

# **Fatal Decision**

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# Chapter 1

"Sheldon we got a problem." I quickly place the phone back in its cradle and race down to the server room where I see Jim, my network manager frantically typing on a keyboard. He's somewhere in his late thirties, slightly overweight and wears thick glasses that look as though they were made out of the same glass they use in banks to separate the tellers from the customers. Behind him is Brian, he's our server guru. He's a tech-head, and as far as I can tell he has no other life other than this job. He just turned twenty-five, but he could easily pass for fifty. He is very slim with a receding gray hairline that he's had ever since he started working here.

"What's going on?" I ask.

Jim slowly turns his head and looks at me. His expression is sour. "It's not looking good Sheldon. I think we have a virus. We now have six more servers down. I've never seen anything like this before." He looks behind him at one of seven large-enclosed racks containing our thirty-five servers. Each rack is about six feet tall and resembles a robot from a sci-fi movie. "I don't think we're going to make it in time."

I feel my phone vibrating in my pocket. I try to ignore it but I know what will happen if our servers go down and production stops. We are a large defense contracting company where every minute counts. Time is money as they say in our business. My phone continues its vibrating crusade and feels like it is going to shake itself right out of my pocket, so I decide I better answer it. I take a jump back hearing Michelle's voice.

"Tommy is missing."

"What?" I hear the word come out of my mouth, but I can't tell if it is actually coming from me or someone else.

"He didn't come out and they were dismissed twenty minutes ago." I feel the air getting stuck in my lungs.

"He's probably talking to his teacher or something."

"I just saw his teachers and they said he was dismissed early. I'm going to check with the office now"

"What?" I yell again causing Jim and Brian to look at me curiously. "How could he do that?"

"He can't. Only an adult can sign him out. Hold on a second they're looking through the log." I don't answer I just stare into the black screen in front of me.

"He was signed out by Lawrence."

"My brother?"

"Yep."

"Hold on. I'll call him right now." I ignore all the incoming email and calls and hang up the phone. There's no way Lawrence would pick Tommy up without telling us. We added him to the emergency list because we are supposed to provide two people for alternative pick-ups, but Lawrence lives and works in DC. He answers his phone on the second ring, business must be slow today. "Lawrence,

do you have Tommy?" I hear him clear his throat; obviously confused by my question and tone.

"No, I don't have Tommy. Is there something wrong?"

"I'm not sure. He didn't come out of school today and the log says you signed him out."

"Can't be me. I've been in court almost all day. How can it say that?"

"I don't know, but I have to go. Thanks. If you hear from him please let me know."

"I promise. Let me know if I can help." I quickly end the call and redial Michelle.

"He doesn't have him." I can hear her breathing quickly.

"The lady at the desk remembers him coming in. He showed his license and everything. She even described him."

"He said he was in court all day. Something's not right. I'll be right there." I look over at Brian and Jim who are until desperately trying to get the servers back up and stop this crisis.

"I got to go guys. My son is missing." I can't believe I just said that. It sounds so surreal. They both look at me for an answer so I say. "I'm sure it's nothing, I should be right back. Keep trying to figure out what's going on here and let me know." I throw my stuff down on an empty table, and feel my legs and feet moving below me in a direction and speed unbeknownst to me. The next thing I know, I'm in my car heading for the school. I arrive at the school and park my Tahoe right out front where I think the buses usually park, but I don't care. I don't see Michelle or Tommy anywhere, so I run in through the front door, it's unlocked but I guess that's because it's after hours. As soon as I see the main office I see Michelle seated in a chair her hands covering her face.

"Do you know where he is?" She looks up at me. Her face is ringing with stress.

"No, they said your brother came and got him around one." I look at the group of women gathered behind me looking concerned. I immediately recognize one of them as the Principal, Mrs. Jackson. She's a small stocky woman somewhere in her mid to late fifties who must get her hair permed at least once a month because it always looks the same. Tight short curls.

A frail looking woman with sandy-colored hair who has to be close to retirement age walks over to me and says, "She's right Mr. Smith, your brother came and signed him out. We made him show his driver's license because we have never seen him before." I look closely at the woman. I can see the pain in her face. I think she's one of the assistants who work in the office. I think I have seen her before.

"Shouldn't you call us if someone comes and tries to pick our son up?" I yell. The Principal steps between me and the woman.

"He's on your emergency pickup list and we ID'd him." I shake my head and look at Michelle.

"You better call Lawrence again Sheldon." She places her head back in her hands. I pull out my cell phone and start dialing. I hear the Principal tell the other ladies to search the school again, and then call the police. I feel myself start to gasp when Lawrence answers.

"Hey Sheldon, any news on Tommy?" I can hear the rustling of papers in the background.

"The school is claiming you came and got him at 1:00 today. Even showed them your driver's license and signed for him." I look down at the log and sure enough it looks like my brother's signature. I have seen it enough times since he has been our acting attorney since Michelle and I got married. "It's your signature Lawrence."

"I don't know what they're talking about I was in court at 1:00. You can check with the judge and the bailiff if you don't believe me." I hear him breathing harder on the phone.

"I do Lawrence. I do. I just don't understand where he is. Hold on a second." I quickly pull out my iPhone and find the picture I am looking for it's my brother and me at my birthday last year. I hold it up to the secretary. Her face is now full of perspiration and her hair is a little more out of place. "Is this the guy that picked up Tommy?" She grabs my phone and stares at the screen for a minute and then shakes her head. "I'm not sure...I mean he looked sort of like that, maybe a little bigger though." I look down at the phone. I somehow disconnected Lawrence, but if he was in court how could he have taken Tommy. He knows we could easily check that so why would he lie. I hear the sirens in the distance and look at Michelle. She hasn't moved. Two custodians enter the office and shake their heads. I hear them telling the Principal they have checked the entire school and didn't find Tommy. Everything is beginning to blur. I feel my head spinning around everything is out of control. I can't believe Tommy is missing. I want to start screaming. The next thing I know I'm sitting down next to Michelle. Her hands are on my shoulders. I see police officers begin to filter in and quickly disperse. I guess they are checking the building and immediate area. Two men in suits walk in and Mrs. Jackson briefly speaks to them and then points them toward us.

"Mr. Smith, my name is Detective Stanton and this is Detective Adams." I reach my hand out and shake the large man's hand. He's probably around my age, but has at least three inches and fifty pounds on me. He has a thick head of dark hair parted neatly to the left. He points at the smaller man, who introduces himself as Detective Adams. He is roughly the same age but much smaller and fairer with glasses and is losing his light thin hair. They almost appear as opposites. Michelle briefly looks up and acknowledges both of them. I feel my phone vibrating and ringing incessantly in my pocket. "Do you need to get that?" Detective Adams quickly asks. I immediately reach down and look at the number being displayed.

"It's my work. We have a small crisis going on." Michelle looks at me and then turns away. I put the phone back in my pocket. I watch Detective Stanton get the log from Mrs. Jackson. He scans it quickly.

"So tell me who Lawrence is?" He has a very authoritative voice.

"He's my brother. I just spoke with him and he was in court at 1:00." The detective nods and hands the book to Adams.

"We'll need to confirm that because we have his signature and a positive ID. Has he ever picked up your son before?"

Michelle quickly answers no.

"We just have him on the list in case neither of us could get here in time. We live too close for Tommy to take the bus, so he's considered a walker. We don't let him

walk home alone because we don't want anything to happen to him...and now he's gone." I feel my voice trembling.

"We've got officers searching the school and the nearby neighborhood. If you have any recent pictures that would help." I immediately pull out my iPhone again and show them some pictures of Tommy from about a month ago. The Detective takes my phone and emails the pictures somewhere. I'm not sure to whom and I really don't care. "We've also got a helicopter on the way and we've already put out an amber alert, so if he's nearby we will find him."

"Has this ever happened before?" The detective looks at Mrs. Jackson who shakes her head no.

"Not around here as far as I know. Usually it involves a custody thing, but both of you are here. There's no one else involved right? No other spouse or anything?"

I shake my head. "Nope, just us and Lawrence who is always so busy we only see him a few times a year."

"Does he have a family?"

"No, it's just him. He's always working."

"Okay. We will need to check him out. Detective Adams is already contacting DC to verify his alibi."

I nod my head. I can't believe he just said alibi. How can this be happening? "So what do we do now?"

"We hold tight. We need to let the officers do their jobs and let the Amber alert get out." He looks around the office. "Do you have a TV in here?" Mrs. Jackson quickly opens a wooden cabinet and a large CRT TV pops out. She turns it on to a local station and on the screen is Tommy. I look over at Michelle who is just staring at the screen; her eyes glassy. I can't stop looking at the screen either. I'm mesmerized seeing my son's face.

"Tommy. Tommy." Michelle is calling out. I place my arm around her and she buries her face into my shoulder. We both can't help but start to cry. I feel the tears streaming down my face and on my shirt from Michelle. The Detectives are speaking into their phones. We remain this way for about ten minutes. I keep glancing at the screen seeing Tommy's face smiling back at me.

"Mr. and Mrs. Smith, we just confirmed your brother was in court this afternoon, so that leaves us with who picked him up and how did he get your brother's driver's license."

I take out my phone and dial Lawrence's number again. He answers it after the first ring. "Lawrence, the police just confirmed you were in court. Do you have your driver's license?" I hear shuffling in the background.

"Got it right here."

"Thanks Lawrence. Somehow they got a copy of your license."

"I'll head right over there. I'm going to call some of my contacts on the way."

I nod my head into the phone. "Thanks." I look at the two detectives who are standing in front of us now. "He has his license with him." I watch as they both look at each other.

"That means we have a fake license and it's someone who knows who is on your emergency pickup list, any ideas?" I look at Michelle and she stares back at me shaking her head.

"I can't think of anyone or any reason for someone to know that. I don't even think Tommy knows that Lawrence is on his list."

The detective looks at the frazzled secretary. She says, "It's all on the computer. I think only the office staff can access it."

"She's right, there are only a handful of us in here and I'm sure the IT folks." Mrs. Jackson slowly answers, her eyes glued to the TV as it begins to show images of Blue Creek Elementary.

"We'll need to check everyone out." Detective Stanton takes out a small notepad.

"I think everyone you need is in this room." Mrs. Jackson looks around. I decide I need to get out of here. I head out the door and step outside into the lobby. It's a normal elementary school lobby. There are a few benches for parents to wait on for their kids and PTA signs taped to the cinder walls. There's even a small monitor displaying today's events and the lunch menu. Pizza today, Tommy's favorite. I head outside and as soon as I step onto the sidewalk, I feel like I'm on a movie set. There are police cars everywhere, helicopters flying above me and news vans with their spiraling antennas setting up in the parking lot. I can't believe it, it doesn't feel real. I want to start screaming Tommy's name, but it probably won't do any good with the sound of all those rotors above me. I slowly walk around to the side of the school. It's a fairly large school for an elementary. I think I heard Tommy tell me there were almost eight hundred kids here. How can it be my kid missing with all these kids? I look up at the sky and hope God is up there somewhere keeping an eye on Tommy. I'm not a regular church going guy, but I do believe in God, and Tommy and I have spent a lot of time talking about him. I hope he's looking above now for support as well. I end up behind the school near the playground equipment. I can see the officer's shadows moving through the woods, but I try not to watch them. I climb up to the top of the slide and end up sitting up there. I close my eyes trying to imagine Tommy is okay. I know they say the more time that goes by the less chance you're going to find someone, but I wonder why someone would go through so much trouble to take Tommy just to hurt him. I mean we have no enemies and I know Tommy doesn't for sure. I don't think he's ever got into any kind of fight or anything. I don't know how much time goes by, but after what seems like hours Michelle, the two detectives and Lawrence approach me from the side of the school.

"He's not the one who picked up Tommy." Detective Stanton points at Lawrence. The secretary is adamant it was someone else." I slowly climb down the steps and embrace Lawrence who hugs me back. We remain there until the detective tells us we need to go home in case Tommy tries to contact us. I look at my watch and notice the game should be starting any minute now. Tommy should be standing next to third base, not on a TV screen above the words "Amber Alert".

## Chapter 2

We finally arrive back home and the house is way too quiet. I feel like screaming just to hear my voice. I see the answering machine indicating we have three new

messages. I carefully listen to each one, but I am let down after hearing they are not from Tommy. Instead, they are all from parents of the kids on the team wondering where we are. My iPhone is vibrating non-stop, I check each time to see if it's him, but it's just callers from work wanting to know about the server crisis. I decide to deal with them later. I'm not really sure why I keep checking, because Tommy's phone is upstairs on his dresser. The reason I know that is because I just called it and heard it ringing the latest Katy Perry hit. I decide to head upstairs and I end up standing outside Tommy's room just looking at his empty bed. The dark blue comforter is pulled up tight to the head of the bed. Definitely not Tommy's doing. He takes after me as far as that kind of thing goes. Michelle is always getting after us for not making the bed or cleaning up. The two detectives and Michelle are downstairs. I can hear them talking. I need to stay away from them, it's too depressing. They think Tommy may try and contact us here, but I think what they're really saying is someone else may try and contact us; so we're told to sit tight which is something I really don't feel like doing right now. I need to go search for him. Michelle is already on the phone calling every friend or parent he has ever come into contact with just in case, but I'm pretty sure if he left with a stranger he is probably with him. The detectives have a sketch of the man that called himself Lawrence. There is definitely a resemblance between him and my brother. The police took Lawrence to the police station to try and figure out how or why someone got a hold of his driver's license and probably ask him a few more questions, but I think everyone is pretty convinced it wasn't him that came and got him. I hear Michelle slowly coming up the steps behind me.

"Did anyone see him?"

She nods her head back and forth. "I called as many as I could and no one has seen him since this morning."

I hug her close to me and feel her arms wrap behind my shoulders. "The part I just can't seem to understand is why would Tommy go with a complete stranger and not say anything."

"I've been thinking about that too. He must have said something to him." I hold her tighter.

"Like what though. I mean he had to know it wasn't Lawrence. There's no way." I hear someone behind us.

"There might be a way." Detective Stanton says in a low voice just above a whisper. "The secretary remembered Tommy being upset, almost crying."

"What's that mean?" I release Michelle a little.

"It could mean a lot of things. Like maybe the man told him something happened to one of you and he had to go with him."

"But wouldn't he have heard him tell the secretary his name was Lawrence?" I ask. "I mean I know he's only thirteen, but he's not that naïve."

"Not necessarily. Apparently the man had already signed Tommy out when he came into the office, so all that would have taken place before Tommy even got there."

"But Tommy would ask who the guy was?" Michelle replies.

"According to the school he was waiting right by the door, so he got to Tommy before anyone could hear what was said. Remember they said Tommy looked sad."

"What was the official reason for signing him out?" I ask.

"Again, this is according to the school and you may know better than me, but you don't have to have an official reason for signing your kid out." He pauses and talks even quieter. I have to lean in. "The secretary was told it was an emergency and the guy wouldn't go any further than that. He wasn't a man of many words." I hear footsteps coming up the stairs behind him and see Detective Adams eagerly appear.

He stops at the top of the stairs, "Maybe some good news." I feel my heart begin to flutter and Michelle's grip on me tighten. "It looks like the school has surveillance footage. We're getting it right now. Maybe we'll be able to see a car or how they left." I feel a twinge of excitement shoot through my body though I was hoping for some better news, but seeing how fast Stanton and Adams run back down the stairs it does give me some hope. Michelle and I head to our bedroom and sit on the edge of the bed. We're not sure what to do. Our son is missing and we can't do anything except wait. I don't think I can just sit here. I walk over to the window. We live on a fairly quiet cul-de-sac where everyone knows everyone but no one really does anything together unless it's our annual Fourth of July party where we shut down the road and cook out on grills. It's really a lot of fun and we all promise to do more together each year, but we all get busy with our lives. I see about five or six news vans parked along the curb as well as several police cars both marked and unmarked. There's also a small gathering of people, who I recognize as our neighbors gathered across the street on the Henson's lawn. They have two boys, one is a little younger than Tommy and the other is a few years older. Last I heard the older boy was some kind of computer genius. I look back at Michelle. She is crying again; her head is in her hands. The phone keeps ringing. I check the caller ID every time, but they are all from media outlet; so I just let them go to the machine. I need to do something. I walk down to Tommy's room and suddenly stop at the doorway seeing someone in his room.

"Can I help you?" I ask. There's a man going through Tommy's things.

"Hi Mr. Smith. I'm Evidence Technician Sanderstrom." He holds out his hand. I give him a light shake. Detective Stanton wanted me to check for anything that might be of use in finding your son." I nod my head and walk out. I head downstairs and don't see either detective, instead there are four or five uniform police officers standing in our living room. One of them is looking at our phone. I think they say something, but I just nod and head for the kitchen, luckily it is empty. I sit at the bar counter that we recently put in that separates our kitchen from our dining room. It is oak with matching granite counter tops and three comfortable swivel bar stools with backs. It was actually Tommy's idea. I think he saw it in a friend's house. I wish Tommy was seated beside me. I grab a few pretzels that are in a bag on the bar even though I'm not hungry. I actually feel nauseous, but it feels good to be doing something. I can hear the officer's radios screeching away in the next room and every time I hear a voice I try and listen to see if it's about Tommy, but a lot it is code so I just tune it out. I have never dealt with the police, but I have always felt like I trusted them. I just hope they are doing everything possible to try and find him. I suddenly get the idea to go out and begin looking for Tommy myself. I'm not sure where to go or what to even look for. I hope that surveillance video has something useful on it. I slowly walk back into the living room past the officers and head for the garage. As soon as I open the



door, I hear them all start yelling at once. The one that was near the phone walks over to me. He appears to be around thirty and very tall, probably at least 6'5", so I stop.

"I'm sorry Mr. Smith, but we need you to stay here in case anyone tries to contact you." I guess carrying the keys in my hand was a dead giveaway.

"I just want to go look for Tommy."

He nods. "I understand, but we have every available officer looking for him." I slowly turn around and walk back towards the kitchen. As soon as I enter I hear Detective Adams and Stanton coming through the front door. I quickly turn around, my feet slide across the linoleum.

"Mr. Smith we need you to come look at this picture." I walk towards the two detectives. Adams is holding a large picture on a piece of white paper from a printer. He holds it towards me and I gasp so loudly, Stanton puts his arm on my back.

"Are you okay?"

"Does that mean you recognize this guy?" Adams looks at me. I can see his pupils dancing around excitedly. I shake my head no. I feel my body begin to tremble as I continue to stare at the picture. I'm not looking at the man, I don't recognize him. I'm looking at something else. It's something he is holding.

"What is it?" Stanton asks.

"Nothing, it's just seeing the guy who took Tommy." I look at the picture again. This time I don't look at the object and instead concentrate on the man's face. He is strikingly similar to Lawrence, but he is much broader and taller. He looks like a very fit athlete, the kind with muscles rippling through his body. He has dark features and closely cropped hair that is pushed back off his forehead, probably uses hair gel. I'd say he is somewhere in his thirties. The picture is taken outside the school. I recognize the exterior of the building.

"What is it Sheldon?" Michelle is standing on the bottom step.

"Can you please come take a look at the picture taken from the surveillance camera Mrs. Smith?" Stanton asks speaking much quieter and gentler. Michelle nods and walks over to the detectives, looks at the picture briefly and shakes her head no. Her eyes are full of tiny red streaks from crying. I watch Stanton thank her; then she immediately heads back upstairs and disappears.

"So what now?" I ask.

"We wait. We have the phones ready to go. We both look at the officers in the living room.

"What if no one calls?"

"They'll call. Someone went to way too much trouble to get him away from school." Stanton looks back at the photo.

"We have nothing to offer them. We're not rich by any means, middle class at best. There are plenty of other people that have a lot more money than we do." I look around our living room. It's well decorated, but it's by no means lavish. The most significant feature is the fifty-inch screen above the fireplace, but it's certainly not enough to bring Tommy back.

Stanton follows my eyes. "That's what we need to find out. Maybe Tommy has something he wants."

I shake my head. "He barely gets an allowance."

"Any drug use?" I stare at Stanton and then shake my head.

"How about friends into drugs or alcohol or anything?"

"He's thirteen, Detective. How much could he be into?"

"I hear you, but after eighteen years on the job I have seen it all." I watch as Adam's nods in agreement.

"The biggest thing he's into is sneaking a drink of soda or candy when his mom isn't looking, other than that he's a good kid who's into the normal early teenage stuff." I look behind me as the evidence technician who was in Tommy's room enters the living room.

"Nothing guys. I even checked his phone." He looks at me. "That was his phone right?" I nod. "I'm heading over to his school next." I watch him exit out the front door.

"This just doesn't make sense." Stanton grunts and slides his foot along the carpet in frustration. "Can you think of any reason anyone would do this? Any problems at work? With friends? Anything?"

"I shake my head. "There's nothing. Our biggest concern is getting Tommy to school, baseball and his homework, after that and our jobs there's no time for anything else. You know how it is." They both nod in agreement. "Could you get anything off the cameras?"

"Nothing more than the picture you saw. The footage doesn't go beyond the sidewalk area so we can't see the parking lot."

"Can I go try and find him?"

"What do you mean?" Stanton looks confused.

"I mean. I can't sit here and wait all night. I need to find him. I would rather be out looking than waiting."

"I can only imagine how you feel Mr. Smith but if someone calls, they're going to want to talk to you and that may be our only chance." Stanton gives me a hard look.

"How long do we wait?"

I watch his eyes look at the floor. "I don't have an answer for that, but with the Amber Alert and every officer searching for him, I'm hoping it is soon."

"I'm going out first thing in the morning if we don't hear anything." I quickly turn around and head upstairs. I think I hear him answer back...something about he would do the same thing if it were his kid, but I don't look back. I just keep on walking up the stairs and fall onto Tommy's bed.

## **Chapter 3**

I watch the sun finally start to rise through our living room windows. Michelle's head is resting on my shoulder. Her eyes are glassy from worry and lack of sleep. We have spent the night on about the fourth or fifth step on our staircase. Our house is built with the main entrance opening into the living room directly across from the staircase. We decided to spend the night here, so we could hear if there was any news about Tommy. We heard nothing. The two detectives left a few

hours ago; probably to go home and try to get some sleep before taking on another long and challenging day. From what I understand, this kind of thing doesn't happen too often in this area. It has occurred before, so they know the procedures to follow. We live in a small community in Northern Virginia far enough away from the confusion of Washington, DC, but close enough to enjoy some of the events happening in the vicinity of a major city. I'm not really sure how we ended up here, but I got out of the military and Michelle was interning in DC, so we both just decided to stay and make the best of it. Now some twenty years later we're still here with our only child missing and apparently not a clue to where he has gone or who took him. I really thought someone would at least recognize the man that took Tommy. They must have showed his picture a thousand times on the TV last night alongside Tommy's, but not one call or sighting from anyone. Our phone has been ringing all night long, but it has been one media agency after another. One of the police officers was assigned to answer our calls and he has been deflecting them all night long. I did answer one call on my iPhone from Randy, our CEO to let him know the status of Tommy. He said they would be there for me and if I needed anything to let him know. I didn't ask him about the server situation. It seems so unimportant now. In fact, everything else does as well. We can see the TV from where we are sitting. They had it tuned to one of the local stations and all night they kept broadcasting local and national news stories that any other time I would have been glued to the TV for, but last night I just closed my eyes. After a while, I couldn't even watch the stories about Tommy without getting myself more upset. I feel Michelle's grip tighten on me as the front door opens. Detective Stanton and Adams enter. They both look tired. They are wearing different clothes, so hopefully they at least went home for a little while. They speak to the officers who were in our house last night and shake their heads. Stanton looks at us and walks over to the bottom of the steps.

"Sorry guys, we didn't get anything last night. We are back on it today and hopefully we'll have better luck today, now that the pictures are out there." He looks at us more closely. I can see the bags under his eyes. "Why don't you guys try and get something to eat?" We both shake our heads. Michelle immediately stands up and runs up the stairs. I hear her go into the bathroom and begin to vomit. I stand up slowly stretching my shoulder where she had her head all night. It is a little stiff. I walk down the steps and step into the living room. There are three officers seated on the chairs. One of them is looking directly at our phone.

"Why aren't they calling?"

Detective Stanton looks at me and then the phone. "Sometimes they like to wait until they feel they are in a secure enough place. It usually happens within twenty-four hours."

I nod. "Isn't there anything else we can do?"

"I wish there was, but without an ID on the guy or a car there's not too much we can do except search and wait for something to come up." He looks down at the floor.

"What's the success rate on these usually?"

"It all depends. There all different. Once we figure out the motivation here we should be able to get a grip on this."

"It's true though the more time that goes by the less of a chance right?" I look directly into his dark brown eyes.

He slowly nods his head. "That's usually true in missing person's cases, but this is different. I mean someone came in and got Tommy to voluntarily go somewhere with him."

"I don't understand that." I think back to the photograph of what was in the man's hand. "He knows better than that."

"Remember what I told you. He could have told him something happened to you or your wife and he had to go."

"But why would someone want him to go with them?" I hear Michelle coughing upstairs.

"That's what we need to find out. I'm planning on going back to the school and talk to that secretary and everyone in that office to see if they noticed anything else. By the way, they cancelled school today."

"I'm going to head out and search for him myself. I can't stay here anymore." I start to back away from him.

"I can't tell you not to, but I wish you would stay here in case they try and call. I'll talk to Mike and see if he can forward your calls to your cell." He looks at the officer seated near our phone.

I nod and head upstairs to check on Michelle. I find her kneeling beside the toilet, her face full of tears and anguish. I grab a towel and wipe her mouth clean. "We'll find him Michelle I promise. I'm going to look for him right now." I'm not sure where I'm going, but at least it's better than waiting around for nothing to happen, though I don't tell her that. "Why don't you go lie down? They're going to patch our phone to my cell in case he calls." She just nods. I lead her to our room and place her on the bed. I stand and watch over her for a minute until her eyes close. I quickly walk back down the stairs. Both detectives are gone, so I head towards the garage and stop when I hear Mike ask me for my phone. I hand him my iPhone. He has short brown hair and a face that should be used on a recruitment poster for the police. The guy just looks about as much like an officer if there is one. I don't think he could ever go undercover. He has a face like Clint Eastwood and a military posture that immediately tells someone he's a cop. He hands me back my phone and tells me I'm all set. I quickly walk out the door and turn the ignition on my Chevy Tahoe. I stop for a second and close my eyes seeing Tommy's glove and bat lying in the back seat. I start yelling "please let me find him...please," so loudly that I see the door going into the house open and an officer looks out at me. I wave him off and back out and down the small driveway. As soon as I reach the road, I see the news vehicles and reporters trying to get my attention. I recognize some of them, but I just keep on driving and ignoring them until they're out of sight behind me. I make sure no one is following me when I pull onto the main road out of our community. I'm not sure where to go, but somehow the truck takes me to the ball field Tommy's team plays on. It's empty now except for a group of Canadian Geese milling about. They ignore my truck as it kicks up dirt and dust from the parking area. I park along the first base line of the field we were supposed to play at last night. I'm one of the coaches. I wonder if they even played. I step out and walk over to the bleachers and climb up to the top row. It's so quiet. I try to imagine Tommy standing out there at third base fielding

grounders when everything just hits me all at once. I can't stop crying and shaking. My face is full of tears and I can't feel anything in my body. I'm not sure how long I stay like this, but I jump to the sound of my iPhone ringing. I quickly answer it and say hello without even thinking; it's probably another news organization.

"Hello." I say. I don't hear any response. "Hello...hello. I'm here." No response. I begin to wonder if they tried to forward the call and it didn't work. I wonder if our only chance was just lost because of technology. I start screaming "Hello" over and over and finally I hear a click. I immediately start to dial our home number when I see the same call come in again. I look at the screen and it says "private" again. I wonder if that's how they forward the calls. I feel every bone in my body tremble with anxiety as I answer the phone.

"Hello." I say as calmly as possible.

"Hello Sheldon." A voice answers. It's one I'm not familiar with. I don't think it's either of the detectives.

"Who is this?" I feel myself becoming agitated. I'm waiting for the voice to identify itself as a reporter.

"It's me of course." I can't tell anything about the person speaking. It's a male, but he has one of those voices that defies all ages, sizes and races. "Are you missing anything?"

"Is this about Tommy?" I'm out of breath.

"I asked are you missing anything. Simple question I should say."

"If this is about Tommy, please tell me he is okay."

"Apparently you're not listening to my question Sheldon." There is a long pause and I want to scream. "Let's try this one more time or I'll hang up. Are you missing anything?"

"Yes." I yell into the phone, "My son. Where the hell is he?"

"Such anger for a sophisticated man like yourself." He is quietly laughing. "I may have what you're looking for indeed."

"Is he okay? Let me talk to him." I am squeezing the phone so hard my knuckles are turning white.

"Slow down, first things first. Why don't you sit up first? You're all hunched over there on those bleachers." I immediately stand up and begin looking around. "Relax. You're not going to be able to find me."

"Where's Tommy? Tell me where Tommy is." I'm looking in every direction.

"First of all, sit back down." I want to throw the phone. "I need you to do a couple of things for me first."

"What are you talking about? Do you have my son?"

"We'll get to that matter in a moment Sheldon. First I need you to agree to do a couple of things first."

I don't say anything for a minute. I'm wondering if Mike, the police officer is monitoring this call. "No let's talk about Tommy now." I yell. I hope they're tracing this right now. I'm waiting for Stanton to show up.

"I thought you might respond like this, so here's the deal. You do the little favor I ask of you and I'll let you see what I have that is yours." He pauses. "Also, stop looking for me or for your little detective friends they have no idea we are talking. I

believe they are only monitoring your home phone. This call will not exist after we disconnect."

"Who are you? Why do you have him?" I'm out of breath.

"We'll discuss that at a later time. Just do what I ask and I'll return what belongs to you. No harm no foul."

"What do you want me to do?" I slowly sit back down.

"Thank you for sitting back down. Now we can conduct some business." I listen closely trying to place the voice. "I need you to drop off the envelope on the back seat of your car at the Commonwealth Bank on Route 236 and Lee."

"There's no envelope in my back seat." I'm screaming.

