me? If that's true, then why have you been bringing me here?"

Her father's bald head turned pink. "Norman is a good friend of mine. We help each other, because no one in this world will even look our way."

"I don't care about you and Norman."

"What's the real reason you want to stay here? Does it have to do with that boy you have been spending time with?"

That was partly true, but Cherub didn't want to admit it. "I want to stay because the letters I've been getting said that I could visit mom."

"She's dead! Why can't you be like a normal kid and learn that simple fact?"

"If you cared about me, then you would stay in Lake Montezuma."

"I can't. We owe fifty dollars a day to keep that stupid car. I have to return it." He shook his head. "We could have bought a used car by now. Why didn't you think about that?"

"You're the adult. You should have—"

Jean slapped her in the face.

Cherub didn't budge. She smiled at him until he walked away. He got into the car and never glanced back, leaving his daughter alone at Norman's house.

\* \* \* \* \*

Later that night Cherub slept in the spare bedroom. On cue, Norman came into the dark bedroom and sat down on the bed. "Do you have everything? You want a glass of water? I can get it for you."

Cherub inched away from him. "No, that's okay."

Norman's eyes could be seen in the dark room like a black cat staring at her. "I'm sorry about what happened to your mother. Do you want to talk about it?"

"Nah. I just want to sleep."

Norman slid his hand to her arm. "Don't forget how pretty you are."

"I won't."

"And I know you like that boy, Devin Poulston, but he's just a kid. And he probably hates me for what I did to his dad." Norman moved his hand up her arm. "Does he ever say anything about me?"

"No."

Norman's hand moved closer to chest. "Have you two kissed, or anything?"

"No."

"Has he ever touched you here?" Norman slid his hand under her pajama top, then touched her breast. "Does he like touching you here?"

Cherub flinched. "He doesn't touch me there."

Norman lowered his hand and slid his fingers inside her pajama bottoms. "Does this feel weird to you?"

"Yes." Cherub raised her voice. "Can you please stop?" She grabbed his hand, attempting to pull it away. "Stop!"

Norman yanked down her bottoms, then underwear. "If you want to be with boys, then you need to learn what boys do to girls. Let me teach you."

Cherub screamed. "No! Leave me alone!" She twisted her body, but Norman rested his full weight on her.

"Just relax. I promise it will feel good."

Cherub felt the pressure between her legs. He was about to have sex with her. "Devin! Help!"

"He's not here," Norman said, forcing her legs open. "Now relax so I can get inside of you."

The next sound was like an aluminum bat hitting a sidewalk, which was pretty close, except it was Devin hitting Norman in the back of the skull with a bat.

Norman rolled off the bed and thumped to the floor. Cherub yanked her underwear and pajamas back up, then kicked Norman in the face with her bare foot. "You fucking pervert!" She kicked him a dozen more times until her toes throbbed with pain.

Devin kneeled down, holding the video camera. "This is payback for killing my father." He stood with the camera in one hand, bat in the other, then left the bedroom with Cherub.

Before leaving the house, Devin and Cherub went downstairs and touched several spots in the basement to make sure their fingerprints could be found later. Then, they headed back to Devin's house.

## 100

The next day, Norman had been lying on the couch with his head resting on a baggie full of ice. He had dozed off, having the worst nightmares in his life. Next to him was a bucket full of vomit that he didn't have the strength to rinse out.

To make matters worse, he expected the police to come busting down the door at any moment.

"Wake up," a voice said.

Norman peeled his eyes open, feeling the pounding in his skull. "What do you want?"

Cherub dropped a piece of paper on his chest. "I need you to order these things."

Norman couldn't sit up. He lifted the paper and put it directly in front of his eyes. "Examination chair. Six different size dildos. Syringes. Sodium pentothol and phenobarbitol." Norman looked at Cherub. "I don't understand?"

Cherub crossed her arms. "Really? You don't know what a dildo is?"

"I do...but..." He glanced at the list. "What do you need all this for?" He then continued reading. "Two different saws. Surgical tools. Electronic generating device." Norman squeezed his eyes shut, attempting to push away the pain. He then forced his eyes open and read more items on the list. "Deck of cards. Monopoly. Frisbee." He looked at her again. "What's all this for?"

"I'm building a Toy-Box." Cherub uncrossed her arms and tapped her finger on the list. "You need to have those items sent to a post office box under a different name."

"How do you know about post office boxes? Where did you learn about sex toys and dangerous drugs?"

"Truth or Consequences."

"Huh?"

"I'm talking about the crappy town I grew up in. I'm also talking about what will happen if you don't order everything on the list. I'll have Devin send that video to the police and post it on YouTube."

"You haven't shown anyone yet?"

"No, but I will if you don't get those things. Also, I need you to deliver everything to a small cabin I found at Saguaro Mountain."

Norman eased the melted bag of ice away from his skull and dropped it in the bucket full of vomit. "I'll get you this stuff, but I'm not dragging it across Saguaro Mountain."

Cherub punched Norman between his legs, connecting on his balls with a perfect shot. "I can tell everyone the truth, or you can suffer the consequences. Which hell do you prefer?"

Norman felt a wave of dizziness. His skull pounded with fierce, hot pain. His balls felt as if they had been busted open. "I'll do it..." he groaned. His skin became moist with sweat. "I swear...I'll do anything that you want."

"Good," Cherub said, picking up the bucket. "Here is some motivation to get you off the couch."

She dumped the buck over his head.

## 101

Cherub knew that Devin's mother was at work and wouldn't be back home for a couple of hours. However, Cherub never went inside the house. She would only meet Devin inside the shed.

"How are feeling?" Devin asked, entering the shed with two cherry Popsicles. He handed one to Cherub. "You look a little freaked out. Are you okay?"

"I'm good," Cherub said, biting the top of the Popsicle. Never before had anyone brought her a snack. Not even her own father. "After all the stuff is in the cabin, we'll go there and try to contact my mother."

Devin sucked on the Popsicle. "And then you promise to help me find my dad, right?"

She gave him a smile. "For sure, I promise." Cherub lunged forward and kissed Devin on his cherry lips. It felt so good, she kept kissing. He hesitated at first, but then they both dropped their Popsicles, hugged each other, and kissed some more.

Devin's face turned the same color as the melted cherry Popsicle on the floor of the shed. "I never kissed a girl before."

"And I never kissed a boy before," Cherub lied. Whether she wanted to or not, plenty of boys and girls had forced their lips on her. If Cherub could start all over, she would somehow destroy the town of Truth or Consequences.

Or at the very least, burn her father's house to the ground.

After the long make-out session, Cherub told Devin that she would be back tonight at the same time so that they could kiss some more. As for now, she didn't want Devin's mother pulling up in the driveway and catching them together.

"Make sure you hide the letters," Cherub said. "It is a secret club."

"I hid all of them in the roof."

"Cool," she said, giving him another quick peck on the cheek. "I'll see you tonight."

Cherub reluctantly had to walk out of the shed. It took all her willpower to leave a boy that she loved while heading towards a man that she loathed.

She was just a block or so away from Devin's house when she noticed a white van crawling next to her with black, red, and orange flames.

The man inside rolled down the window. "Would you like to see my puppy? He's inside."

Cherub continued walking forward, wondering how she seemed to attract the worst scum of the world like she was a magnet.

"I have an Xbox at home," the man said. "What do you think about playing some games with me? It would be fun."

Cherub shook her head no, then started jogging. The van stayed right with her.

"Where are you going? Talk to me for a second."

Norman's house was too far away. She needed to turn around and hurry back in the direction she came from, which was Devin's house. Cherub spun around and ran full speed. The van did a U-turn and followed her.

"I'm going to get you!"

Tears spray from Cherub's eyes as she noticed the other side of the white van had orange, yellow, and green bubbles.

The engine in the van roared. "I want you! You can't get away from me!"

Cherub made it back to Devin's, ran up the driveway, and screamed, "Devin! Help!"

Behind her, the van screeched to a halt, then peeled away. Devin had still been in the shed. He came running out with the aluminum bat in his hand.

Cherub screamed, "Someone is after me!" Cherub kept running until she was inside the shed, slamming the door shut. She breathed in a pocket of air, then peeked outside. Devin walked down the driveway, gripping the bat.

The white van returned and slowed down. The man inside smiled at Devin, then hit the gas.

## 102

Cherub and Devin spent the next year together. Cherub learned to drive Norman's car, making trips back and forth from New Mexico. She stole money and gave Norman some of it to pay his bills.

Also, Cherub continued writing letters to herself and Devin.

By January the following year, Norman had ordered everything on the list and lugged the items to the small cabin at the far edge of Saguaro Mountain.

Cherub then paid Norman a visit. "Thanks for all your help," she said. "We couldn't have done it without you."

"Are we square?" Norman asked.

"That depends."

"On what?"

Cherub stepped forward and brushed her fingers along his hairy arm. "Can you push me away?"

He narrowed his eyes. "I don't understand?"

"I want to know if you can resist coming on to girls under the age of eighteen."

"Yes...um...yes..."

Cherub looked up at him. "Really?" She pressed her body against his. "I'm cute, don't you think?"

"Very cute."

"After everything that happened, you still are tempted to molest me."

"It's not like that."

"Oh no?"

"I can't help it. You're pretty." Norman placed his large hands on her shoulders. "You're a human and I'm a human. There's nothing wrong with being together."

Cherub drove her knee into his nuts. "You'll never change, will you?"

Norman cringed, then bent over. "You little bitch!"

Devin opened the front door and stepped inside, holding a jacket. "I did it."

Norman wobbled away from Cherub. "You did what?"

"I posted the video on YouTube. Over ten thousand people have seen it already."

Cherub smiled. "I bet the police will be here any moment."

A gush of tears burst from Norman's eyes. "We had a deal!" He attempted to stand up straight, but the pain between his legs kept him bent over. "Why would you do that to me?"

Devin raised the jacket. "My dad bought this for me when we saw the Arizona Diamondbacks. It was one of the best days of my life."

"I didn't mean to kill your father!" Norman's voice squeaked, as thick tears sprayed from his eyes. "You have to believe that!"

Cherub pointed to the basement door. "I think it's time you moved on."

Norman glanced at the door. "What are you talking about?"

Cherub leaned forward. "I want you crawling into hell."

Norman shook his head. "Please...I don't..."

Devin marched to Norman and shoved him toward the door. "Move it!"

They followed Norman as he stumbled forward, still cringing in pain. "Can you call my sister in Nebraska? Tell her that I love her."

"No," Cherub said as they arrived in the musty basement. "Hang yourself. And make it quick. The police will be here any minute. You don't want to be arrested and spend the rest of your pathetic life in an Arizona prison getting raped by Mexican's."

More tears gushed from his eyes. "How do you know so much? You talk like an adult."

"That's because I never had a chance to be a girl." Cherub pointed to a rope near the washer and dryer. "Let's get this over with."

Norman took about fifteen minutes to wrap the rope around the basement rafters and make a noose. He stood on a chair, then placed the noose around his head, fastening it on his neck.

His body trembled as if he had been dumped in an icy lake.

"I can't do it..." he cried. "I'd rather go to jail! Please don't make me do this."

Cherub locked her eyes on him. "Do not keep the devil waiting."

Norman violently shook on the chair, then slipped off. The rope snapped around his neck, instantly turning his face a deep purple. His eyes bugged out as he choked and fought to pull the rope with his twitching fingers.

Cherub and Devin never moved. They watched the pervert squeak a final breath with bloody tears drizzling from the corners of his eyes.

Devin tossed the jacket on the floor. "Let's go."

Cherub held his hand as they walked toward the basement steps. "Did you really post that video?"

Devin formed a grin. "No."

## 103

The following night, Devin snuck out of the house at the usual time, seeing Cherub in the darkness next to the shed. He shivered from the cold while jogging to her. "What are you doing out here?" he asked in the lowest voice possible. "Get inside the shed."

Cherub handed him a backpack. "We're leaving," she whispered.

"I can't leave."

"We're going to speak with your father."

Devin gripped the backpack. "How?"

"I was walking through Devils Windpipe to the Toy-Box when I heard a voice. He said his name was Ryan Poulston." She leaned forward. "Is that your father's name?"

Devin's teeth began shivering, still holding the backpack. "Yes...what did he say?"

"He's needs your help." Cherub paused, still whispering. "Your dad is stuck between heaven and hell."

That was all Devin needed to hear. He retrieved a thick hoody from the backpack and a pair of sweat pants. Cherub even brought him socks and shoes.

As they jogged through the neighborhood, Devin asked, "Why didn't you bring Norman's car?"

"I was worried that a cop might see it parked on the road. Besides, we've walked to the shed before."

Devin and Cherub had planned their long trips to Devils Windpipe and the Toy-Box around his mother's work schedule and school. Not once had Devin been questioned by his mother about where he was during the day.

In the darkness they passed through the valley, hearing only a distant sound of eerie music. They continued forward, hiking for hours, until they reached the cabin.