"Take a breath Sheldon. The deposit slip is all filled out and in your back seat. All you have to do is give it to the teller."

"Then I'll get Tommy?" I have never felt so anxious. My hands are trembling, but I'm trying to keep my voice steady.

"As soon as you complete that, check your phone and you'll see what I have. Then you can tell me if that's what you want back."

"If you hurt him, I'll kill you."

I hear nothing. "Easy...easy, no need to get so worked up. Just follow my directions and I'll return what's not mine in the same condition. Don't follow my directions or talk to anyone, including those two nice detectives and I'll return what you want in not so good condition. You understand?"

I nod my head. "I'll do what you want. Please don't hurt him. He's just a kid. He didn't do anything wrong."

"Just do what I ask. The call ends. I'm still yelling and checking the phone, but he's gone. I can't believe it. That was the guy that has Tommy."

## Chapter 4

I jump up off the bleachers and run towards the parking lot and open the door of the Tahoe. Sure enough, on the back seat is a large thick manila envelope. I open it up and peak inside. It is full of cash. More than I have ever seen. I quickly leaf through the bills. They are all hundred's. I don't even consider taking this to the police. I can't take the chance of something happening to Tommy. I slam my hand down on the seat and take one more look at the money. I stare in disbelief and start the engine up. Ten minutes later, I'm seated in the parking lot of the bank. It's the same bank we use, but a branch I have never been to before. I think it might be the main branch due to the size and amount of cars in the parking lot. I gather up the large envelope and step into the bank. It's not too crowded. I found the deposit slip earlier, so I wait in line for a minute or so behind an elderly lady and hand the slip to the teller. She looks young and refreshed. I watch her eyes as she gasps at the sum on the slip, 1.5 million dollars. She can't believe I have that much cash, but I hand her the envelope and about fifteen minutes later, she hands me a receipt and lets me know a currency transaction report will be filed due to the amount of money, but I just shrug. I quickly sign it and rush back to

the Tahoe. As soon as I close the door, my phone rings and I see the same "private" message flash on my iPhone's screen.

"Very nice job Sheldon, you are now a millionaire. That money was placed in your account."

"What are you talking about? I yell into the phone.

"Just as I promised, you will receive a token of my thanks. Please check your email as soon as we hang up."

"What about Tommy?"

"Relax Sheldon. Take another breath. You will see what I have on your phone in a moment and let me know if that is yours. By the way, remember our deal about not telling the law enforcement officials or I might damage what you want. Also, you should enjoy the second email. Wonder what the police would say if they saw that. We'll be in touch."

I throw the phone on the seat. He is gone again, but I immediately pick it up again hearing it begin to vibrate. There are two new emails, both with attachments. They are both marked private as the sender, something I have never seen before. I open the first one and click on the attachment. I can't believe it, there is Tommy. He's lying on a bed in a small room. He doesn't look injured. He has a laptop in his hand and behind him I can see a large screen TV with what looks like a Wii and a few other gaming systems. There are also tons of books around him. The video immediately cuts out. I try to hit replay, but it doesn't work. I go back to my inbox and try to open the email again, but it has been deleted. I can't believe this. I open the second email and again there is an attachment. I click on it and another video begins to play. It's me at the Commonwealth Bank handing the teller the envelope full of cash. I don't understand how he could have gotten that. He's right, what would the police think if they saw that the next day after my son was kidnapped? I quickly close the email and like the first one, the attachment and email vanish. I set the phone down and quickly pull out of the parking lot. I look in the rear view mirror and don't recognize the guy staring back at me. I don't know what to think. I'm happy seeing Tommy is okay, at least I think he is from that video, but I'm terrified because he's in that monster's hands. I know I can't tell the police or anyone, but I need to go home and see if there are any developments. I reach the house about twenty minutes later. There seem to be a few more people gathered out front. Some of them appear to be holding pictures. As I get closer, I can see they are carrying pictures of Tommy. I stop the Tahoe opposite our front lawn and roll down the window. I'm immediately attacked by a mob of people. Most of them holding microphones, but a lot of them are neighbors and colleagues from work. They must be organizing a search party. I want to get out and thank each one of them, but I just yell out the window thanking them and pull into the driveway and into our garage. Michelle's Accord is in there, so she must be home. I've been gone for hours, though I'm not really sure how long it's been since I don't know what time it was when I left. I feel so confused with all that happened and seeing Tommy on that video. I keep replaying the ten or fifteen second video over and over in my head. I'm tempted to open the door to the house and tell everyone what happened, but I decide not to as soon as I enter and Michelle and the two detectives stare at me.

"Sheldon, where have you been all day?" I look at the clock and see it's after 4:00. Michelle quickly walks across the room and places her arms around me.

"Just looking for Tommy, did you guys hear anything?" Michelle looks at Stanton. I feel my stomach begin to jump around.

"We think we got a break on the vehicle. A parent coming to pick up her kid around the same time remembers seeing a light-blue Jeep Cherokee pulling out when she came in. We're searching for it now." He looks at Adams and the other officers seated in the living room. I see Mike seated by the phone. "We didn't hear anything yet, but like I said before they could be waiting until they feel more secure. I feel myself begin to have trouble breathing, like my throat is closing in.

"What's wrong Sheldon?" Michelle asks clutching me.

I cough. "I just thought we would hear something by now." I take a seat on the couch. The officer sitting there quickly jumps up to allow Michelle to sit next to me.

"You sure you're okay Mr. Smith?" Stanton is looking at me very hard. I can see his pupils dancing around. I wonder if he can tell I'm lying.

"I'm fine now." I take a deep breath and stand up to show everyone I'm okay. I walk over to the window. "That's great they're looking for Tommy."

"Yes, they are going to search the neighborhood inside and out. I'm suggesting you two go on TV and plead to the guy to bring Tommy back." He looks at Michelle first and then me. "I usually wouldn't recommend this, but since we haven't heard from him maybe it will speed things up. This has become a national story."

I look at Michelle and she nods. "Who is going to do it?"

"The lady from Channel 7, Noreen," Stanton answers. He looks outside. "I'd like to do it as soon as possible, so whenever you guys are ready we'll call her in."

"Let's do it." I say. I can't believe I haven't told the police or Michelle about my phone call or the video that Tommy is alive, but I can't risk anything happening to him. The guy sounded like he meant what he said.

A half hour or so later, we're seated at the bar in the kitchen; the one Tommy picked out and Noreen is sitting opposite us. She seems very genuine and concerned, so I guess Stanton knows what he's doing and this isn't all about getting ratings. I can't take my mind off seeing Tommy in that room all by himself. I hope he isn't being hurt or anything. He looked okay. At least he was surrounded by books and games, so he has something to occupy his time. I promise myself right then and there that I will do whatever it takes to get him back.

"Sheldon...Sheldon...are you okay?" I look at Michelle. Everyone is looking directly at me.

I nod yes. "I'm fine. I'm just thinking about Tommy." She puts her arm on my shoulder.

"We'll get him back I just know it. While you were gone all day, I had a dream about him that he was alive and well." I almost gasp.

"Hold on a second." I jump off the stool and head towards the bathroom. I walk back into the kitchen a few minutes later and everyone is looking at me nervously. I can't look at Michelle or Stanton in the face. I feel like they will know I'm hiding something. Instead, I look at Noreen and the camera crew behind her.

"Are you sure you're up for this?" Noreen asks in that voice only a reporter can do.



"Yes. Let's do this." I speak as calmly as I can.

"Here's how it's going to work. I'm going to talk first, and then you two are going to look right at that camera." She points at the camera few feet away. It's mounted on a tri-pod opposite one of the kitchen counters. "And then you tell them how much you want him back and plead with whoever has him to please bring him back or contact you." She looks at Stanton who nods in agreement. "Ready?"

We both nod. I wonder if Tommy knew he was being videotaped when I saw that attachment. He looked so innocent just sitting there on a bed. It looked like it could be any typical teenager's bedroom anywhere. I look down at my cell phone and wonder if there is any way to retrieve the emails. I could ask the guys at work.

"Sheldon...Sheldon. You're doing it again. Are you sure you're okay?" I nod just as Noreen points at us. It's our turn to speak.

"Please...please if you have Tommy out there. Please let him come home. He didn't do anything wrong. He's a great kid. If you've seen anyone with him please call the police." I see the tears rolling down Michelle's face as she is speaking. I place my arm around her.

"Whoever you are...please send him home. I'll switch places with him right now. Please let him go if you have him. He hasn't done anything. He's just a kid...please...please." I hear Noreen begin talking as Michelle and I embrace each other. Tears are flowing down our faces. I can feel the camera's glare infringing on us, but I don't care. I just want to run away. How could this happen? And how can I not say anything? I quickly jump off the stool and run out into the living room causing the officers seated in there to suddenly look up. Who is this guy? I pull out my phone and try and click redial of the private number, but there is no number or anything in the recent calls list. I fall onto the couch and bury my head into my hands. A moment later, I feel Michelle clutching my shoulder telling me everything is okay.

"You guys did a great job." I look up and Noreen and Stanton are standing in front of us pointing at the TV. I watch as they show a collage of pictures of Tommy and then our kitchen comes into focus with us seated on those bar stools pleading for Tommy's return. We look so much older than before. They cut the footage before my leap off the bar stool and into here. Instead, Noreen is seen in our kitchen continuing our plea to return Tommy safely.

"She's right. Good job guys. Hopefully, we'll hear from someone soon." Stanton says causing me to cringe again.

"How do we know he's even alive?" Michelle sobbingly asks.

Stanton quickly answers. "It's just too much effort to take him for no reason. Not to sound bad, but there are plenty of kids walking down our streets every day if someone wanted to just take a kid. This was a planned effort. The driver's license, the signing out Tommy with your brother's name; it goes on and on. This is no ordinary abduction." He stops and looks at both of us. "I suspect we will be hearing something soon." I quickly turn my head. "I have some specialists coming in from the FBI very soon."

"Why aren't they calling? It's been a long time."

"I wish I had the answer. They usually call within twenty-four hours. But like I said this is different, but that's a good thing. Try and keep positive."

"I'm trying. Do you have any kids?"

Stanton closes his eyes and looks at Michelle before answering. "Yes, I have two boys a few years older than Tommy and believe me this is affecting me too."

"At least you have them." She cries.

"We're doing the best we can Mrs. Smith. I promise you I won't give up until we get him back." I pull Michelle close to me, pulling her head into my shoulder.

"Thanks Detective." He slowly walks away and speaks with Mike near the phone.

"What are we going to do Sheldon? I can't go on knowing he might be out there lying hurt somewhere or dead." I rub her back.

"He's okay. I know he is. We'll get him back. You heard Stanton."

"I hope you're right Sheldon."

"So do I," I whisper. I replay the video again in my head trying to see if there's anything I missed.

## Chapter 5

Somehow another night goes by with no phone calls. I check my iPhone almost every five seconds, causing Michelle to give me some odd looks. I try not to make it too obvious when Stanton is looking. I watch the sun breaking through the windows. I'm not sure if we slept or just sat here, but we are both still seated on the couch in the same position. Stanton left an hour or so ago and Adams took his place. Apparently, they are taking shifts now as we go into the third day of not having Tommy. I make my way into the kitchen; hard to believe just last night we were sitting here talking to the reporter from Channel 7. I hope that my message had some kind of effect on Tommy's taker, although I'm pretty sure it won't. I sit down at the table and pour a bowl of cereal. I don't even taste it. I just go through the motions. I never thought anything would ever make me not feel like living, but with Tommy out there in the unknown; I feel as though life has no meaning except to get him back. I don't know how much longer we can keep this up. I think I'm wearing the same clothes I was wearing two days ago, or three days ago. I don't even know what day it is. It's like the world has stopped. I look up and see Adams coming through the door.

"Good morning Mr. Smith."

"Good morning." I shrug. I look at my cold and mushy cereal. He sits down next to me.

"I think we need to begin eliminating anyone connected to Tommy to get a better grasp on this."

"What's that mean?" I look up.

"It means. Unfortunately we need to look at his family, his parents, relatives or anyone closely associated with him."

"I thought you already checked out Lawrence." I take another bite.

"We did, but we need to talk about anyone else here who may have any kind of relationship with him."

I look back at the bowl of cereal. It is Cheerios, Tommy's favorite. "Look, we told you there is no one else. Both of our families are not local and our closest friends are outside conducting search parties. It sounds like a waste of time."

"You're probably right, but we need to rule out all possibilities. How about Lawrence? Is he in any kind of relationship?" I take a large bite and feel it stick to the back of my throat as I swallow.

"Lawrence? You're still going on about him?" Adams leans back slightly.

"Look, we don't have much to go on and as you probably know, most missing children are the result of a family member."

"I can assure you no one in our family is capable of anything like this. You saw the guy on the video and it clearly wasn't Lawrence."

"How about teachers? Or Coaches, parents or anybody pay close attention to Tommy?" He opens his notepad. It looks just like Stanton's.

"If I knew of anyone I would tell you. Now please forget about our family and look into who really took him." I feel sweat building up on my forehead.

"I'm just trying to do my job."

"I know." I quickly stand up and drop my bowl in the sink. It makes a loud crash. "Any leads on the car?"

He shakes his head. I walk out of the kitchen and head upstairs. I think I hear the water running. Michelle is probably in the shower. I decide to get changed. I throw on a pair of old sweats and a sweatshirt and head back downstairs. I go directly to the garage and fire up the Tahoe. My eyes suddenly look in the backseat. Tommy's baseball hat is sitting there. He always wears it to and from school. I reach in the back scoop it up and squeeze it. Suddenly my phone rings. It's the same private number.

"Hello Sheldon. Nice performance on TV last night. I couldn't have done better myself."

"Where's Tommy?" I look at the door leading to the house to make sure it is closed. "Please tell me where he is. I did what you asked."

"Yes, you did a fine job and I rewarded you with a video treat did I not?" It almost sounds like he has a slight accent now, but I can't make it out. I'm trying to gather as much information as I can. I back the Tahoe out of the garage weaving around the police cars and media vans. There seems to be less media vans around now.

"Please let me talk to him...please."

"Oh, I see you are in your vehicle. Did you enjoy the little surprise in the back seat?"

"I swear I'll kill you when I see you." I turn up at the end of the street and pull onto Lee. I check behind me to see if anyone is following me. I don't see anyone, but I make a few more turns just to be sure. "I don't know how you're doing this, and I really don't care just give him back to me. I'll give you whatever you want."

"That you will Sheldon. You will give me whatever I want. You have already done one thing with the money yesterday. I just have a few more easy jobs for you and then I will give you back what is yours. You have my word. One's word is the most valuable thing wouldn't you agree?"

"Just tell me what you want. Damn it. Why are you doing this?"

"You'll find out in due time. Just keep on doing what I say. Did you notice that little clue I left you in the surveillance video? I thought you would enjoy that."

"Let me talk to him to make sure he is okay."

"I can ensure your property is fine in my possession. As long as you follow the rules it will not be damaged. You remember our little chat yesterday?" I stop at a red light.

"How do I even know you really have him?"

"You enjoyed the video and I'm sure and the surprise in your back seat. I've got another job for you today, so get ready."

I step on the gas pedal as soon as the light changes. There's no one behind me as far as I can tell. "Just tell me why you are doing this and when will I get him back?"

"Let's just call this a little business transaction and to your second question, you are almost done with your side just a few more things and you'll get back what is yours. I'll be in touch."

"Wait...wait." I yell into the phone hearing nothing but silence. Once again the call is erased from the call log. I pick up Tommy's red hat and clutch it in my hand as I drive by the bank I went to yesterday and turn towards the ball field again. I'm not sure why I'm going back again, but it just feels like the right place to go. I sit on the same row of bleachers and stare out at the field trying to imagine myself coaching and Tommy playing. The kids are back in school, so the field is empty. I'm sure the kidnapper is out there somewhere, but I really don't care if he's watching me anymore. I end up just sitting there for the next several hours thinking about everything that has happened the last few days and what I should do next. My phone doesn't ring, so maybe he isn't watching me. I'm kind of hoping he will call even though I think he's just playing games with me. I believe him that he will hold up his end of the bargain though I'm not really sure why. I think about all the movies I have seen and how the police say never negotiate with a hostage taker, but I wonder if they would act differently if it were their own kid as the hostage. I don't know what I'm going to tell Michelle. She deserves to know what is going on, but I'm scared she might try and tell the police and then we'll lose Tommy forever. I decide not to take that chance and just keep this to myself. I'm not sure it's the best decision, but it seems like I don't really have any choice. How does he have access to everything I am doing? He must be some kind of computer genius, especially with the fake driver's license and everything else. I figure maybe I should use my technology know-how and try and figure it out. It seems like a better choice than waiting for his phone call and then dropping money off at the bank. I quickly get an idea and access my bank's customer website to check our account. It shows our balance as normal again. There is no sign of the one and a half million dollars. I keep clicking and see that it was transferred two minutes after I deposited it to another account that I am not familiar with. I can't figure out what that means except that I was used to somehow illegally transfer money to and from my account. I slide the phone back in my pocket and head back to the Tahoe. I carefully check all the seats and there are no new surprises this time. I start it up and head back towards my house. I pull down our street and things look as though they are coming back to normal. There is only one news van parked in front of our house now. It's the same station

that Noreen works on. I guess they are trying to keep an exclusive to us in case something breaks. The crowds of searchers have disappeared, probably had to return to life and work. I wish we could. The police cars are still parked along our curb and in the driveway. I squeeze by two unmarked cruisers and pull into our open garage. The door shuts noisily behind me. I reach for the door when my phone starts ringing again. It's the same number marked as private.

"Why hello again Sheldon, did you have a nice time at the park again?" I look up at the door to the house again and see no one coming.

"What's it matter to you?"

"Such hostility again, one day we need to talk about that." I squeeze the phone close to my ear. "I've got your next job Sheldon."

"What? What is it you want me to do? And when will I get Tommy back?"

"Very soon Sheldon...very soon." I flip the keys in my hand. "Here's what I need you to do for me; and I promise I will make it worth your while."

"What's that mean?"

"It means, depending on how you do I may let you communicate with your property that I have acquired."

"All right, tell me what I need to do." I can't believe I'm agreeing this. I know I'm going against everything I believe in.

"Very simple task Sheldon, tonight I need you to go to an office and get me a file."

"What are you talking about?" I squeeze the phone some more.

"I'll provide you with everything you need. You just need to go there grab the file and leave it where I tell you and I promise you can communicate with your property."

"First of all he's my son, not property so stop saying that and second of all, you're crazy I'm not going to some office tonight to get you a file."

"As you wish then Sheldon, it's been a pleasure doing business with you. I will return your property as promised. I just can't guarantee it will be in one piece." I look at my face in the mirror and see the anger burning through my veins.

"Okay. How do I do it? I'm still going to kill you when this is done."

"I will send you an email with your directions in a few hours. You will just need to make a short drive and enter the office, get the file and you're done. Very simple, wouldn't you agree?"

"When will I talk to Tommy?" I can feel the sweat trickling down my forehead. I wonder what Michelle is thinking with me still in the garage.

"As soon as you complete this task, a communication link will be set up. Have I broken a promise yet?" I don't answer. "Look for my directions in a few hours Sheldon." Once again I hear the silence and know he is gone. I don't even check the call log this time. I slowly exit the Tahoe and open the door entering the living room. Michelle is seated on the couch and the detectives are seated in nearby chairs. They all turn their heads as I approach. Michelle jumps up and hugs me. Both Stanton and Adams approach as well.

"Where have you been Sheldon?" I look closely at the three of them. Their eyes are all focused on me. I wipe the perspiration off my forehead.

"Same place as yesterday... the ball field again."

"We've been trying to call you all day." I see Adams looking at me suspiciously. I am really starting to dislike this guy. "Why did you have your phone off Mr. Smith? What if someone tried to call?"

I take my phone out of my pocket and note the full signal strength. "It's been on all day."

"We got a hit on the vehicle while you were gone." I feel my breath jump out of my lungs.

"Where?" I look directly at Stanton. I can feel Adam's eyes boring into mine.

"About two miles from here, it was parked in front of a house." He explains.

"Did you find anything?"

"If you had your phone on you would know." Adams quickly snaps.

"Take it easy Jerry." Stanton says. I immediately wonder if they're playing some kind of game, but I dismiss Stanton's heed as genuine.

"It was clean, except for this." I watch Stanton reach onto the end table and pick up a small carved wooden model car. "Do you recognize this?" I reach out and grab it.

"Yes, this is a car I made when I was a kid." I rub my fingers along the hood. I made this when I was in high school as a project. I actually won an award for the design. It is one of my prize possessions.

"Now look at this." I look at the photograph Adams is holding and see my car in the hands of the kidnapper. "Why didn't you say something before when you saw this? And why would he have this?"

I don't answer. I just look down at the car. It looks the same as it did when I made it. I try and clean it up at least once a year and it always stays on my dresser.

"How did he get this Mr. Smith?" Stanton asks. He takes the car out of my hands.

"I don't know."

"Would Tommy ever take it?"

"No...never." Michelle quickly answers. "So you're saying this guy has been in our house?" I see fear overtake her face.

"Possibly, unless Mr. Smith knows something about it." They both look in my direction.

"I have no idea."

"I wish you had said something when you saw the photo. Is that why you reacted the way you did when you saw it?"

"No, I reacted because I saw the guy who took my son. And I didn't notice the car." I look down at the car again.

"I find that hard to believe." Adams responds.

"How about the name Douglas Sorenson, does that mean anything to you?" Stanton asks. He sets the car back on the table.

I shake my head. "No, should it?"

"Not necessarily, that was the house the car was parked in front of and this." He holds up a small piece of paper. "This was glued to the bottom of the car." He points at the model. I read the name on the paper. It says Douglas Sorenson and has an address written below it.

## Chapter 6

Michelle and I head upstairs leaving the officers down below. We slowly walk by Tommy's room instinctively looking in to see if he is there. I keep expecting to see him lying there sound asleep, but it's empty.

"Why don't you try and get some sleep. I'll stay up in case anyone needs us."

"Do you really think someone is going to call? Didn't they say twenty-four hours?" I don't respond. I'm thinking about seeing Tommy in the video again. "Sheldon...Sheldon. Are you sure you're okay?"

I want to tell her the truth, but for some reason I can't. I just don't want to take a chance and jeopardize Tommy. "No Michelle. I'm not fine. I can't take this not having him here." She pulls me close and we sit down on the bed.

"I think we will get him back. I really believe that. It's what keeps me going. Please don't worry about the detectives. They're just doing their jobs. They know we don't know anything right Sheldon, we don't do we?"

I shake my head. "Of course not, weird about taking my model car though."

"I can't figure that out. I hate knowing someone was in our house. I guess he took it just to taunt us or something."

"I don't know what he's doing. I hate this Michelle." I feel the tears begin to run down my cheeks. Michelle wipes them off with her hand and I do the same for her. We remain that way for a few hours until I suddenly awake to my iPhone vibrating in my pocket. I look at Michelle; she is sound asleep on the bed. I slowly get up and click the email. It's from the same sender again. It reads as follows: 'Hello Sheldon. Hope you had a nice evening. I need you to go to 4884 Birchwood Avenue - Suite 500. Once you get in you will go to the third office on the right and look in the second drawer of the taller file cabinet and get me file #2399. It should be located in the back. The key and pass code are already in your glove box. Your reward will be worth your efforts.'

I quickly write down the address on a piece of paper on my dresser and click "end" on the iPhone knowing the message will immediately disappear. I can't imagine what I am getting into this time. I am breaking and entering into a locked office after hours. I guess I'm not technically breaking in since I have a key and a pass code but it is trespassing at the least. For a minute, I wonder if it is a trap and I will set off an alarm, but I put all that aside as I walk by Tommy's room again. I notice the bright digital numbers on his clock saying 10:30 PM. I can't believe I'm doing this. I don't know how I'm going to explain to Adams that I'm going out this late. Luckily, when I go down neither detective appears to be here, only two officers who I haven't seen before. I walk directly to the garage door when the short one with closely cropped blond hair calls out to me.

"Mr. Smith. I'm supposed to report any comings and goings by you. Can you tell me where you're going?" He is a younger looking officer, probably right out of the academy.

"I'm going to get something to eat. Is that okay?" I reach and grab the door handle.

"Where?" He has a pen and pad in his hand.

"I don't know. I'll see what is open at this time of night. In case you haven't realized, I haven't eaten a meal in days. Is this really necessary?"

"It's protocol Sir."

"Thank you. I'll call in when I find a place." I tap my phone in my pocket. The young officer quickly looks away." Good night." I reach the door and step into the garage. I can already feel that the temperature has dropped. I get into the Tahoe and immediately open the glove box. Sure enough there is a key and a small piece of paper with a typed number. How does he get in here without being seen? I shake my head and turn the ignition and back out of the driveway. I turn up our street and make a few rights and lefts on side streets. After about ten minutes, I'm convinced no one is behind me. I head towards Birchwood Ave. I'm not sure why I'm doing this, but I have Tommy's hat in my lap. I look down at it and keep driving. I pull onto Birchwood. It's a busy commercial thorough way. I check the numbers on the buildings and a few minutes later I pull into an office building. It's one of those upscale brick professional buildings that usually house lawyers, accountants and doctors. I'm not sure where to park, everything looks dark. I slowly pull around to the back and leave the Tahoe in a spot closest to the woods. I can't see any other buildings on either side, despite knowing they're nearby. They have done a good job of making this place appear private even though it's on such a busy road. I palm the key and hop out of the truck. It is very quiet and the few lights above the parking area are few far in between. I'm thinking that seems odd for a professional building where most of these people probably work late hours on a regular basis. I look at my watch and remember it's almost 11:00 PM on a Friday, so they've all probably gone to their beach houses for the weekend. I creep through the parking lot and reach what looks like the back door. I stick the key in the lock and it easily turns opening into a dark lobby. The door closes behind me making a snap when it locks. I see the glowing red and green lights from the alarm system about five feet in front of me on the wall. Luckily, there was a flashlight in the glove box as well. I don't know how he has access to everything. I wonder why he is making me do this. If he's so good at sneaking around, he should be the one stealing files late at night. I punch in the code and the red light turns off; I'm hoping that doesn't mean the police are being called. I wait by the door for a minute just in case. Satisfied, I slowly walk down the hallway and into a large empty lobby. I head straight for the elevator. I'm happy it's working after hours. I punch in the number five button and watch the numbers light up as I travel upwards. It only takes about twenty seconds until the door dings and opens into another lobby. This one is much more spacious and plush than the one downstairs. There are three or four expensive leather sofas and chairs and mahogany furniture everywhere. I feel like I'm in my own living room. I walk towards the receptionist desk and try the door leading into the offices; it's locked as I expected. I place the key in and it opens the door, so far so good. This isn't too bad, and it will hopefully get Tommy back. I really wish I could have told someone where I'm going at this hour though. It is really creepy here late at night, but I'm trying not to let my mind get hung up on that and just complete the mission. I served four years as an infantry officer in the Army after college, but there is a big difference between being in the middle of the woods with a platoon full of armed



soldiers opposed to being in a strange office late at night without even a stick or any weapon at all. I know I'm in a law office by the name on the door. It's one of those firms with a half dozen names in the title. I didn't bother to read them. I just want to get out of here and do it soon. Despite my Army experience I am still a little nervous, but I'm not really sure what I'm most nervous about since there are so many things that could possibly happen. The police could show up at any minute or someone could attack me from the darkness around me. I try and put all that aside as I walk down the carpeted hallway. I count two doors and stop in front of the third one and try and open it up. It is locked. I try the key and it doesn't work. Now what do I do? I really need to get out of here soon. My pulse is knocking in my ear. I try the key again, nothing. I look around for any other way in. It's a thick wooden door with a tinted glass opening. I try and ram my shoulder into the door, it won't budge. I wonder why the guy didn't get me a key for this. I guess he's not as thorough as he thinks he is. I keep ramming the door with my shoulder harder and harder each time, but it doesn't move and my shoulder is starting to get sore. I feel like giving up, but there's no way I'm doing this again. I don't want to take the chance of anything happening to Tommy so I head back to the lobby. I shine the flashlight all around. I look for any place they might keep keys; in desks, under tables, I don't see anything. There is a small wooden chair next to the receptionist desk that I pick up. It's pretty heavy. I know this is a mistake as soon as I do it, but I carry the chair back down to the office anyway and throw it through the window. Glass shatters everywhere. I feel a sharp pain between my thumb and fingers and a warm substance seeping out. I grab my shirt and bundle it over my hand hopefully stopping the blood. I don't want to get any on the floor, I shine my flashlight onto my hand, and the shirt seems to be doing the job keeping the blood off the floor. I carefully reach through the broken opening and open the door. In the office there is a large desk, two expensive looking leather chairs, and on the right two file cabinets. One is smaller than the other one. I go to the correct drawer and the back, and sure enough the file is right there. I scoop up the thick folder and tuck it under my jacket and start to head for the door when I suddenly turn around remembering something I learned from watching too many police drama shows. I take my jacket and wipe off the handle on the file cabinet, the door knobs and everything else I may have come into contact with in the office. Feeling proud of my work, I pull the broken door shut with my jacket covering my hand. I take one more look around and backtrack my way crunching on broken glass through the lobby and wiping off everything I may have touched again. I'm not sure what I have done, but I start walking very quickly and make it to the elevator in a jog. I continue wiping down everything as I go. I can't believe I just did what I did, especially breaking the door, no one probably would have noticed anything if I hadn't done that. I'm so mad I feel like kicking the wall but I don't want to do any more damage, so I head back down to the main lobby, set the alarm and continue to wipe everything off as I go. I run towards my car as fast as I can. I jump in the driver's seat, turn on the ignition and force myself to drive at a reasonable pace until I see a twenty-four hour McDonald's that I pull into. The first thing I do is examine my hand, the cut isn't too bad, I don't think I'll need stitches or anything, but I do need to clean it off. I head inside the McDonald's and go straight to the restroom. Luckily it's empty, so

I take my time cleaning my hand. I place a bunch of paper towels over it to ensure it has stopped bleeding which it appears it has. I decide to order something to eat. I get a cheeseburger and fries and find a table in the back where I can keep an eye on the Tahoe. I'm not taking any chances. As soon as I finish the burger my phone begins to ring. I don't even have to look at the number to know it's him. I click the answer button.