When they arrived, Devin lit the kerosene lamp, then about dropped it when he saw someone else inside. Cherub screamed, recognizing the stalker from the white van.

Only the devil could describe what happened next.

## 104

***Jon Truss, Author***

***Court Truss, Bodyguard***

***Marcus Cane, Former Hostage Negotiator***

***Drey Harten, Psychic***

***Rita Horton, Private Detective***

***Andrew and Ashley Wilcher, Bodyguards***

***Detective Caplan, Investigator***

Jon finished typing. He had been writing what he said on his laptop while speaking it to the group.

Rita: "If you told me that story was true, I'd believe it. Where did you come up with all that?"

Jon: "It's just a theory."

Marcus: "Well, it's a pretty damn good theory. At the very least, we have something to go on."

Court: "Parts of that story were disturbing."

Jon: "Ya think?"

Court: "I understand the whole thing is disturbing, but I'm referring to Cherub and how she seems to be obsessed with the devil."

Rita: "It's quite possible the girl snapped, based on everything Jon had written. But according to Jon's story, she was killed in the cabin. How did she possibly come back?"

Marcus: "Maybe the white van guy..." He paused, clearing his throat. "He could have tortured Devin and Cherub, but she escaped, leaving her clothes behind. She could have somehow gotten Devin's hoodie and sweatpants in the process."

Court: "Which would explain white van guy burying the clothes that Devin and Cherub had been wearing. It would also explain the blood from those poor children."

Rita: "So we can assume how Norman's fingerprints were at the cabin, but what about the white van guy?"

Marcus: "He had to be wearing gloves."

Rita: "Let's say that he did, which is very possible. But spending time in the cabin, there would at least be a hair sample."

Marcus: "You know how the FBI works. If they found a hair sample, it wouldn't become public until they made an arrest."

Andrew: "Maybe the white van guy didn't have hair. Maybe he was bald."

Ashley: "Why did he bury the clothes and not Devin's body?"

Rita: "If Cherub found a way to escape, then so could have Devin."

Marcus: "The white van guy might have chased them, but to no avail. So he cleaned up the cabin the best he could, then buried the clothes. Only a forensics investigation would discover the blood."

There was a light tap on the door. Ashley stood up and answered it. She moved to the side, allowing Detective Caplan to enter. He carried a suitcase, dressed in the same outfit he had been wearing since he arrived in Lake Montezuma; blazer, slacks, tennis shoes.

"I just wanted to say goodbye before I left." He went around the room, shaking everyone's hand. "It's been a pleasure meeting all of you."

Court: "You're leaving?"

Caplan: "My job is finished here. Between my investigation and the CARP investigation, we proved that Norman Hertzler kidnapped Devin Poulston and Cherub Fetterman, then tortured those poor kids, murdered Devin, while Cherub escaped."

Jon: "But aren't you going to keep looking for Cherub?"

Caplan: "Well..."

Drey stood. "My God...you found her, didn't you?"

Caplan: "She was picked up an hour ago in Las Cruces, New Mexico, driving a stolen car."

Rita: "Can I ask where she was going?"

Caplan formed a weary grin. "Of course you can. It's already on the news. Cherub was driving from Truth or Consequences, heading to Shakespeare."

Court: "What is that? A building?"

Caplan: "A ghost town, but do not take the word, ghost, literally. It's just an abandon town. Cherub had several other stolen cars there, along with a gang of fifty girls that took up residence there."

Marcus: "Cherub was in a gang?"

Caplan: "Actually, she's the leader."

Ashley: "How old are the other girls?"

Caplan: "They ranged from nine to nineteen. All of them runaways."

Andrew had his iPhone out and pulled up a map. "Cherub could take I-10 west into Arizona from the town of Shakespeare, then head north to Lake Montezuma. It's not that long of a drive."

Rita: "Her gang friends could also make the drive, especially since they had several stolen cars."

Drey stared at Detective Caplan. "There's something that you're keeping from us."



Caplan shook his head. "I really need to get out of this room. There's too much cleverness."

Drey: "Just tell us what's going on. Did Cherub appear in front of a judge yet?"

Caplan: "No. First thing tomorrow morning."

Drey: "But she'll be released to her father shortly after."

Caplan: "That's correct."

Marcus: "Let me guess...Cherub is going to testify and tell the Feds everything that happened. She's going to discuss what Norman Hertzier did to her and Devin."

Caplan: "Again...that's correct."

Court: "Does she know where Devin's body is?"

Caplan: "No, but she knows that he's dead. She was forced to watch as Norman tortured and murdered him. Cherub escaped with a few clothes from the cabin, running naked along the trails of Saguaro Mountain, then through the valley at Devils Windpipe, and back to Lake Montezuma in the middle of the night. She stole a car, then headed to Shakespeare, New Mexico."

Jon: "But between her escape and arrest, Cherub came back to Devils Windpipe and then came after us. You realize that, don't you?"

Caplan picked up his suitcase. "Maybe she did, or maybe she didn't. It's possible that she sent her teen girl-gang back to Devils Windpipe to seek revenge. The bottom line is that Cherub is going to need years of counseling. Also, we know that Norman Hertzier is a murderer who committed suicide and Devin Poulston is in heaven with his father."

Drey: "But we think there was someone else involved."

Caplan swept his eyes across the room. "All of you need to get over this obsession and go home. Trust me, no good will come from it."

## 105

Going home would have been the prudent thing to do, but not the team of Revelation, Inc. They weren't finished and did not follow the rules that police and government adhered to.

Marcus: "We need two things. Find the white van guy and prove that Norman Hertzier and Jean Fetterman had met and became friends."

Rita: "But that theory is based on Jon's story?"

Court: "And your point is?"

Rita: "It was a great story for his novel, but are we going to base our entire investigation on that?"

Court: "Yes...we are. Jon's never wrong."

Jon: "Well, I wouldn't go that far. I'm not perfect."

Court: "When it comes to your writing, you are spot on perfect. Trust your gift." Court looked over the group. "All of you. Trust your instincts. It's why you're the best at what you do." Court eyed Rita. "And I'm asking that you to trust us the same as you trust Drey."

Rita: "Of course. I'm sorry." She pulled in a deep breath. "So how are we going to locate white van guy?"

Drey: "Let's go in front of Kristy Poulston's house. Now that I know what I'm looking for, maybe I can get a sense of where he was going, because I'm sure that he left town after Cherub got away."

Marcus: "If white van guy went back home, would you be able to find the location?"

Drey: "It's possible."

Marcus: "Meanwhile, I would sure like to get five minutes alone with Cherub Fetterman so I can ask her a few questions. I'll bet she's going to lie to the judge and anyone else that questions her. But maybe I can at least find out if she really believes Devin had been killed."

Rita: "Also, we can ask her if someone else was involved besides Norman Hertzler. All we need to do is catch her in a lie, then we'll figure out the rest."

Court: "I'm sensing that we need to split up into two teams. I want to find the white van guy."

Rita: "I want to go with Marcus and grill that little bitch." Everyone looked at her. "Sorry. I meant that little brat."

Court looked at Jon. "Do you want to look for the white van guy, or go with Marcus and Rita to Truth or Consequences?"

"Neither," Jon said. "I'd like to stay here and keep writing my novel. I may come up with more theories while all of you are gone. But take the twins with you so they can help."

Court: "Out of the question. The twins are your bodyguards for a reason."

Jon: "It's okay. I'll stay in the hotel."

Court gave him a sarcastic grin. "That's right you will stay in the hotel. And the twins will make sure you don't get any bright ideas, like going to Devils Windpipe for your so-called research."

Andrew: "My sister and I are in this room," he said sarcastically. "You can talk to us."

Ashley: "And don't worry. There's no freakin' way that Jon will convince us to go back to Devils Windpipe."

Court shook her head. "Jon can be very persuasive. But if you two so much as think about taking him to that valley, I'll make sure your bodyguard days are over."

Jon laughed. "Well, I'm glad we cleared that up."

Court smiled at him. "And by the way...we're taking the Yukon with us."

## 106

***Court Truss, Bodyguard***  
***Drey Harten, Psychic***

Court drove the Yukon with Drey to Kristy Poulston's house and parked in the street, then stood on the sidewalk. They had seen Kristy at the Beaver Creek Inn dressed in her assistant manager uniform, but they didn't tell her what they would be doing.

Kristy had enough false hopes to last her a lifetime.

Drey took in a few deep breaths. The afternoon air cooled as thick clouds began to take over the blue sky. He rotated the meditation balls in his fingers while thinking about the white van. It didn't take long for the image to appear. He saw Devin holding an aluminum bat in the driveway. In the backyard, the shed door was cracked open. Drey couldn't see Cherub, but he knew that she was inside.

The van had already turned around, then slowed in front of the house. The man inside smiled at Devin, then hit the gas and sped down the road. Drey looked at the license plate, but it was a blur. In fact, he couldn't even tell if the plates were Arizona.

Drey closed his eyes and started over. This time when the van slowed, Drey floated inside of it and looked at the man. He had a massive body and tan skin that had been weathered from years of working in the sun. The skin on his fingers had been shredded as if he had a job in construction, or a mechanic, or something that demanded the constant use of his hands.

The chime from the meditation balls did not have a comfortable ring. Instead, it sounded more like the evil tune that he heard in Devils Windpipe flowing through the trees, always in the distance as if detached from the good of the world.

"Nevada..." Drey whispered. "No...that's not it..." He took in a few breaths, feeling a cold mist on his face. Was that from his vision, or had it begun to rain? "Nevada..." he said again. He became frustrated, rotating the meditation balls with quick thrusts in his fingers. But the same word kept popping his head. "Nevada...Nevada...Nevada..."

The van sped south, which was the opposite direction of Nevada. Why did he keep seeing that state? What was so important about it? Did Jean Fetterman, or Norman Hertzler meet the guy in the white van while in Las Vegas? Perhaps Jon was close with his story, but the characters had been switched.

*Nevada.*

*Nevada.*

*Nevada.*

Suddenly, more images appeared. "Capricorn...no, that's not it. Pisces...no, that's not it." Drey rotated the balls as the chimes rang deep into his ears. The driver of the white van turned on his windshield wipers as he continued driving south. "Aquarius..." Drey felt a surge, knowing that he was getting close. A mountain came into view. "Aquarius Mountain." His veins pumped with fear. Something was wrong. There were children...women...

Drey popped his eyes open. "Oh God..."

Court placed her hand on Drey's shoulder. "Are you okay?" She guided him to the Yukon as the iron clouds sprayed them with cold rain. When they were inside the Yukon, Court asked, "What did you see?"

Drey continued to hold the meditation balls, but didn't rotate them. "Aquarius Mountain." A tear slid from his eye. "I saw dead women and children."

"Did the guy in the white van murder them?"

Drey leaned his head back as tears drained down the side of his face. "This guy has been stalking and killing children and women for years." Drey wiped the tears, then took in a deep breath. "Why do these monsters continue to live while innocent people have to suffer?"

"We can only stop one at time." Court fired up the engine. "What direction should I head?"

"South on I-17."

Court spun the van around and drove through the neighborhood, heading toward the highway. "Where are we going?"

"I'm not sure." Drey gathered his senses then used his iPhone to research Aquarius Mountain. A small town seemed to flash amongst all the rest, as if trying to get his attention. "Bagdad," Drey whispered.

Court headed toward I-17. "What about Bagdad?"

"It's near Aquarius Mountain." Drey stared out the window. "That's where we will find the white van guy."

## 107

***Marcus Cane, Former Hostage Negotiator***

***Rita Horton, Private Detective***

Marcus drove the minivan while Rita made several phone calls to her office, gave instructions, and put out any fires that needed her attention. When she hung up, Marcus smiled at her. "It's tough running your own business."

"Yes it is. But it's worth the headache."

"I noticed that you don't take on male clients."

Rita spun her head around. "How did you know that? Did Drey tell you?"

"No. I did a background check on you and your company."

"Why?"

Marcus continued smiling. "If we're going to spend the next twenty-four hours together, I need to know who I'm dealing with."

Rita chuckled. "Well that's okay, because I had my investigators research you as well."

Marcus lost his smile and gripped the steering wheel. "Really?"

"Yeah. If I'm going to be spending the next twenty-four hours with you, I need to know who I'm dealing with."

"Touché," Marcus said. "So, what did your investigators dig up on me?"

"That you retired from the Hillsboro Police Department in Oregon, your wife died of cancer, you live alone in a house that you and your wife purchased, you have a sister named Trudy and nephew named Aiden that live in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Your father died of a heart attack, but your mother is alive and well in Tallahassee, living in the house that you grew up in. You've been involved in over seventy hostage situations, mostly people trying to kill themselves. Your claim to fame is the Bradburn Hostage Situation, where you negotiated the release of sixty-four hostages, lost eight lives in process, including the ten hostage-takers. Jon Truss included you in his book, which made you instantly famous. You turned down hundreds of interviews and speaking requests. You retired shortly after a teenage boy held his ex-girlfriend hostage in her closet. You saved the girl, but the boy killed himself. You started a new business with Court and Jon called Revelation,

Inc. The purpose of the business is to stop crimes before they happen, rather than after, especially crimes that involve children.”