"Nice work Sheldon. Sorry about the extra key you needed. I figured the master you had would be enough, but I see you overcame the situation. Not exactly the way I would have handled it, but likewise you have the file." For a second I forget there are people around me and I begin to yell before heads start to turn in my direction so I stop.

"Now let me have Tommy. I did what you said."

"I promised you would have a communication and I will live up to that promise. Remember our word is the most important thing we possess."

I pull the phone close to my ear and lean forward. "Look, I don't care about your word or my word or anyone's word anymore I just want Tommy back. This has gone on long enough. I did what you asked."

"As you wish. Just remember the property doesn't know why it's in my possession, so I would prefer to keep it that way so as not to disturb it."

"Just let me talk to my son."

"Stand by." I hear the call end and I begin to look around. I know I'm not going to see Tommy, but just in case. I feel my phone vibrate. I click "accept" on the little window and I see Tommy looking back at me. He's in the same room as I saw him before only this time he's looking directly at me.

"Dad...are you okay?"

"I'm fine Tommy. How are you?" I feel my head spinning. I don't know what to say.

"You don't look so good Dad. Are you sure you're all right?" I look at my face in the small window on the top right part of the screen. The image that he sees, and he's right I don't look good. My hair is all over the place, I haven't shaved in days and there are bags not only under my eyes, but all over my face.

"I'm good Tommy. Just a little tired. Look, I'm going to get you out of there very soon. Just hang in there." I watch him nod his head and then look around him. The camera pans the room. I see pizza boxes, soda bottles and all the media equipment I saw before.

"Really Dad, it's not too bad. I think I can make it. I want to make you and Mom happy."

"Tommy. We are happy. We love you so much and miss you. I promise I'll get you out of there."

"It's okay Dad. Take your time. You can see I have everything I ever wanted here. I just wish I could call you guys or email or something more often." I can't get over how calm he is. It's like he doesn't even know he's being held captive. I stare at his face focusing on what I have seen and loved ever since he was born. It hasn't really changed that much. He still looks like the little boy who Michelle and I dropped off at Kindergarten so many years ago and cried all the way to the car together. "Where are you? That looks like a McDonalds." He smiles. I decide to go along with whatever is going on and smile back.

"It is a McDonalds. It's the best I could find at this hour."

"Where's Mom?"

"She's home. She was tired."

"You sure you guys are okay?"

I nod my head and begin to say something but the screen goes blank. I slam the phone onto the table, jump up off my seat and throw what's left of my food away. I'm suddenly not hungry anymore. I get back in the Tahoe and feel my phone begin to ring again.

"How was that for a reward Sheldon?"

"Look, I don't know what kind of sick and twisted game you're playing here, but this better end soon. What did you tell him?" I pull out of the parking lot.

"Relax Sheldon. As you can see I take care of things that aren't mine that happen to be in my possession. As long as you continue to follow my instructions, everything will be returned as I guaranteed you. One word to anyone about anything and our business partnership will end and you know what that means."

"You make me sick."

"Now have an enjoyable rest of the evening and I'll be in touch shortly for our next venture and I promise a greater reward as well." The phone goes silent.

I drive onto the busy road despite the late hour and head back towards our house. I wish I didn't have to face the police again about where I was, but at least I know Tommy is okay at least for now. I need to come up with a plan on how to get him back immediately.

## Chapter 7

Somehow I actually got a few hours of sleep last night, despite all the events. The young officer didn't even question me when I came inside last night, maybe my agitated expression made him back off. He just looked up and wrote something in his notebook as I walked by and headed upstairs. Michelle was asleep and didn't even wake up when I got into bed. We are actually having a regular breakfast this morning. Michelle and I are seated in the kitchen drinking coffee. We still don't say much to each other. What can really be said when your child is gone missing, but I can feel her company and I know she can feel mine. I still haven't told her anything either. I have an overwhelming sense of guilt not saying anything, but I think she would agree with my decision if she knew it could mean the difference between Tommy living or dying. We both look up as Stanton and Adams enter the kitchen and sit down at the table.

"Coffee?" I ask; both of them shake their heads.

"We may have a break or at least a lead to go on in finding Tommy." Stanton says. He leans slightly forward. Last night there was a break-in at Douglas Sorenson's office."

"Who is Douglas Sorenson?" Michelle asks.

"Remember, that's the house where the car was found and the name under your husband's model car." I visualize the typed address.

"So what does that mean?" She asks.

"We're not really sure, especially since it looks like the only thing stolen was a file. We're trying to figure out what file was taken." Suddenly, I feel a lump forming in my throat. "Another thing, someone stole one and half-million in cash from Sorenson too, so something is going on with this Sorenson and where the car was found. It doesn't sound like a coincidence." I take a big gulp of coffee to keep the vomit from coming up.

"Where does Sorenson work?" I ask.

"He's in a law office over on Birchwood Ave." I'm going to lose it at any minute. I quickly get up from the table.

"You okay Mr. Smith?" Stanton asks.

"Just getting some more coffee." I wonder if they know it was me. My forehead is full of sweat. I can't let them see me. I pretend to fiddle with the coffee maker.

"The good news is the office is full of surveillance cameras, so we should be getting a copy soon." Now I'm convinced they're playing with me. It's an old trick cops do. I wonder if should run. I decide to stay put until I hear them get up.

"We'll be in touch as soon as we hear anything. I just wanted to keep you up to date and let you know we're working on this." He pauses. "By the way, what happened to your hand Mr. Smith?" I look down at my hand. It is wrapped with several bandages I found in our bathroom last night. I feel adrenaline kick into my veins causing my heart rate to at least double.

"Oh this," I point at my hand. "I hit my hand out of frustration at the field yesterday." I softly tap my hands together. That seems to satisfy them and they both walk out of the kitchen together. I slowly walk back to the table and sit down next to Michelle.

"Is your hand okay Sheldon?" She touches my bandage. "Sorry I didn't even notice before."

"It's fine. I just cut it on something on the field."

"Why do you keep going there?"

I shrug my shoulders. "I don't know it just makes me think about Tommy."

"I hope this break-in has something to do with Tommy. Maybe they have the guy on camera."

I want to tell her it is me on the camera, but instead I nod my head up and down. "Let's hope so. We could sure use a break."

"My parents are coming in tomorrow to help us out. I woke up last night to answer the phone when they called and you weren't home. The officer said you went to get something to eat."

I touch my hand again. "I went to McDonalds. I didn't realize how hungry I was until I got there." I take a sip of coffee. "That's great your parents are coming. I talked to mine the other day and they said they would come east if we needed them. I told them to hold on for a while."

Michelle nods her head. "That's probably a good idea. I'll make up the guest room before they get here." She holds my hands in hers. "I think he's out there and safe. I can feel it Sheldon. I really can. I think I would know if he wasn't."

"I think you would too. I'm sure we'll get him back real soon. The police seem to be doing their jobs." I slowly stand up and take one last gulp. "I'm going to go take a shower and then head out for a while."

"Okay. I love you Sheldon."

"I love you too." I run through the living room and up the stairs. I don't even look to see what officers are in our house. I go into the bathroom and throw up. I can't believe I didn't tell Michelle our child is alive and well. He has no idea what is even going on. I don't even think he knows he's in danger. I stay in the shower for I'm not sure how long. It just feels good letting the hot water hit me. It feels like I'm cleansing all the guilt and worry from my body. Finally, I get out when I feel the water turning cooler. I step out into the hallway. I can hear Stanton and Adams talking to Michelle downstairs, something about the surveillance footage. I wonder if I should make my get away now. I look toward the windows. I don't even know what I'm going to say when they confront me. I can't tell them the truth because it may put Tommy's life in danger, but if I don't say anything I'll go to jail and not be able to get Tommy back. I don't know what to do. I sit on Tommy's bed for a while and come up with a plan. I decide to confess when they tell me and say I was investigating Douglas Sorenson on my own. I quietly head downstairs feeling a little better about everything. As soon as I step into the living room I see Michelle seated on the couch looking upset. She must have just found out I'm on the video. Stanton and Adams are on the other side of the room by the TV talking on their cell phones. I sit down next to Michelle; she doesn't even look up. This is not looking good. Finally, Stanton walks over to us. He doesn't look happy. Maybe I should just tell the truth. He sits down next to me.

"I just got off the phone with our technician and it doesn't look good." I feel my stomach begin to move upwards again. "The footage was completely deleted."

"What? You didn't see the footage?" I take a deep breath.

Stanton shakes his head.

"It's not a good thing Sheldon." Michelle nudges me. "That means we aren't any closer to seeing who took Tommy."

I sit back. I can't believe it. "How did he do it?" I say thinking out loud.

"That's what we're trying to figure out. The whole sequence is gone; about two hours of footage. This was on a secure server too." Stanton says.

"Just like the driver's license." I say.

"Yes, exactly. Whoever this is has access I have never seen before. I think we need to look into this Douglas Sorenson some more. I think he's the key to the whole thing."

"Who exactly is he?"

"He's a big time trust lawyer. He used to be a D.A. somewhere down south a few years ago, but with the million and a half stolen the other day it leads me to believe this is all connected to something he's working on now. He looks at his notepad. "Somehow the money was taken out of an account he was working on and just disappeared. I have officers checking all the local banks for any large deposits, so we should get a hit sooner or later." I gulp. "I can't believe they haven't called."

"What are they waiting for?" I look at Michelle.

"I wish we knew. I thought the news bit might have helped. Maybe we should try that again."

We both nod our heads. "Let's do it." Michelle answers.

"I'll get a hold of Noreen. It will be good to let the public know he's still missing. It's like he has taken him far away or he's holed up somewhere out of sight." I quickly turn my eyes away from him. "By the way, how's your hand?" I look down. I just have one large band aid covering it now.

"Much better."

"Be careful. We don't need you getting hurt or anything." I nod. "All right, why don't I go make it happen? I'll get back with you. Don't give up."

"Never," Michelle responds and squeezes my other hand. After a few minutes, both detectives leave again. I stand up and stretch.

"I'll be back in a little while."

"Where are you going now?"

"I can't just sit here and wait. I need to be out there in case."

"In case of what?" She is looking at me oddly.

"I don't know. I just need to be."

"Okay. Just be careful this time." She rubs my bandage. It feels good to get out again. I'm really beginning to hate being at home. It's just too difficult to see Michelle and not tell her Tommy is okay, but I'm not taking any chances. I think he must have the house bugged and who knows what else. I'm still feeling a little shook up after the close call with the break-in last night. I was sure I was going to be in trouble and not be able to help get Tommy out, though I'm beginning to wonder if I'm just playing a game and no matter what I do he's not going to come home. I make the usual turns through the neighborhood to make sure no one is following me. I even pull over and check under the car for some kind of GPS device. I'm not really sure what they look like, but I don't see anything that seems out of place so I continue on. I decide to head to my office for a change of scenery. I usually do my best thinking at work. I pull into the parking lot. Luckily, it's a Saturday so there aren't many cars here. I use my key and head up to my office. It feels odd not having been here all week. I'm usually the type who doesn't miss much work. I really don't enjoy going on vacations anywhere except for maybe a night or two. I just never sleep well, and I always look forward to getting back home. Michelle is the same way, so we rarely go anywhere. I unlock my office door and the first thing I notice is the flashing red light on my phone causing a weird glow throughout the room. I'm sure I have a thousand messages by now being gone for so long and the problem with the servers. I don't even know the status of them and I'm not really sure I want to know. I haven't even thought about getting back to a normal routine. As long as Tommy is gone, there's no way I can go back to work and just act like everything is okay. Suddenly, I start to feel really dizzy and my head starts aching. I sit down at my desk and just let the tears flow. I want him back so bad. I grab a family photo from a shelf behind my desk and clutch it as tightly as I can. I stop when I see Tommy's cleats hanging on the back of one of the extra chairs in my office. There's no way they could have gotten in here. They were in the Tahoe last time I checked. I quickly step up and wipe the tears from my face and pick them up. They are definitely his. How is this happening? I can't believe it. Who is this guy and why is he doing this? What did we ever do to deserve this? I bring the cleats over to my desk when I hear a noise outside my door. There is definitely someone out there. For a second I wonder if it's the kidnapper until I see Randy, our CEO peek his head around the corner.

"Hey Sheldon, any news on Tommy?" I watch him step into the doorway. He's wearing jeans and a sweatshirt. He looks very different from his usual dark suit. He's somewhere just over fifty, but he could probably pass for thirty-five with his dark non-receding hairline and trim frame.

"Nothing," I shake my head. I'm holding the cleats.

He steps in and sits in the chair that the cleats were hanging on. "You don't have to be here. Please take as much time as you want."

"I needed somewhere to go besides waiting at home." I look around my office. I never realized how plain it is. There are only the family pictures behind my desk and a few chairs and almost nothing on the walls.

"Have they gotten any leads? I have been following the news, but they haven't been saying much lately."

"They thought they had a few times, but they have turned out to be nothing." I look down at the cleats. There is mud caked on the bottom from practice the other night. It seems so long ago.

"There were a few officers around here yesterday asking if anyone knew anything, but as far as I know, no one here knows anything." I thought about Stanton and Adam's poking through here and getting another dead end. I wonder if the cleats were here when they came in.

"Did they come in here?"

"Your office?" I nod. "I think so. They weren't here very long." He looks down. "I just wish there was something we could do. I know a lot of us have been passing out posters with Tommy's picture. I have been driving around just looking for anything."

"You guys are great."

"Your team has been doing some stuff on the Internet. I think they came up with a website called "Findtommy.com" I haven't seen it yet, but I think it is full of pictures and things about Tommy." I try and smile. "They cleaned up all of our servers. They all worked overtime to get them going. They really support you."

"They're good guys." I look at the computer screen on my desk that used to be such a big part of my life and now it is just sitting there dark. I watch Randy stand up. He walks over to me and taps my shoulder.

"You hang in there and we'll get him back to you I promise." I nod as he slowly walks out. I turn my computer on and go to the website "Findtommy.com". It is just like Randy said. There are about twenty or so pictures of Tommy and even the news clip of Michelle and me pleading for him to come back. They have a picture of Detective Stanton with his number. I start clicking on thumbnail pictures of Tommy and just stare into his face trying to imagine I'm talking to him in real life. I click on one of him wearing his baseball cap and I almost fall over in my chair when the link brings me to a cartoon picture of Tommy's body lying in that same bedroom from the video with his head separated from his body.

## Chapter 8

After I left work, I immediately called Jim and Brian, my two network guys. They agreed to meet me at a nearby Starbucks. I'm sitting at a table waiting for them drinking a hot cup of black coffee when my phone begins to vibrate. I look down and see it's a text message from a private number. I quickly scroll through the words and read that I will be contacted later about my final job. I wonder what that means. I start to read it again when I look up hearing my name. Jim and Brian enter. They both give me a hug, and I update them on what's going on and thank them for the website. I watch them stand in line and order their drinks. I go to read the text again, but it is already been erased.

"Thanks for coming guys." They both sit down across from me. I can tell they are a little uncomfortable being here.

"Any time Sheldon." Jim says. He takes a small sip through the opening in his cup.

"So tell me about the website. Who designed it?"

Brian nods his head. "I did the initial design and Jim put up all the content. We both are kind of updating it whenever we can. We've already had over two thousand hits. I really hope it helps. Did you read any of the comments on the bottom?"

I shake my head. "No, I never got that far. I can't wait to take a look at them."

"There's some really nice stuff in there. A lot of people really care Sheldon." Brian takes another drink.

I try and smile. I take out my iPhone and pull up the website. I wait until the page fully loads and click on the photos section. I click on the thumbnail of Tommy wearing his baseball hat, and instead of the cartoon I get a white page that has the words, "Do as I say" in bold dark letters. I turn the phone around so both of them can see. Confused looks wash over their faces like a technical specialist gets when they see something that shouldn't be happening on a computer.

"How did you get to that?" Jim takes the iPhone in his hand.

"I just clicked on the one of Tommy in the baseball hat." I watch him tap the screen a few times until he turns the phone towards me and I can see the same screen as before, but this time it is full of question marks.

"What the heck is going on?" Brian grabs the phone and refreshes the screen. He turns the phone so we can all see and we watch the picture of Tommy load up correctly.

"How can that happen?" I ask. I'm staring at Tommy's face under the cap. I smile seeing his lopsided grin and hair poking down on his forehead.

"This is a secure website. Only Jim and I have access to this."

Brian pulls the phone closer to his face and looks down for a second.

"What is it?"

"The question marks...they were on one of the servers back at work when we were dealing with the virus. I just assumed it was part of it, so I didn't make a big deal about it, but now this." I suddenly feel the coffee seeping its way back up my throat. I try my best to hold it down. "How can that be? This website is on a totally independent hosting company. I think it's in California. What's going on here?" I want to tell them everything because they could probably help me get to the bottom of this, but I don't say anything. I just sit there and try to slow my head down enough so it doesn't spin off my neck. "I'm going to go and get to the bottom



of this. If the same person who put the virus on our server is hacking our website, we've got a major problem." I watch them both get up and throw their coffee cups in the trash and head out the door. I sit there staring at Tommy's image on my phone. I'm not sure what to do any more. Everything is getting so strange. I need to find out who this guy really is. I almost jump when I feel my phone begin to vibrate. I look at the number and am surprised to see it's our home phone.

"Hello." I hear Michelle's voice. She sounds anxious.

"Sheldon, where are you?"

"I'm near work."

"Work? What are you doing at work?"

"It's usually where I do my best thinking."

"Are you coming up with anything?" She is speaking louder now. It's like she wants to tell me something.

"No, nothing new. What's going on back there?"

"The detectives just left to head to Commonwealth Bank. They've got a lead on the deposit they were talking about." I quickly stand up. "They asked me to have you meet them there if you could."

"At the bank?" I ask. I'm trying my hardest to hide my trembling voice.

"Yes. Can you go?" I look around the Starbucks. I feel like every set of eyes are on me now. "It's the big one on 236...Sheldon...Sheldon. Are you there?"

"...Yes, I'm here. Okay."

"Are you okay?"

I nod. "I'm fine."

"You don't sound good."

I take a deep breath. "I think I'm just tired."

"I would go, but they said they wanted you there." I try and take another deep breath.

"I'm heading over there now. I love you."

"I love you too Sheldon. Please call me if you find anything out."

"I will." I quickly end the call and go into the men's room. I throw cold water onto my face. I have no idea what I'm going to say when they ask me about the money. Twenty minutes later, I'm pulling into the bank parking lot. I can see the unmarked detective cruiser parked in the closest space near the door, next to the handicapped spaces. It feels weird coming back here. This was my first interaction with Tommy's captor. I park the Tahoe in a spot furthest away to prolong my entry into the bank. I still don't have any idea what I'm going to say. I feel like coming clean but I can't risk it. I slowly pull the door open and enter the lobby. I spot Stanton and Adams seated in front of a dark mahogany desk to my right. It looks like a manager or a customer service person on the other side. They quickly spot me and wave me over. I walk towards them and stand beside the desk feeling their eyes burning into me.

"Thanks for coming down so quickly Mr. Smith." Stanton says. "Why don't you have a seat." The bank employee quickly steps from behind the desk and drags another upholstered chair next to the two the detectives are seated in. "This is James Stolz; he is the assistant branch manager here. I shake the hand of a man in his mid to late fifties. He has gray hair and some extra pounds around his waist; somewhat disguised by a loose fitting suit, but he has bright-blue piercing

eyes that instantly raise my discomfort level. I take a seat and feel my body slouching underneath me.

"So let's get right to it." Stanton looks directly at me. "We're you here two days ago?" I slowly nod my head. Even though I knew this was coming, it feels as though I'm being dragged over broken glass. "Is that you?" I watch as the manager turns the monitor towards me. I can see myself entering the bank. It cuts to me standing front of the teller. I look around at the teller line behind me and don't see the same girl here. She's hopefully out for the day, but I'm guessing she's probably already down at the station giving a statement. The footage is a little fuzzy, but you can definitely see me handing something to the teller.

"That's me." I respond in a voice just above a whisper.

"I think you have some explaining to do here." Both Stanton and Adams give me a hard look. I'm not sure what to do, so I just keep looking at the footage of me standing there. Suddenly, I see something strange. I lean closer. I feel my heart begin to flutter in my chest. I can't believe it. I'm staring at the screen when Stanton hands me a piece of paper. It's the paper that reports a deposit over ten thousand dollars that I signed. I'm going to have to say something here.

"Does that look familiar?" I look at the paper and my eyes lock on the signature. I don't believe it, it's not my signature. It's not even close.

I shake my head no. "That's not mine."

"What do you mean? That's your signature." I shake my head no.

"It's not." I'm staring at the paper in disbelief. I can't believe what is happening here. I watch as the manager turns the screen back around. A minute later, he points at it and both detectives shake their heads.

"What is going on here?" Stanton stands up. "We have you at the bank, a deposit of a million and a half dollars of cash going into your account and leaving two minutes later to a bank in Brazil around the same time you were here." He looks around the bank. "And a very reliable teller who hasn't shown up for work for a second day in a row, and you making a withdrawal for fifty dollars. The video footage shows you handing her a slip of paper and obviously no cash. Jim just showed us your signature card and it's clearly not your signature." He looks at me then the manager. "And yet we have documentation that a million and a half dollars in cash was deposited here into your account." He throws up his arms. He looks back at me. "So you just withdrew money right?" I nod. "Then someone is setting you up."

The manager looks at me. "How much do you have in your account?"

"I don't know probably around ten thousand with both checking and saving." I watch him click on the keyboard.

"Your balance is just under eleven thousand."

"That sounds about right."

Adams slowly stands up as well. "Are you sure you don't know Douglas Sorenson?"

"I have never heard of him until you guys told me his name yesterday or was it, the other day." I realize I don't even know what day it is anymore.

"None of this makes sense. Let's go find Ms. Jensen." Stanton looks at a small piece of paper in his hand. "This is her current address right?" The manager nods.

"She will definitely remember who brought in that amount of cash. That can't happen too often does it?"

The manager looks back at the screen. "Not every day, but we do get high amounts of cash with some of the businesses nearby." Stanton shakes his head like he's amazed by the amount of money. "Let's go." He looks at the manager and then me. "Thank you guys for your help. Sorry to bring you down here Mr. Smith. We'll get to the bottom of this. We'll stop by your house after we check out the teller's address." I nod my head and look back at the teller line and walk out.

By the time I start my engine, my phone starts vibrating. I look down and see it's the private number.

"Hello."

"Hello Sheldon. I hope you enjoyed your little encounter with the detectives and the manager in the bank. I sure enjoyed watching their expressions as well as yours of course."

"Who are you? Where is Tommy?" I scream into the phone.

"Remember your manners Sheldon."

"Screw manners. I want Tommy back now. I'm sick of your twisted little games. I've done everything you've asked now tell me where he is."

"I promise I will give back what is yours. Like I told you, I just have one more little job for you. Did you enjoy my video editing? How about the signature trick? I had fun with that one?"

"If I end up in jail then what?"

"Don't you worry about that Sheldon, haven't I shown you by now that I can control everything."

"They're going to talk to the teller now. She'll remember me, and then what? Can you control her mind too? Please give me back my son." I squeeze the phone even tighter; I want to throw it out the window.

"I've got her under control too. Remember don't worry."

"I am worried about Tommy. Tell me where he is." I hear a long sigh on the other end of the phone.

"I told you just one more little job and what's yours is yours again."

"Who is Douglas Sorenson and what does he have to do with all this?" I turn the volume up on the phone.

"You are about to find out very soon. Stand by for my next call." I hear the call end.

"Wait...wait. Please...please." I start pounding on the seat and feel the tears pouring down my face. I suddenly look up hearing someone knocking on the window. It's the assistant manager. I roll down the window.

"Are you okay Mr. Smith?"

"I'm fine. I'm just sick and tired of this."

"I know I've been following everything on the news. Take care and good luck. Let me know if there's anything we can do." I turn the ignition and drive away and grab my phone when I hear it begin to vibrate again. It's an email marked "urgent".

## Chapter 9

I'm still in the bank parking lot watching a twenty-second video of Tommy I just received. I instantly saved it to my videos folder on my iPhone, so I can keep it and it looks like it actually worked. Of course, the original email was deleted right after I viewed it. Tommy is still in that same bedroom. I'm really starting to dislike seeing that room, I'm not sure why, but there is something eerily familiar about it. Tommy is sitting on the edge of the bed looking directly into the camera. I can't tell if he knows someone is filming him or he just happens to be looking in that particular direction. I feel like calling out to him, but I know he can't hear me. Something about him doesn't look right. I can't tell if it's his eyes or just his expression, but something is wrong. I think it's his eyes; they are glassed over and his body isn't responding the way it should. At first, I figured it's the quality of the camera but after watching it several times I think it's him. I suddenly feel very weird; there's sweat tingling all over my body as the anxiety runs its course. I hope he's okay. I really do. I can't let anything happen to him. He's my life. I remember the day Michelle and I found out we were having him. It wasn't like we weren't trying or anything, but it was still so unexpected. It was like a miracle. I even set up a calendar in our kitchen and scratched off every day for almost eight months until the due date, and then he came five days late. I think they were the longest five days of our lives. Michelle was withering in pain from all the discomforts of pregnancy, and I was wound so tightly with stress I felt like I was about to burst, but finally the day came and her water broke. We rushed to the hospital, and eight hours later we were holding Tommy in our arms and as most of the people who know us say we haven't put him down since. God I miss him. How could I let this happen? I watch the video over and over again. I wish I could somehow reach through the screen and pull him out of there. Finally, it hits me. The room in the video is set up exactly like Tommy's room in our house, minus all the electronic gadgets. We keep the computer and video games in our main family room, not just to protect him, but also so we can all play together. We usually do everything as a family and always have up until this week. I throw the phone back down on the seat. I can't watch it anymore. I try and think like a detective and see if there is anything useful from the video, but all I can see in my mind is a room set up exactly like Tommy's that could be located in any house in the country. I don't see any way to track him down. Maybe Jim and Brian will come up with something from the website, but I doubt it. This guy is too good and too prepared. He has planned every move. I try and imagine what the next job will be. I'm sure it will be some kind of crime, but so far he has managed to outsmart the police on every aspect, and at this point I really don't care anyway. I've been working in technology for years and I have no idea how he is accessing the secure things he is accessing. At work, we even had a security consultant come in and test our system. He recommended making some changes, and afterwards we determined it was about as safe as we could make it. Yet he somehow still penetrated our firewalls and accessed the servers. From what I have read, banks are almost as secure as the Federal Government and he's accessing them like they are open to

the public. I still can't figure out what Tommy, Michelle or I could possibly have to offer. I scroll through the video one last time and feel a tear drop roll down my face as Tommy's glassy eyes look into the camera. There's got to be a way to get to him. I need to come up with a plan. I try and think about a common thread. As I pull the Tahoe out onto the busy Lee Highway and come to a stop at a red light, I keep coming back to Douglas Sorenson; for some reason he seems to be the key behind the whole thing. Maybe I should start with him, especially after the guy on the phone said I would learn a lot more about him soon. I decide to head over to his law office. I quickly make a right hand turn. I'm not really sure why I'm heading over there, but it just feels like the right thing to do. I get an odd feeling when I pull into the parking lot. It looks so different during the day. The surrounding buildings are actually much closer than I thought. I park on the other side of the building, far away from where I parked the other night, just in case. I instinctively reach out and open the door and find myself standing in the same lobby as before. The only difference is the lights are on and there are people milling about, most of them in suits and ties. None of them even give me a second look. I push the up button on the elevator and when the bell rings for my floor; my feet feel as though they are glued to the floor. I can't move. A minute later I'm standing in front of a very young and very blond receptionist. I ask to see Mr. Sorenson. I'm still not sure why I'm doing this. I have no idea what I'm going to say. She points at the lobby. I take a seat in one of the chairs. It's very similar to the one I threw through the window. I pretend to read a magazine while my eyes wander around the waiting area. It is elegantly furnished and appears like a law firm should look like, leather couches, dark mahogany furniture and scenic pictures on the wall. It looks much more stylish than it did last time I was here. I feel so odd sitting in the place I burglarized the night before. I was glad the receptionist didn't ask why I wanted to see him. I have no idea what I would have said. I wonder if they get a lot of walk-in clients, but it seems odd for such an upscale place. I read the name of the firm on the wall above her. It's one of those typical law firm names with tons of last names in it. I almost catch my breath when I see Sorenson's name as the third one. I wonder how I missed that before. I'm still not sure what I am going to say. About ten minutes later, a very tall and slender man with thinning brown hair walks out. He must be at least 6'4" and no more than two hundred pounds. He's dressed in an elegant dark gray suit and walks out of the back and stops at the receptionist desk. He appears to be probably mid-forties, but looks as though he could suit up and be part of a professional basketball team. I watch as the receptionist points at me and he walks over. His face shows no expression.

"Mr. Smith. How are you?" We shake hands. "I'm so sorry to hear about what you're going through." I nod in return. "What brings you to see me?"

"Can we talk somewhere more private?" He nods and gestures me to follow him past the receptionist desk. I walk down the hallway and come to the third office. The glass window has been completely removed.

"Please pardon the mess. We had an accident the other day. They are in the process of cleaning it up." It feels so odd going in here. I feel goose bumps all over. He points to a chair for me to sit on facing his large desk filled with manila folders. "I take it you're not here to see about representation." I nod. "I'm very aware of my involvement in your son's disappearance. The police told me about the car being

parked in front of my house and the note with my address." He looks down at the screen on his laptop. "I've told them everything I know and I'm not sure how I am in any way related to your son."

"I understand. I just wanted to meet you in person and see if there is anything you can offer to help find him. I know about the money being stolen as well. Apparently, I was framed for that."

"I heard that. I was actually on the phone with the detective when you came in. He told me you were in the bank at the same time, but that it wasn't you." He looks me up and down.

"If you don't mind my asking where was the money taken from?"

He looks down at the screen again. "It was taken from here. It was part of a case I am currently involved in." I look behind me at the open glass window. "That is from another situation. The money was taken a few days before."

"Was the case the money was taken from anything in particular?"

"It was an estate case. Nothing different from any other hundreds of cases we work on besides the cash. That's another story." I give him an odd look. "The guy was one of those that kept the money in a mattress." I nod. "I just don't see how it is related to your son. I wish it was so I could help. I have been over this with the police already."

"I understand. I just don't know where else to start." I'm trying to look for any possible clue that Sorenson is involved with Tommy or knows anything and so far I am getting nothing. "Do you have any children?" He looks at me oddly.

"I have a daughter in first grade, so I can relate to what you're going through, but I can't possibly fathom what it must be like to have her missing." I watch him look at a photo of a little girl behind him.

"I don't mean that. I'm just trying to find any connection between you and Tommy."

"I understand. I just don't think there is any. I wish I could help you or offer you something, but I've told you everything I know. I have a pretty boring life. I work and my wife thinks I work way too many hours and she's probably right and then I go home to my family. Other than that, unless your son has been involved in any litigation, I don't know of any way I can help." I nod and watch him answer his phone. He holds up one finger and hangs up a moment later. I stand up.

"Thanks so much for taking the time with me." He shakes my hand and grabs my shoulder with the other.

"Sorry I couldn't be more help. Please contact me any time if you think I can be of any help. Good luck." I shake his hand and head back down the hallway. I take one more look back at the missing window and walk out of the firm. As soon as I get back in the Tahoe, my phone begins to vibrate. I quickly answer it recognizing my home number.

"Hello."

"Sheldon, where are you?" Michelle's voice sounds nervous.

"I'm driving around getting ready to head home."

"Okay. Please hurry. Detective Stanton is waiting for you. He needs to talk to you about the bank."

"What do you mean?" I pull out of the parking lot.

"I don't know. He won't tell me, but he did tell me about how he thinks you were set up when you made that withdrawal. Don't you usually go to the ATM?"

I pull in front of a red Camaro and hear his horn bark at me. I wave. "Usually, I just needed to do something different."

"I'm worried about you."

"I'm okay. I just don't know what to do anymore."

"I know, just come right home."

"I'm on my way." I end the call. I hate lying to my wife. It's one thing I promised myself I would never do and I never have until all this happened. We've been married fifteen years now and have probably had fourteen good years, just one bad year. I think it was when Tommy was first born. The stress of a new baby and lack of sleep added to our discontent of each other, but after that everything has been great. We actually met in a very unique way. We we're both involved in a fender bender in a supermarket parking lot and after exchanging information and calling each other something much greater developed. She is really my best friend, especially since my parents live so far away on the other coast. I remind myself that her parents are due in tomorrow. I will definitely welcome all their help and support. I stop at a red light and watch the video of Tommy again. I can't get over his eyes. I will definitely ask the guy about that next time he calls, and I know he will call again about the last job. I wish he would just tell me what it is so I can get Tommy back to me. I close my eyes for a second and pretend he's seated right beside me. Just this year, he started sitting in the front seat next to me. I drive for the next fifteen minutes. I don't turn the radio on anymore in case they talk about Tommy. It's too depressing. I pull onto our street and see the detective's car in front as well as a news van. We must be going to go on the air again tonight. I pull into the driveway and wait for the garage to open. I turn the ignition and walk into the house. Detective Stanton is seated on the couch alongside Mike and I can hear Michelle in the kitchen. It looks like Adam's isn't here.

"Hello Mr. Smith. Please have a seat." I look at Stanton. His shirt is wrinkled, his blue pasty tie is dangling around his neck and his hair is strewn all over the place. He looks a lot different from the guy I first met at Tommy's school.

"Hi Sheldon." Michelle sits down next to me. It's like we don't know how to act any more. Should we touch each other, hold hands, I don't know. What do you do when the most important part of your life is missing and probably in harm's way, or in Michelle's case not knowing whether he's even alive. I take a long look at her curled up on the couch. I don't think she has left the house since this all happened. She looks ten years older than she did before. Her hair is frizzy, her clothes aren't fresh and she has lost the gleam in her eyes I fell in love with, but I look at her and I don't think I have ever loved her more than right now. I grab hold of her hand and squeeze it gently in mine. I watch as Stanton stands up and opens up that little notebook he always has. It looks like one right out of an old cop movie from the seventies.

"Okay, so here's where we are now." He looks down at his notebook again. I squeeze Michelle's hand a little tighter. "After we left you at the bank, we went to the address of the teller and found her body." I gasp. I picture her face in my mind. She was petite and couldn't have been more than thirty. "It appears she

died from the results of a small caliber gunshot. Detective Adams is heading that case up."

"Oh my God, I can't believe this." Stanton shakes his head looking at both Michelle and me.

I take Michelle's other hand in mine. I feel my phone begin to vibrate. I look at the number, it's Brian from work. I stand up and push the answer key.

"Hello."

"Hi Brian what's up?"

"Just wanted to let you know, Jim and I have been working on who hacked the website and it looks like we have traced it back to a guy named Douglas Sorenson."

"What?" I say so loudly both Michelle and Stanton to look at me.

"Yeah, he actually lives locally. He's some big-time attorney. I can't believe he would have the know-how, but I guess you never know any more."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive. Jim got into the web server and they ran tracers showing where all the hits came from and the ones corresponding at the same time we were hacked lead back to his home computer. Do you want us to contact the police?" I look at Stanton.

"Not yet. Thanks so much for figuring that out."

"No problem. We'll call you if we learn anything else." I end the call and sit down back next to Michelle.

"What was that all about?"

"That was Brian and he wanted to tell me he and Jim came up with a website to find Tommy." I pull up the site on my phone, Stanton tries to smile and Michelle begins to cry.

## Chapter 10

A few hours later, Noreen and her crew have us speak into the cameras from the kitchen again. We both tearfully plead for whoever has Tommy to please let him go. Noreen and Stanton say we did a good job, but I know it isn't going to bring him home until I do the last job, at least that's what I hope. I'm still checking my phone every few minutes to see if there are any text messages or calls, but everything has been quiet. I'm still wondering how he got the "Findtommy" website to show the hacks came from Sorenson's computer. I almost feel as though I should go to his house and let him know, but I stay at home tonight and somehow fall asleep on the couch next to Michelle. We both awake in the middle of the night when one of the officer's radios begins blaring about finding a body. Michelle begins to break down when she hears it's a teenager. The body was found off of a small road about two miles from our house. I'm convinced it's not Tommy because I haven't done anything, but Michelle is beside herself. I hold her tightly until her insides begin pouring out and she ends up in the bathroom. I listen as the young officer calls Stanton and Adams at their homes waking them up. I can only



imagine what they are thinking. I wonder at first if they just want this case to go away and would almost be somewhat relieved if it was Tommy, but I know deep down they have spent way too many hours trying to get him back that they would not be able to live with themselves. I listen as the radio chatter comes to life in the middle of the night. I can make out most of the things that are being said, but a lot of it is in code. A minute later, the home phone rings.

"Hello."

"Hi Mr. Smith, this is Detective Stanton. I know that you have heard a body was found that is approximately the same age as your son. I want to let you know. I am heading over there now." I hear him take a deep breath. "I don't think it is him, but we may need you to identify the body of it comes to that," another deep breath, "I just want to keep you aware of what may happen, but just because we call you down doesn't mean we think it's him." I nod to myself and thank him for calling. I am by no means worried that it is him. It just can't happen like this. The guy on the phone has too much planned out to just end it now. He wants me to do something else for him. I look up to see Michelle standing in front of me. Her face looks a faint green color and her body appears to be sagging in a very awkward position. I gently guide her onto the couch next to me and hold her tightly.

"Who was on the phone?"

"It was Stanton letting us know he's on the way to identify the body." She quickly wrestles away from my grip.

"How can you talk like that?"

"Like what?"

She lowers her voice almost to a whisper. "That could be Tommy you're talking about, not just a body."

I pull her back close to me. "It's not Tommy, Michelle. He's okay."

"How do you know?" I gently wipe the tears from her face.

"Because we would know, you said it yourself the other day. You could feel him alive and okay."

"I don't know anymore."

"Don't say that." I put my finger to her lips. "He's going to come home. I promise."

She rubs her eyes. "I wish I knew that were true Sheldon, but it has been days. Remember Stanton said we would hear something within twenty-four hours."

"He also said this was different, and it really is. I know he's okay. I know." I pull her tightly to my chest. I can feel her breaths tickling my throat. We remain like that for a long time until I feel my phone begin to vibrate. Michelle sits up quickly.

"Your phone Sheldon, aren't you going to answer it?"

I reach into my pocket not sure what to expect when I click the "send" key.

"Hello Sheldon. I hope you're enjoying the excitement as much as I am." I quickly stand up leaving Michelle gasping at me. I wave her off letting her know everything is okay.

"What's going on?"

"I don't know, but if I were you I would keep my fingers crossed."

"Wait. Please tell me." I throw the phone on the couch when I know he's gone.

"What? Sheldon who was that?" Michelle grabs my phone and starts clicking buttons. "There's no recent calls listed here."

"I know. I know." I feel the heat of anger growing on my face.

"What is it Sheldon. What is going on here?"

I look at the police officers standing on the other side of the room. They are busy typing on laptops. "Nothing, it was another one of those stupid reporters asking me what I thought."

She looks down at the phone again. "Why doesn't it show they called?"

I slowly sit back down and put the phone back in my pocket. "You know how they are. They can call you, but you can't call them." Michelle sits next me as the young officer quickly approaches us.

"Mr. and Mrs. Smith, Detective Stanton just called. He wants one of you to identify the body." Michelle runs towards the restroom again.

"I'll go." I stand up and check on Michelle. She is sitting on the bathroom floor leaning against the wall. I bend over and give her a kiss and whisper. "It's not him." She just waves me off. I head back out to the living room and get the address from the officer and head out to the Tahoe. As soon as I'm backing out my phone begins to vibrate again. I don't even look at the screen. I just answer the call knowing who it is already.

"Hello again Sheldon, I see you are on your way to identify the body."

"Why are you doing this?" I quickly back down the driveway carefully avoiding the two police cars at the bottom.

"Why Sheldon, I'm not doing anything. I'm just calling to let you know. The body they recovered is a thirteen year old boy with brown hair, roughly ninety pounds. Does that sound familiar?"

"You're a dead man. I'm serious. If this is him, I will hunt you down for the rest of my life and I will find you I promise. I thought we had a deal. I would do that last thing for you..." I realize he has already hung up. I don't think it is Tommy, but now I'm not so sure. It seems like something has changed in his tone, but I'm not sure exactly what it is. I'm trying to keep myself positive thinking that it isn't Tommy. I feel like I would know if it was, and I'm just not feeling anything right now except for anger. I quickly pull out of our neighborhood ignoring a stop sign. I just don't care anymore. How much more of this can we take? It's been almost five days now. I'm not sure I have even slept at all since I got that call from Michelle at work. Everything has been a blur. The only thing that is clear in my mind is seeing Tommy sitting on that bed in that room on the video. I grab the iPhone and click on the video. I watch Tommy's glassy eyes stare into the camera, until I feel myself becoming dizzy and concentrate on the road again. I'm supposed to meet Stanton at a building. I'm guessing it's the morgue. It's down the street from the police station. I'm not really sure how I'm going to handle it if it is Tommy. I haven't prepared myself at all for that. I'm pretty sure if it is, I won't be coming home. I don't know where I'll go or what will happen to me, but I feel like the world will come to an end if it is. I quickly change my mind and concentrate on what Jim and Brian said about the hacks leading to Sorenson's home PC. I decide I will stop by and talk to him again tomorrow at his office and make sure he is telling me everything. A few minutes later, I pull into the parking lot to a small non-descript two-story brick building that looks like any local Government building. There are no signs or indications that it is a morgue. I pull into the parking lot and park next to what I guess is Stanton's Crown Vic. I have difficulty taking the key out of

the ignition because my hands are shaking so much, but I don't feel sadness yet, maybe I'm in denial. I walk the short few steps on the sidewalk and open the door to what looks like a small police station. There is a thick glass window around a uniformed police officer seated behind a desk and a few chairs placed alongside the wall opposite it. I walk up to the window and get the attention of the officer. As soon as I tell him my name, Stanton appears out of a side door. He invites me back inside a large room full of cubicles.

"Thanks for coming down Mr. Smith." He places his hand on my shoulder. "I know this isn't what you hoped for." I nod and look around at all the empty desks.

Stanton must have picked up on my curiosity. "This is one of our sub-stations. We use it mostly for our undercover operations or to keep the media away. I didn't think you wanted reporters wondering where you're going."

"Thank you." I say. "Is it here?"

"The body?" I nod. "No. I'm just going to have you look at some pictures and if it's a positive ID. I'll take you right over if you want." I nod my head again. All of a sudden I feel the reality settling in knowing this could be the end. I try and keep that thought out of my head as I follow Stanton to a desk. I see a folder lying on it which looks like it contains pictures. I can't believe it. I feel like turning around and running out of here and never coming back, just disappearing into something, I'm not sure what though. We arrive at the desk and Stanton sits down and indicates me to sit on the other chair.

"How did he die?" I can't take my eyes off the folder in his hands.

"Let's not talk about that yet. I need you to just look at the pictures." He hands me the folder and gets up. "I'll leave you alone for a minute." I don't take my eyes off the folder. It feels like it weighs a hundred pounds. I slowly set it down on the desk and carefully open it up. Immediately, I see a piece of paper on top describing the boy. He is just as the guy on the phone told me. I wonder if it is Tommy. I don't think I can do it, but somehow my hand slowly lifts the paper off revealing the first picture. I only look at it for a second before I take my eyes off it and jump up. I run to the other side of the room where Stanton disappeared too and feel the surge of emotion overcome my body. The next thing I know, I'm on the floor and Stanton and another officer are trying to pull me to my feet.

"Mr. Smith. Are you okay?" My head is filled with fog. It feels like I have been asleep for hours. "You passed out. Does anything hurt?" I shake my head.

"I'm fine." I slowly sit up with their help and then begin to shake my head uncontrollably as my memory fills my brain again. "It wasn't him." I yell. "It wasn't him." They both pull me to my feet and place me in a nearby chair far enough away from the desk with the folder that I can't see it anymore.

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely." I say. I almost sense a slight smile coming from Stanton's face, but I'm probably seeing things because a child was killed here. Someone else has just lost their child.

"Thank you Mr. Smith. Please stay right there for a few minutes before you leave. I need to run out." He looks at the other officer. "Officer Paulson can you get him some water or something?" I watch as they both leave the room. I immediately call Michelle and give her the good news and promise I'll be home shortly. I can almost feel her relief through the phone. After two or three glasses of water and

some stale Saltines, they finally let me go. I slowly climb back into the Tahoe and begin the drive back home. The sun is just starting to rise and the light is pushing the darkness away and opening up a new and bright day. I don't think I have ever really seen a sunrise. I'm awake almost every day when the sun rises, but I've never actually sat and watched one. Today it just seems so glorious. I watch as the amber sky finishes engulfing the rest of the night and then I thank God for not letting that boy be Tommy, despite the fact that now someone else is grieving. I can't believe how beautiful it is. I'll have to get Tommy up early when he comes back and have him watch the sunrise with me. I vow to watch it every morning. I jump when my phone vibrates in my pocket.

"How did you like the good news? No worries Sheldon your property is still in good hands and in one piece unlike that poor soul you just laid eyes on."

"You are a monster. That was just a little kid. Now give me Tommy back. This has gone too far."

"Hang on Sheldon. I promised you I would deliver as soon as you fulfill your obligation..." I cut him off.

"Then tell me what I have to do." I hear a deep breath.

"In due time Sheldon...in due time."

"Please let me talk to him at least to be sure he's okay." I look in the rearview mirror and can see the anger on my face.

"After you complete your last job, you will have full access to it."

"Then tell me what I have to do."

"You will get instructions tomorrow. Enjoy the good news."

"Wait...wait. Did you do that to that little kid?"

"Why Sheldon, what kind of a person do you think I am? Or as you called me a moment ago, a monster."

"I think it was you." I step on the gas pulling out onto the road.

"Very well, I'll be in touch tomorrow. By the way, the boy's murder weapon is located in your house."

"What? Where?" I yell into the phone but the call has already ended.

## Chapter 11

I make it back home and find Michelle seated at the kitchen table. There is an unopened box of crackers in front of her. "Hi, are you okay?"

She slowly turns her head towards me and her bloodshot eyes gradually open. "You sure it wasn't him right?" I nod.

"It was definitely someone else. Same age, very sad...but it wasn't Tommy." I sit down next to her and take her hand in mine.

"I miss him so much Sheldon. How much longer can this go on? I don't think I can do this anymore." I hug her tightly.

"He'll come home Michelle. I promise he'll come home." I place my hand in my pocket and make sure I have the iPhone with me. I wish the call would come and I can do the last thing and bring Tommy home.

"I hope so." She looks at me. "Do I look as bad as you?" I shake my head.

"No you look fine. Why don't we get something to eat and go get some sleep?"

She shakes her head. "I don't think I can sleep or eat or anything anymore Sheldon. How do people do this?"

I raise my hands. "I don't know how. I guess they just keep the hope alive, because that's all they've got."

"I'm beginning to lose hope. I just don't have the same feeling anymore. Ever since we got that call last night, I just keep thinking what if that had been Tommy." I watch her face swallow itself and tears begin to fall. I gently pull her close to me and hold her tightly.

"I know he's alive and well Michelle. I know. I can't tell you how I know, but I do." She squeezes me tighter.

"I really hope you're right. How did this happen? What did we do wrong?" I wipe the tears from under her eyes.

"We didn't do anything wrong. For some reason they picked Tommy. I wish I knew why." We both turn our heads as the kitchen door opens and Stanton enters. He is wearing different clothes. He has a light-blue polo shirt on with the word "Police" embroidered on it and a pair of fresh khakis.

"How we holding up guys?"

"Not well Detective... not so well." He sits down on a chair opposite us.

"Thanks for coming out last night. Sorry to had to put you through that." He gives me a deep sympathetic look. "I can't even begin to imagine what that is like?"

"It was tough, but fortunately it wasn't him."

"I wanted to let you know I was at your son's school and they are actively displaying the website your friends created." I nod. "They are doing the same at the high school as well. My kids were asking me about it last night."

"How are they doing through all of this?"

He looks down. "They're hanging in there, like all the local kids. Just trying to help in any way they can."

"Please thank them for us." Michelle whispers.

"Will do." He opens up his notebook. "The real reason I'm here is to let you know we may have a new lead to follow. They determined that the ballistics matches both the teller and the boy that was killed yesterday and we may have a print." Both Michelle and I quickly sit up straight.

"What does that mean?" She asks.

"It means with any luck we can find a match on the print and find out who killed those two and maybe who has Tommy, but I don't want you to get your hopes up yet. What we really need to find is the murder weapon." I gasp remembering the guy on the phone told me it is in our house.

"Are you okay Sheldon?" Michelle touches my hand.

My eyes quickly dart all around the room hoping I don't see a weapon. "I'm fine. Just happy we might be getting somewhere." I'll have to search the house sometime later.

"What about them not contacting us by now?"

Stanton looks at Michelle then his notebook. "I don't have an answer for that. The only thing I can think of is the possibility of them contacting you in another way. Another cell phone? Email or anything like that. Please keep those devices

available and let us know if you hear anything. Any strange email, hang ups or anything out of the ordinary."

"You've been checking our email right Sheldon?" Michelle looks at me. I tap my pocket with my iPhone and avoid her eyes.

"Yes. I've got all of our email accounts on here, so far nothing."

"Well I'm going to head back out and see if I can find out any updates. I just wanted to keep you guys informed."

"Thank you Detective." He stops and chats with one of the officers and then heads out the front door.

"Sheldon, it sounds like these two people killed might be related to Tommy. What is going on? Does that mean he will kill Tommy?" I pull her close again.

"No. I think they want something from us. The other's just got killed for another reason." I understand his motivation for killing the teller, but I can't possibly think of any reason for taking the life of the young boy except to taunt us.

"Like what? I thought we already went through this?"

"We did, but there's got to be something we're missing." She begins to sob again and hastily heads upstairs. I look over at the two officers seated in chairs typing on their laptops on the coffee table. I wonder how much longer they will be here. I wonder if our case is going to be low priority since there are now two murders. I haven't seen Adams in days, so I guess he's wrapped up with the other cases. I decide to take a look around the house. I start in the kitchen. I look through all the cupboards and cabinets, nothing. I keep searching through drawers and in the pots and pans. I'm not sure where someone would hide a gun and even if he is telling the truth, but I know I would much rather find it than one of the officers. We have a fairly small kitchen, so it doesn't take long for me to go through most of the obvious places. I move on to our dining room, which is off to the other side. It's a fairly large room with a big mahogany table in the center and two hutches on the opposite walls that my parents gave us when we were married. Michelle has them filled with mostly dishes and silverware, so I quickly look through those and don't see anything. I move on to the downstairs bathroom; there's only one cabinet in there and it's empty. I walk through the living room where the officers are. I figure there's no reason to search in there with the officers there all the time, so I head upstairs. I get to the top of the stairs and start in the guest room right at the top of the stairs. I can tell Michelle was in here today, because it smells fresh and looks neat. Her parents are coming tomorrow. I check under the queen -size bed and the closet, nothing. I continue with all the rooms upstairs, even Tommy's. I pause in there for a while, lying on his bed and closing my eyes. I can't help but notice how much it looks like the room on the video. I even click on the video and watch him a few more times. After a little while, I head downstairs and double-check a cabinet in the kitchen just in case. As soon as I close the door, I feel my phone vibrate. There's a text message. I open the message and it reads "keep checking, you're getting close." I slam the phone down on the counter and begin looking at the ceiling. A half an hour later, I get the step ladder from the garage and find what I've been looking for. There's a small wireless camera mounted next to the kitchen light. I pull it out of the ceiling and unhook the wires wrapped around the light's electrical system. As expected, I feel my phone begin to vibrate. There's another text message, "very good Sheldon, keep looking." I go back to each room I already

checked and remove six more cameras. There was even one in our bedroom, luckily Michelle is sound asleep. I gather them all up in my arms under my jacket and take them out to the garage. I place them in the front seat of the Tahoe and get ready to turn the key when I see my model car sitting on top of my tool cabinet. I jump out of the truck and grab the car. The last time I saw it, Stanton was holding it in the living room with Sorenson's address. I quickly turn it over looking for anything, there's nothing. I begin to take it back to the truck, but stop, turn around and go back and open up the tool cabinet. It's a small wooden cabinet mounted to the wall above my tool bench where I keep all my tools handy. As soon as I open it, I feel my heart begin to lunge. There's a small black revolver hanging from the hook where my hammer usually hangs. I don't know what to do. I just stand there and look at it. Instinctively, I grab a piece of cloth nearby and grab the gun and carry it back to the truck. I can't believe I'm holding the murder weapon. I look next to me on the passenger seat and there are six cameras and a small gun. I don't know what to do; they may have fingerprints on them that could lead the police to Tommy. I'm tempted to drive right over to the police station and give everything to Stanton, but if I'm wrong then Tommy's life will probably end. I slowly back out of the garage keeping my eyes on the seat next to me. I have the gun pointing towards the passenger door even though I know a revolver is one of the safest guns around. I was in the Army for a few years so I'm familiar with guns, but not one that may have taken two innocent lives. I pull out of the driveway, I'm convinced one of the officers is going to stop me before I get too far, so I quickly accelerate and head down the street. I don't even know what time it is anymore, but it is pitch black. It seems darker outside than any night before. I'm not really sure why and I'm not really sure where I'm headed. I make a few turns and I find myself on the street Douglas Sorenson lives on. I slowly pull by his house. It's a large colonial, probably close to four thousand square feet, but I'm not sure because of the lack of light. It just appears large, much larger than ours. I look over and see a few lights burning in the downstairs floor and I'm almost tempted to stop by, but I keep on driving staying on the back roads so I won't get pulled over. The last thing I need to do is to get pulled over with the murder weapon in my front seat. About fifteen minutes later, I'm driving by the station that Stanton and Adam's work out of. I want to pull in the parking lot and hand them everything. I slow down when I pass the entrance, but I don't turn. I feel my phone begin to vibrate as I watch the police station disappear in my rear view mirror. It's not a text, it's an actual call. I quickly answer.

"How are you Sheldon? Great work in finding all those cameras. I'm impressed."

"Why are you spying on us? Why did you leave that gun in the garage?" I pull over onto the side of the road.

"Why Sheldon because I like you my friend."

"I'm not your friend and don't even think about calling me that. Now what about Tommy? What do you want from me?"

"Slow down Sheldon. I can only answer one question at a time. First of all...how do you know I left the gun? I am going to fill you in on your last job in a moment."

"What kind of games are you playing and why are you playing it with my family?" I feel the anxiety attacking my body and causing tingling all over.

"My...we are inquisitive tonight. I chose you because you are the most capable and you have done a beautiful job thus far and I expect you to continue. By the way, I'm very impressed you haven't turned anything over to the police officers. I know you were near the police station earlier. Fighting off temptation is one of life's most difficult tasks." I watch a car drive by wondering if that could possibly be him. "Do I need to remind you what happens if you give in to that temptation? Did you enjoy the photographs last night of the poor boy? I'm guessing that should be enough to keep you away from the police. If not, please let me know and I can arrange more." I feel my anger growing as he keeps talking.

I begin to scream into the phone. "Why did you have to do that and the teller too? They are innocent people."

"To prove a point Sheldon. Sometimes there are innocent bystanders who just happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, happens in every major conflict."

I'm start screaming. "You are a very sick person. You need help."

"You are quite right Sheldon and that is exactly what you are going to do for me next, help me and then I will help you. Remember our deal. You do for me and I return what's not mine."

I try to speak as calmly as I can...I take a deep breath. "Just tell me what I have to do." I watch another car's lights dart past me in the other lane.

"First of all, I need you to secure that gun, because it may come in handy in a few days."

"What are you talking about?" I slide the volume button all the way to the top.

"I'm getting to that. Oh and by the way don't worry about getting fingerprints from anything you have because they have been thoroughly cleansed." I shake my head and look at the cameras and gun. "You're going to take the gun to a storage unit until we need it."

"What are you talking about?" I look at the clock on the dashboard and it reads 11:00PM.

"As a matter of fact, I have already rented a unit and it is open twenty four hours. It is just a few blocks from Sorenson's office. The one you entered a few nights ago, so why don't you head over there and drop it off." He gives me the directions and code so, I pull the Tahoe off the shoulder and back onto the road and head in the direction of Sorenson's building. As soon as I secure the door on the box my phone vibrates again.

"Did you get it in there?" I'm really beginning to hate his voice. It has a nasty ting to it.

"I'm surprised you don't know."

"Let's not develop an attitude now Sheldon. Are you ready for your last job?" I nod to myself and look in both directions as I pull out of the empty storage facility and head back in the direction of Sorenson's office. "On Wednesday of this week, three nights from now, I need you to go get that gun again from the storage facility and point it at Mr. Sorenson and pull the trigger."

"What?" I almost drop the phone. "I'm not shooting him or anyone. You're crazy. Just give me Tommy, the deal is off."

"If that's what you want Sheldon. I hope you enjoyed the photos last night because next time they will be of something that belongs to you." I can't talk. I



can't even move. I'm not sure how I'm even driving any more or anything. There's no way I am going to kill someone.

"Look, I'll do anything but I can't kill someone. I'm sorry. Isn't there something else I can do?"

"We made a deal. What should I tell your property that you wouldn't do anything to get him back?"

"You're a monster. I hate you. I'm going to kill you."

"Save that anger for your job Sheldon. Are you up for the task or no?"

I don't say anything. I just stare at the lines on the road and keep driving. I look at the empty seat where the gun was.

"I need an answer Sheldon." Somehow the word yes comes out of my mouth. I have just agreed to kill an innocent man.

## Chapter 12

I spend the next few hours driving around. I had to stop for gas, but other than that I feel as though I have been driving in circles. I know there is no way I can kill an innocent man, but I can't let anything happen to Tommy. I look at the clock; it's nearly three in the morning. I aim the Tahoe back towards our house and pull into the driveway and garage. I sit in the garage so long that one of the officers opens the door going into the house and waves at me. I wave at him to let him know I'm okay. He walks back inside. I wait a few minutes and then get out of the truck and enter the house. I look at the toolbox and grab the model car and place it in my jacket pocket. I nod to the officers in the living room and catch my reflection in the large mirror hanging on the living room wall, three more days until I'm supposed to murder an innocent man. The man looking back at me in the mirror does not look like someone capable of murder, but then again I have deposited a million and a half dollars of stolen money, and broken into an office in the last few days so I don't know what I'm capable of anymore. I head directly upstairs and see Michelle sound asleep on our bed. I climb in next to her and within seconds I am drifting off into another world. I'm not sure how long I actually slept, but when I wake up, the sun is out and Michelle is not lying next to me. I look for the alarm clock behind me, but it's not there, so I reach for my iPhone, but it's not there either. I quickly jump up and start jogging down the hall. I stop, seeing Michelle seated on Tommy's bed. She has all his clothes lying next to her. I walk into the room. I can't help thinking about the video again.

"What are you doing?" I watch as she slowly turns her head and looks towards me.

"Just missing him," I notice she has his baseball uniform in her lap. "He never even got to wear this." She pulls it close to her face.

"We'll get him back." I sit down next to her. I'm not sure I'm going to be able to do what he wants me to do to get him back. I reach out and touch the smooth texture of Tommy's red and white baseball uniform. A few days ago was supposed to be his first game. This was the first year he decided he wanted to play baseball.

He never had any interest up until last year when he approached me and indicated he wanted to give it a try. We worked every night on hitting and throwing until both our hands were full of blisters, but he was ready. We were all so excited for the first game. I don't even know if they ever played. I think that was the night I went to the field, but I don't know anymore. I close my eyes and try to imagine Tommy standing out at third base fielding grounders. "What time is it?"

"It's just after noon." I look around the room surprised to see the time on Tommy's clock. I can't believe I slept that long. "Sorry I slept so long."