“Wow...” Marcus glanced at her. “Anything else?”

“Oh I could keep going, but I won’t.” She paused, giving Marcus a grin. “So, what did you dig up on me?”

“Um...just that you don’t take on male clients. That’s pretty much it.”

Rita laughed. “That’s solid investigative work on your part.”

“Yeah right. I’m not going to get on your bad side.”

They passed a sign that said, “Welcome to New Mexico! Please Drive Safely!”

Rita moved the bandage to the side and examined the scar on her hand. “How much money do you think Jon Truss is worth? A million?”

Marcus chuckled. “He’s worth much more than that. I would say about hundred and twenty-five million. Maybe more.”

“Wow, authors make that much money.”

“Only the best do, and Jon Truss is certainly the best.”

Rita grabbed her cell phone and called Jon. She explained her plan to purchase the abandon building at Truth or Consequences and turn it into a safe place where teens could hangout. She also suggested that they have counselors on staff twenty-four hours a day to help teens that are being abused, on drugs, or having any other major problems.

Jon agreed and took down the address. He promised to call his business manager and get started right away.

Rita hung up the phone. “Well, that was easy.”

“Jon’s a nice guy,” Marcus said. “When I decided to retire, he was the first person I thought of discussing my idea for a new business to help prevent crimes.”

“Court seems nice.”

“She’s a firecracker and has the hair to match. I read that she was the best bodyguard in the private sector, although she quit the business.”

Rita rubbed her hand, then took in a few deep breaths.

Marcus gave her a quick glance. “What’s on your mind?”

She smiled. “I hate being next to a person that reads expressions and body mannerisms for a living.” She pulled in another quick breath. “I was just thinking about the story Jon told us. The details were incredible.” She paused, still rubbing her hand. “How accurate do you think Jon’s story was?”

“I don’t know.” Marcus shifted in his seat. “I suppose we’re about to find out.”

## 108

***Jon Truss, Author***

***Ashley Wilcher, Bodyguard***

After Jon hung up with his business manager, he called Bram to give him an update and ask about the publisher.

“They’re pissed,” Bram said. The one thing Jon could always count on was how forward and honest Bram was.

“I really don’t care if they are pissed,” Jon said. “What are they going to do?”

"Nothing. Just please don't get killed."

"I'll do my best."

"Are the twins staying by your side?"

"You sound like my wife."

Bram chuckled. "You're lucky Court didn't finish the job after that girl shot you."

"Court is a bit overprotective."

"She's smart to think that way. You have a ton of loony fans."

"Maybe I should have written children books."

"Nah. There's more money in what you're doing." Bram cleared his throat. "Speaking of money, how is—"

"I'm on chapter 108 of *Devils Windpipe*."

"That's great. Is it winding down?"

"I'm not sure."

"Is there any chance that you will leave Lake Montezuma today?"

"I can't."

"Why?"

Jon smiled. "Court took my vehicle." He hung up, laughing to himself. He then walked into the hallway and knocked on the door to Ashley's room.

She swung the door open, holding her specialized Taser. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Jon said, looking at the Taser. "You need to chill out."

"Court called me twice today, asking how you were doing."

"Are you kidding?"

"No."

Jon shook his head. "Anyway, I'm going downstairs to get something to eat, then find a book to read. Do you want to come with—"

The door to Andrew's room opened. Ruana, the hotel manager, tucked in her polo shirt as she closed the door, then noticed Jon.

Ashley stepped into the hallway, still holding the Taser, and smiled at Ruana. "Whatcha doing in Andrew's room?"

Ruana's face turned a bright pink. "He...um...he...needed fresh towels." Ruana hurried down the corridor with short, quick steps. "I need to get back downstairs."

Jon waited until she was gone. "I don't get it. Ruana is like four feet tall and your brother is over six feet. How do they..."

Ashley put her hand up, then shoved the Taser in her belt. "Please don't ask me how my brother has sex with the hotel manager." She shut the door to her room. "I'm going downstairs with you."

Jon strolled next to Ashley with a sarcastic grin on his face. "Your brother is really going above and beyond to make sure we have the whole floor to ourselves."

"Jon!" Ashley snapped. "I don't want to talk about it."

They headed down the steps.

"Your brother is even getting towels personally delivered to his room by the hotel manager." Jon's grin turned into smile. "If he gets on his knees, where does his face lineup on her?"

Ashley spoke through her teeth. "I swear to God, if you keep talking about my brother having sex with the hotel manager, I'm going to shoot you with my Taser."

They arrived at the small dining area. Jon leaned close to Ashley. "I wonder what your brother needed the extra towels for? What do you think they were doing that caused such a mess?"

Ashley shook her head. "You're not going to stop, are you?"

Jon patted her on the back. "No...I'm not."

## 109

***Marcus Cane, Former Hostage Negotiator***

***Rita Horton, Private Detective***

It was dark by the time Marcus and Rita arrived at Jean Fetterman's house. Rita wasn't thrilled to be back here, but there wasn't much of a choice.

A large man with an oversized beer belly and a stain on his faded Hooters shirt answered the door. "Well, well," he said to Rita. "Please tell me you're here for the party."

"What party?"

He belched. "Does it matter?"

"Where is Mr. Fetterman?"

"Who?"

"Jean."

Another belch. "Oh. He's in the can taking a shit." He looked at Marcus. "Are you the pimp, or something?"

Marcus shoved him to the side and walked in the home with Rita. They were immediately belted with a cloud of cigarette smoke and the aroma of cheap beer. Four other men were at the card table that was filled with empty beer cans. Jean wobbled from the bathroom. His head and legs seemed behind his body while his stomach arched forward.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" Jean slurred.

"Where is your daughter?"

"I don't know."

The other four men stood, while the guy at the door slapped Rita on the ass. "Let's get this party started!" he shouted with a drunken smile.

Rita twisted the guy's arm and shoved him to the floor, kneeling on his head and pressing his face to the grimy carpet.

Marcus approached the four at the card table. "Sit the hell down!"

The four eased back down to their chairs.

Rita stood up, leaving the drunk asshole on the floor. She glared at Jean. "Tell me where Cherub is...now!"

Jean stumbled forward. Without warning, a stream of brown vomit projected from his mouth, spilling on the card table. The four guys sprung to their feet and ran out the front door. The guy on the floor was so drunk and disoriented, he had to crawl out the door.

Jean fell to his knees, mumbling incoherent words. Marcus carefully stepped around the vomit and located Cherub's bedroom. He returned with two pieces of

broken plastic with wires sticking out of each piece. "The judge must have ordered Cherub to wear an ankle bracelet and serve her sentence at home."

"Wouldn't the local police be notified if she broke it off?"

Marcus dropped the pieces to the floor, seeing that Jean was now passed out and snoring. "The police must have come and gone already."

"Do you think she's headed back to Lake Montezuma?"

"I don't know." Marcus hurried across the room. "Let's go. It smells worse than a public restroom in here." They hurried to the van and climbed inside. Marcus fired up the engine, then made a U-turn. "I have an idea where she went. It's the same place Cherub got that gun to shoot Jon with and the same place she is getting the stolen cars."

Rita already knew. "The Shakespeare Ghost Town."

"Yep," Marcus said, pressing his foot down on the gas. "You'd better call one of the twins and let them know that Cherub may be heading their way." Marcus gripped the steering wheel, then looked at Rita. "You don't think Jon would be stupid enough to go back to Devils Windpipe...do you?"

Rita began dialing Ashley number. "I sure hope not."

## 110

***Court Truss, Bodyguard***

***Drey Harten, Psychic***

As Court drove into the town of Bagdad, she glanced at Drey. "Is it possible that you keep seeing the word Nevada because it's a person's name?"

"Pull over at that gas station," Drey said. He barely waited for Court to stop when he exited the Yukon and jogged inside. A young woman was behind the counter, chewing gum, reading a copy of Vogue.

She rolled her eyes up. "Can I help you?"

Drey placed a twenty-dollar bill on the counter. "I'm looking for someone named, Nevada."

She popped a bubble, looking at the money. "Do you want gas, or something?"

"No, just information."

"Is Nevada in more trouble?"

Drey had renewed hope. "So you know him?"

"Yeah. Take the first street on the right. Nevada lives at the second house on the left."

Drey pushed the twenty-dollar bill forward. "Do you know his last name?"

She scooped up the money. "Are you going to tell him that I said something?"

"Of course not."

She shoved money in her pocket, then returned to her magazine. "His last name is Slueth."

Drey hurried back outside and climbed in the Yukon. "Nevada Slueth. Turn right on the next street; he's the second house on the left."

Court hit the gas. "How much did you pay for that information?"

"Twenty bucks."



"You got off cheap," Court joked. She turned right, then pulled the Yukon into the second driveway.

Crimson rocks surrounded Nevada's house, which replaced the lawn. The front yard was decorated with several small cacti, a white boulder, and a stone pathway to the porch. Parked in front of garage was a white 2008 Dodge Dakota.

Just as Court and Drey stepped onto the front porch, the door opened.

"Hello there," the man said with a pleasant voice. He wore a tan sweater and jeans, carrying a coffee mug in his hand. "You must be Mr. and Mrs. Donaldson." He reached out his free hand. "It's nice to finally meet you. Come inside."

Court hesitated. "We're not Mr. and Mrs. Donald-

A horn beeped twice from behind. Court spun around, seeing a black BMW sedan park in front of the house. A man and woman climbed out, both dressed casual in turtlenecks and slacks. They approached and introduced themselves as the Donaldson's.

Nevada looked at Court and Drey. "I'm sorry. Who are you?"

There was an awkward moment when no one spoke. Drey finally said, "We are investigators and need just a few minutes of your time."

"Of course," Nevada said. He turned to the Donaldson's. "I have coffee inside the kitchen. Make yourself at home."

The Donaldson's eyed Court and Drey, then went in without speaking.

Court: "I guess we came at a bad time?"

Nevada: "It's okay. They're realtors. I've never met them face-to-face before."

Drey: "You're moving?"

Nevada pointed to the driveway. "Let's talk down here." He stepped off the porch and waited for Court and Drey to join him. "I've been having regular visits from police, FBI, private investigators, and media."

Court: "What do they want?"

Nevada leveled his eyes on her. "The same thing you probably want. To ask me about some missing kid, or woman. I'm going to tell you what I've told everyone else. I've never harmed anyone in my life."

Drey: "Why does everyone suspect you?"

Nevada: "If I knew the answer to that question, I wouldn't have to move."

Court: "Do you own a white van decorated with flames and bubbles?"

Nevada: "I did, but sold it a few months ago. It's the same thing everyone else had asked me, along with my whereabouts on certain days."

Court: "How long has this been going on?"

Nevada: "Over a year."

Drey: "Have you ever been to Lake Montezuma?"

Nevada: "No." He shook his head. "And I've answered that question a dozen times. It had been stolen in November of last year. I think whoever took it, drove to Lake Montezuma and attempted to abduct a young girl. I reported the van stolen that same day. Police later found it in Wickenburg, which is halfway between here and Lake Montezuma."

Mr. Donaldson poked his head out the front door. "Should we come back another time?"

Nevada turned. "I'll just be another moment. Thank you for being patient."

Mr. Donaldson rolled his eyes and closed the door.

Court: "Do you know a Jean Fetterman?"

Nevada: "That name rings a bell."

Court: "He lives in New Mexico."

Nevada: "Oh yeah, I met him once. Back in 2009 when I lived in Silver City, New Mexico. I had a great job working at the copper mine in Santa Rita, which is tucked into the Burro Mountains. Jean had the worst luck in the world. He had been hired on February sixth, then the copper mine had to shut down and lay off all eight hundred employees on February thirteenth. Of course, everyone was upset. Jean actually dropped to his knees and cried like a kid that had his bike stolen. Everyone made fun of him, but felt bad for the guy. As for the town of Santa Rita, it turned into another New Mexico ghost town that had been erased from the map."

Drey: "Did you ever see Jean Fetterman after that?"

Nevada: "One other time. At the Job Expo in Albuquerque. That's where I found a job as a school janitor here in Bagdad. I packed up and moved. The house was cheap and the pay as a janitor was actually good, considering I got plenty of overtime, because I was a one-man show."

Court: "Did you lose your job?"

Nevada: "Well, not officially. Word got out that I had been questioned in several child abduction cases. Rumors are enough to find a person guilty these days."

Drey: "You said that you met Jean Fetterman at the Job Expo. Did he say anything to you?"

Nevada: "He introduced me to his daughter. Her name was...Sharon I think."

Drey: "Cherub."

Nevada: "That's right. Cute girl, but a little weird."

Drey: "How so?"

Nevada: "She kept staring at me with these freaky eyes. It gave me the chills."

Court: "Did Jean or Cherub say anything else?"

Nevada: "Not really. They were with some other guy who was looking for a job. He used to be a bus driver, or something."