Michelle looks at me. Her hair is pulled into a pony tail. "I'm glad you did. I'm charging your phone downstairs."

I look at the uniform again. "Thanks." She places her hand on mine. "Where's our clock?"

"It's in the guest room. I wanted to let you sleep as long as you could. I know you always look at the clock." I try to smile, but my mouth doesn't cooperate. "Why are you so sure we're going to get him back? It's been almost a week now."

I look away. I want to tell her I'm not, because I don't think I can kill a man, but instead I just say "I just know."

"I hope so. Are you going out today?"

"I don't know. I might head down to the police station to see if I can find anything out?" She looks at me curiously. "I'm sure there isn't anything, but it just makes me feel like I'm doing something." She nods. I can't believe today is Monday, two more days until Wednesday.

"The officers had to leave, so we are by ourselves now?"

"What?"

"Stanton came by this morning and said they would be better served having them investigate the two murders to get us closer to Tommy. They left all the phone equipment here and said to call right away if we hear anything." I nod my head not really sure what to think. "So I guess that means they don't think they are going to call right?"

"I guess, but they probably feel they will have better luck working the murders."

"I'm so scared for him if he's still alive." I look at her.

"He is still alive Michelle." She looks out the window. I can see the sun's rays shining through the half-closed blinds.

"Why are you so sure? Is there something you're not telling me?" I look up at the ceiling at the spot where I found the camera. It was located near the light, impossible to see unless you were looking for it. I know there has got to be microphones in here somewhere.

"I'm just sure. I know we would have heard something by now if he wasn't okay."

"How do we know he's not lying out there in the woods somewhere waiting for us to come find him?" I pull her close.

"Michelle, he may only be thirteen, but we raised him to be able to handle things. If he were in trouble I'm confident he would figure out what to do. We just have to keep our hopes up and give the police a chance."

"It's been almost a week. I think that is a chance."

"They're doing all they can." She quickly releases herself from me.

"How would you know? You're never here." I try and pull her back, but she squirms away from me.

"It's the only thing I can do Michelle. I feel like I need to keep looking for him.

"We'll go look some more. I'm going to clean up his room." I slowly stand up and kiss her on the forehead. She keeps her eyes on the uniform and begins to fold it neatly along with Tommy's other clothes. I walk to the doorway and watch her fold a few more shirts. I really want to tell her how I know he's okay and show her the video but I can't, so I quickly walk out of the room and down the stairs. I find my iPhone in the kitchen plugged in. I push the home button and check for any messages. There are none, so I pour bowl of cereal and sit at the kitchen table. I decide to turn on the TV in the kitchen; it's a small 22 inch LCD we bought for Michelle to watch when she's cooking. I turn it on to a local news channel and the first thing I see is a picture of the young teller I saw in the bank. The news anchors are showing pictures of her and her fiancé. I can't believe how young she looks. They show a picture of the outside of the bank and my heart skips a few beats just seeing the place again. I quickly click the off button and decide to call Jim and Brian. I dial Jim's number first. He answers on the second ring.

"Hi Sheldon, anything new?"

I shake my head and answer no. "Have you guys had any luck finding out anything about how the website was hacked?"

I don't hear anything for a minute. "I told you it traces back to that Sorenson guy." Well, it turns his computer is being used as an attack computer."

"What do you mean?"

"Brian was able to access his computer and he found tons of trojans and executables that were set up to run malicious programs. The computer was being used as a launch pad for an attack, so we shut it down. I hope you don't mind."

I stand up and look out the window in the back yard. I watch a small blue bird lift off a branch and fly into the sky. "No, not at all. Do what you have to do. We're you able to find out anything about where the programs came from?"

"Not yet, but Brian thinks he can trace them back to the origin. You know how he is. He won't give up." I nod. "He thinks with the combination of what was on our servers and what he found there, he'll be able to figure it out. He said it will just take a few days." I want to say I don't have a few days, but I thank him and he promises me they will call as soon as Brian cracks the code which I know he eventually will. The guy just has a knack for getting to the bottom of things and he won't stop until he gets there. I remember last year we had a mysterious issue with printers shutting down for no apparent reason that lasted a few weeks. I would come to work in the morning and find Brian asleep on the floor in front of one of our many large network printers where he had spent the night trying to figure it out. It turns out one of us had somehow written a task on one of the servers to shut them down in the middle of the work day, but it wasn't showing it anywhere. Brian figured it out and solved the problem, great guy to have on your team.

"Thanks for working on it. Please let me know what you find."

"You got it. We're going to take this guy down."

"Great. Just don't go to the authorities until you let me know okay?"

"No problem. Is there something else going on here? You don't think this is related to your son's disappearance do you?"

"I don't think so, but I want to make sure."

"Okay. We'll keep digging. Let me know if you hear anything about Tommy." I hang up the phone and as soon as I put it back in my pocket, it begins to vibrate. It's another text message. I quickly read through the text. It says, "I hope you're doing well Sheldon. More details will come for Wed night." As usual the text vanishes immediately after I finish reading it. Suddenly, I get an idea. I throw on a jacket and head for the Tahoe. On the front seat the cameras are still there. I head directly to work. I enter through a maintenance door to avoid any contact with anyone. Luckily, the IT staff is located near the maintenance section and my office is right around the corner. I quickly brush into the maintenance office. Luckily, no one is in there so I call Jim and Brian to me. A minute later, they both appear at the door with surprised looks on my face.

"What are you doing here? I just talked to you." I nod and scoot the chair closer to a desk.

"Please come in and shut the door." They both shuffle in and sit on the chairs in front of me. I can see the anticipation on their faces. "I was wondering if you guys could take a look at these." I point at the pile of small cameras on the desk. They both lean in closer. Brian picks one of them up in his hands and twists it around looking at it closely.

"Are these IP cameras?" I nod. "Where did you get them?"

"Let's just say I found them and I need to find out anything you can find out about them." I look down at the cameras. Each one is about the size of a battery. "Like the IP address and where they are being broadcasted to."

"That may be tough, but I might be able to get something off the memory if it hasn't been flushed." I nod at Brian and look at Jim who nods back as if he understands.

"Is this related to the website thing?" I nod at Jim again. He reaches down and gathers up the remaining cameras. Brian is closely examining the one he picked up.

"I hate to say this but is there any way you guys can get on this right away. I mean do your work here first. I'll pay you."

They both shake their heads. "No, don't even suggest that. If this has anything to do with what I think it does, we will do this right now." I try and smile at Jim.

"You can use my office if you want. How's everything else going around here?"

Brian quickly sets the camera back down on my desk. "It's been a slow few days after the virus fiasco. We're doing upgrades on servers now."

"Sounds good...you guys are the best." I stand up and tap each of their shoulders. "I've got to go. Please don't mention this to anyone, and don't go to the police before you talk to me."

Jim looks up at me. "Are you sure there's nothing you want to talk about." I shake my head no and thank them again. I drive around for the next few hours, passing both Sorenson's office and house multiple times. I'm tempted to stop by, but I just keep driving until I decide to head back home. Michelle is in the kitchen eating a bowl of cereal. We talk for a moment and then I head upstairs and step into Tommy's room and sit on the bed. All the clothes are gone and the room is

spotless. I click on the video of Tommy and imagine he's sitting in this room with me. I try and see myself shooting Sorenson, but I just can't go through with it. I don't know what I'm going to do. I can't let Tommy down, but on the same hand I can't kill someone in cold blood. I watch the video a few more times until Michelle calls my name to tell me I have a phone call. I run down the stairs and pick up the phone.

"Hello."

"Hi Mr. Smith, this is Douglas Sorenson. You came by my office the other day." I feel my stomach begin to flip as I realize I'm supposed to kill this guy in two days. Michelle is looking at me wondering who I'm talking to. I whisper Sorenson's name. She shrugs her shoulders.

"How are you?" I lean against the counter.

"I'm fine. Remember you asked me if I can think of anything that might help to let you know." I feel a tinge of excitement begin to grow. I look at Michelle who is waiting for another response from me. "Well I think I may have something. I'm not sure if it will help or not, but the guy in that picture from the school is a former client of mine."

"What?" I feel Michelle step closer to me. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. I have his file right here. His name is Frank Harris. I haven't gone to the police yet. I figured I would let you know first." Michelle leans in to listen.

"Do you have his address?" I can't believe it. We may have him. Sorenson gives me an address in the town next to us. He says it is a few years old, but as far as he knows it is valid. I thank him over and over again. Hang up and give Michelle a giant hug. We both run to the garage and I quickly back the Tahoe out of the garage.

## Chapter 13

"Shouldn't we call Stanton and let him know what we're doing?"

I nod to her. "Let's just check it out first." We pull into a middle class neighborhood. It's similar to ours, but the houses are a little newer and the yards a little more manicured. We make a few turns and listen to the soft female voice on the GPS guide us. We slowly turn onto a small narrow road with only a few houses on it. It is a cul-de-sac, and apparently the largest houses in the neighborhood reside on. The sides of the road are covered with trees, so it's difficult to see the house numbers, but as we reach a small circle at the end of the road the GPS cries out "destination reached". Michelle and I both look at each other. I can feel the excitement jumping off us as we pull in front of a large brick colonial. It's the kind of home that appears to be cared for. There isn't a shrub out of place and the yard is green and cut in parallel rows. I'm not really sure what to do. There are two cars in the driveway; two late model BMW's.

"What do we do?" I place the car in park in the middle of the circle just beyond the house.

"I think we need to see if Tommy's in there."

"Shouldn't we call the police now Sheldon." I look all around us. The next closest house is barely visible across the street and looks like no one is home. I turn the ignition off.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm going to head up there and just look around. Why don't you stay here just in case." She nods, but looks a little nervous. "I have a good feeling about this."

"If you're not back in about five minutes, I'm calling Stanton."

"That's fine." I lean over and kiss her softly on the cheek. "I love you."

"I love you too. Please be careful." I slowly step out of the Tahoe. I see Michelle slide over to the driver's seat and turn the ignition back on. I wave to her as I walk towards the house. It has a large driveway and to the right of it is a heavy band of trees and bushes. I creep across to that side of the yard. The house is far enough away from the street, so unless someone is looking out one of the upper floors they aren't going to see me. I'm hoping Tommy is in one of those rooms. I try and imagine entering the bedroom he is in and pull him out of there. I can feel my heart beating faster as I move through the shrubbery. Luckily, it is only knee high so I have no problem climbing through it. I angle towards the far right side of the house staying under the cover of the trees. I'm not really sure what I'm looking for or what I'm actually going to do, but I know I must keep going. A few minutes later, I am parallel to the side of the house. There are two windows on the second floor on the side, but I'm way too far away to tell if they're occupied. I decide to continue on around to the back. I suddenly stop when I hear voices. I carefully kneel down beside a large evergreen and peek around the side of it. There are two men facing me about fifty yards away in an enclosed pool area. They are both looking in my direction. I can almost feel their eyes burning into me. I gently get down to the prone position. It's one I'm comfortable with after my time in the Army. I don't move a muscle. I can hear them talking and it sounds like their voices are getting louder. I slowly lift my head and can see them walking in my direction. They both are holding hand guns out in front of them and appear to be in their thirties or forties dressed in shirts and ties. I'm not sure what to do, so I start crawling back in the direction I came. I'm trying to be as quiet as possible, but with all the small twigs below me, I know they must be able to hear me. I decide to get up and start running. I sprint back through the trees leaping over the small groups of shrubs until I end up on the driveway. I can hear them yelling at me from behind but I don't stop. I run all the way to the Tahoe and hop in the passenger side startling Michelle. She instinctively begins driving around the circle and up the street. I look behind me and see the two men run out onto the road. They are waving their guns behind us, but they don't fire. We just keep going. I explain to Michelle what happened and she insists that we call Stanton. I agree and he tells him to meet him around the corner in about fifteen minutes.

"So what do you think?" Michelle pulls the Tahoe over onto the side of the road.

I'm out of breath. "I'm not sure what was going on back there, but they saw me and started coming after me."

"Do you think they have Tommy?"

I shake my head. "I don't know. I only made it to the back, but one of the guys resembled the one in the picture." I watch Michelle almost smile. "But it was hard to tell because they were far away."

"I hope he's here Sheldon. How much time has gone by since we called Stanton?" I look at the clock on the dash. "It's been almost fifteen minutes." A minute later we see Stanton's unmarked pull up next to us. I fill him in on exactly what happened and tell him that one of the guys looks like the one in the school picture. I see his expression change from one of disbelief to one of excitement.

"I'm going to go down there and see what's going on." He looks down the road.

"I'm coming with you." I walk towards the passenger door.

"You know I can't allow that." I ignore him and climb into the passenger seat. Michelle turns the truck off. "We'll be right back. Stay put. I called a few other officers so you may see some cars come by. She nods. I figure Stanton probably doesn't want to go alone, so he reluctantly agrees that I can come along, plus he knows there's no way I'm going to get out unless he forces me. I direct him back to the cul-de-sac and we pull up in front of the house. The two BMW's are still there, but there is no sign of the two men. We get out and begin to walk up the driveway. I see Stanton's hand rest on his gun as we approach the front door. It's a double door painted dark green. Stanton knocks loudly on the door. No one answers. He continues to knock and after a minute he waves at me to step back. He is looking up at the second-story window right above the front door. "You see that?"

"What?" I'm looking up at the window. My emotions are shooting through my brain.

"There was movement up there. I saw it when we were walking up." I'm suddenly not sure if I should cry or break down the front door, but I remain standing next to Stanton until all of a sudden the front door opens. Stanton pulls his gun slightly out of its holster and we see an elderly man appear in the doorway.

"Can I help you guys?" His voice is soft and raspy. It looks like he has just woken up. His clothes are wrinkled and his hair is strewn all over his head.

Stanton holds up his badge and identifies himself. "We need to ask you a few questions."

"About what?" I hear some shuffling behind the man. I see Stanton lean forward until a large Golden Retriever makes his way through the opening. "Stay here Buster."

"There were two men here just a few minutes ago. I want to just ask them a few questions."

The old man turns around and looks back inside. "There's no one here but me and Buster." I feel my blood pressure building up inside me. It feels like I'm going to explode.

"They were just in the backyard." I say.

The old man shrugs his shoulders, "just me and Buster."

Stanton steps closer to the old man. "Would you mind if we took a look around just to be sure?"

The old man throws up his arms and steps out of the way. I follow Stanton into the house. We step into a giant lobby with a dual staircase coming down on each side. The house is immaculately decorated. There are small statues and figurines placed all over. Stanton turns right into a dining room area with a large table and the walls lined with antique collections of plates and silver that must be worth a fortune. I look back and don't see either the man or the dog. We continue walking

into the next two rooms which are both living rooms decorated very formally. I feel like I am in a museum. Stanton doesn't seem to notice. He keeps walking. We come to the kitchen. It is the biggest kitchen I have ever seen. There are three large islands and two large stoves and more cabinets than one could ever fill, but no sign of Tommy or the two men. The kitchen looks out onto the pool area where I saw the two men talking but they don't appear to be out there anymore. We continue searching through the first floor of the house and don't find anyone. We come back to the lobby and slowly walk up the stairs. There's no sign of the old man or the dog. The front doors are still open. We arrive at the top of a long narrow hallway and Stanton turns right. I feel the excitement and my nerves squeezing every muscle in my body. I almost can't breathe. I keep imagining one of these rooms contains Tommy. Stanton quickly opens the first door and we see what looks to be a guest room. There's an unmade bed in the corner. We continue down the hallway and reach the master bedroom; no sign of the room I saw on the video. Stanton stops and looks into the master. We see ruffled sheets where someone had been recently sleeping. I follow him into the room as he checks the closets and large bathroom area, but there is no sign of anyone. We start to leave the room and head back downstairs when I suddenly stop. I quickly walk towards a dresser and grab a framed photo. Stanton comes bounding towards me seeing what I'm looking at. He pulls out the photo of the man at the school with Tommy from his pocket and holds it up to the one on the dresser. They are one in the same.

"That's him." I shout. Stanton grabs the framed picture tucks it under his arm and almost trips over Buster when we hear a loud bang outside. I quickly follow him down the staircase. He has his weapon out in front of him and his eyes are scanning in every direction. We reach the bottom of the stairs and step into the massive foyer. He waves at me to hold up as he slowly peeks outside the open door. At the same time, we hear a car's engine and tires moving on the driveway. He quickly disappears out the front door. I slowly walk out and see him bent down over the old man. He is lying in the middle of the driveway in a pool of blood. I quickly turn my head as Buster brushes past me and heads toward his master. The dog stops and sits vigilantly at the man's head. I can see Stanton checking his neck for a pulse and talking into his radio mic. One of the BMW's is gone. I look up the road and don't see anything moving. I assume Stanton has already given out the information that the suspects are in a BMW. He waves at me to come over.

"Mr. Smith. Did you happen to get a look at the other car?"

I shake my head no. "Other than it was a dark colored BMW. I don't know. I think it was bigger than that one." I point at the dark green car behind Stanton. I think it is a 500 or 700 series, but I'm not sure. I can already hear sirens off in the distance. Stanton stands up and walks behind the second car. Buster remains in the same place.

"He's gone." Stanton looks at the man and shakes his head. "I can't believe this. How did this happen?"

I shake my head and approach the dog. I scratch his neck and try and keep my eyes off the man. Stanton walks back into the house. He's writing something in his notebook. About two minutes later, piercing sirens and flashing blue lights



overtake the scene causing a thick blue-flashing haze. I remain next to Buster as two EMT's kneel down beside the man. The dozen or so officers follow Stanton into the house. I can hear him directing them all over. Two or three of them quickly turn around and head back out the door and walk around to the back. I think I recognize one of them from being in our house over the last few days. I watch as the driveway and circle fills with emergency vehicles, and people rush by Buster and me, everything seems blurry. It's all happening so fast. The paramedics have apparently finished trying to resuscitate the old man, because they are standing up and watching a police officer take pictures of the body. I can hear a description of the BMW being blasted on all the radios, but I haven't heard anyone say they have seen it. A few minutes later, I feel a tap on my shoulder and a man dressed similar to Stanton asks me if he can ask me some questions. He leads me over closer to the front door.

"Detective Milken." He shakes my hand. "So can you tell me exactly what happened before Detective Stanton arrived?" I describe all the events and finish talking about being chased and jumping in the truck with Michelle. "Are you sure this was one of the men?" He holds up the picture that was on the dresser.

I suddenly think about Michelle, and realize I better get a hold of her. "I'm pretty sure it was him. I was a little distance away, but that was who I thought it was as soon as I saw him." He writes something down in his notebook. I pull out my phone. "Excuse me. I need to call my wife."

"No problem. This will only take another minute." He looks back at his notebook. "Did you happen to see where the two men went after you left?" I close my eyes and try and visualize what happened again.

"I think they were on the road when we were driving away." I point down the driveway and he nods.

"Do you think they were close enough to see what kind of vehicle you were driving?"

"Probably," He closes his notebook.

"Okay, just stay close by in case we need you. I know Detective Stanton will want to talk to you." I watch as he hurries back into the house. I dial Michelle's phone hoping she has it with her. Luckily, she answers right away. I explain what happened and she tells me she'll be right over here. I slowly walk back to Buster and begin to scratch his neck again. A few moments later, an officer approaches me and tells me Michelle is here. I didn't even notice the crime scene tape until now. I can see her on the other side. I run over to her and duck under the tape. We are standing next to the driveway on the grass. I explain to her what happened. We sit down on a large rock and watch as the man's body gets wheeled down the driveway on a gurney and then disappears into a chaos of flashing blue and red lights. Buster slowly stands up and begins walking in circles. His eyes and head are pointing downward. I clap my hands and he reluctantly walks over to Michelle and me. He sits down beside us, so I begin to scratch his neck again until he lays his head on my shoes. I think I see Michelle try and smile, but I'm not sure. I'm not sure how much longer we stay there, but sometime later Stanton comes out and talks to an officer who points at us. We watch him duck under the tape and walk towards us.

"Hi Mr. and Mrs. Smith, sorry about all the confusion that went on here."

"What happened?" Michelle asks.

"Well first of all, it looks like the BMW is nowhere to be found. We have no reports of anyone calling in seeing it or anything." He shakes his head. "Second of all, apparently the man that was shot was the father of the two guys you saw?"

"They shot their own father?" I move my hand to Buster's back.

"It looks as though they didn't want him to talk, so they shut him up; nice sons huh?"

"Is this the same guy from the school?" I ask.

"We think so."

"But there's no sign of Tommy right?"

Stanton looks at Michelle. "That's right. We have searched the place upside down and there's nothing that indicates he was ever here. We have the techs going through it now." He looks back at the house. "The weird thing is it looks like there are no personal items at all in the house except for that photograph you saw on the dresser."

"So what do we do now? Do you know who this guy is?"

"As you know his name is Frank Harris and his brother's name is Shane, but other than that we don't know much about them. In fact, it's like Shane doesn't even exist. Neither of them have a record or anything. The man they killed is Frank Harris Sr." He looks towards the driveway. "He is apparently a retired judge. We are talking to some of the neighbors, so hopefully we'll get more information soon." I look down at Buster who looks like he's sound asleep. "Why don't you guys head home and I'll update you in a little bit." He looks at the dog. "Take him with you if you want. I don't think anyone else is going to care for him."

Michelle nods. "We'll watch him until we can find a home for him. We slowly walk back towards the truck with Buster tailing behind us, when my phone begins to vibrate. I look at the text message and it reads. "No greater love than that between a father and son... ha ha".

## Chapter 14

We arrive back home. We're both exhausted after all the suspense. I take Buster out in the backyard for a few minutes and then fall asleep next to Michelle on the couch. I wake up a few times during the night feeling a wet tongue on my face, but I just rub Buster's back and we both go back to sleep. Next thing I know, I wake up to a knock on the door. I look at Michelle and Buster. They slowly rise up to the sound. It is morning and the sun is shining brightly through the windows; one more day until I'm supposed to pull the trigger. I feel my stomach toss around at the thought. I quickly open the door to both Detective Stanton and Adams. They both look fresh and awake. I wave them in and Stanton hands me a bag full of donuts and two large cups of coffee. He looks at Michelle and Buster standing on the other side of the living room near the couch.

"How was the dog? I found this and thought you could use it." He hands me a green nylon leash.

I tap my leg to call him over, Buster bounds across the room and stops at my feet. I rub under his collar. "I think he's doing okay. I'm sure he's a little confused about what happened. Come sit down." I walk back towards the couch and set the bag of donuts on the coffee table and hand Michelle one of the coffees. Buster sticks his nose near the bag and then turns away. He places his head on my feet when I sit down. I reach in and grab a glazed donut. Stanton and Adams sit opposite us and each take out a donut as well. Michelle just stares at the bag.

"Well we found the car. You'll never guess where it was?"

"In front of Sorenson's house right?" They both nod their heads.

"There was nothing useful in there except for this." He pulls out a piece of paper with some numbers written on it. "It's definitely some kind of code for a combination or something." I lean in closer and gasp for air when I read the numbers. They're for the storage compartment where the gun is located I'm supposed to use tomorrow. I can't believe it. "Does this mean anything to you guys?" We both shake our heads. "I've got some guys checking some of the local storage facilities, but with the amount around here, I doubt we'll have any luck." He looks directly at me. I feel a band of sweat forming on my forehead. Buster rustles his body below me. "By the way, some of the neighbors have reported seeing the two men in the vicinity of their father's house before, but no one has spoken to them and the next door neighbor has limited eyesight, so she won't be much help."

"Do we know anything else about them?" Stanton looks at Adam's.

"There is no record of either one of them. They have never filed taxes, held a job, served in the military or anything that we can find." He looks at Stanton. "We can't even find birth certificates for them. The only record we have of them is from Sorenson."

Stanton pulls his chair closer causing Buster to quickly turn his head. "We think these are the guys holding Tommy and responsible for the teller and the boy, so we really want to find them." He looks at our TV. "We have broadcasted the photograph we found...or actually you found and are hoping someone will have seen them. I mean they're not invisible. I think despite all that happened last night we caught a big break with you being there and spotting them. I just wish you had called us first."

I look at Michelle. For the first time, I can see a hint of the sparkle in her eyes coming back. "So what do we do now?"

"We're staking out the house in case they decide to come back, plus we're dusting and checking through the car for any more clues. With any luck someone will recognize one of them." We both nod. They both grab another donut and let us know they'll be back with any more news. I walk them to the door and thank them. Buster stays directly behind me the whole time. It's as if he's watching over me like he did with his owner. We spend the rest of the morning just hanging around and not really talking to each other except a couple of comments about what the detectives said. Things do sound more promising than they did a week ago. I can't believe that much time has gone by. You really have no idea of time or anything when your child is missing and is in danger. I can't stop thinking about tomorrow, despite the fact that if I can do it Tommy will be back. How can I shoot a man? Especially, one who went out of his way to give us a possible break. I just

hope they can find the guy before tomorrow comes so I don't have to go through with it. I can't imagine Tommy being killed for something I don't do. I look at Buster and he stares back at me with his big sad eyes. I try and imagine myself holding the gun and pointing it at Sorenson and shooting him. I just can't get past the shooting part. How can I pull the trigger? I've shot enough guns in the Army to know what they can do. I don't think I can live with the alternative of knowing Tommy will be killed because I was too afraid to do something. I place my hands on my head and shut my eyes. I feel Buster curling up around my feet as if he knows I'm upset. A minute later, I'm drifting off to sleep when I suddenly wake up in terror full of sweat with the last thought of me pulling the trigger and Sorenson falling over backwards. I'm not sure how long this goes on, but eventually Michelle taps me on the shoulder and tells me I have a phone call. I slowly sit up and stretch my arms before answering.

"Hello."

"Hey Shelton. It's Jim." I feel my oxygen levels come back to normal knowing it isn't the guy or the police telling me they have found Tommy. "Brian has made some progress. I just wanted to give you an update." I pull the phone closer to my ear. "We have traced the path through the Internet. I'm not sure how he does it, but he has found the original computer that placed the virus on both our servers and the website."

"Really? Was it Sorenson's?"

"No, his was just the one that was used to launch the attack from. Weird thing is the person who was using Sorenson's was almost trying to let it be known he was using that one. Anyway, the computer was one in the public library. Brian is down there now going over the computer and talking to the staff. I think we are on to something."

I look down at Buster. His eyes are closed tight. "That is great news. What do you think the chances are he'll be able to get anything?"

"I think they are very good, because the same computer was used in both attacks and you have to sign up and show ID to use it." I think back to Lawrence's license being used to get Tommy out of school.

"Thanks so much for all you guys are doing. I owe you everything."

"No...no, anytime, we want to help you in any way. I'll call you back as soon as he is finished with the computer. We're also still working on those webcams." I hang up the phone and update Michelle on what they are working on. I feel pretty good having two separate paths to this guy, one by the police and one by Jim and Brian. I just hope one of them can get there before tomorrow. I decide to take Buster out for a walk. I hook up his leash and head out the front door. By the time we get to the bottom of the driveway, my phone begins to vibrate. I see it's a phone call so I answer.

"Why hello Sheldon, I see you have been busy the last few days. I hope you are ready for tomorrow's activities."

"Look, I'll do anything you want, but killing someone is beyond my grasp."

I stop and Buster lifts his leg on a small bush. "Sheldon we made a deal and when I make deals I stand by them. Here's the plan, Douglas Sorenson will be home alone from seven until nine tomorrow night. His wife and daughter attend a dance class together, so I need you to pick up the weapon beforehand and head

over to his house." Buster starts pulling me to move forward. "You can tell him you just want to talk, and then when you get inside all you have to do is pull the trigger and your property will be returned within ten minutes."

I don't say anything. I just follow Buster as he pulls me down the street in search of the next perfect bush to mark his scent on. "Please there has to be another way."

"Sheldon, let me ask you a simple question. Do you want it back or not?"

"Of course I want Tommy back. I would do anything to get him back. Please shoot me instead. I don't care."

"That isn't part of the deal. You have your directions and if you fail to go through with it, you know the consequences. Your property's condition lies in your hands from here on out. It's up to you how you want it returned."

I watch as Buster begins sniffing another small area of grass. "What has he done to you that he deserves to be killed?"

"If you're referring to Mr. Sorenson then you'll have to leave those details up to me, if you're referring to your property, you will find out the answer shortly. Think of this as a special game of how much you really love your child." I pull on Buster's leash and turn him back towards our house. "Most people say they will do anything for their kids, but you actually have an opportunity to do it."

"You're a sick person you know that?"

"Actually, I feel quite fine. I see myself as more of a business partner to you than as sick."

"You're no partner of mine and you never will be. You better hope I never find you." Buster is almost running down the street pulling me.

"Sheldon my friend, I will never be found. I can hide anywhere I want and never be seen. In fact I may be standing right in front of you as you walk that bastardly hound." I suddenly stop and look around in all directions. Buster is looking at me. "Tomorrow at seven don't forget." I hear the call end. I'm out of breath. I'm looking at every house, car, tree, and I don't see anything out of the ordinary. Where is he and how does he do it? I slam my foot against the curb in frustration causing Buster to quickly rub his nose against my leg. We head directly back to the house and I slam the door shut. Buster runs and jumps on the couch. Michelle appears through the kitchen door.

"You okay Sheldon?" She looks at me and then Buster who is lying down.

"No, I'm not okay. I can't do this anymore. We need to find out where Tommy is right now." I throw the leash onto the floor. "This isn't fair anymore. He didn't do anything, neither did we." I start screaming and stomping my feet on the floor. I see Buster scurry into the kitchen. I'm scaring him, but right now I don't care. Michelle places her arms on my shoulders and is telling me to calm down. I finally stop yelling and end up sitting in the middle of the floor with Michelle's arms wrapped around me.

"It will be okay Sheldon." I feel Buster's nose on the back of my neck. I rub his back gently. Michelle quickly gets up and heads to the kitchen and comes right back. She's carrying a glass of water. "Please take this Sheldon." She hands me the glass and a small bluish colored pill.

"What is this?" I hold the pill in my hand.