Court: "Was his name, Norman Hertzler?"

Nevada: "I don't remember. He was fat, bald, and grumpy. Then again, most everyone at the expo was in a bad mood. There were about five hundred companies there, but over ten thousand people looking for a job."

The front door opened. This time, it was Mrs. Donaldson. "Excuse me, Mr. Slueth. We are on a tight schedule. Could you join us please?"

Nevada waved his hand. "Of course. I'm coming." He looked at Court and Drey. "I really should get back inside." He dumped the remains of his coffee on the rocks. "Is there anything else?"

Drey: "No, that's it. Thank you for taking the time to speak with us."

Nevada shook both their hands. "No problem. I've gotten used to this." He turned and jogged up to the porch and went inside.

Court pulled the keys from her pocket and headed back to the Yukon. "Now we know that Jean and Norman did actually meet. Jon was right about that. He just got the place wrong. Instead of Vegas, they met in Albuquerque." She climbed into the Yukon and fired up the engine, waiting as Drey came in and buckled. Court said, "Actually, Nevada seemed to be a pretty nice guy."

Drey glared at her. "Yeah, for a cold blooded killer."

"What are you talking about?"

"Nevada has kidnapped and murdered at least a dozen women and children. There are bodies all over Aquarius Mountain." Drey looked forward. "And when he mentioned Burro Mountains, I saw more bodies."

Court's hand became frozen on the gearshift. "Are you sure?"

Drey continued gazing forward. "Head west to Aquarius Mountain. I'll show you the evidence."

## 111

***Marcus Cane, Former Hostage Negotiator***

***Rita Horton, Private Detective***

Marcus drove slowly through the town of Shakespeare. When you think of old ghost towns, you envision tumbleweed, dust, and empty wooden buildings. That's exactly how Shakespeare, New Mexico looked.

Rita peered out the window. "They are watching us," she said with a nervous edge to her voice.

"I see them." Marcus eased off the gas. "Where should we go?"

Rita rubbed the bandage on her hand. "How crazy do you think these kids are?"

"Well first of all, I wouldn't classify them as kids. If they are living here on their own, then they're young adults. Second of all, the world looks at them as crazy, but they have layers of problems that consumed their lives, which eventually shoved them to this place."

"Nice speech," Rita said. "Maybe you can share it with these girls."

Marcus pulled the van over, shoved the gear into park, then cut off the engine. "They are going to assume we are cops."

"Is that a good thing, or bad thing?"

Marcus opened the door. "I'm not sure."

They stood in the middle of the dusty street, waiting to see how many of the girl-gang they would have to deal with.

After a long, torturous few minutes, only one girl appeared from an alleyway. She was a tall black girl in her late teens, dressed oddly in ragged orange sweatpants and a brown leather jacket. As the girl approached, her dark eyes never moved from them. "What do you want?" she asked, stopping about twenty feet away.

Rita cleared her throat. "What's your name?"

"Beeper," the girl said. "What do you want?"

"How many other girls are hiding here?"

"Does it matter?"

"We're looking for Cherub."

Beeper stepped back. "You don't need to find Cherub; she'll find you."

Marcus put his hands up. "Don't walk away. We're here to help."

Rita looked at him, then whispered, "Help them with what?"

Marcus ignored her. "All of you have a good reason to be here. I'm sure the police raided this town on several occasions."

"What do you want?" Beeper asked again. Her eyes became unsteady, moving from side-to-side.

"Like I said, we're here to help, but we need to speak with Cherub."

"She's not here."

Marcus studied Beeper for a moment. She didn't appear to be lying. But then again, these teens had been through enough bad circumstances that lying became second nature to them. "My friend here owns a private investigator business. She only helps girls that had been harmed by other men."

Rita leaned close to him. "What the hell are you doing?"

Marcus stepped toward Beeper. "She has investigators all over the country. They can locate anyone that hurt you, or your friends."

A tear slid from Beeper's eye. "What good would that do?"

"Two things. First, you can punish the person who harmed you." Marcus took another few steps toward her. "Second, you can leave this town and start over."

"What makes you think we want to start over?"

"You need food and clothes. Heck, you need a hot shower without anyone staring at you." Marcus moved forward. "You need to find a place where you can be a young lady, rather than hiding from the evils of the world."

More tears spilled from Beeper's eyes. "You can't help us. No one can."

"You're wrong." Marcus was just six feet away. "And I understand that you haven't had a reason to trust anyone in your life, but that is going to change starting right now. We do not want anything in return; not even a thank you. All we want to do is help." He moved forward, now standing face-to-face with her. "What is your real name? The name that you are trying to forget?"

Her lips trembled. "Tanesha."

"That's a beautiful name." Marcus leaned close and embraced her, as warm tears soaked his neck. "Go tell the others to come here. Tell them the good news."

Tanesha stepped back, wiping the tears from her face. "What good news?"

"Your lives are about to change for the better."

## 112

While Marcus arranged for five buses to transport the sixty-three girls to Las Cruces, Rita called in a team of her private investigators to take down their names and statements. Marcus and Rita made sure the girls would spend the next week in their own private hotel room while being looked after by the investigators.

Marcus told the girls that his new company, Revelation, Inc., would find them a safe family to live with. Meanwhile, the girls would receive medical attention, counseling, education, and job training as needed. Rita promised the girls that her company would track down every scumbag that harmed them and make sure they are put in jail.

The only problem was that of the sixty-three girls, Cherub wasn't anywhere to be found. Rita called Ashley again. "You need to stay close to Jon."

Ashley sniffled through the phone. "I..."

"What's wrong?"

"I was having dinner with Jon. He went to the bathroom and never came back. I looked everywhere, but can't find him."

"Where's Andrew?"

"He's next to me."

Rita gripped the cell phone, trying to unclog her fatigued mind. "Did you call Court?"

"Not yet. She'll fire us."

"You need to tell her."

"I know." Ashley sniffled again.

"Put Andrew on the phone."

"Hey Rita," he said in a soft tone. "Could you speak to Court for us?"

"That's fine, but you and your sister need to get a grip. You're professional bodyguards. Start acting like it." Rita came across a little too strong, but that was the point. She needed the twins to forget about their jobs and find Jon. "Let's say Jon went to Devils Windpipe. How would he get there?"

"I don't know," Andrew said. "Court and Drey have the Yukon. You and Marcus have the van." Andrew paused. "Maybe he took a cab?"

"That's not likely."

Andrew sighed. "Then I don't...Wait, I just thought of something! I'll call you back."

Before Rita could say anything, Andrew hung up.

"What's going on?" Marcus asked.

"Jon is missing."

They headed to the minivan. "Do you think he was crazy enough to go back to Devils Windpipe?"

"Well, he is an author that writes psychological thrillers, which means, he's insane." Rita slid into the passenger's seat and clicked the seatbelt.

Marcus climbed in and fired up the engine, then shoved the gear into drive and hit the gas. It was after midnight and they wouldn't arrive back to Lake Montezuma for another eight hours or so.

Rita's cell rang. "Hello?"

"It's Andrew."

"What's going on?"

"Jon borrowed the Toyota Echo from the hotel."

"Do you think he went to Devils Windpipe?"

"I'm sure of it."

"Why would he risk his life? Cherub could be there waiting for him."

Andrew took a long moment to answer. "I couldn't possibly understand what it's like to be in the mind of Jon Truss. He'll do anything to write the perfect novel."

"Even if that means risking his life?"

"Especially if it means risking his life. That's why Jon is the best."

"I'll call Court. You head to..." Rita had a thought. "I can't ask you to go there and risk your lives as well."

"It's not a problem," Andrew said. "You're right. We're bodyguards. We need to start acting like it."

***Court Truss, Bodyguard***  
***Drey Harten, Psychic***

Drey and Court stood at the edge of Aquarius Mountain. Drey rotated the meditation balls in his hand, gazing forward into the darkness.

Court had her phone on vibrate. She eased away from him when a call came through. She didn't want to disturb Drey's thought process. "Hold on a second," she whispered to the caller. Court hurried to the Yukon and went inside. "Hello?"

"Hey, it's Rita. I have some bad news. Jon snuck away from the twins."

"Are you shitting me? I'll kill him."

"Not unless Cherub gets to him first."

"What are you talking about?"

"We've been to Truth or Consequences, where we discovered the judge made Cherub wear an ankle bracelet, which she broke off and escaped once again. We then drove to Shakespeare and found sixty-three young girls that belonged to Cherub's gang. Marcus convinced them all to surrender. We've spent the last five hours transporting them to Las Cruces. However, Cherub wasn't with them, which means..."

Court shook her head. "That means Cherub is at Devils Windpipe. It also means that Jon could be with her."

"Why would he go there?"

"Because Jon has no concept of reality." Court rubbed her eyes. "What vehicle did Jon take?"

"Some car that the hotel uses."

Court looked forward, unable to see Drey in the darkness. In fact, she couldn't even see the mountain. "We discovered that Norman Hertzler and Jean Fetterman really did meet."

"You're kidding? That means Jon's story was true."

"Somewhat. They didn't meet in Vegas. Instead, they met at some job convention in Albuquerque."

"Still, that is pretty amazing that Jon was that close."

"I agree. It also means that Jon has blurred the lines between reality and fiction, which explains why he is so damn determined to go into that Godforsaken valley."

"Are you going to head back?"

"We weren't planning on it. We found the white van guy. His name is Nevada Slueth."

"Did he admit anything?"

"No. He claimed that the van had been stolen and someone else drove it around Lake Montezuma."

"Do you believe him?"

"I did, but Drey doesn't believe him. In fact, Drey thinks this guy is a serial killer."

"What is his connection to Cherub?"

"He admitted knowing Jean Fetterman. I'd say that's a pretty strong connection."

"Maybe he was the one that helped Cherub."

"It's possible."

"Okay. Marcus and I are heading back to Lake Montezuma."

"Do not try to find Jon. I don't want anyone else getting hurt."

"Alright. We'll meet you at the hotel. Meanwhile, keep in touch."

Court pressed END on her phone, then dialed Andrew. He picked up on the third ring. "We're trying to rent a car," Andrew said defensively. "Please don't fire us. We'll get Jon back."

"I don't want you to get Jon back. I want you stay at the hotel and wait for Marcus and Rita."

"Are we fired?"

"No. But if Jon is so willing to put his life in danger, then let him. It's not your fault." Court hung up and decided to make one more phone call.

The voice on the other end was soft. He had obviously been sleeping. "This is Detective Caplan."

"Sorry to wake you. This is Court Truss."

"It's four o'clock in the morning. This better be good."

"Have you ever investigated a man named Nevada Slueth?"

"Sounds familiar." Caplan cleared his throat several times. "Is that the guy who lives in Bagdad?"

"Yes."

"I haven't questioned him personally, but I know other detectives and Feds have been to see him. He's clean."

"Actually, no he's not."

"What do you mean?"

"Drey thinks..."

"Stop right there. I need to know what you think."

Court didn't know how to respond. "It's possible that Nevada is hiding bodies in the Aquarius and Burro Mountains. If we find those bodies, my next call won't be to you. I'll call the media."

"Are you in Bagdad right now?"

"Yes."

"Do you realize I live in Phoenix?"

"I understand. But you have to know that if Drey thinks there are bodies here, then it's only a matter of time before he finds them."

"If you or Drey find a dead body, call 911. Then a sheriff from Bagdad will either contact me, or the FBI. Until that happens, I'm staying here."

"You're making a big mistake." Court hung up, startled by an image that appeared from the darkness. At first she thought it was Drey.

But as the man approached and opened the door of the Yukon, she realized it was Nevada Slueth.

As a bodyguard, Court had been trained to see danger coming, then react before the danger arrived. Nevada Slueth had been able to open the Yukon driver's side door, snatch her from the vehicle, and bound her hands and feet before Court knew what happened.

Nevada had also been trained with kidnapping experience, which proved to be more valuable than Court's training.

He dragged her away from the Yukon, then kneeled down on her chest. "After you left my house, it dawned on me who you were...Jon Truss' wife."

Court shifted the weight of her body, but to no prevail. Nevada had his knee pressed hard against her chest. "What do you want?" She had to keep him occupied while hoping that Drey would arrive back at any second. However, if she couldn't fight off Nevada, then Drey would certainly have his hands full.

"I didn't want anything," Nevada said with an icy voice. "You came to me, which pushed me into a corner. In just another two days I would have been gone." His voice rose to a shout. "Why did you track me down!"

Court's breathing became difficult. "I'm trying to understand what happened to Devin Poulston."

"I had nothing to do with that."

"What about Cherub Fetterman?"

He slapped her in the face. "I had nothing to do with her either! What the fuck led you to my house? Was it that fucking white van?"

"Yes," Court admitted. "Now get off of me!"

Nevada stood up. Court realized that she had made a mistake. Nevada would be more vulnerable kneeling on her, rather than standing. And Drey will now be at a huge disadvantage.

"I did research on your husband. I know he has a private jet and a ton of money."

Court sucked in a pocket of cold air, then sat up. "What exactly do you want?"

"There's an airport at Kingman, which is an hour drive from here. Have the plane ready."

"Where do you want to go?"

Nevada formed a sly grin. "Actually, we are going together."

"I'll go with you to the airport, but I'm not flying anywhere with you." Actually, Court wasn't going to put their pilot in harm's way, so she would have to overtake Nevada before they arrived at Kingman Airport.

"Your wealth is the key to my freedom. I'm sure Jon Truss will pay anything to keep you safe."

Court thought about Jon at Devils Windpipe, fighting his own demons. "Get my phone and I'll make the arrangements."

Nevada looked around the dark area. "Where is your friend? Is he trying to find the dead bodies I hid in the Aquarius Mountains?"

"That is exactly what he's doing. He won't be back for a while."

"We'll leave without him and—"

A blue flashing light cut through the darkness, followed by the sound of an approaching vehicle. Nevada reached down and grabbed Court by the arm, then yanked her up. He then pulled a gun from his belt and pressed the barrel against



her temple. She could barely keep her balance because her feet were bound together along with her wrists.

The police officer driving the SUV came to a stop, shining the headlights on them. "I am Officer Denise Adams of the Bagdad Police Department," she said over a loud speaker. "Drop your gun and lay face first on the ground."

Court saw Nevada's Dodge Dakota parked on the side of the dirt road. "Give up," she said to Nevada. "I'm sure more police are coming."

"There're only two police officers in Bagdad," Nevada said, holding her close to his body. "The next cop is hours away."

"Drop your weapon!" the voice demanded from the police SUV.

"I can't do that," Nevada shouted back. "I'm taking this woman as my hostage. Do not follow me, or I'll kill her!"

Denise stepped out of her vehicle. The lights created a blue and white silhouette around her large frame. She pointed the gun. "I'm telling you this for the last time. Drop your weapon and get on the ground!"

Nevada grabbed Court by her red hair with one hand, pressing the gun on her temple with the other hand. "I'll fucking kill her! Get back in your vehicle and drive—"

The gunshot, followed by the blood splattering Court's face, seemed to happen in a dream state of mind. She fell backwards with Nevada's body, both thumping on the hard ground.

Denise hurried to them and knelt down by Court. "Are you okay?"

She looked up. "I'm..." Court had to catch her breath. "I'm okay."

Denise holstered her weapon, then retrieved a pocketknife from her belt, and cut the duct tape from Court's wrists and ankles. They both stood, looking down at Nevada's dead body. One eye was open, the other closed, blood leaking from his skull.

Another set of blue flashing lights appeared, also driving an SUV. He slid out wearing civilian clothes, holster around his jeans, gun drawn.

Denise put her hand up. "He's down."

The officer jogged over. "Jesus. Are you both okay?"

"We're fine," Denise said. "You better call the FBI and get them down here. We had a report of several dead women and children in the Aquarius Mountains." The male officer hurried away while dialing a number on his cell phone. Denise looked at Court. "I have some wipes in my glove compartment. I'll get them for you."

"Who called you?" Court asked.

"Someone named Drey Harten. It's the reason I'm here in the first place."

Court looked around, getting a better visual with the flashing blue lights. "Is he okay?"

Drey appeared like a ghost into the perimeter of blue lights. He approached them, taking cautious steps, eyes on the dead body. "Is that Nevada Slueth?" Drey's eyes then examined Court, probably seeing the blood. "Are you okay?"

Denise stepped forward. "Are you the one that reported the dead bodies?"

"Yes. I can show them to you. I found eight so far."

\* \* \* \*

*"His spirit set me down in a valley where the ground was covered with bones."*

**Jon Truss, Author**

Jon arrived at the boulder, sat on the ground, and leaned his back against the rock. He placed the flashlight next to him on the ground as he stared into the darkness.

An hour passed, followed by another. Jon didn't move. He thought about his book, *Devils Windpipe*, envisioning the chapters, writing the novel in his mind, knowing what would happen next.

That's when Cherub stepped into the glow of the flashlight, carrying a backpack. She kneeled next to Jon and dropped the backpack on the dirt. "You came back to me...again."

Jon took a long moment to respond. "I know what you can do. I've written about it in books."

"Tell me about it."

"I once followed a serial killer that was nicknamed—"

"Ghoul," Cherub said. "I remember reading all about it." Her tone was as if they were in a library discussing the favorite parts of Jon's books.

"Why on earth would you be reading an adult novel?"

"I had to grow up in a hurry." She gave Jon a playful smack on the arm. "Besides, your stories are awesome. I even took notes, especially everything you said about Ghoul. He did a *Waking Suggestion* on his victims, which is a sort of hypnotism. The victims came to him, rather than the Ghoul having to kidnap them."

"Is that what you did to Devin Poulston?"

"Are you still looking for him?"

"Of course."

"He's dead. Why can't you accept that?"

Jon lowered his head. "I don't know. It just seems possible that he lived." He glared at Cherub. "After all, you're alive."

"Devin was killed," she said with a harsh tone. "Get over it."

Jon breathed in the cold night air. "You're only thirteen. How did you perform a *Waking Suggestion* on me?"

"I learned from the best." She cocked her head. "After all, aren't you good at writing *Waking Suggestions* in your novels so your readers will be hooked? Isn't that why your books sell so many copies?"

"I don't use it for evil intentions."

Cherub laughed. "Bullshit. Money is the root of all evil."

"Tell me how you learned to use a *Waking Suggestion*."

"I made an impression on you and your friends. Just think about how obsessed all of you have become with me."

Jon thought about the first step of a *Waking Suggestion* which is to make an impression on someone's mind, but without them knowing. He and the others

came here, focused on Devin Poulston, but deep down in their subconscious they were fascinated by Cherub. She is a thirteen-year-old girl that has controlled so many people, including the police.

"You had the element of surprise," Jon said. "But to make an impression, you have to be credible. The serial killer I wrote about had credibility. I have credibility. But you don't."

"I was the focus of attention. That's all I needed."

Jon thought that she made a good point. "Following your impression, the victim must have an inner feeling that something is changing."

"That's what I did. You had a feeling about me the second I pulled the trigger. Later, you discovered my true identity, which formed an impression and an emotional shift on everyone that knew me."

Once again, Jon thought that Cherub made a good point. He knew his books had an impact on readers, but Cherub actually used his stories to create this new life.

It was as if she created a new character.

"Next," Cherub said. "The idea is considered by the victims. Opinions are changed. The illogical becomes reality. The mind is willing to believe. There is an impulse to act." She smiled. "Now here you are."

Jon leaned his head against the boulder. "I suppose with my imagination, it's actually easier to use a *Waking Suggestion* on me."

Cherub unzipped her backpack. "You should be proud of what your novels teach others." She retrieved a long piece of rope, placed Jon's hands on his lap, then tied his wrists together. "I'm going to punish you now." She rubbed her fingers along his face. "If this were your book, what would happen next?"

## 116

Cherub retrieved a pair of wire cutters from her backpack. "I could kill you, but that doesn't seem vile enough. I need to find a way to destroy your life."

Jon swallowed a lump of fear. What was he doing? Why had he put himself in this situation? The only way a *Waking Suggestion* could succeed was if he believed it. But what did he believe about Cherub?

The answer to that question had lingered in the dark part of his imagination. He always believed that the devil was a young female girl, pale skin, wearing a sweater with black and white stripes.

Jon knew what Cherub was the moment he saw her. It's also the reason she had such influence and control over so many people. She is the voice that whispers in Devils Windpipe. Her song is played in the distance like a warped vinyl record.

Jon's skin became moist with a layer of cold sweat as he stared at the wire cutters. "What are you going to do?" If he survived this, he would write that sinister question in his novel. However, he knew the answer. After all, the devil was holding wire cutters. He knew exactly what she was going to do with them.

"I could pinch the skin on your neck," Cherub suggested. She spread open the wire cutters and pressed them on his Adams Apple. "If you were found in Devils

Windpipe with the skin peeled away from your voice box it would keep the legend alive for many years.”

Jon gazed in her satanic eyes. “You asked what I would do if this were my novel.”

“Yes...I did.”

“I wouldn’t kill my character off.”

“That’s a good point.” Cherub looked down. “Perhaps I should take away something precious. It would be something that you care more about than anything else in this world, which includes your wife.” Cherub locked her eyes on him. “The reason Court is still alive, was because I allowed her to live. I wanted your imagination to run wild.” Cherub placed the wire cutters around the ring finger of his left hand. “If I cut off all your fingers, how would you write your stories?”

Jon began to tremble. Never had he been so terrified. “Please...don’t...”

Cherub’s face lit up with anticipation. “Wow, you are really scared. I should have thought about this sooner.”

Jon looked at the blades of the wire cutters on his trembling finger. “I’m begging you...do not cut off my fingers.”

“You have a lot of money. You could replace the missing fingers with metal ones, or rubber fingers. Then learn how to type with your new hands.” Cherub slightly closed the wire cutters, causing the finger to trickle with blood. “Or you could hire an assistant to write what you say.” Cherub formed a grin. “But I know it wouldn’t be the same. You could adapt, but the agony of not having your fingers will be too much.”

“Have mercy on me,” Jon whispered as tears spilled from his eyes. “I know that even the devil would give mercy if a deal was made.”

“Are you talking about your soul?” Cherub laughed. “I’d rather have your fingers.” She began to close the wire cutters.

“Wait!” Jon screamed. He heard his own voice float through the valley.

*Wait!*

*Wait!*

*Wait!*

“If you want me to suffer, I can come up with something better.” Hot pain seared from his finger as blood dripped on his leg. “Just give me a second to think.”

“Oh come on. What’s more horrible than cutting off your fingers? You can talk about this in your new novel. The reader will feel so bad for you.”

“No. The reader won’t like the main character being tortured this way. It’s not entertaining. They will be disappointed.”

“I don’t know,” Cherub said. “Are you going to have your bodyguards show up just in time to save you? That’s a bit cliché, don’t you think?”

“There’s something more vile and disgusting than cutting off my fingers. The reader will be so traumatized that they won’t ever read my books again. I will be arrested, humiliated, and my career will be over. But at least I’ll be able to write about it.”

“Okay...I’m interested. What’s your idea?”

Jon considered that someday people would read these words. He has written about torture, murder, rape and even kidnapped children. But this would cross

the literary line. People would think the worst of him. "I..." Jon once again considered his thoughts. "I can have sex with you."

Cherub's eyes became wide. She removed the wire cutters from his hand and dropped them to the ground. "It's brilliant!" She then narrowed her eyes. "But would you just write about it, or will it really happen?"

"To have the impact, it must really happen."

"You would use detailed descriptions?"

"Of course?"

"Then what?"

"We go to the hospital together. I admit what I've done. They will do a rape test on you." Tears mixed with sweat ran down his cheeks. "The evidence will be overwhelming. I'll be arrested and charged, then put in jail. I'll lose my publishing contract. My books will be removed from stores. I'll never be able to sell another book in my life."

Cherub leaned close. "But you will be able to keep writing, despite your miserable life."

"Yes. That's all I ask." He swallowed. "It's what I beg from you."

"If this doesn't work, then I have to cut your fingers off. You realize that, don't you?"

"Yes. I understand."

Cherub opened her mouth and licked away his sweat and tears around his cheeks. "Okay, Mr. Author. Tell me what happens next."

*WARNING! The following scene in chapter 117 is an adult male having sex with an under aged female. It is the most unpleasant and immoral words that I've ever written. For most readers, I suggest you skip over chapter 117 and continue reading on the next chapter.*

*Let me make something perfectly clear. If you read chapter 117, despite my warning, then you have no right to judge.*

## 117

Cherub unzipped his bloodstained jeans and pulled them down. She rubbed Jon through his boxers. "You're not aroused. Most boys are hard by now."

"I'm not a boy," Jon said. "This is wrong. It won't be easy for me to do."

"Should I get the wire cutters?"

Jon closed his tearful eyes. "Just get this over with."

Cherub pulled down his boxers. Moments later, he felt her on top of him. Her skin was chilled by the night air; evil flowed in her cold blood, yet, her innocence could be felt.

"You're not excited," Cherub whispered. "What do you want me to do?"

Jon was well aware that Cherub had sex before. He could probably tell her to rub him until he became hard, but just saying that would be impossible. It was bad enough he would someday write about this in his novel, but he couldn't speak aloud and hear his own disgusting words.

Cherub pressed her lips against him. They were small, pure, and cold. She kissed his cheeks and licked away the remaining sweat and tears. Her buttock skimmed between his legs, yet he still could not be aroused.

His mind drifted. He thought about Court and the way she made him feel. Court was aggressive, strong, and sexy. She would crawl on top of him and ride him through several orgasms. Court was perfect for him. They could have sex twice a day for the next fifty years and it would be different, yet exciting.

Jon popped his eyes open, then squeezed them shut. He realized that he had become semi-hard. Cherub was on top of him, gliding up and down. Her tiny hands on his shoulders. Soft moans drifting into his ear. She wasn't wet; at least, not like Court, or any other woman he had been with.