"It's something to calm you down. Dr. Maruder came by yesterday and dropped off a prescription." I shrug my shoulders and quickly swallow the pill. A few minutes later, I'm lying down in our bed feeling drowsy. Buster is at my feet and Michelle is pulling the covers up to my neck. The next thing I know I wake up and the sun is shining very brightly. I roll over, Buster is lying next to my feet at the bottom of the bed and Michelle is next to me. I can see her eyes are open.

"What day is it?"

"Wednesday." She places her hands on my back. I immediately sit upright.

"It's Wednesday, Oh my God."

"What is it Sheldon? What's wrong?" Buster rolls over and looks at me.

"What time is it?" Michelle sits up and looks behind us on the nightstand. She has brought the clock back.

"It's 9:00." She says.

"Already?" She nods her head up and down. I can't believe in ten hours I have to shoot another man to save my son's life. I feel my eyes welling up. Michelle is clutching me tighter.

"What is it Sheldon? What's going on?" I want to come out and tell her, just let it all spill out, but instead I just hold her tighter and close my eyes. I try and think of playing catch with Tommy. I could have him home tonight. All I have to do is pull a trigger. I picture Sorenson falling backwards clutching his bleeding throat.

## Chapter 15

It's just after 12:00 now, seven more hours to go. I've spent the last few hours doing everything possible to keep myself busy. I have walked Buster twice, taken a shower, and even cleaned up the kitchen. I think Michelle senses something is going on, but if all goes well, Tommy will be home and everything will be back to normal, except I'll have committed a murder. I check the time almost every other minute. I'm driving myself crazy. I'm not really sure what to do. I finally decide to go out for a drive. I slowly back the Tahoe out. I'm not really sure where I'm going, but I need to go somewhere. I end up back at the baseball field. There are maintenance workers grooming the field. I climb up the bleachers and watch them magically take the field from a mound of grass to a well-groomed diamond ready for memories and dreams to be made on. I keep thinking all I have to do is squeeze the trigger and Tommy will be out here playing again. Michelle will be happy and all will be well. I look down as my phone begins to vibrate. I can tell it's not a phone call or a text from the vibration. I click on the screen and feel my heart begin to beat wildly as I see Tommy. He's seated in the same bedroom on the edge of the bed looking directly at me through the camera. I hold the phone up higher so he can see me.

"Tommy? How are you doing?" I watch his eyes focus in on me through the camera.

"Hi Dad, I'm fine. I'm just ready to come home...I miss you guys so much." I want to reach through the phone and pull him out, but I know I can't so I try and do the next best thing; keep my head straight.

"Not much longer buddy, I promise." I look at his eyes; they look much clearer than on the video I have on my iPhone. I can see him looking off to his left every few seconds as if he's looking at someone else. I'm having a tough time coming up with anything to say, my emotions are running wild. "What have you been doing?" I finally ask.

"I've been working on the computers and playing some new games." He points behind him at all the equipment. "I've finished two whole books too." He picks up two large novels and holds them up to the camera. I feel tears start coming from my eyes, but I blink my eyes to hold them back. Reading has always been something Tommy has always had trouble with. We usually struggle just to get him to read a page a night of anything.

"I'm so proud of you...Tommy." I feel the tears break through, but I don't care anymore. "Where are you buddy?"

"You know Dad. I'm right where you had Mr. Ken take me." I watch his eyes look to the left again.

"What?"

"Dad, he says we can't talk about that. It's part of the deal."

"Is he right there?" His eyes look to the left again and then he looks back at me and nods.

"Has he been good to you?"

"He's been really nice Dad. He gets me whatever I want to eat or drink and lets me watch whatever I want except for the news. I do miss email and the internet though. How much longer until I can come home?" I can't believe this. What is going on? What are they telling him?

"Very soon Tommy...very soon."

"Dad, he says I have to go soon. I miss you guys so much. Please tell Mom hello."

"We miss you too. Can you ask him if I can talk to him?" I watch his mouth form the words as he looks to his left. A minute later, he looks back and shakes his head no.

"He says that isn't part of the deal either. Where are you Dad? It looks like the baseball field?" I take the phone and slowly pan it around the field.

"I am."

"Shouldn't you be at work?"

"I'm just taking a break. It's such a nice day." I realize I shouldn't have said that as soon as it comes out of my mouth.

"I wish I could go outside."

"You haven't been outside at all?" I watch him look down.

"Not since Mr. Ken brought me here."

"What does Mr. Ken look like?" I watch him look to his left again.

"I don't know Dad...I guess kind of like you, tall with dark hair." I nod.

"Do you remember a few years ago when we went on that vacation with your cousins?"

"Yeah." I watch him smile.

"Does this remind you of that at all?" I watch as he thinks about it for a minute. We spent a few days and nights camping out in the Blue Ridge Mountains region in Virginia off of Skyline drive.

"Not really Dad. I don't know what you mean."

"How about where we went last year?" As soon as I finish asking I hear another voice, a much lower one saying "that's enough".

"Dad, I have to go. Please come get me soon. I love you."

"I will Tommy...I will. I love you too buddy." As soon as I say that the screen goes blank and the session has ended. I feel my body explode, all the tension and excitement pours out. Tears are flowing down my face. I bury my head in my hands, until I feel someone tapping my shoulder. I look up and see one of the maintenance workers looking at me and asking me if I'm okay. I nod and put my head back down until I feel my phone begin to vibrate again. I quickly pull the phone up and see it's a text message.

"I hope you enjoyed that. It could either be your last or just the beginning. Nice try at the end with the vacation questions. Don't forget about tonight."

I look at my watch. It's three o'clock. Four more hours until my son's life rests in my hands. I feel sick to my stomach. I stumble back towards the Tahoe and just sit in the front seat. I don't feel like starting the engine because I know where I have to go and I don't want to go there. Luckily, I am saved by my phone vibrating again. I look down and see Jim's number.

"Hello Jim."

"Sheldon, I just got off the phone with Brian. You're not going to believe this, but the person who was on the computer in the library was your brother Lawrence Smith."

"Of course."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know anymore." I look out the window and watch the maintenance vehicles pull out of their parking spots.

"Do you really think it was him?"

"No, they used his driver's license when they took Tommy from school too and we were able to prove it wasn't Lawrence. Thanks for all the help though."

"That's not all." I feel my senses keen up. "He also has an email that was being used at the same time the computer was being accessed."

"Do we know the address?" I turn the ignition of the Tahoe and start to back up.

"It's a Gmail account. Brian is tracking it down now. I really think we need to go to the police." I pull out of the parking lot, past the old sign indicating it was donated by a descendant of Robert E. Lee.

"Just hold off for a little longer. Please call me back if he gets anywhere on the email address." I end the call and feel like I just lost my last hope to save me from tonight, unless he can get a name and address for the Gmail. If it was anyone else besides Brian I would say there is no chance, but there is still a glimmer of hope I think. I pull out onto the road and head towards the storage unit. I can't believe I'm actually going through with this. What will my parents think? What about Tommy? I wonder what he would want me to do. I force myself not to think of anything anymore and keep driving. I arrive at the storage unit at around 5:00 PM; two more hours to go. I wonder what Sorenson is thinking not knowing he



may only have two more hours to live. I nervously put in the code and the box opens. I reach in and grab the gun. It feels so odd in my hand; it's like I'm holding something that isn't mine. I slip the gun into my pocket and close the door. There is no one nearby, so after I close the door and make sure it is locked I casually walk back towards the Tahoe with the weight of the world in my pocket. I decide to call Michelle and let her know that I won't be home until later. There's no way I can face her with 7:00 PM approaching. Less than two hours. I'm crippled with anxiety as I sit in the back of a Starbucks sipping on a hot cup of tea. I'm right down the street from Sorenson's and it's almost time to do it. I'm trying to psych myself up and say it won't be so hard. All I have to do is squeeze a trigger on a mechanical tool and I get Tommy back. It's just the end result I can't handle. I'm basically trading a life for a life, though I tell myself Tommy's is worth more because he has youth on his side, but Sorenson is a father and a husband. I don't know what to do. I take a long hot sip of tea. I feel relieved as the hot liquid touches the back of my throat and seeps down. I look down at my watch it's almost 6:00 PM. A little more than an hour to go until I face a decision that will change many lives forever. I quickly get up and throw the unfinished cup of tea into the trash. I pull the Tahoe out of the parking lot and head back in the direction I came in. I pull into a large church that I passed on the way here. It's not one I've been to before. I'm not even sure what religion it is, but I park the truck and walk up the sidewalk and enter through two large doors. I see a sign pointing towards the main chapel area so I follow that and enter into a beautiful large room that must seat at least five hundred people. Right now there are maybe five or six people seated in various rows of pews, their heads are bowed. I climb into a pew at the back and stare up at a life-size sculpture of Jesus above the altar. It's crafted magnificently, and from my vantage point it appears real. Jesus is on the cross. His face is full of determination, strength and resolve that the artist has captured perfectly. I am mesmerized as I stare at the statue and I start to spill out everything in my mind. I'm not sure if I'm saying it out loud or to myself, but after a few minutes I feel much better. I look down at my watch and see it is time to go. It is quarter to seven. I take one last look at the statue and thank God for everything and head back to my truck for what feels like the walk to my death. A few minutes later, I'm parked down the street from Sorenson's house. It is just dark enough that my truck won't be able to be recognized. I feel the gun a few times in my pocket. My hand pretends to squeeze the trigger. I think I can do what I have to do. I slowly get out and close the door quietly, so it doesn't make too much noise. Luckily, the houses are spread out on their street and there is no one directly next to or across from them. I walk down the street with both sides lined thickly with trees. A moment later, I am at the bottom of the driveway. I have never felt this nervous in my life. I keep thinking about talking to Tommy a little while ago and how he doesn't even understand why he is where he is. I don't think he realizes the danger he is in. I start walking up the driveway. It's a long sloped one. I can see the house up above. The outside lights are on, both on the side of the house and on a lamp post to my left. I can see the side of the house and it appears some of the downstairs lights are on as well, so I'm guessing Sorenson's home; though deep in my mind I'm hoping he's not. It's quite a large house. It probably has four bedrooms. I get to the end of the driveway where it meets a two

car garage with two doors. I look in the garage windows and see one car inside. It looks like a new model sedan, but it's too dark to see what kind. The other spot is empty. I figure it must be his wife's car. I take a quick look at the phone hoping for a last minute message from someone telling me that they either have the guy or that this is off. I can't believe I'm actually going through with this. I rarely even hurt bugs. I try and take them outside our house instead of squashing them just to spare their lives and here I am standing outside a man's house with a loaded firearm getting ready to end his life as well as ruin his family's. I lean against the garage. It's a dark night. I can hear the crickets chirping in the woods behind me. The moon is out casting a soft glow onto the pavement. It is otherwise a perfect evening. The kind I would like to be out walking with Michelle and Tommy or watching Tommy playing ball under the lights at Lee Field. I look all around me. There is no one around. I'm guessing the guy, Frank Harris, Mr. Ken or whatever his name is, is out there somewhere watching me, but I don't see him. I begin to walk down a small sidewalk that leads from the garage to the front door. It is curved and lined with small flower beds. Someone has obviously spent many hours perfecting the look. I reach the front door a moment later. I feel like I can barely breathe anymore. My lungs and body feel tight and constricted. I check the gun again with my hand in my pocket. I tell myself I can do this and think of Tommy sitting in that room all alone waiting for me to do what I have to do. I step up to the door and start to knock then pull my hand back. I need a little more time before I can do this. I haven't even planned how I'm going to do it yet. I can't think about it without feeling sick. I figure I'll go inside and talk for a while and wait for the right time. I feel the gun again. It feels so foreign and cold. I hate this. I don't even care about getting arrested or anything, though I figure Harris probably has all that figured out anyway, but I just can't think of actually killing another innocent man. In the Army, we were always taught to shoot someone because otherwise they were going to shoot you, but this is an innocent unarmed man who is just trying to live his life. I start to turn around and head back towards my truck and say forget it, but I instinctively stop and lightly knock on the door. I start out knocking lightly and there is no response, so I reluctantly knock a little harder. I'm hoping no one will answer, but a few seconds later I hear footsteps inside. I feel like my heart is going to stop. I don't think I can go through with this. A second later, the door opens and Douglas Sorenson is standing in front of me. He's wearing a large Redskin sweatshirt and faded blue jeans. He looks like any other person just living their life and not expecting to be killed by a firearm on a Wednesday night.

"Mr. Smith. How are you? Please come in." I shake his hand and step into the house. He closes the door behind me. I feel like turning around and running out the door, but I remain standing in the lobby. It's a fairly large lobby that has a staircase in front of me and two doorways off to each side. The room on the right looks like a dining room and the other a living room. "What can I do for you?" I can't answer. My mouth isn't functioning. "Mr. Smith, are you okay?"

I'm finally able to utter a response. "I just wanted to stop by and see if you can think of anything else."

"Why don't we head into the living room, can I get you anything?" I shake my head no and follow him into a large living room with a huge off-white leather

couch and two matching chairs. Sorenson sits on the couch and I sit on the chair closest to him. "Unfortunately, I don't have anything new other than what I told you the other day. Detective Stanton came by here earlier and I filled him in on everything I told you again. He wanted the files for Harris and his brother."

I nod my head. "Thank you so much for coming up with that information. I think at least we know who to go after now."

"I wish I could help more, but I haven't had any contact with them since then." He takes a drink from a wine glass filled with red wine. I place my hand in my jacket pocket and feel for the gun. I'm not sure when to do this. I figure I better wait until he's not looking. I think I'm close enough to get a good shot. I feel my hand shaking so much on the gun. I'm scared. I hope I don't accidentally pull the trigger. "I've got to tell you those guys were not known for their friendliness." He suddenly stands up and looks out the window. I suddenly wonder if he knows what I'm here for. "I remember when we were doing the estate they were pretty upset about something. I think it was something about too much money going to someone else, but I can't remember who. I wish that file wasn't missing."

"What do you mean?" I watch as he sits back down on the end of the couch facing me.

"I keep all my files in a secure cabinet in my office and that file is missing. I noticed it was missing shortly after the break-in. You saw the way my office looked. I wonder if that's when it all happened. Something is going on here." He leans forward. Now's my chance, I place my hand on the trigger. I'm thinking I should just take the gun out and do it now and get it over with. "Maybe that's what this is all about. The money that was stolen, I think that was from the other party in that case." He looks directly at me. "That file is missing too by the way, so this is all coming from my memory. Why don't you give me a little time and I think I can get to the bottom of this. I'm not sure how it relates to your son, but I think for both of our sakes I better look through whatever I have and see if I can find out anything else." I nod and slowly stand up. I have my hand on the trigger. He turns around and looks off at a bookcase on the other side of the room. I pull the gun out of my pocket and aim directly at the back of his head. I'm not more than three feet away. It should be quick and easy. I close my eyes and then the next thing I know I'm back in the Tahoe seated on the front seat shaking terribly. The gun feels warm and is still in my pocket. My hand is clutched tightly around the trigger.

## Chapter 16

"Sheldon... Sheldon. Are you okay?" I open my eyes. I have no idea where I am. I see Michelle leaning over me. It isn't until I sit up, that I realize I'm seated in the front seat of the Tahoe in our driveway. I don't remember how I got here or anything that happened at Sorenson's house. "What happened to you? You look awful?"

"I don't know." I slowly climb out of the truck and step onto the driveway. The sun is out and it feels like early morning. I put my hand in my jacket pocket and

feel the gun in there. I close my eyes again. Michelle is holding me up and guiding me towards the garage.

"You spent the night out here in your car Sheldon?"

"I guess...I'm not really sure." She leads me through the empty spot in the garage and into the house. As soon as I step through the door, I feel Buster's nose tickling the bottoms of my legs. I reach down and rub his neck. Michelle guides me to the couch and Buster follows, landing on my feet as soon as I sit down.

"I was so worried about you. Please don't do this anymore. It's bad enough we can't find Tommy." I suddenly sit straight up.

"Tommy. What about Tommy? Have you heard anything?" Michelle shakes her head.

"I'm going to take you to the doctor. I think you're breaking down." I immediately check my pockets for my iPhone. I can't find it anywhere. My hand lands on the gun instead.

"I'll be right back." I jump up from the couch and stumble towards the door.

"Sheldon, where are you going?" I look back and Buster is following me.

"To get my phone, I think I left it in the truck."

"Just please be careful. It looks like Buster is coming with you."

I look down at Buster. "I'll take him for a walk while we're out there."

"Okay. Please don't go far." I nod, and quickly head through the garage followed by Buster and find my phone in the truck. The battery is dead. I lead Buster down the driveway and watch him lift his leg on a small bush at the end of our driveway. He sniffs the area for a few minutes before I call him in. We head into the kitchen to plug my phone in and as soon as I see Michelle, I know something's wrong. She is holding the phone in one hand and tears are running down her face.

"What is it?"

She looks down. I quickly run to her and place my arm around her to keep her from falling. "Detective Stanton just called. They have found another boy's body that matches Tommy's description. He wants you to come down and identify it." I have to grab hold of Michelle to keep myself from falling down. I can't believe it.

"Okay. I'll go." I look at Buster. His sad eyes are reflecting my emotions.

"Also, Doug Sorenson called earlier. He says he may have some more information for you."

"How long ago did he call?" She looks at the kitchen clock.

"About an hour ago." I'm not sure how to act. I'm relieved at first that I didn't end up shooting him, but now I have gotten Tommy killed. I have to go identify my son. I lean over the garbage can and begin to vomit. I feel Michelle grabbing on to me, but my head is spinning too wildly to see straight. I remain this way for what seems like hours. Somehow a little while later, I'm back in the Tahoe heading to the same police station to see my boy's lifeless body that I killed. I can't stop crying. The tears are flowing down my face like a bad rainstorm. I pull into the same unmarked building and see Detective Stanton's cruiser parked out in front. I pull in next to him and shut off the engine. I can't move my legs. I don't know what happened last night, but I know I didn't do what I was supposed to do. I feel the gun in my pocket. I take it out and place it under my seat. I don't know how I'm going to handle this, once I see that it's Tommy I know my life will be over. I hope I just collapse on the floor and it ends quickly, because I don't think I'll be

able to handle anything else. I just keep asking myself why I didn't pull the trigger. I don't remember anything. The last thing I picture is me taking the gun out while Sorenson had his back to me, but after that everything is a blur until Michelle found me this morning. I'm not sure how long I have been sitting here, but I see Stanton walking towards my truck in the mirror. I slowly open the door and step down. He approaches me and places an arm around me.

"I'm so sorry to have to do this again to you. Hopefully, it will be the same result as last time." I want to tell him I know it isn't because I didn't pull a simple little trigger, but instead I just nod and follow him into the same building. We walk directly past the officer seated behind the glass. He doesn't even look up. I sit down at the same table, though this time it is empty. A minute later, Stanton returns with another folder. It appears a bit thicker, but the same color and size. He sits down across from me. Something is different this time. It's as if he knows the sorrow I am going to be going through in a moment. I look around the empty room and see no one, not even the uniformed officer that was behind the glass. Everyone has disappeared. I'm not even nervous anymore. I have lost all emotion. I just sit and stare at the folder being manipulated in his hands. Stanton doesn't speak or even look me in the eye. I feel my life coming to an end. They say the hardest thing for any one person to face is burying their children and I honestly believe that comprehending that is beyond my control, but here I am sitting face to face with the detective investigating the disappearance of my son, and because of my lack of actions I now have the privilege of being responsible for my son's death. I want to cry or scream, but there is nothing to come out, only silence. I have nothing left. I watch as Stanton methodically opens up the folder and briefly scans the contents. I'm not sure what he is looking at but by the look of his face I can tell it isn't good.

"I have to warn you Mr. Smith, it was pretty violent." I nod...I can't speak. I don't even feel my chest breathing anymore. I can't hear anything, and it feels as though everything is moving in a slow-motion pattern. I keep seeing Tommy's face pleading for me to bring him home and me promising he would be coming home soon, and now I have caused him to be killed in a brutally and inhumane way. I watch as Stanton slowly stands up. He places the photographs down in front of me. There are four or five of them. I can't tell. My mind is not functioning correctly. The first thing I notice is the hair on the first picture is the same as Tommy's. It is thick and brown. He is the same size as Tommy as well. I feel my heart begin to sink into my chest and slowly come to a halt. How could I be such a coward? I will never forgive myself. I can't take my eyes off the first picture and Tommy's hair. I look across the room and see Stanton nod at me and start to walk back towards me. Everything in the room is beginning to spin. I try to focus on the other pictures. I need to know how his life ended. When I get to the last one, I can see his mouth open. It's as if he's screaming for me to spare him. It's then I notice the braces. Tommy doesn't have braces on his teeth. I immediately stand up and scream it's not him. Stanton runs over to me, grabbing my shoulders.

"Are you sure?" I scan the pictures again and now I can tell it's definitely not him. The body is different. I'm not sure how I didn't notice it before. I curse myself, but I can't believe it's not him. What a mean trick. The thought of another kid losing his life hits me hard, but I feel some relief knowing it's not my son.

"I'm sure Detective. It's not Tommy." I stand up and begin heading for the door.

"We'll get him Mr. Smith. I promise." I look back and nod my head and head back out the door. I reach down for my phone to let Michelle know, but I realize I left it on the counter in the kitchen charging. I turn around and ask the officer behind the glass and ask to use his phone he agrees. I let Michelle know and she gasps out her relief through the phone. She tells me Sorenson has called again. I immediately hop back into the Tahoe and head directly back to the same church I went to last night. I see the same amount of people scattered throughout the pews. I go to my same spot and stare at the large statue thanking God for sparing Tommy's life. I say a few words out loud for the child that was killed in place of mine. After about a half hour, I head back home and find Michelle in the shower. I grab a few stale crackers from the pantry, grab Buster and his leash and take him out for a walk. I get to the bottom of the driveway and feel my phone begin vibrating. I know who it is without looking. I nervously press the send button.

"Hello Sheldon. I believe a thank you should be in order."

"What are you talking about?" I let Buster off his leash and he runs to a row of small bushes.

"I think you just saw the evidence that your property was spared. I hope you take this is a lesson to be learned when I make a deal you need to follow through." I watch Buster come back to me. I rub his neck.

"I tried to do it but I couldn't. Please just let Tommy come home now."

"Sheldon, we made a deal and you are going to hold up your end or I will do what I told you I would do. Here's the plan, Today is Thursday, on Sunday, Mr. Sorenson will be watching the Redskins at 1:00, and his wife and daughter will be out." Buster takes off down the street and stops at a strip of grass that needs to be cut. "I want you to perform what you are supposed to do then or the next pictures you look at will be something you are very familiar with."

"Please don't make me do this."

"Remember we are partners and we made a deal. I expect you to hold up your side and then I'll hold up mine. I understand the first time was tough, but now you know what to do and I expect you to do it or there won't be another chance."?

"Why did you have to kill that kid?" I watch Buster turn around and look at me.

"Actually Sheldon, his blood is on your hands. If you had done what you were supposed to do, he would be alive and you wouldn't be talking to me now, instead you would be with what is yours." I slam my foot down causing Buster to jump.

"Look you're a sick and twisted person. I don't know what you want, but I want Tommy back now."

"You should have what is yours now, but you didn't hold up your end of the bargain. I hope you learned your lesson, because that was the last one. I'll be in touch before Sunday. Make sure and return the weapon to its proper place until you need it." I throw the leash into the grass. Buster runs and retrieves it in his mouth and drops it in front of me. I kneel down and pat his back furiously. I slowly get up and begin walking back towards our house, Buster is following close behind. I open the door and let Buster run in. He goes directly to the kitchen and starts lapping water from a metal bowl Michelle must have put down. I walk into the living room and see Michelle seated on the couch. I walk over and give her a long hard hug. This is the second time in the last few days we have thought

Tommy was dead and it wasn't him. We exchange no words. There is nothing left to be said. I slowly head back upstairs and lie down. I think I'm asleep before I even land on the pillow. We both wake up the next morning. I think it's the best I have slept since Tommy went missing. I guess it's just something about knowing that boy wasn't Tommy. I still refuse to watch the news because I don't want to hear about the grieving family of the two boys and the young teller. I think I can almost imagine what they are going through. Maybe after Sunday and this is all over, yes, I have decided that I need to go through with it this time. I will reach out and help the families of the murder victims. I make my way to the kitchen. Michelle is seated at the table staring at an un-eaten bowl of cereal. She stands up as soon as she sees me. I can tell something is wrong again.

"What is it?" She sits me down. "What happened Michelle?" She looks around the kitchen and then her eyes lock on mine.

"I'm sorry Sheldon, but Stanton and Adams were just here. They found Lawrence in his apartment. He died from a gunshot. They said he didn't suffer." I stare ahead. There are no more tears to come out, just sadness. My mind goes blank. I hear voices in the next room.

"Is that them in the living room?" I start to get up, but Michelle waves me back down and places her arms around my neck.

"That's my parents. They came in yesterday." I nod my head. "I'm so sorry Sheldon."

"I can't believe it. He killed Lawrence."

"Do you know who did it?" I try and look up at Michelle. It feels like my head weighs a hundred pounds.

"No, but I know it's the same person who has Tommy."

"Really? You think they are connected." I feel her hands gripping my shoulders tightly.

"Has to be." She nods.

"Stanton said he wants you to go over there when you are ready. Apparently, there are some things they found there that they want to ask you about."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. I think there were some notes or something." She begins rubbing my back softly. "I told them you would be over later. Why don't you just take it easy for a while." I look behind me as Michelle's mother enters the kitchen. She is an older version of Michelle. Same wavy hair and oval face, just a few years older. She gives me a hug and tells me how sorry they are for everything and that they are here if anyone needs anything. I thank her.

I stand up. "I'm going to head over there now."

"Please Sheldon just take it easy. We can't keep up this pace. I mean look at us."

"Why don't you guys both go back upstairs and get some rest and me and Bob will take care of everything. Please eat something Sheldon. I went to the grocery store last night. There wasn't a piece of fresh food in the house. "I shake my head side to side slowly and thank them and head back upstairs. I pass her dad Bob in the hallway. He shakes my hand and tells me he's sorry. He's quite a bit older than her mom and is beginning to slow down quite a bit, but he is sincere. I somehow manage to get dressed. I don't bother to look in the mirror any more, I

don't know if it's because I'm more afraid of the way I look or of who I've become. I head back out to the Tahoe and make the twenty-five minute drive to Lawrence's house. He lives just outside DC, in Arlington. As soon as I pull down his street, I can see all the police cars. He lives in a garden-style apartment building. Each unit contains maybe twenty apartments. His is the second building on the right. I instantly feel guilty for not coming here more often. I know he's busy working and I'm busy with my family, but I should've made more time. Despite the fact that we didn't see a lot of each other, we were close and always shared that brotherly bond, especially with our parents on the west coast. I look at the clock. I will have to call them after I'm done here and let them know. I hope they'll be able to make it back here due to their health, since I know Lawrence would want to be buried here. This was his life. He loved DC and the surrounding areas. He never had a family, but he was always dating; though they were usually other attorneys who were living the same lifestyle he was. I know one day he was hoping to settle down and raise a family, but now all that was over. I feel like I killed him because I didn't pull the trigger. I know there's no reason to think this was just a random crime. I know it is connected to me not shooting Sorenson. I park behind two Arlington cruisers and walk towards his building. I can see the yellow crime scene tape strung around his door. His is on the second floor. All the units have doors facing outside, and his is the first one to the left at the top of the stairs. I walk to the bottom of the steps and the officer tells me I can't go in. I tell him who I am and a minute later, I see Sorenson and another man dressed in a suit open Lawrence's door and wave me in. I walk up the stairs and shake both of their hands. Sorenson introduces me to the Detective, I think his last name is Nelson, but I don't really hear anything. Everything is a blur. I step into the one bedroom apartment and everything appears normal and clean, just how Lawrence kept it. I feel like he is going to come out of the bedroom at any minute and give me a high five. We never hug, we always high five. Ever since we were in about seventh grade, we made a deal we would always say hi that way. Although right now, I would love to give him a giant hug. I'm not really sure what to do, so I just stand inside the door watching all the activity. There are technicians working in all parts of the house. They look like they are finishing up, but it's difficult to tell, so I don't move until Sorenson waves me towards the bedroom. I'm not really sure what I'm expecting to see as I reach the doorway, but the first thing I notice is Lawrence is not here anymore. There is a lot of dried blood on the bed, but I turn my eyes away from that and begin to look around the bedroom. I've never really been inside his bedroom. I'm amazed at how sparse it is. There are no pictures on the walls or any personal touches, just a small mirror hanging over a four-drawer dresser. I can see into his closet on the other side. It is filled with lawyerly suits as I would expect. They are all the standard attorney colors, dark gray, blue and black. I can't remember the last time I saw Lawrence not in a suit. I would be surprised if he owned anything else.

"Mr. Smith. Please step over here." Stanton is waving me to the other side of the bed. I slowly step around the queen sized bed being careful not to look at the blood on the sheets. Once I get to the other side, both detectives take a step back. They are both staring at the floor. There is a stack of at least three dozen large-sized photos of Tommy.



## Chapter 17

"What are these?" I kneel down and start to touch them and then I suddenly stop.

"It's okay, they've already all been dusted for prints and the only ones we found were your brothers." Stanton is whispering. I begin to pick them up and the first thing I notice is that they are all taken in the same room from the video and the FaceTime chats we have been having. I can see all the video game equipment behind him. I pick one up and just stare into his eyes. He doesn't have that foggy look. He looks just like Tommy. "Any idea how recent these are?" I look at the pictures then at the detectives.

"I'm not really sure, but they look recent."

"How about where they were taken?" I shake my head. "The room resembles your son's room at your house don't you think?" I nod. "Do you think there is anything going on here?" I throw the photo down.

"Are you kidding me, you think Lawrence is involved in this?"

"I'm not saying anything. It's just odd that we found these photos here." I look back at the photos.

"They were obviously placed here by the person that killed him." I quickly stand up and begin walking towards the door.

"There's also this." I look back and Stanton is holding Lawrence's cell phone. It's one of those large Android phones. He clicks something and I see Tommy in the same room talking about a book he is holding.