Court, Jon thought. He had to think of her.

She picked up the speed, practically hopping up and down on him. Jon's bound wrists were on his left side, feeling the cold skin of her calf squeezing together with each thrust upward.

Suddenly, he felt a tiny spurt of warm fluid and then he went limp.

Jon opened his eyes. He became hollow inside. He thought about the choice that altered his life. He chose his fingers over his soul. Was writing that important to him?

Cherub stood and pulled back on her underwear and pants. She then loosened the rope. Jon dressed, but remained on the ground with the flashlight.

Cherub smiled at Jon and said, "Welcome to hell."

## 118

"Don't move!" a voice shouted from about twenty feet away.

Jon realized it was Ashley. His bodyguards actually came here to save him, despite the cliché storyline.

Andrew's voice shouted, now ten feet away. "Step away from him!"

Jon stared at Cherub. If the twins had arrived just a minute earlier, they would have caught him in the act. Eventually, they would discover what he had done, but actually seeing him and Cherub would have been more devastating.

Cherub reached down and grabbed the wire cutters. She gave Jon a wink. "What's going to happen next?"

Jon became full of hate as he heard the footsteps of the twins shuffling forward. The lights on their Taser's lit the area around the boulder. "Kill yourself," Jon said to Cherub. "It would make everyone happy."

"So be it." Cherub opened the wire cutters and shoved the points into her windpipe, then closed them and removed a chunk of muscle and skin. Blood drained from the hole as her eyes lowered and gazed at Jon.

She dropped to the ground in front of him, blood leaking into the dirt, with a playful smile on her face.

Ashley leaned down. "Jon, are you okay?"

His legs felt numb. "Just help me up."

The twins took each arm and lifted Jon. Andrew then looked at the dead girl on the ground, blood still pouring from her wound. "We better call the police."

“No,” Jon snapped. “I want you to find a spot and bury her.”

“What?” Ashley shouted. “You didn’t do anything wrong. We have her suicide recorded on our Taser’s.”

Jon glared at her. “Smash the Taser’s and bury the pieces away from the body. I don’t want a shred of evidence that we were here tonight.”

“Jon,” Andrew said in a low voice. “You’re asking us to break some serious laws.”

Jon stared at both of them for a long moment. “No, I’m asking you to protect me.”

## 119

### ***Drey Harten, Psychic***

Twenty-seven bodies of both women and children were discovered in the Aquarius Mountains after Drey led a team of FBI Agents on a search. When Drey couldn’t find any more bodies, he then accompanied the agents to Burro Mountains in New Mexico, where he led them to another six bodies, all women.

The evidence pointed to Nevada Slueth. However, there was no evidence that Nevada had anything to do with the Devin Poulston disappearance.

Laws were changed that federally approved psychics that discover the whereabouts of missing children and adults, along with evidence, can be used in court.

As of now, Drey Harten is the only psychic that is on the FBI approved list.

## 120

***Jon Truss, Author***

***Court Truss, Bodyguard***

***Marcus Cane, Former Hostage Negotiator***

***Kristy Polston, Mother of Missing Child***

***Drey Harten, Psychic***

***Rita Horton, Private Detective***

***Andrew and Ashley Wilcher, Bodyguards***

Jon, Court, the twins, Rita, and Marcus said goodbye to Kristy Poulston.

Drey was the last to say goodbye to her. “I’m sorry,” he said, choked with emotion.

Kristy held his hand. “You did everything you could. That’s all I asked.”

“I wanted to find him.”

“I know.”

Drey gave her another hug and whispered in her ear. “I’ll never stop looking for missing children. Devin is my motivation.”

Kristy's tears became wet on his cheeks. "I'm sure Devin would love that. Thank you."

Drey stepped away from Kristy and headed out of the hotel. He couldn't look back.

Andrew stepped into Ruana's office. "Well, I have to get going," Andrew said. She practically flung her body into his arms. "I'm guessing you're going to miss me."

She smiled. "I have great news."

"Tell me."

"I applied for a manager's position at the Raleigh Holiday Inn."

"Let me guess, you got it."

"Yes!" Ruana shouted. She stepped on her toes, but still couldn't reach Andrew's mouth. He leaned down the rest of the way and kissed her for a long moment.

Court stepped into the office and grabbed Andrew by the shoulder. "Jon's waiting. Let's go." She tugged on Andrew's arm and dragged him out of the office. "Do you really like her that much?" Court asked as they stepped into the Yukon.

"I'd better," Andrew said. "She's moving to Raleigh."

Jon, Marcus, and Court laughed at him.

Ashley shoved the gear into drive and sped away from the Beaver Creek Inn. "Well, say goodbye to Lake Montezuma."

Everyone became silent, gazing out the window. They saw Kristy on the sidewalk, head down, crying into her hands.

## 121

Drey and Rita loaded up into his red Ford Ranger truck and headed north. The Yukon followed close behind. They arrived in Flagstaff, stopped off to get something to eat, then made their way east into New Mexico.

A few hours later they arrived at the Black Rock Zuni Indian Reservation. A large sign made it clear how the Zuni Tribe felt: No Alcohol, No Firearms, No Attitude. Rita gave Drey directions to the Tribal Government building, located a mile into the reservation next to the casino.

Jon stayed behind in the Yukon and continued writing his novel on his laptop. Andrew sat on the hood, texting Ruana. Court, Marcus, and Ashley went inside the casino.

Drey and Rita went into the Tribal Government building. It was two floors, with several offices. The inside of the building had sort of a museum appeal with Zuni art, statues, and historic artifacts.

Drey and Rita were led to a conference room. Joining them was a woman named Suniti, who had long dark hair that shined like silk. She wore a crimson skirt and matching blouse. Also joining them was an older gentleman named Halian, who had a thick mound of shocking gray hair, weathered skin, and wore a blue business suit that glimmered under the lights. Both of them worked in the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

After shaking hands and introducing themselves, they took a seat at the conference table.



Suniti: "We have seventy-eight hundred residents on the Zuni Indian Reservation. When the FBI searched the area, it certainly made everyone a bit uneasy."

Rita: "How old were you then?"

Suniti: "Fourteen. How old were you?"

Rita: "Old enough to be a young, naïve federal agent."

Halian: "I was far from naïve when it happened." His voice had more of a thick accent compared to Suniti's modernized tone. "The United States Government was trying to say that a criminal like David Parker Ray could sneak on the reservation with dead bodies, bury them, then leave without anyone noticing. It would be impossible."

Drey: "Would you mind if I took a walk around?"

Halian: "Yes...I would mind."

Suniti: "My father was a member of the Tribal Government back in 1999. He went through a great deal of agony and frustration to keep the FBI investigation from the media. It would have ruined our economy."

Rita: "Do you mean that people wouldn't have gambled their life savings away in your casino?"

Suniti: "Let's just say our tourism numbers would have significantly dropped off."

Rita: "How many agents did the FBI send to this area?"

Halian: "Five."

Rita: "Five?"

Halian: "Yes. Weren't you among them?"

Rita: "No. I was assigned to the search team at Truth or Consequences."

Halian: "Well, no bodies were discovered here at the Zuni Reservation."

Drey: "How could five agents possibly cover the entire reservation?"

Halian: "What are you implying?"

Drey: "That something was missed."

Suniti: "I've been watching you on the news. It's amazing that you found all those bodies in the Aquarius and Burro Mountains."

Rita: "And by the way, I know for a fact that over eighty bodies had been discovered here."

Halian: "You are mistaken."

Rita: "It was never made public, but I saw the report."

Suniti: "What do you hope to achieve by being here?"

Rita: "We want the bodies transported to cemeteries so the families can have some closure. There are many people that believe these women are still alive, simply because the FBI reported that the bodies were not discovered."

Halian: "No bodies are here. You're wasting your time."

Drey: "Give me an hour. If I do not discover one single-"

Halian: "Out of the question. We have our own families buried here. I do not want their spirit disturbed."

Drey: "How about giving me fifteen minutes?"

Suniti: "There isn't much you can do with fifteen minutes."

Drey: "Then you have nothing to lose."

Halian considered this for a moment. "Okay. Fifteen minutes. But Suniti and I will escort you."

Drey: "Sounds good."

The group stood and headed down the corridor, through the small lobby, then outside. Rita leaned close to Drey and whispered, "Do you already know where the bodies are hidden?"

"Yes," Drey said. "I have images of the casino. It's clear as anything I've seen before."

The group walked by the Yukon. Andrew was still on the hood. He looked up from his phone, gave a weak smile, then went back to texting. Drey noticed Jon in the backseat, working on his laptop. Drey walked to the rear of the casino.

Halian put his hand up. "Wait. Where are you going?"

"I'm leading you to the bodies," Drey said, marching forward. He didn't need his meditation balls for this. He could feel death all around him.

"Please, wait a just a moment."

The group stopped. Drey glared at Halian. "Do you have something to share with us?"

Halian's skin darkened. "How did you know?"

Suniti put her hands on her hips. "Know what?"

Rita answered the question. "That David Parker Ray traveled here, buried the bodies behind the casino at night, then gambled for a few hours and lured other women to his Toy-Box."

Suniti: "So the bodies are here?" Her voice became soft. "Why didn't the FBI find them?"

Rita: "They did, which is the point. But the five agents were sent away."

Suniti looked at Halian. "What is she talking about?"

He didn't respond. Instead, Halian lowered his eyes, gazing at the ground.

Rita heaved a sigh. "The only logical explanation is that the Bureau of Indian Affairs made a deal with the FBI."

Suniti went pale. "What deal? I don't understand? Why would—"

"It had to be done," Halian said. "David Parker Ray was arrested, but the evidence was weak. The government did not have a strong enough case. Digging up the bodies would have lengthen the investigation, and at the same time, disrupted the investigation. It was possible that David Ray would have been set free."

"But the dead bodies *are* evidence?" Suniti pleaded.

Drey shook his head. "No...they weren't."

"Why?" Suniti asked, almost in tears.

Drey took in a deep breath. "According to the law back then, evidence found by psychics is inadmissible in court. Not only that, but the psychic could be charged with the crime."

A tear spilt from Rita's eye. "The only way I could convince the agents to search the reservation, was to tell the truth."

Drey's heart thundered against his chest as he glared at Rita. "You didn't retire from the FBI. They fired you."

"Yes," Rita said, wiping the tear away. "They fired me because I talked to you."

Halian placed his hand on Suniti's shoulder. "Since the evidence could not be used, your father and I made a deal with the FBI to keep this quiet. It was the best thing for the Zuni people, along with the investigation of David Parker Ray."

Suniti stepped back. "But hiding evidence wasn't the best thing for the families that lost a loved one. It wasn't the best thing for the women who were tortured, raped, and murdered, then buried next to a Godforsaken casino!"

Halian pointed an angry finger. "This casino provides food and shelter for the Zuni people! Not to mention it pays your salary!" Suniti began walking away. Halian shouted, "Where are you going?"

Suniti turned. "Make sure you watch the news tonight. I'll be on it." She turned on her heels and headed back to the office.

Halian shook his head, then glared at Drey and Rita. "You just destroyed us. Seventy-eight hundred Zuni people will be looking for a way to survive. What have you done?"

Drey gently took Rita's hand. "We did the right thing...that's all I care about."

## 122

### ***Truth or Consequences***

Beeper and the other girls from the gang charged into the home of Jean Fetterman, carrying aluminum baseball bats. Jean and six of his pervert friends were drinking beer in the living room, smoking weed, and passing around photos of young girls who lived in the town Truth or Consequences.

Beeper swung the bat, striking the nearest man on the skull and sending him to the floor. In just seconds, the girls were beating the men with the bats. They broke bones, cracked open gashes in their faces and skulls, and continued until the men were barely alive.

Jean rolled on the grimy floor with a surge of blood from his cheeks. He forced a smile, exposing the cracked teeth as more blood gushed from his mouth. "Cherub sent you...didn't she..."

Beeper dropped the bat on the floor. "Cherub is in every dark place that exists in the fucking world." Beeper walked away as the other girl's poured gasoline over the men and all over the house.

With a strike of a match, the Fetterman home was destroyed in flames and burnt to the ground.

## 123

### ***Drey Harten, Psychic*** ***Rita Horton, Private Detective***

Ashley drove the Yukon to the Gallup Municipal Airport, where Court arranged for their private jet to take them back to Raleigh.

Drey and Rita continued to Colorado, then to his home in Timpas.

"Let me just pack some things," Drey said. "Then we'll head to New York."

"We can stay here for the night," Rita suggested. "And remember, I can run the office from anywhere in the world. I don't need to be in New--"

Drey pulled her close and kissed her. The moment lasted for a lover's eternity.

When he finally stepped back, Drey had to take in several deep breaths to calm himself. "We can't live here," he said. "And I don't want to live in New York."

Rita smiled. "I'm open for suggestions."

"How about Raleigh?"

"Do you mean join forces with Revelation, Inc.? Become the super heroes of the private investigation world?"