"Let me see that." I grab the phone from his hand and start the video over. I can't believe it, it's an edited version of the FaceTime session I had with Tommy the other day. I look at both detectives. They both look back at me waiting for an answer. I don't have anything to say. I'm not sure if I'm in shock or just mad. I watch the video again and recognize the whole conversation.

"We're thinking he may have been involved somehow. This video show's he was having conversations with Tommy." I hand him back the phone.

"No it doesn't, it just shows a video of him." I want to tell them that it was me he was talking to, but I know I can't, so instead I turn around and begin walking for the door. I stop in the doorway and turn around. They are both still standing there looking at me for an answer. "Can you tell me where my brother is?" Stanton walks over to me and whispers to me where Lawrence's body is and warns me not to go. He also apologizes to me about the video and pictures, but he wanted to let me know. I nod and head back out the door past the Arlington officer standing at the bottom of the stairs who writes something in his notebook after I walk away. I get back in the Tahoe and feel another message on my phone coming in. I click on my email and read, "Sorry about Lawrence, just wanted to let you know I am serious about Sunday. You know failure will not be accepted. How about that for a twist in the case? Did you see those detective's faces when they saw your reaction to the FaceTime chat? They don't know what to think now."

I bypass the address Stanton gave me and drive straight to the storage facility. I place the gun back into the container and close the door. I can't stop thinking that I could have prevented Lawrence's death had I gone through with what I was supposed to do. I climb back into the Tahoe and begin dialing my parent's number. I'm dreading this but I know it is something that has to be done. I spend the next ten minutes crying and agonizing with my Mom and Dad over both Lawrence and Tommy. They vow to fly out immediately. I try and convince them otherwise, but it is useless so I hang up and drive over to the park. It's totally dark and the sign says do not enter after hours, but I pull through the gate anyway and end up sitting on the same bleachers. I have that sixth sense feeling that I'm being watched but I don't care. I really don't care anymore about anything except getting Tommy back. Too much has happened these last few days. I don't think I'll ever be the same again even if I get Tommy back, which I promise myself I will do no matter what. After a while I think I hear someone walking in the woods beside me, but I don't even look. Sometimes I wish someone would come just put me out of my misery, but I know I can't give up, not now. Not until I get Tommy back. I feel my phone buzzing again. I look down at the number. I don't recognize it so I answer it.

"Hey Sheldon, Doug Sorenson here." I press the phone to my ear.

"How are you doing Doug?" If he only he knew I had a gun pointed at him just a short time ago.

"I wanted to let you know, I've been doing some digging and I found out some interesting things about Frank Harris that I thought you should know." I step up off the bleachers and begin walking back towards my truck. I stop and lean against the driver's door

"So what did you find?"

"Well as you know Frank has a brother Shane. Apparently, they are fraternal. Shane is a little bigger and stronger." I immediately think he must be the one who took Tommy from school. "And Frank is a little smarter and personable." The one who is calling me I imagine. I pull the door shut.

"How did you become their attorney?" I turn the key to the ignition.

"I wasn't actually representing them, I was representing their mother and then they just started showing up every time she did."

"Do you know where she is?"

"She died right after the case was over, a mysterious car crash. I remember her car caught on fire and the doors malfunctioned and she couldn't get out. After that I lost touch with what happened and who ended up with all the money."

"That sounds suspicious." I back out of the space.

"It was, but the police ruled it was just a freak accident."

"So where did all the rest of the money end up?" I pull past the dark sign and onto the main road. I turn in the direction of our house.

"That's the thing, no one really knows. I've been trying to look into it, but it just comes to dead ends. Anyway, I just wanted to let you know."

"Thanks so much for the information."

"Any time, remember if you need anything please let me know." I catch my reflection in the rearview mirror and almost swerve off the road seeing the man who is going to kill this guy in a few days. I thank him again and hang up. I turn

the wheel and begin heading back home. I pass Sorensen's place on the way. I stop in front of the house just out of view, and watch a small child and Sorensen's wife run around the front yard chasing a friendly black Lab. I quickly pull away from the curb and make sure not to look back. I keep telling myself at least I'll get Tommy back. A few minutes later, I pull back into our garage. It's already mid-afternoon, and I feel as though I've been punched and knocked out by the time I enter our living room. Michelle is seated on the couch alongside her mom and dad. She immediately jumps up and gives me a hug telling me she's sorry about Lawrence. I fill her in about my parents coming here and that we're going to have a service shortly. Her parents both nod at me. Buster comes running to me from the kitchen.

"He's been waiting for you all day Sheldon." I quickly rub his neck with my hand and he sits down at my feet.

"I'll take him out in a minute."

"So what did Stanton want you to see at Lawrence's?" I look around for the leash. It isn't where it was this morning.

"They found a bunch of pictures and video of Tommy."

"What? What do you mean?"

I keep looking around. I don't see the leash. "It's just a setup. The guy who took Tommy left them there to screw with the police and us."

"Are you serious? That's why Lawrence was killed." I nod my head. I reach in my pocket and hand her one of the pictures of Tommy. She grabs it in both hands and begins crying.

"At least it shows he's alive and well." Buster is nudging my feet.

"How do we know when this was taken?" She puts the picture close to her face.

"Look at him and where he is." Her mom jumps up and stands next to her. She places her hands on her shoulders.

"It looks a little like his room except all those game things."

"Sick guy isn't he? Do you know where Buster's leash is?"

Michelle doesn't take her eyes off the photo. "Dad do you remember where you left it." She looks at me. "Dad took him for a walk earlier." I look at her dad and he doesn't appear to hear us or is ignoring us.

"It doesn't matter. C'mon Buster let's go." I walk towards the front door followed closely by Buster. I open the door and he flies outside running to the first tree to mark his territory. We spend the next half an hour walking up and down the street. As we near our house, I can see a car in the driveway. I recognize it as Stanton's cruiser. I quickly open the front door and let Buster in. He runs to the kitchen, I can hear him lapping up water from his bowl again. I walk back into the living room and see Michelle holding a blue-striped shirt and standing next to Stanton.

"What's that?"

Stanton steps forward. "We found this in your brother's apartment after you left." He points at the shirt. I recognize it as one of Tommy's.

"It's Tommy's, Sheldon. What's going on?"

"We believe your brother may have been involved in this. We obtained a copy of his bank statement and he has received two large deposits in the last week of over a hundred thousand dollars." I look at Stanton and Michelle holding the shirt.

"Look, there's no way Lawrence would do anything to harm Tommy. Why can't you see he's just messing with us?" I stomp my foot in frustration causing Buster to come out of the kitchen.

"Regardless, we need to look at every angle, and there is too much evidence to ignore this." Stanton looks at the shirt.

"Do whatever you want, but you're wasting your time with Lawrence. Hasn't he had enough? I mean they killed him." I feel my anger creeping in my lungs.

"I would agree with you about everything except there is no way you can explain away the video. I mean we have video evidence with FaceTime of Tommy and Lawrence speaking. You saw it."

Michelle leans forward. "Do you have the video here?"

"No, sorry it is being processed. I'll get it to you as soon as we are done so you can watch it."

She clutches the shirt to her face. "How does he look?" Stanton looks at me.

"He looks fine, just like the picture." I look down at Buster. He is stretching his legs out in front of him.

"My technicians believe that FaceTime is the real thing. It isn't doctored." I shake my head.

"Lawrence wasn't involved." I keep shaking my head. I feel Buster's head on my feet.

"I'm so sorry about your brother, but you have to understand where I'm coming from. There's no other explanation, unless you can think of something. We're going to contact Apple and see if we can get a full copy of the session." I look away and begin to walk up the stairs. I can hear them saying something to me, but I just continue. I feel Buster right behind me. I whisper to Buster that I need to tell him everything. I fall down on our bed and feel Buster snuggle up next to me. I place my arm around him and confess everything I have done in the last week. He licks my face.

## Chapter 18

"Sheldon." I hear Michelle calling me. It sounds like her voice is coming from downstairs. I fold the laptop up, place the address in my pocket and head downstairs. It's dark outside, so it must be Friday night; though I'm not sure any more about time or days. It all just seems to blend into one long nightmare ever since Tommy was picked up at school. I walk downstairs and enter into the living room. Michelle and Buster are sitting on the couch. Buster has his head on her lap. I try and smile, but I'm not sure what my face does. I think Michelle does the same. She's holding Tommy's shirt and she has the picture on the coffee table. "Jim called. He wants you to meet him at work sometime in the morning. He said both he and Brian will be there all day." I nod and take a seat next to them. Buster lifts his head and looks at me. I rub the top of his head lightly. "He came down a little while ago. I let him out earlier."

"Where are your parents?"

"I sent them out to dinner. They tried to get me to go, but I can't go out, not until Tommy's safe and sound." I take her hand in mine.

"You saw the picture and Stanton told you about the video, so you believe me he's okay right?" She leans over causing Buster to adjust a little and picks up the picture. We both stare at it.

"He looks the same Sheldon. Why are all those things around him?"

I lean over and take a close look at the picture. "That's to keep him busy until he gets home. If you look close you'll see a couple of books. He read those too." She snaps her head away from the picture and looks directly at me.

"How do you know that? You're just saying that because he doesn't like to read."

"I think there was something about it on the video or something." Buster slides himself forward so his nose is now touching my leg.

"Do you really think he is okay?" I grab hold of her hand and squeeze it gently. I look at Tommy in the picture.

"Yes. I really do. I think he'll be home very soon."

"I really hope so Sheldon. I really do." We both fall asleep on the couch a few hours later. We wake up Saturday morning. There's a blanket over us and a box of Danishes on the coffee table. We both look at each other.

"My parents," Michelle says. I grab a Danish and actually enjoy the sweet taste filling my stomach. I haven't really enjoyed eating anything in almost a week, but this Danish tastes so good. I grab a second one, it looks like apple, but I can't tell until I take a deep bite. Michelle is watching me curiously. I head for the door and let Buster run out into the crisp air. One more day until I pull the trigger and get Tommy back, I think as I watch Buster run through the yard leaving his scent. I finish the Danish about the same time he comes back to me and we both head back inside. I head upstairs for a shower and afterwards tell Michelle I'm going to work to meet with Jim and Brian. I'm not really sure what I'm going to do today, but for some reason it feels like my last day, so I figure I better get as much done as possible. I have convinced myself I am going to go through with it tomorrow. I even had another dream of myself pulling the trigger, but this time it wasn't Sorenson that falls backwards it was Tommy. I think I woke up four or five times last night with the same dream. Each time I felt Buster snuggle a little closer to me. He really is a great dog. It makes me wonder why we never got a dog before. Tommy had asked about it a year ago and both Michelle and I immediately nixed the idea thinking it would be too much work with our busy schedules. Just maybe things will be back to normal once we get Tommy back tomorrow and we go back to our normal routines, though I don't think that is ever going to happen again. I think we are changed forever, no matter what happens. I back the Tahoe out of the driveway. I think I can see Buster's head looking at me through the living room window but I'm not sure. I slowly drive down the road. It's early Saturday morning, so there isn't much traffic, but I do pass a few cars on the way. None of them look familiar. I have begun to look at almost every car behind me to see if I have seen them before, so far I haven't noticed anything unusual. I pull into my usual parking spot. There aren't any other cars here yet, so I must have beat Jim and Brian. I enter through the side entrance again since there is no one out front at the receptionist desk. I walk down to my office. It feels so strange going here now. It used to be my second home, but now it feels like some strange far-away

place I have never been to before only imagined. I unlock my door and enter my office. It looks so odd. Everything just doesn't seem right anymore. The desk isn't in the right place, the books on the bookshelf don't seem to be the right books or in the correct place. The pictures behind me are all wrong. I sit down at my desk and power on my computer. It turns on way too slowly. Nothing is right. I feel my forehead filling with moisture. It feels way too hot. I go and open my window and pull a Diet Coke out of a small refrigerator I keep tucked in the corner. After a few minutes things seem to feel a little more normal, so I sit down and log in to the computer. I wonder if I'm starting to have panic attacks. I have heard about them but I have never experienced anything like that before. I look around my office again and things appear to be back to normal, maybe I shouldn't have come in today. I look out in the parking lot. I still don't see any cars. I quickly look up when I hear the knock on my door. Jim is standing in my doorway. I didn't even hear him come in.

"Hey Jim, come on in." He slowly enters and sits in one of my chairs. I can immediately tell there is something worrying him. "What's wrong?"

"It's Brian. I haven't been able to get a hold of him since the other day, and you know how he is with his phone." I nod.

"He's probably just caught up in something."

"That's what I was thinking too, so I stopped by his house this morning before coming here and it looks like he hasn't been there in days." I lean forward.

"What do you mean?"

"The mail is there from the last two days, newspapers are lying on the porch. I knocked for like ten minutes and no one answered so I finally went in. He gave me a key." I feel my hands and feet begin to tingle. "Then when I went in the place was trashed and you know how neat he is." I nod again. "What do you think that means?"

"I'm not sure, but knowing him, he probably is working somewhere else, you know how he used to fall asleep here because he was working all night."

He shuffles in his chair. "You're probably right. He was trying to get to the bottom of that email account that he found on the library computer." I look down. "When I talked to him last he said he had a name and an address and he was going to go check it out."

"Are you serious? How did he get an address from an email account? Don't most people use a bogus name?"

He looks behind him. "Brian hacked the account and was reading the emails. From what he was telling me some of the stuff was so crazy it sounded made up, so he had to go check it out."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't remember everything, because it sounded pretty far out, but there were emails about murder for money and kidnapping...oops I'm sorry."

"Don't be. It might all be connected?"

I look at my computer screen. I watch him pull a piece of paper out of his pocket. "He had me write this name down." I take the piece of paper and see the name, "Mary Clausen", written down.

"Who is this?"

"I'm not sure but Brian said the name kept coming up in the emails. He was going to try and track her down. You think this is all connected to your son missing?"

"I think there is a good chance. I think we need to get a hold of Brian." He pulls out his cell phone and begins dialing. He puts the phone down a minute later.

"Still no answer."

I minimize the browser screen and click on a file. "I have a few numbers for him here." I read him the numbers I have and he tells me he has already tried all of them. I dial them as well and leave a message at each one. Jim and I talk for another hour or so about where Brian might be and what he was working on. I'm not convinced he's in any danger yet, because of his work habits, but we both promise to keep each other updated if we hear or think of anything. I immediately type in the name Mary Clausen on my computer after Jim leaves. There are hundreds of them in Google, but one comes up with the name Frank Harris linked to it. I click on the page and there's a picture of a lumpy middle-aged woman and the man that was killed at the house the other night, Frank Harris Sr. They are standing next to each other at what looks like some kind of formal function. He's in a dark suit and she's wearing a dress. She is smiling and he has one of those uncomfortable looks on his face like he is being forced to stand for the picture. Underneath the picture, it explains that Ms. Clausen is holding her annual charity function. I'm guessing she must be the one who inherited the fifty million. I look at her picture closer and she is covered with giant expensive stones around her neck and arms. I click back to Google and continue reading about her, she was apparently at one time a school teacher who was attending nursing school at night in the next county over and then she resigned upon receiving a large inheritance and setup many charity functions. It says she is a real socialite and has never been married, it doesn't say her relation to Frank or Shane or even Frank Sr. She looks too young to be his wife, maybe a daughter but I'm not sure. I look up one of her charities and it gives an address in Old Town Alexandria. I quickly write it down. I start searching some more, but I keep ending up on the same pages with the same picture. Finally, I open up Google again and re-type her name in. I get most of the same sites that I got before, but I do find another page with a picture of her with Frank Harris again. It's a better shot of Frank. He is standing slightly behind Ms. Clausen and appears to be holding a drink in his hand. He is smiling and looking at something to his right, but I can't tell because the picture is cut off. At least this confirms that they know each other. I stare at the picture of him for a while. I keep thinking she is related to Tommy missing. I head back out to my truck and drive north towards Alexandria. After a little while, I drive past the famous Masonic Temple and head down the scenic and quaint Duke Street. It starts out moving quickly, but as I get closer to the Potomac River, the street narrows and the traffic crowds. There are plenty of people out and about; both tourists and locals enjoying the scenery on a beautiful Saturday morning. I'm not exactly sure where the charity office is, but it is in the four-hundred block, so it's a prestigious address located near the water. I find a spot a few blocks away and join the morning crowd walking. I take notice of all the small shops full of people and trinkets selling anywhere from a dollar to thousands of dollars. I continue walking past a few small art galleries and see the sign for the office I'm looking for.

It's a small sign over a brick building next to two popular seafood restaurants. I can see lights on and people inside. I stop outside the door and peer in. I see a larger woman who I'm pretty sure is Mary Clausen. I feel my excitement level rise as I push the door open and step inside. There are two others in the office besides Ms. Clausen and they both look at me curiously as I step inside. One of them is another woman quite a bit older than Clausen, and the other is a man who is probably no more than twenty five. The man walks towards me.

"Hi can we help you?" He's very tall and slim with light blond hair swept away from his forehead, definitely the model type.

"I'm here to see Mary Clausen." He looks back at the two women. The one that looks like Ms. Clausen waves me forward.

"I'm Mary Clausen, how can I help you?" She is a little larger than she looks in the picture. She's almost as tall as I am. Her hair is long and very dark, it has obviously been dyed. She's wearing a long yellowish-colored dress. I lightly shake her hand.

"Yes, my name is Shelton Smith. I'm wondering if you could tell me anything about Frank Harris." I watch her expression change.

"Please follow me." I follow her through the rest of the office and into the back to a small room equipped with a computer and what looks like a small copy machine. She shuts the door and leans against the desk. "Look I don't know who you are or what you want, but whatever happened to Frank he didn't deserve. He was a straight up guy who was just trying to enjoy his retirement and stay away from all that chaos that always followed him."

"What do you mean all that chaos?"

She looks at the closed door then back at me. "Are you a reporter or something?" She has a weird twang to her voice. I shake my head no. "You know with the money and his kids and everything. The guy has been through hell and now this." She takes a good long look at me. "Do I know you? You look familiar? Who are you?"

"Someone trying to find out some more information about Frank and Shane," She quickly turns her head.

"So you do know them?" I nod. "Well then you know they are two of the nastiest people on this earth who will do anything to get at the money which is why I am working so hard on my charities to keep it out of their hands." She looks at the door again and lowers her voice. "I do recognize you. You're the guy whose son is missing right?" I nod in agreement. "What does Frank have to do with this?"

"That's what I'm trying to find out."

"You think Frank was involved in that?" She shakes her head, "No way. Like I said he was a straight shooter. He was a judge. I mean he had to resign from the bench, but that wasn't his fault. There's no way he would do anything like that. I'm sorry I can't help you there." She reaches for the door handle.

"Hold on." She stops and looks back at me. I can see a glittery necklace full of diamonds peeking out from under her neckline. "How do you know Frank and Shane?"

She looks down at her feet. She's wearing bright yellow high-heels. "I don't think they're involved either. They just want the money. They are my step brothers from



his second marriage. I don't talk to them, never did. Like I said, they are pure evil." She reaches for the door handle again and slowly opens it.

"Do you know where they live or stay at?" She opens the door and walks back out into the main office, then stops and turns around.

"Their mom has a little house somewhere around here. You know those boys killed her right? Only reason they haven't killed me is because if something happens to me, the money goes to my attorney. I have a great one who set it all this up so if something happens to me I have a safeguard. You can talk to him if you want to know anything else."

"Where did their mom live?" She looks at me.

"Look...she and I weren't close, so I'm not really sure, but I know it's in Alexandria somewhere near here. It's on the water I know that." The older woman and the man are both looking at us.

"Who's your attorney?" She pauses, looks at both of them and then looks back at me.

"Douglas Sorenson."

## Chapter 19

I can't believe it. Sorenson is her attorney. How can that be? Why isn't Sorenson telling me everything? I walk out of the charity office and head down towards the pier. I find a spot on an empty bench facing the river. I watch the convoy of small boats racing back and forth. Some of them tie up at the dock to get lunch, gas or whatever they need. I try and imagine Michelle, Tommy and me on the river. I vow to rent a boat when we get Tommy back tomorrow. I try and think about what I'll say to him when I first see him. I wonder how he will be given back to me. I so hope I can go through with it tomorrow. I close my eyes and try and imagine pulling the trigger. For the first time, I see Sorenson hitting the floor and there's no blood. I think to myself I can do it. I have to do it. I look at my watch, it's almost one o'clock. Twenty-four hours from now it will be over. I only wonder what will happen after that, but I force myself not to think about that. Instead, I concentrate on a large open tour boat advertising a cruise through Washington, DC. There are maybe twenty people boarding the boat with the assistance of two college-aged kids. Everyone looks so happy and carefree. I can't even remember what that must feel like. It's like they have no care in the world. It's hard to believe I used to be like that a week ago. My biggest worry was getting up on time and making sure a bunch of computers do what they're supposed to do. It seems so irrelevant now. I can't seem to comprehend how I'll ever be able to go back to that. I go back to watching the boat. The college kids are standing on the edge of the boat un-tying the lines. All the passengers are seated. A minute later, they pull away and eventually disappear to my left. I turn my head behind me when I hear a loud cheer and clapping. There's a small crowd gathered in a circle with a man in the middle riding a unicycle and juggling. I'm waiting for him to fall, but he expertly stays upright and catches the three pins until the crowd disperses and

fills a bucket set up in front of him with cash. I'm startled when my phone begins to vibrate. I look down and see an email with no address, so I immediately know who it's from. I click on the message and then the attachment. I see Tommy seated in the same bedroom, but now it looks empty. There are no more video games, books, food boxes or anything. Tommy is seated in the same place he always is looking to his left, probably at Mr. Ken. He appears as though he's not aware of being filmed. He looks much more bored and uncomfortable than the last few times, but at least his eyes look clear. I watch the video for about twenty seconds. I try and save it but it deletes itself too quickly. I keep clicking but nothing is happening, both the video and email are gone. I set the phone down beside me in frustration. I look back out at the busy river and try not to think about Tommy sitting there in that room now with nothing but him. A small powerboat zips by pulling a rubber raft with two kids clinging to it. They are going so fast I almost don't even hear my phone begin vibrating again. I quickly look away and answer.

"Hello my dear Sheldon. Are we ready for tomorrow's activities at 1:00? I hear the Redskins are playing the Giants, should be a good game. I just feel bad our friend won't be able to watch it since you are going to follow through this time I presume." I watch the powerboat continue to go back and forth in front of me.

"Look, you better give me Tommy as soon as I am out of there."

"You will receive instructions within ten minutes of confirmation which I assume you should know I can do." I stand up and lean over the railing and look at the water below. "Isn't there a better way to do this?"

"You're not getting cold feet again are you Sheldon. I promise you if you if you don't do what I ask this will be our last conversation. I hope you enjoyed the video."

"Where's all the stuff? Why's he sitting there with nothing to do?" I watch a seagull land on the railing about ten feet from me.

"I think you know the answer to that. Let me put it like this. One way or another, in less than twenty-four hours he won't be in that room anymore, if you know what I mean. Where he goes is up to you of course." The seagull quickly flies away.

"You better not hurt him. Why did you have to kill Lawrence? He didn't do anything?"

"Remember I told you there is always collateral damage in every battle. It can't be helped. I send my condolences to you. Hopefully, there won't be any more tragedies for you tomorrow." I walk away from the rail and head back towards the street. I walk by the unicyclist. He's seated on the ground, emptying his cash bucket into his pocket.

"I'm going to find you after this is all over. I promise you that." I squeeze the phone. "There better not be a scratch on Tommy."

"What did I tell you in the beginning? I take care of what's not mine. You do your job and I'll do mine. I must go. I have to keep packing. Tomorrow is moving day." I hear the line go dead. I walk back out onto Duke Street and up the few blocks to my truck. I pass the charity office on the way by. I can see Mary Clausen talking to her workers in there. They don't notice me. I drive back home. Michelle is seated in the kitchen with her parents. Buster hops up and greets me at the kitchen door. I pet his back lightly.

"How did it go with Jim, Sheldon?" I go to the refrigerator and pour a glass of milk.

"Okay. They're working on how to find Tommy." I decide not to tell her about Brian not being able to be contacted.

"Jim called again. He said for you to give him a call when you get a chance." I nod.

"Why don't you have a sandwich? I made two or three of them. They're in the refrigerator." I look at Michelle's mom. She is seated next to Michelle and has her hand on her shoulder. I grab a sandwich. She smiles and I head upstairs. I end up in Tommy's room. For some reason, I decide to rearrange the furniture and take everything on the walls down. I don't want it to look like the room he's been staying in. I push the bed to the other side and move the dresser where the bed was. An hour later, my clothes are soaked and my forehead is dripping wet, but I'm satisfied the room doesn't look anything like it used to. I look at the clock. It's almost 5:00, tomorrow at this time Sorenson will have been dead a few hours. His wife and daughter will have found him and their lives will be ruined. The police will probably be combing through his house and dusting for prints and any DNA evidence they can find. I'm not sure how I'll be able to explain my prints being there, but I figure I can tell Stanton that we have talked a few times about the clue he gave me. I'm still puzzled about him being Mary Clausen's lawyer, but I tell myself I'll deal with that later when I hear Buster's collar clanging as he comes up the stairs. I quickly take him for another walk up the street. The night is beginning to move in, so we move quickly. We still haven't found the leash, but Buster doesn't seem to want to wander off too far away from me. I watch him stop at certain trees and bushes, so many decisions and he does it so easily. I wish my life was that simple. One decision tomorrow, not only affects my life but so many others as well. I can't help thinking time is running out. I decide to give Jim a call. I really need a last minute break.

"Hi Sheldon."

"Jim, any luck with contacting Brian yet?" I watch Buster chase a squirrel.

"Nothing, I've been trying non-stop. I have a bad feeling about this. I went by his house again earlier and there's still no sign of him." I shake my head. A squirrel races up the tree leaving Buster at the bottom staring upwards. I clap my hands and he comes towards me.

"We have to believe he's trying to track this stuff down and is just caught up."

"Yeah, but he would have called by now. He always checks in." I nod my head. I watch Buster sniff a small patch of grass opposite our house.

"I'll keep trying to call him myself." I'm getting a sinking feeling about Brian, but there's no way he could be connected to what happened to Tommy. "Thanks for calling Jim. Let me know if you hear from him." He hangs up and I take Buster back into the house. Michelle is seated in the kitchen with her parents. I watch Buster run in and go straight to the water bowl. Michelle and I hang out on the couch for the rest of the night and end up falling asleep as usual. I feel myself wake up every few hours throughout the night causing Buster to roll over and become antsy. Finally, I give up and decide to get up. I take Buster out for an early morning walk. As soon as we step outside, the air definitely feels different. It's almost as if God has thrown a thick blanket over everything trying to ease the

calm before the storm. Even Buster is walking a little slower. I try and fight through the thick air and walk to the end of our driveway. My legs feel like rubber bands and my feet are tingling. I'm not sure if it's from my lack of sleep or from what I'm about to do today. I'm thinking it is from the latter. Buster isn't running away today, he is staying directly by my side. They say that dogs can sense things humans can't and I'm sure Buster is recognizing what I am about to go through. I reach down and rub his neck and point towards the grass that he usually goes to, but he is refusing to leave me. I walk over to the grass with him and he finally lifts his leg on one of his favorite shrubs. We spend the next little while repeating this procedure up and down the street until we go back inside. Buster doesn't go for the kitchen this time. He just stays by my side. I walk him out to the kitchen and show him the water. He laps up at least a half-gallon. I can't help but look at the kitchen clock. It's almost 7:00 AM, just a little over six hours until the world explodes. I can't seem to sit still. I try eating something, cleaning, even watching TV but nothing is working. I'm just too fidgety. Buster isn't leaving my side. No matter where I go he is right there. Michelle is asleep on the couch and I haven't heard any activity upstairs yet from the guest room. Her father is one of those guys who sleep until 11:00 AM every morning. I think he stays up all night reading or watching TV, so I guess he makes up for it in the morning. I decide to check our voice messages. There is one new one. It's from my mom, she says they are flying into Reagan National early this afternoon and they want me to pick them up. They'll call me back with the flight information. I hope it's after 1:00, though I really wish it was at 1:00 and I could use that as an excuse not to go to Sorenson's. I keep looking at the clock. Another fifteen minutes has passed. I don't know how I'm going to make it until 1:00. I still don't even know if I can really go through with it, though I think I have to or I'll never see Tommy again and that is something I can't bear to live with. I keep thinking back to what Harris said on the phone about parents always saying they will do anything for their kids and now I have a chance to actually do it. I just wish it didn't mean I had to murder an innocent man. I can't stop picturing his daughter chasing that dog around her front yard. She will lose her father. He's probably her hero and she's his little girl, and now she'll never see him again. She's barely even old enough to remember him. How am I going to live with that? I look down at Buster. His head is across my feet and his eyes are closed. There's not a worry in his body, just peace and bliss. I finally decide to try and eat something. I'm not sure if it's going to help since my stomach is turning somersaults, but I can't just sit here and worry. I think I'll go crazy. I pour a bowl of cereal and add a tiny bit of milk. Buster follows me through the whole process and then places his head back on my feet at the table. The two of us remain that way for what must be a few hours because Michelle comes in and eats something then her parents do the same. I don't think I say one word and Buster doesn't move an inch. I've been trying not to look at the clock, but I see out of the corner of my eye I see that it is almost 11:00. I feel the tension brewing up even more and it seems to have gone beyond my stomach. I imagine the NFL pre-game shows have already gone on the air preparing for the 1:00 Redskin game. We're that close now. Michelle and her parents disappear upstairs and I take Buster out for one more walk before I grab my keys and head for the Tahoe. I can barely start the engine because my hands are shaking so

much. It feels like déjà vu as I pull into the parking lot of the storage facility. It's 12:00, one hour to go until kickoff. I find the gun in the same place I put it before. I slip it into my jacket and crawl back into the truck. I quickly look and see it has six rounds. I drive around for a while, I even pass the same church I stopped in before, but I can't bear to confront the beautiful statue of Jesus a second time before what I'm about to do. I'm not sure I'll be able to go through with it, but I keep thinking what will happen to Tommy if I don't. I try to imagine an executioner at a prison pulling the switch or the injection. They can't think about the consequences from their actions, they just focus on completing the task at hand. I drive down Sorenson's street without slowing down when I pass the house, though I almost slam into a tree when I see his wife and daughter outside in the yard again. I keep thinking maybe they'll be there at 1:00 and I won't have to go through with it. I drive through the neighborhood and come back towards Sorenson's house again, only this time I see a car beginning to back out of the driveway with two heads in it. 12:45, the time is approaching much too quickly. I can't concentrate anymore. I can barely even keep my eyes on the road. I consider intentionally hitting a tree head on, but I don't want to take the chance of Tommy not being let go. That's what it all comes down to. I'm doing this for Tommy. Whether or not I spend the rest of my life in jail or in hell doesn't matter as long as Tommy is free from this sick and twisted killer. I have to do it for him. I am one of the few parents who can actually choose to do anything for their kids. This has become my mantra. I turn around and pull up alongside the wooded road. I decided earlier I would duck into his yard through the trees so no one would see me walking down the road. I'm hoping they won't recognize my car, but in reality I'm not thinking straight and if they do, that's probably the price I need to pay. I slowly walk through the manicured grass. It's the same grass Sorenson's precious daughter was just playing on. I keep looking in all directions. I'm not sure what I'm looking for, maybe a miracle that I know isn't coming. I check my phone hoping for one last call, nothing. 12:58, it is time. I make it to the front door. I check my gun in my pocket with my hand again. It is still there and feels cold and foreign. I stand looking at the front door for some time. I'm not sure if I'm frozen or just not ready, but it is much harder this time, maybe because last time I knew deep down there was no way I was actually going to do it. This time it is different. This is real this time. If I don't do it, Tommy dies. I turn around and look back at the yard. Everything looks so perfect, the grass is green, the sky is blue, the sun is shining, the birds are singing and then I feel the gun in my pocket and all of a sudden everything looks wrong and out of focus like the world is all of a sudden upside down. I feel myself breathing very rapidly and my forehead is full of sweat. I quickly try and get control by taking deep long breaths and it seems to be helping because everything is starting to clear up into a nice thick fog. I turn back around, it's 1:00. I knock on the door. No answer, so I knock harder. A minute later, Sorenson appears at the door. He's holding a beer in one hand and sandwich in the other.