Drey chuckled. "The bestselling author, the twins, the bodyguard, the hostage negotiator, the private investigator, and the psychic. Sounds like an unstoppable team."

"It sure does," Rita agreed. "So get packed. I'll have my investigators in North Carolina hunt down a nice home."

Drey raised an eyebrow. "By the way. We're getting married, correct?"

"Oh yeah. I just assumed that."

"Good." Drey kissed her again. "I'll be back in four minutes."

Drey hurried to his bedroom, went into the closet, grabbed a suitcase, then opened it on the bed. He began throwing in random clothes. He really didn't have much to take with him. And he didn't want any memories from this place.

He carried the suitcase to the living room. "Rita, where are you?"

"In here," she said from the small office.

Drey hurried inside, then stopped dead in his tracks. All the photos on the wall were taken down, piled neatly in a box.

Except for one.

Drey stared at the picture of Devin Poulston on the wall, which Kristy had put up when she was here. Below the photo, written in red crayon, were these words...

*The devil could not keep me forever...Devin.*

Rita was breathing heavy. "Was Devin actually here?"

Drey placed his trembling hands into his pocket and retrieved the meditation balls. He rotated them in the palm of his hand, concentrating on the chime. He saw a vision of Devin on the computer, searching for famous psychics. He clicked on Drey's name and read a story about him.

Drey looked at the doorway. Devin stood there, dressed in a new Arizona Diamondbacks T-shirt, new jeans, and new Sketchers. He looked around the room, noticing his picture on the wall. He gazed at it with tears drizzling from his eyes.

Devin took down the rest of the pictures and placed them in an empty storage box that Drey had under the desk. Devin reached into his pocket and pulled out a crayon, then wrote on the wall, under his picture. When finished, he wiped his eyes and left the room.

"My God..." Drey dropped the meditation balls on the floor. They hit with a loud chime, then rolled under the desk. "Devin Poulston is alive."

***Detective Caplan, Investigator***

Detective Caplan arrived in Lake Montezuma. He drove to the Beaver Creek Inn and parked, then went inside the lobby. A young girl at the front desk with a nametag, Amy, greeted him. "Welcome to the Beaver Creek Inn. How may I help you?"

Caplan reached into his gray blazer and pulled out his ID and badge. "I'm looking for the manager, Ms. Ruana Kelly."

"She's in her room at the moment." Amy picked up the phone. "I'll tell her you're here."

Caplan put his hand up. "No need. Just tell me where her room is."

Amy placed the phone back down. "Um...down the hallway, last door on the right."

"Thank you." Caplan walked down the corridor and knocked on Ruana's door.

She answered, dressed in her manager uniform. "Can I help you?"

"I just need a moment. May I come in?"

"Well, I'm packing. How about we go to my office."

"No need." Caplan walked by her and entered the room. "This will just take a second."

Ruana turned. "I would really feel more comfortable if we spoke in my office."

Caplan did a quick examination of the room. "I thought of something early this morning."

"That's great, but we should—"

"The entire town of Lake Montezuma had been searched. Every house. Every building. Every vacant lot." He leveled his eyes on Ruana. "Except for the most obvious place, which is this hotel."

"That's not true. I took an officer on a room-to-room search."

"I'm sure that is accurate."

Ruana glared at him. "It is accurate."

"And you took the officer to this room."

"Of course."

"Do you mind if I take a quick look around."

"Yes I mind!"

He poked his head into several open boxes that she had piled on the bed. "I believe that a couple of people were involved with the disappearance of Devin Poulston." Caplan tore open a box that had been sealed with tape. "Your hotel became quite busy and every room had been filled."

"I don't appreciate your accusations. I want you to leave."

Caplan reached into the box and pulled out a copy of *Chicken Soup for the Soul, Teen Version*. He then tipped the box over and spilt the contents on the bed.

About fifty letters spilt out.

"My, my," Caplan said. "You have been very busy."

The blood drained from Ruana's skin. "I...those aren't mine."

"Yes they are," Caplan said. "But I don't think you came up with the idea on your own. But I do believe you were with Cherub Fetterman in Devils Windpipe when she shot Jon Truss." He gave her a grin. "How am I doing?"

Ruana leaned against the wall, mouth open, eyes wide with fear. "I don't know what to say."

"Well, you can say that you were best friends with Mila Saguario, the woman that hung herself in Devils Windpipe. You used to baby sit her daughter, Angel, who also hung herself."

"I..." Ruana's voice was low. "It was all Jon Truss' fault. His novel."

"Do you really believe that Mila and her daughter killed themselves because of a book?"

Ruana pushed herself away from the wall. "Yes...I do."

Caplan reached into his pocket and retrieved a set of handcuffs. "He's just a fiction writer. Nothing more."

"You're wrong." Tears welled up in her eyes. "His books control the thoughts of others. Jon Truss is responsible for everything that happened here."

Caplan grabbed her arms and pulled them behind her back. He then squeezed on the handcuffs. "You're a fool...and you are also under arrest for the kidnapping of Devin Poulston."

## 125

***Jon Truss, Author***

***Andrew and Ashley Wilcher, Bodyguards***

Andrew closed his phone, standing outside the doorway of the New York office of Ertmas Literary Agency. Andrew looked at Jon. "That was Detective Caplan. He followed your lead." Andrew paused. "How did you know?"

Jon formed a tired grin. "I was writing the novel and it just came to me."

Andrew looked at Ashley, then back at Jon. "Do you want us to go inside with you?"

"No. I want you both to wait here."

Ashley touched her brother's arm. "Are you okay?"

He pulled in a deep breath. "Yeah. It's just...I should have seen it. I had been in Ruana's room. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary."

Jon patted him on the back. "Don't beat yourself up. You weren't in Ruana's room to investigate her." He opened the door. "I'll just be a moment."

Jon walked into the lobby, greeted by a receptionist that looked more like a model dressed in a short black skirt and tight fitting white blouse. She stood and walked around her desk. Her six-inch heels clicked on the marble floor. "Mr. Truss. It's an honor to meet you."

"Is Bram ready to see me?"

"Yes, sir. He's in his office."

Jon ignored the flirtatious smile from the receptionist and headed to Bram's massive office, decorated in dark woods and large shelf of untouched books from his clients that he never read, including Jon's novels.

"Jon Truss," Bram said, easing out of his leather chair. He shook Jon's hand. "Good to have you back. This calls for a celebration. How about a shot of tequila?"

"I don't drink," Jon said. "You should know that."

Bram plopped down in his chair. "Yeah...I was just kidding."

Jon glared at him. "That was quite an adventure that you sent me on."

"Well, it worked out. You got plenty of media exposure and a bestselling novel." He reached his hands behind his head. "So, where is it?"

"Where's what?"

"The novel...*Devils Windpipe*. Are you still doing some finishing touches?"

"No, I'm done."

"Well, get it to me so I can send it off to the publisher."

"That's not going to happen."

Bram leaned forward, placing his hands on the desk. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"I'm going to start my own publishing company."

Bram practically leaped from his chair. "That's a bad idea. Do you know how much time that will eat away from your writing schedule?"

"I'll have people do the work. And I have plenty of money to get it off the ground."

"But--"

"And another thing. I'm not calling the book, *Devils Windpipe*. I'm calling it, *Revelation, Inc.* It's about everything that Court and Marcus went through before starting the company, what I went through at Lake Montezuma, along with the twins, Drey Harten, and Rita Horton."

Bram marched around the desk. "Are you firing me as your agent?"

"Yes." Jon and Bram were now face-to-face. "Let me tell you why."

"Please do."

"Ruana Kelly was arrested a half-hour ago."

"Who's that?"

"The hotel manager at Beaver Creek Inn."

"What was she arrested for?"

"Kidnapping Devin Poulston."

"What does that have to do with firing me?"

"You did a great job getting Ruana involved, along with Norman Hertzler. I bet they jumped at the chance to make some easy money."

Bram stepped back. "You are sick in the fucking head."

"I'm guessing that once you made contact with Devin Poulston, you pretended to be speaking for his father."

"Get out of my office," Bram snapped. "And get some help."

"I had once been turned down by a hundred and forty-four publishers, just like *Chicken Soup for the Soul* had been. You referenced that when talking about me at your speaking engagements and interviews. I'm guessing that's where you got the idea for the letters."

Bram's cheeks turned a deep red. "Good luck finding a new agent after pulling this crap. No one will want to work with you!"

"I have my wife and close friends. I really don't need anyone else."

"Fuck off!" Bram shouted. "I sent you to Lake Montezuma because it sounded like a great story. What the hell happened to you over there?"

"Plenty," Jon said. "And I don't regret one second of it."

"Yeah, well, just remember that it was my idea."

"That's right. It was your idea. You can read about yourself in my book." Jon opened the door left.

## 126

***Jon Truss, Author***

***Court Truss, Bodyguard***

After Jon returned to Raleigh, he paced throughout the house while Court read his new manuscript. He ran on the treadmill, lifted weights, and hit the punching bag until he couldn't lift his arms. He took a long shower, then paced the house some more.

Now exhausted, he sat on the living room couch and just gazed at the fireplace. He studied each flame while focusing on the burning logs.

"I'm finished," Court said, jolting him from his trance. She sat down next to him on the couch and placed the manuscript on the coffee table. "I just have a few questions."

Jon hated that response. He wanted Court to come into the room and yell, 'That was the best damn story I've ever read!'

"What's wrong with it?" he asked.

Court looked at him for a long moment. "How did you know about Ruana Kelly?"

"It just came to me naturally in the story."

"Yeah, but...how long did you know she was involved?"

"What are you getting at?"

"I'm wondering which parts are fiction and which are real."

"I can't tell you that. It will ruin the book."

Court pulled in a deep breath. "And you think Bram was involved. He controlled Ruana Kelly and Norman Hertzler, because they were both desperate for money."

"That's what I wrote."

"But is that true?"

"You've never questioned me before, why now?"

"It's just..." Court averted her eyes for a moment. "There's another part that bothered me."

Jon sighed. "You're wondering about chapter 117, which is the scene where Cherub and I have sex."

"Yes...well...yes." Court ran her hand through her curly red hair. "The problem I'm having is with the twins. I told them to stay away from you."

"And?"

"I asked them if they went against my orders and then looked for you at Devils Windpipe, then saw you and Cherub together. I also asked if they witnessed Cherub kill herself and you ordering them to bury her in the valley."



"What did the twins say?"

"Both of them claim to have never left the hotel. They followed my orders and didn't go looking for you." Court pointed to the ring finger on his left hand. "You still have a scar from the wire cutters."

Jon looked at his finger, then rolled his eyes up. "I'm not sure what you want from me?"

"How about the truth?"

"It's just a book," Jon said.

"Which parts are fiction and which are real?"

"I'm not telling you. It will ruin the story."

Court stood, rubbed the back of her neck, then locked her eyes on Jon. "Did you have sex with an under aged girl?"

"I've written stories about brutal murders, rape, kidnappings, torture, and some other horrible things. You've never asked me if I really did those things, so why ask now?"

"People are going to read this story. They are going to look at you differently."

"So what you're saying is that no one will really believe I could murder someone, but they would believe I could have sex with a thirteen-year-old girl?"

"Yes...no...I'm not sure." Court plopped back down on the couch. "It's different."

"You mean it's sick."

"Yes, I guess that's what I mean. You went too far."

"But that's not your primary concern," Jon said, attempting to keep his voice calm. "You're wondering if it really happened."

"Did it?"

Jon laughed to himself. "Do I have to divulge all my secrets?"

"Just this once. Tell me if it really happened."

"No. I won't."

"Is Cherub really dead?"

Jon formed a grin. "I just love these moments, when the reader is captured by mystery and suspense. Please do not rob me of that thrill."

Court sighed. "Okay. You're right. I'm sorry." She gazed at him for a long moment. "I want to talk about the ending."

"What about it? I wrote the ending just moments before I printed the manuscript and handed it to you. No one else has seen it."

"Well, your ending is interesting. You wrote that Devin Poulston is alive. You wrote about how he and Cherub went to the Toy-Box cabin. Devin and Cherub agreed to keep what they had done a secret. They sealed that agreement by cutting their arms and pressing them together, so the blood would mix. Devin and Cherub became one."

"It's good...right?"

"Yeah, it's good. But, if you really thought that Devin was still alive, we shouldn't have left Lake Montezuma. We should have kept searching for him."

"Why?"

Court raised her hands. "You saw Kristy Poulston before we left. She was devastated. Maybe there was more we could have done."

"It's just book," Jon assured her. "Don't question every little thing."

"But..." Court placed her hands on her lap, then folded her fingers together. "Listen. I love the way you write. Actually, I'm in awe of what you do. But when does the fiction start and the reality end?"

"That's a decision the reader has to make. Let each person decide on their own what really happened. The reader can also rule out certain parts as fiction, which will give them peace of mind. But I'm not going to tell the reader what to think." He touched her hands. "Decide for yourself what fiction is and what reality is. Then live with that decision."

## 127

### ***Kristy Polston, Mother of Devin***

Kristy Poulston buttoned her jacket. The Arizona sun faded behind the valley as she entered Devils Windpipe. She found the large boulder and stood next to it.

An eerie chime or music drifted along the treetops. She wasn't sure if it was her imagination. "It's real," Kristy decided. She had to accept that everything she saw, everything she heard or felt, was real. No more hiding behind a wall with reality on the other side.

Her son is dead. That is reality. Her husband is dead. That is reality. She is alone in the world. That is real...

The vision appeared from the shadows of the trees as the sun continued to lower and the air cooled. Kristy had just made her peace with the world, but now, her son...Devin...was walking towards her.

*Real?*

*Not real?*

Once again, she questioned the eerie music that played in the distance. She questioned her insanity.

"Mom..." Devin said as he walked closer. He wore a shiny jacket with an Arizona Diamondbacks emblem. His jeans looked new. His shoes didn't have a speck of dirt.

"He's not here," Kristy said to herself.

The devil has been known to speak in this valley. The devil was also known for playing evil tricks. This was one of them.

Kristy began to shiver as Devin walked closer. He took off his jacket and placed it on the ground. He then sat on the jacket, looking up at her. "Mom, come here. Sit down with me."

Kristy could barely move. Her heart thundered against her chest. She stumbled forward, then kneeled. She opened her mouth to speak, but no words could be summoned.

"It's okay mom. I'm sorry for leaving."

Kristy reached out her trembling hand. She was terrified that if she touched Devin, he would disappear.

Her quivering fingers reached his arm. The skin was cold, but not the kind of cold that represented death. And Devin remained sitting next to her. He didn't fly away while the devil laughed at her.

Kristy noticed a scar on both arms in the shape of a cross. "What happened?" Her voice was barely audible. "Were you hurt?"

Devin glanced at his arms, then held his mother's hand. "It hurt a little bit. I'm okay."

Kristy pulled him close. She breathed in the scent of Devin's hair. She felt his heart beating.

This is real.

Tears drained from her eyes. "Where were you?"

"I had to leave," Devin said. "I'll tell you the whole thing, but not today."

A thousand questions raced through her mind.

*Where you forced to leave?*

*Where have you been?*

*Did someone hurt you?*

*Why couldn't anyone find you?*

*Who buried your bloody clothes next to the cabin?*

Kristy kept her hands on him, fearing that if she let go he would disappear forever. She rubbed the scars on his arms. "Did someone cut you?"

"No, I had to do that." Devin raised his arms, showing her. "I made a bloody cross."

It took several attempts for Kristy to say one word. "Why?"

Devin's eyes looked at his mother. His gaze became distant. "I had to protect myself from the devil..."

## 128

### **Revelation, Inc.**

**By Jon Truss**

### **Chapter One**

The world needs an occurrence of evil so that we may pledge a resolution to subdue the unsettled phantom that emerges at our bedside.

That's quite a mouthful and a little hard to swallow for the first sentence of a new book. Here's what it means.

The world needs evil to occur. Why? I don't know, but just look around. Evil doesn't always hide in the dark, or the shadows of alleyways. Evil can sometimes approach, introduce itself, then act in a manner to prove how dominate it is over our lives.

So what can we do? I believe you and I are already doing it. We pledge each day to find a solution to evil and subdue its power over us and the ones we love. We

even pray that evil won't harm others, including the people that we do not know. However...

*The phantom is unsettled.*

Evil doesn't like to be taken away. It emerges when we are weak. I believe that evil loves to stand at our bedside when we are asleep. How much more vulnerable can a person be?

Evil will tap on your shoulder when you least expect it. Evil is an electric razor that goes off in the bathroom while you are watching television. It breathes. It has arms and legs. It has the sweet scent of garbage baking in the sun.

When you want to escape, evil will hold you down and pin you into a helpless position. If you are taking a shower, evil will push its way into the steam of the water.

The black figure will cross over your body when sitting at the dinner table. It is frigid on her feet, yet burning your fingertips. It moves your socks around in the dresser. It rattles pieces of paper. A door will open and you will resist the feeling that you know to be true.

Evil is walking in.

It is a gateway, an opening to fear. It is when reality and unconsciousness meet in a perfect moment of eye fluttering dreams. It is exhausting, yet pumps your veins with great urgency.

It is there.

It is here.

It is exactly where you think it is.

Being by yourself will sharpen your sympathy, because you know that evil has spent many nights alone with those that are helpless.

840 feet away, evil will always lurk. Be aware of that distance, but do not search for what is following you.

Evil will sense your fear and use it as an invitation to rip apart what sanity you have left.

It is above.

It is below.

It is the message of which you hold.

The world needs an occurrence of evil.

We must pledge a resolution to subdue and unsettle the phantom that emerges at our bedside.

Along with the bedsides of others.

This is your Revelation. Believe in these words, because fiction and reality have drifted to a place in which I cannot seem to find anymore...

I would tell you the rest story, but I think you already know it.

They just wanted to go out for a quiet dinner. Instead, more problems would come their way.

Jon, Court, Marcus, Drey, Rita, and the twins entered The Pit barbeque restaurant and were escorted to a private room in the back. Jon liked this place, because of its terrific food, great service, and a mixture of high-class allure and easygoing bar atmosphere. Jon has met some of Raleigh's most prominent people here, but he had also come here with Court and the twins to watch football and relax with their friends.

The backroom seated twenty-six people. Court paid the \$1,500 fee in advance, which covered anything they wanted on the menu.

"A toast," Jon said, raising his glass of root beer. "To our new publishing company and to Revelation, Inc.!"

The group clinked glasses, all drinking something different, but all drinking alcohol, except for Jon.

Rita: "What should be our first order of business?"

Court: "You mean after we get drunk?"

Rita smiled. "Yes, after we get drun-"

Drey stood up. "Something's wrong."

The group stared at him. A second later, a gun went off in the main dining area. People screamed, glass broke, and someone barked out orders.

Marcus shook his head. "We are like magnets for violence."

A young man stormed into the room wearing a Carolina Panther's baseball cap and matching T-shirt. He held a gun to the head of a waitress that Jon knew well. Her name was Megan. She had been working here while going to school part-time to be a hairdresser.

Drey eased back down to his seat. "Damn we have some bad luck."

Rita: "I know. We didn't even eat yet."

"Shut up!" the man yelled. "Nobody move!"

Jon retrieved his voice recorder from his pocket. "Actually, this is good stuff."

"Shut up!" he yelled again, still pressing the long barrel of the gun on Megan's skull. "I need to think!"

Court leaned over to Marcus and whispered, "This is your area of expertise. Do something."

"Shit," Marcus said with a deep sigh. He stood up, holding his hands in a non-offensive position. "What's your name?"

"It doesn't matter!"

"Sure it does. Tell me your name."

"Webster!"

"Calm down Webster."

Jon raised his hand. "Hey Webster. What kind of gun is that?"

Marcus glared at him. "Will you be quiet?"

"I need to know for my book. I'm going to write about this."

Webster shouted, "Stop talking!"

Jon shifted in his chair. "That gun looks unique...Marcus, take a look."

"Fine," Marcus said, now studying the weapon. "It's a Safari Arms G.I. It has a long barrel, checkerboard handle, extended thumb safety, and satin stainless frame."

Jon had moved the recorder to the center of the table so all the voices would be picked up. "How many shots does it have?"

"Seven."

Webster raised the gun. "Why are all of you still talking?"

The sound of approaching sirens could be heard. Marcus brought his attention back on Webster. "Is the safety on?"

"No!"

"Put it on. No one will know the difference. You don't want to accidentally shoot that waitress."

"She's my girlfriend!"

Megan twisted her body. "I'm your ex-girlfriend! Leave me alone!"

## 130

Jon cleared his throat to get their attention. "So, how did you two meet?"

Court smacked him on the arm. "Would you shut the hell up?"

"I need background information for the story."

Marcus sighed. "Webster. The police are entering the building. You'll want to tell them to stay out of this room. Inform them that you will give your demands in a few minutes."

Webster looked confused. "How do I tell them?"

"They'll have someone knock on the door and speak with you. It will be a hostage negotiator. Tell him or her that you will release a hostage in the next five minutes. That will keep the police off your back and prevent them from storming in the room and killing everybody."

"Okay," Webster said.

Andrew leaned close to his sister and said, "Did you know that the word *barbecue* comes from the Caribbean phrase, *sacred fire pit*."

Ashley looked at him. "How did you know that?"

"Saw it printed on a napkin when we walked in the restaurant."

"Well, you learn something every day."

Court smacked her hand on the table. "Would you two be quiet!"

Webster shouted, "Everyone be quiet!"

A female voice sounded from the other side of the door. "Can I speak to the person with the gun?"

Marcus kept his voice low. "Okay, Webster. That's the hostage negotiator. Remember what I told you."

Webster kept Megan by his side, the gun still pointed at her, but the safety on. He approached the door. "Who's there?"

"This is Lieutenant Charlotte McGuire. I'm the hostage negotiator for the Raleigh Police Department. Can we talk a moment?"

Jon smiled. "That's incredible. Her name is Charlotte. The only thing better would be if her name was Raleigh."

Rita whispered to Drey, "So, how do you see all this turning out?"

"I don't know."

"You're psychic. Give me something."

"I'm too hungry and don't feel like thinking." He kissed her on the cheek. "I'm sure everything will turn out just fine."

"Thanks," Rita said. "That is reassuring."

Webster yelled at the door, "I will give you my demands in a few minutes. Also, I will be letting a hostage go. Do not come inside!"

"No one is coming in there," Charlotte assured him. "Can you open the door and let me make sure everyone is okay?"

Webster looked at Marcus with an expression that asked, *What should I do?*

Marcus whispered, "Don't let her open the door. That will give her a better picture of the situation. You want them guessing."

Webster shouted, "I'm not opening the door. Stay away!"

"That's fine. Just tell me what you want."

"I want my girlfriend back!"

"Is that the same girl you have hostage?"

"Her name is Megan and she is the love of my life."

Megan tried to squirm away, but Webster had a firm grip on her arm. "Leave me alone," she groaned. "Just let all of us go."

Charlotte said, "Megan, I need you to stay calm. Let me handle this."

"Fine!" Megan snapped.

Ashley whispered to Jon, "Do you want us to take him out? Andrew and I have the Taser's."

"Not yet," Jon said in her ear. "Let's see what happens."

Court shook her head. "You're killing me."

He gave her a quick peck on the cheek. "Oh come on, honey. You know you love me."

Rita chuckled. "I wonder if Webster knows how powerful this group is. The only thing worse would be if he walked into a room of Navy Seals."

Drey rubbed his stomach. "Speaking of dinner. Do you think they are keeping ours warm? Or is everyone escorted from the building?"

Webster shouted, "What are you talking about over there?"

"Stay calm," Marcus said. "Don't worry about them."

Jon raised his hand. "Hey Webster. Why did you two break up?"

Megan answered. "Because he's possessive. He followed me to work. To school. I couldn't go anywhere."

"That's not true!" Webster shouted, keeping the gun steady on her head. "I just loved you too much. Is that a crime?"

"Just let me go you loser."

Rita whispered across the table. "Um, Jon. Maybe we better let the twins take Webster down. This isn't going so well."

"What about you?" Jon asked. "You're trained."

"I'm not going near that maniac." Rita pointed to Court. "Maybe you should go."

"Nah," Court said. "Let the twins handle it. That's what we pay them for."

Marcus glared back at the table. "Do any of you want to come over here and handle this? If not, then you can keep the sidebar conversations to a minimum."

Webster shouted at the door. "Are you ready for my demands?"

"Go ahead," Charlotte responded with a calm tone.

"I want my girlfriend to love me. Once that happens, then I'll come peacefully."

“We can discuss that,” Charlotte said. “How about releasing a hostage now?”

Webster looked over the group. “Who wants to go first?”

Rita pointed to the twins. “Send both of them out.”

“Fine,” Webster said. “You two can go.”

Marcus stepped back, seeing the determination on the twins’ faces. He knew what was about to happen.

Before Webster could react, the twins pulled their Taser’s from behind their belt and fired two small probes each into Webster’s body, jolting him with a total of 100,000 volts.

Megan screamed, then ran out the door. The twins stood over Webster as the police rushed in.

“Well,” Jon said. “That was fun.” He clicked off the recorder as the police dragged Webster out of the room.

Drey looked around. “I wonder if the staff will come back in and serve us now? I’m starving.”

Marcus joined them at the table and guzzled down his drink. “I’ve seen more action in the last few weeks than my last few years on the force.”

Rita laughed. “The FBI was a piece of cake compared to this.”

Drey put his hand up. “Seriously, are they still going to feed us?”

Jon smiled and stood. “I’ll go see if the manager is outside.”

Jon walked from the room, catching a glimpse of Webster being shoved into a police cruiser. Then, Jon noticed someone standing across the street. She was staring right at him, as if she could see through the tinted restaurant windows.

Cherub.