"Hey Mr. Smith, what can I do for you?" He opens the door and wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. "Sorry, I was expecting someone trying to sell me something. They seem to come around here knocking on doors every weekend." I nod. "Why don't you come on in?" I follow him on in and through the same living

room as we sat in before to a much smaller room with a gigantic TV mounted on the wall showing the Redskins. "Just getting ready to watch the game, you don't mind do you?" I sit down on the other end of the L-shaped sectional couch. "Can I get you a beer?" I shake my head and watch the Redskin kicker kick the ball deep into the end zone. "I hate this new rule where they moved the kickoff up. It kills all the fun in the kickoff." I nod. "So what brings you by today?" I'm making the movements with my mouth but nothing is coming out. "Are you okay?" I nod again and take a few deep breaths. "Are you sure you don't want a beer?"

"I'm sure. I just wanted to stop by and see if you thought of anything else." I can't believe how hard this is. I feel so out of place. It's like my body is here, but my mind is in the truck. I imagine Harris is watching this from one of the many cameras that I'm sure are placed in this room. I look up at the ceiling, but I don't see anything.

"I haven't thought of anything else. To be honest with you, I've actually been trying not to think about it anymore. Been taking a toll on my wife and kids some." He doesn't take his eyes off the screen as one of the Giant receivers catches a short pass and runs out of bounds about forty yards downfield. "Damn Redskins. I hope they get it together one of these years." I feel the gun with my hand in my pocket. I'm trying to think about how I'm actually going to do this. I still don't think I can go through with it. I look at Sorenson. He's another human being, an innocent man just sitting there watching his favorite team on a peaceful Sunday afternoon. He probably went to church this morning with his family. He looks over at me. "Sorry, I'm not much company, it's just whenever they play I get pretty involved with the game. Used to have season tickets, but once Haley was born I decided it would be better to stay close to home instead so I compromised and bought this." He points at the large screen TV. "It's not the same, but it is close enough. You a Skins fan?"

"I try and watch when I can, but I was born in Southern Florida, so I have always favored the Dolphins."

"Can't go wrong with the Fish, though they have been struggling the last few years too." He turns his head back towards the game. I feel my hand squeeze the gun again and suddenly it's out and I'm pointing it directly at Sorenson. I hear a loud explosion and see a trail of orange flames shoot out above my wrist. Sorenson is on the ground clutching his throat and staring at me. There is a large amount of blood pouring out of him just above his nose. What have I done? I look down at my hand. I'm still clutching the weapon. It feels like it weighs a thousand pounds. I can't believe it. I don't know what to do. I'm staring into Sorenson's eyes. He seems unable to breathe or talk. He is just looking at me. I can't tell if he's even alive. I want to kneel down beside him, but I'm unable to move. It feels like I'm watching a bad horror movie, but I know it's real. I somehow stand up, not sure how. I walk over to him and see his chest isn't moving and his eyes have gone lifeless. I have never seen someone die before, but I never imagined it would be anything like this. I don't know what to do, somehow the gun is back in my pocket and I'm running towards the front door back through the living room. I suddenly turn back around and take my shirt and wipe off where I sat on the couch. I run back to the front door and do the same. I have just committed a murder. I race back outside and onto the grass and stay behind the trees all the way to where I entered the yard. I

look out between two trees and don't see anyone, so I dart to the Tahoe. My hand turns the ignition and I slowly drive away. I don't dare even turn my head as I go past the Sorenson house. I don't pass any other cars on the way out of the neighborhood and I make it all the way to one of the main roads about two miles away where I quickly stop and begin violently vomiting out my door. I can't believe I just shot and killed a man. My heart is beating in my ears so loudly I feel like my head will explode. My vision is blurry. There is no way I can drive. I step out of the Tahoe and walk into the small vacant parking lot I have pulled into. It looks like an old abandoned gas station. I walk around the crumbling building and lean against the back wall. I'm not sure what is going to happen to me. I feel like I am going to just collapse at any moment. My legs are rubbery and everything is spinning in all directions. I hold onto the building as tightly as I can until I begin to feel my phone start to vibrate continuously. At first I don't answer it, because my arms don't seem to be functioning, but I'm finally able to get a hand around it. I don't even bother to look at the screen, there's no way my eyes are going to be able to read it anyway. I click the answer button and fall to the ground hearing the voice on the other end.

## Chapter 20

"Sheldon... Sheldon. Where are you?"

"I don't know. I love you Michelle. I really do."

"Are you okay? You're supposed to be at the airport picking up your parents. They're waiting out front for you. Didn't you get the message?" I feel the rocky pavement digging into my back. "I really love you Michelle. Please forgive me for whatever I have done."

"What are you talking about Sheldon? Where are you?" On one side of me I see nothing but trees, and the other side decaying cement walls of the abandoned gas station.

"I have no idea. Please forgive me."

I hear her voice grow louder and more concerned. "Please Sheldon tell me where you are so I can come get you."

"I don't know where I am or how I got here." I roll over on my stomach. I feel the pavement scraping me again as I roll over, but I feel no pain. All of a sudden, I hear a barrage of sirens. "I gotta go. I'll call you back in a little while."

"Sheldon, please tell me what's going on."

"I have to go Michelle." I try and sit up slowly. I lean my back against the wall.

"Please don't do this Sheldon. Please. Are you drinking? I need you Sheldon."

"I'm fine. I call you back in a little while. Please Michelle." I can't hear anything except the blaring of the sirens approaching. It sounds like they are whirling around inside my head. I pull the phone as close to my head as possible.

"Okay. I love you too. What would you like me to tell your parents?" I take a few deep breaths. "What are all those sirens? Are you sure you're okay?" I try and compose myself as best as I possibly can.

"I'm fine. Tell them I'll be there in a little while. Maybe they can get a bite to eat or something." The sirens are so loud now. I can't hear Michelle even with the phone pushed right up next to my ear. I think I hear her say goodbye so I try and yell goodbye into the phone, but I don't know if we're even connected anymore. I somehow crawl around to the side of the building and watch at least five police cars sail by blue lights and sirens following them. I wonder if they'll notice the Tahoe in the middle of the parking lot. I think I'm far enough away not to get noticed, but I decide to stay out of sight for a while, so make my way back behind the building again and fall back down on my back. I quickly pull my hand away from the gun in my pocket as it accidentally touches it. I can still see Sorenson's lifeless eyes staring at me as he passed away to another world. I look up and try to explain to God how sorry I am, but I don't get too far because I start vomiting and crying again. I look down at my pants and see blood, at first I think it's coming from me, but then I realize I'm covered in it. It must have come from Sorenson. My shirt and pants are both stained crimson red. I quickly throw off my jeans and polo shirt. I don't want it near me. I kick them away from me with my feet causing the gravel to dust up. I continue to lie there for another five or so minutes listening to the sirens approach and then fade away and stop. I feel my phone begin vibrating again. I can't read the screen, so I just answer it expecting to hear Michelle asking me how I'm doing, but instead it's Harris or whoever he is.

"Why hello Sheldon, partner, very nice work today. I would say mission accomplished, but there is one more thing I need to do." I'm listening, but the words aren't making any sense. "I think you know what that is. I will have your property delivered to you promptly and unscathed as promised." I quickly sit up and think about Tommy, the whole reason I just did this awful thing.

"Where is he?"

"It will be delivered to your favorite field in about an hour." I stand all the way up. The sirens have quieted down. "I need you to drop that object in your pocket off back into the unit before you head over to pick up what is yours."

"He better be okay."

"I gave you my word and you came through. By the way, you probably heard the sirens a few minutes ago. I called 911 and let them know a gunshot was heard coming from the house. I didn't want his wife and daughter to walk into that mess you made." I walk around to the edge of the building and look around the corner. I don't see any more police cars. "I think it's safe for you to leave that parking lot you are hiding in and head for the storage unit, then in approximately one hour head to the field. Don't go early or we'll have to come up with another means." I quickly begin walking from the building to the Tahoe. It's about fifty yards. I don't see any police cars. "Once again, it has been a pleasure doing business with you. I'll be in touch."

"No you won't. I hate you..." I realize he's gone as I step up and close the door. I turn the ignition and slowly pull out of the parking space. I'm just wearing an undershirt and boxers. I have the bloodied clothes in the seat beside me. I drive directly to the storage unit facility. I park near the unit and wait for a man and a woman to finish up at a nearby compartment before I get out. I run from the truck to the unit and punch in the code. When I open the door, I find a small envelope sitting on the shelf. I quickly look in it. It's full of cash. I throw it in my pocket and



place the gun inside where the envelope was. Before I shut the door, I pull the gun back out and wipe it off as best as I can with my shirt. I hate having to think like a criminal, but now I'm a murderer. I feel my temples begin to ache at the thought. I look in the envelope again and notice a small typed letter. It says, "Job well done. Here is a little token of my appreciation for all your hard work. Enjoy. Ps. Look in the back of your car before you go to pick up what is yours." I walk back to the truck and throw the envelope on the front seat. There's a new pair of pants and shirt lying in there. I quickly throw them on over my underclothes. I'm not surprised they are a perfect fit. I jump back in and start up the Tahoe. The envelope full of money and the bloodied clothes are staring at me from the passenger seat. I force myself to look the other way. I still have forty-five minutes until I'm supposed to be at the field. As much as I want to go early, I decide to follow what he said and get there on time. I drive out of the unit. A few police cars pass by me, but they don't have their lights on. I'm pretty sure they are looking for someone. They don't seem to pay any attention to me, so I keep driving in the direction of the field. I see a large industrial area filled with car repair and furniture dealers. I pull behind a large warehouse building and stop in front of a giant green dumpster. I drop the old clothes in there. I make sure and hide them under some flattened boxes. I quickly drive away to not cause any suspicion. I can barely contain myself. I have less than thirty minutes until I will see Tommy. He will be in my arms and safe. I just hope Harris isn't up to anything, but for some reason I believe him. I try and imagine what I would do to him if I actually saw him at the field, and it is worse than what I just did to Sorenson. I quickly direct my attention back to Tommy. I see the envelope beside me. I pick it up and there must be at least a hundred thousand dollars in it. I wait until the speedometer reaches sixty, then I open the window and throw it out leaving a trail of green behind me. I wonder what the cars behind me will think. Fifteen minutes to go, so I start heading to the field. I'm ready. I have no idea what I'm going to say to him, or if he's really going to be there, but I'm ready. I see the signs for the field and I slowly pull up into the parking lot. The lot is full of cars and there are people everywhere. I forgot it's Sunday afternoon and all the leagues are playing this afternoon like they do every Sunday. I think Tommy's team is supposed to play at 4:00. I find a parking spot towards the back. There are four rows of cars between me and the nearest field, the same one where I have been spending time at the last few days. I can see the bleachers from where I am sitting and there doesn't appear to be any openings. I'm looking at every person for Tommy or Harris. I know I'm a few minutes early, but I can't wait anymore. I need to get Tommy back. I stay seated in the truck. I'm looking in all directions. I'm not sure where to go, so a minute later I get out and begin walking towards the first field's bleachers. I decide to stand next to the fence. On the field are two teams. I watch the young pitcher lean in and throw a strike. The umpire barks out the call, causing the batter to grimace and a few screams from the other set of bleachers erupt. I quickly scan every face on the other bleachers and I don't see Tommy there either, but I'm not worried yet because it's only been an hour. I'm still not sure if I should stay here or walk around to the other three fields. They are all full. I decide to stay put. I watch the pitcher retire the next two batters and the teams switch places. The next batter appears very similar to Tommy. He has the same brown hair and body

type but he's at least two or three years older. I look down at my watch. It's now ten minutes past an hour. I'm starting to feel a little nervous. My mind starts drifting to all the scenarios that could have happened and I'm wondering if Sorenson's wife and daughter have found out what happened yet. I can't imagine the pain they must be going through. I can't believe I did that to someone. I feel like breaking down right here and curling up into a ball and hoping it was all a bad dream, but I know if there is any chance of Tommy being here, I can't fall apart until he's safe and sound and back home. I try to imagine Michelle's face when I show up at home with Tommy beside me. The boy hits a high fly ball towards left field. The left fielder runs backwards keeping his eyes upwards until he gets under the ball and makes the catch right at the fence. A loud sigh rings out from the parents behind me and then a thunderous cheer follows from the other side. I begin to look more closely at the next field when I feel my phone vibrate. I quickly read the message. "I asked you not to come early, now please go back to your car and wait until you hear from me." I'm starting to feel as though this whole thing is not going to happen. A man lost his life for no reason, and I killed him. I can't bear to realize what I have done, but I'm trying my best to just concentrate on getting Tommy back so I reluctantly turn around and walk back towards the Tahoe. I weave through the parked cars and see mine sitting there just as I left it. I open the door and start to climb in when suddenly I feel a surge of adrenaline, my heart starts racing and my head begins throbbing so violently it feels like it is going to explode again. There's someone in the backseat. I'm not sure how, but the next thing I know is that I'm outside opening the back door as quickly as possible. Tommy is lying down on the seat. It really is him. He's lying on his side, his face is against the seat so I can't quite see it, but there's no mistake it's him. I call out his name several times and try and roll him over but he's not responding. My first thought is he's not alive, but I can see his chest moving and I feel a pulse on the side of his neck, so I'm instantly relieved. I keep calling him, but I'm getting no response. I begin to panic and start to shake him harder. "What have they done with my boy?" I call out. I just want to hug him so tightly but I can't get him to wake up. I'm not sure what to do. I hop back in the front and pull out of the parking lot as quickly as I can. I drive west and pass cars on both the right and left causing irritating looks from the drivers, but I don't care. I make a quick turn and pull in front of an emergency room at a nearby hospital. I run inside and alert the staff members seated in the lobby to assist me. Three or four people follow me out to the car and they place Tommy on a gurney and push him quickly inside. I watch him disappear into the back while a woman directs me to a small private room where she takes my information. She asks me if Tommy has a drug problem which I deny. Then she asks me what happened to him. I tell her I have no idea, I just found him like that. Eventually, she takes me to the back and into Tommy's room. I run in there and see him hooked up to an IV and there is someone, who I assume is a doctor taking his vitals.

"Are you his father?" I nod. "I'm Dr. Simmons. Can you tell me what happened?" I look at him. He's in his late fifties with thinning gray hair and thick glasses.

"I don't know. This is how I found him." He looks back at Tommy and touches his forehead.

"Where did you find him? Was there any bottles nearby?"

"What do you mean?"

"This is obviously a drug overdose. I just need to know what he has taken." I gasp and lightly squeeze Tommy's hand.

I look back at the doctor. "There was nothing near him. He was just lying like this. He doesn't use drugs. He's going to be okay right?"

"He's in some kind of drug induced coma. I'm running some blood tests to see what is in his system. Once we get that we should know more." He writes something on a clipboard and then adjusts the IV. "We're going to move him to ICU, so they'll be coming to get him in a minute." I just nod. I look at Tommy. I can't believe I have my son back. I just hope he lives. Before I even can turn around two men dressed in blue jump suits come in and disconnect the IV and monitor from the wall and begin wheeling Tommy down the hall. I struggle to keep up with them. A minute later, we're in an elevator getting off the floor for the ICU. They quickly rush him into a small room filled with machines. I stand there helpless watching my son who I haven't seen in over a week being treated for a drug overdose. I really believed Harris that he would be okay. I remember his little speech about how his word means everything and now this. I watch as two different doctors begin checking him and writing down things on their clipboards. Everything is moving so quickly. A minute later, another doctor jogs past me and into the room. He's tall and is somewhere in his forties. He's holding a sheet of paper filled with what looks like letters and numbers. He stops in front of Tommy and looks at the other two doctors. They continue checking Tommy.

"It's called Metyrapone. In this dosage it's supposed to decrease Cortisol levels."

The doctor checking Tommy's blood pressure looks up. He has a confused look on his face. He's very slight and has a very narrow face. "Never heard of it this way, is it experimental?"

"Yep, it is supposed to eliminate memory, though they have no confirmation that it does so." They all look at me. "Any idea how your son would get a hold of this?" I take a step into the room and speak in a lower voice.

"He was kidnapped." I watch the look of surprise come over their faces.

"Hold on... is this... are you? The boy that went missing from school? This is him?" I nod my head.

The doctor who came running in the room looks at me. "He's in very bad shape. He was given an extremely high dose." I run over and squeeze Tommy's hand. It is limp and cold.

"What can you do?"

He looks back at the other two doctors. "Unfortunately there isn't an antidote for Metyrapone so we'll use charcoal."

"Charcoal?"

"Yes, it is activated charcoal. It will prevent the body from absorbing the drug. We'll pump his stomach first. Hopefully, he hasn't had this in his system too long. How long ago did you find him?"

I look at the clock on the wall. "Ten minutes ago."

"Let's hope. Now we need you to wait right outside for a few minutes." I don't let go of Tommy's hand. There's no way I'm leaving him after getting this far. "Please sir, it will be best for your son if you wait out here." He points at the door and lightly grabs my shoulder. I feel my legs pick me up and take me out the door. I

look back at Tommy and feel tears streaming down my face. The doctor places his arm around me and tries to assure me then he disappears back through the door. I quickly pull out my phone and Michelle answers right away.

"Sheldon what about your parents, they just called again." She sounds concerned.

"Michelle, come down to First Memorial right now. I have Tommy."

"What." She screams so loudly I have to pull the phone away from my ear. I slowly explain to what happened and what they are doing. I can hear her crying through the phone and her mom trying to comfort her. "We're on our way." She ends the call and I dial my parent's cell phone and explain to them what is going on. They agree to take a cab directly to the hospital. I tell them I don't care what it costs. I hang up and go back to leaning against the wall. I can't even think about everything that has happened in the last few hours. Killing Sorenson seems so long ago, now that I'm standing outside of Tommy's ICU room and he's fighting for his life. I try not to think about what Sorenson's wife and daughter are doing right now; at least Tommy has a chance to live. Sorenson never had a chance. I'm trying to listen for anything coming out of the room, but there's nothing, not any sound. I end up on my knees facing the wall asking for God's help. I know I have no reason asking for it after what I have done and I'm not sure how long I am like this, but the next thing I feel is Michelle pulling me up.

"Sheldon, they said we can go in." I quickly snap out of my daze and follow Michelle back into the room. There is only one doctor in the room, the one that had the drug information. The sheets are pulled up high on Tommy, in fact they are so high that I immediately think he didn't make it, especially seeing Michelle run over and begin hugging him. The doctor quickly tells us he thinks he will be fine in a few hours. I have to grab hold of a nearby chair to keep from falling. He explains the whole charcoal thing again and how they got most of it out after pumping his stomach, but I don't think I heard a word of what he said I'm concentrating so much on Michelle and Tommy. The doctor says he should come to in a little while. I think I thank him and then he leaves the room, but I'm not really sure. A nurse enters behind him and begins to adjust the machines surrounding Tommy. I stand next to Michelle and place my head on Tommy's chest. Nothing has ever felt this good. I grasp Michelle's other hand in mine and we both stare into each other's eyes knowing everything will be okay. Tommy is fine and Tommy is back.

## **Chapter 21**

We're seated just inside Tommy's room. He's been moved upstairs to a private one. It's fairly spacious, there's a TV, a small bathroom and a large window with the curtains tightly closed over it. Michelle's parents just left for the cafeteria. Tommy still hasn't gained consciousness, but the doctor has promised us he will come to any time now, so we are both waiting very impatiently. They haven't guaranteed us that he'll remember anything but we don't care, we're just glad he's

okay. I can't take my eyes off him. It's like I'm seeing him for the first time. Michelle and I are both seated next to each other in chairs that turn into beds, and we both have already stated we aren't leaving here no matter what. I decide I'm never leaving him again. We both turn our heads towards the door and see Stanton enter. He immediately looks at Tommy lying on the bed. I can see the astonishment in his eyes.

"Congratulations on getting him back." He pulls up a chair in front of us. His back is to Tommy. "How's he doing?" I quickly explain what the doctor told us about his recovery. He looks back towards the door. "We're going to have to get a detail up here for your protection." Both Michelle and I curiously look at each other. "There's a gathering of media outlets out front like I have never seen." He looks towards the window. I had a tough time just getting in the front door. Word travels quickly. So tell me how it happened?"

"I was back at Lee Field hanging out and when I went back to my truck I saw him lying in the back seat. He wasn't conscious so I immediately took him here." Stanton is writing down things in his notebook.

"Is your truck out front?"

"Yes."

"We'll need to go through it if that's okay with you. We need to check for any kind of fingerprints or anything." I nod my head. He immediately begins dialing on his phone. A minute later, he places the phone back in his pocket. "I've got some other news I need to share with you. Apparently, Doug Sorenson was murdered a few hours ago in his home." I feel his eyes boring into me and a tinge of sweat begins forming on my head.

"Oh my God... when does it stop?" Stanton removes his eyes from me and looks upon Michelle.

"I don't know. I haven't been over there yet, but we are currently processing the scene. I think it's pretty fair to say it is related." I can't speak. All I keep seeing is Sorenson's dying eyes looking at me. "Are you okay Mr. Smith?" I look up and both Stanton and Michelle are curiously eying me.

"I'm okay. I just don't understand why all this is happening." I look over at Tommy. The machines are steadily recording his heartbeat and breathing. I also start to wonder how well I really wiped down my fingerprints. For a second, I think about confessing to Stanton and Michelle right now, but then I don't speak. I can't talk. I just look at Tommy lying there alive because of Sorenson dying. Somehow, there must be a rationale for that, but I quickly stop myself from trying to rationalize a man's death. Stanton and Michelle are still looking at me, so I quickly stand up and look out the window. I'm amazed at the amount of media vans outside.

"It's a tragedy. We received an anonymous call and immediately responded and found him shot to death. The only blessing was his wife and daughter weren't at home." He pauses. "But hey you don't need to worry about that any more, your son is back. However it happened or for whatever reason, he is here and from what you tell me he's going to be okay." He slowly stands up and looks at Tommy. "Please do me a favor after he wakes up and you spend some time with him, give me a call so we can see if he remembers anything. We could desperately use a good lead right now." I stand up and shake his hand. He pats Michelle's back and

walks to Tommy's bed. He pauses over him for a minute and then walks out the door. I'm not sure if I feel relieved when he leaves, but when I look down both of my hands are trembling out of control. The next thing I feel is Michelle's arms around me. She is clutching me tightly. Not sure how long we remain like that, but suddenly Tommy's eyes are open. We run over to his bedside.

"Tommy...Tommy. How are you?" I scream out. I watch him look up at us and it looks like he's trying to smile. Michelle immediately gives him a kiss on the forehead. He responds by shaking his head.

"It's going to take time for him to come out all the way." I look back and see the doctor standing behind me. "This is a good sign though." He writes down something on his clipboard and walks to the foot of his bed. Tommy continues to nod his head slowly and then almost as quickly as he woke up his eyes close and it looks like he's back to sleep. "Very typical, just means his body is adjusting to a new stage."

"Does that mean he's out of the coma?" I watch the doctor nod. He walks up to the heart rhythm machine.

"Yes. In another hour or two he should be able to communicate. He'll probably be very confused and have no idea where he is, but seeing you two should help him." We watch as the doctor steps back out of the room. We both stay at his bedside sitting on the edge of the bed watching our son rest peacefully. I feel my phone begin to vibrate again. I look down and see its Jim.

"Hey Jim."

"Congratulations Sheldon. I just heard Tommy is okay. It's all over the news."

"Thanks."

"I'm so happy for you guys. He's such a great kid."

"Thanks. Any word on Brian yet?" I look at Michelle. She's holding Tommy's hand.

"No, still nothing. I keep going by his house but there is no sign of him anywhere."

I look back at Tommy. His chest is rising and falling so steadily. "Okay, let me know if you hear from him." I quickly hang up and sit down beside Michelle again. Another hour or so passes, and Michelle's parents return from lunch. They volunteer to go pick up my parents, so I thank them as they leave. Luckily, both of our parents get along great despite the fact they haven't seen each other in years. A few minutes later, someone in a white uniform enters our room and drops off two trays of food. Michelle and I both finish everything on them. I think it's the first time we have eaten a full meal since Tommy went missing. My mind is actually cooperating and focusing on Tommy instead of shooting Sorenson, so the food actually stays down at least for now. A minute later, we both hear a tiny grunt coming from Tommy. We both run over to his bed and see him looking at us. His eyes are wide open and he is mouthing the words "Mom and Dad."

"Hey Tommy." I softly squeeze his hand while Michelle rubs his forehead.

"Hi Mom and Dad." His voice almost sounds angelic despite being just above a whisper. "Where am I?" Michelle and I both look at each other.

"You're in the hospital buddy." I squeeze his hand a little tighter.

"You're going to be fine honey." Michelle is smiling broadly. I'm so elated. I feel tears in my eyes forming. I have almost completely forgotten about Sorenson for now.

"What happened? Am I done with Mr. Ken?" His eyes are going back and forth between us.

"Yes, you are all done with him." Michelle looks at me oddly. I shake my head.

"How did I get sick?"

"Something you took, but you're going to be fine. It just made you sleepy." Michelle is looking at me curiously.

"I didn't take anything Dad. Was it Mr. Ken?" I look at Michelle.

"Yes it was Tommy. You did nothing wrong. Do you remember anything?" He nods his head.

"You don't have to think about it now honey."

"Mom's right Tommy, don't think about it now."

"I did like you said right Dad?" I look at Michelle and then the heart machine. I fix my eyes on the steady patters flashing across the screen.

"You did great Tommy. Do you remember where Mr. Ken brought you?" I watch him close his eyes for a minute and then look at me.

"I don't remember how I got there or where I went, but I remember it was just like my room at home except it was full of all this cool stuff." Michelle and I both smile. "Then Mr. Ken said I had to stay in my room until something was over...but I can't remember what. Everything seems kind of fuzzy."

"It's okay Tommy. You did great." Michelle kisses his forehead.

"I do remember talking to you Dad. I think you were at McDonald's or something." I feel the sweat forming on my head again. Michelle is eyeing me so I just nod back and give Michelle one of those looks that people can give each other after they have been married for many years.

"I remember too. We missed you buddy. We're so glad you're back." Michelle seems satisfied with my answer. She is looking back at Tommy.

"Why did I have to go there? I can't remember? Why can't I remember anything?"

"It was just somewhere you had to go for a while, so you could use all those toys that were in your room. The stuff he gave you apparently erases parts of your memory so you may not be able to remember everything."

"Your Dad's right." Michelle and I quickly turn our heads behind us as the doctor speaks. He's a different one than before. He's wearing a long white doctor's jacket and is carrying an electronic tablet in his hand. He is probably mid-fifties with gray stylish hair. "I'm Dr. Brandon from Neurology." We shake hands. "The drug you were given can remove certain parts of your memory. There's no guarantee that you will ever recover it, but we may not know for several months until we see the effects." He walks between Michelle and me and holds up his hand to give Tommy a high-five. Tommy slowly raises his right hand and softly taps the doctor's. "How would you feel like going home soon?" I watch Tommy's mouth form a slight smile. "I think we should be able to check you out of this hotel tomorrow." He looks at both of us. "I've got to warn you you're probably going to get a big welcome when you get home though." Tommy gives me a confused look. The doctor runs a few tests on Tommy and then types into his tablet and promises

to return in a few hours. Tommy's eyes start to get heavy and Michelle and I watch him fall back to sleep, we return to our seats. Before we even sit down, Michelle leans over to me.

"What was he talking about with you at McDonalds? Is there something you're not telling me here?" I don't answer right away. I watch the machine monitoring Tommy's pulse rate fluctuates between 70 and 72.

"There's nothing else. You heard what the doctor said he won't remember certain things?"

She leans in closer. "He was very clear on remembering you Sheldon. What aren't you telling me?" I see tears forming in her eyes. I jump up and look out the window again. I see nothing but a sea of emergency vehicles and media vans swarming the parking lot. I slowly walk back over to Michelle and sit down next to her. Her eyes still haven't left me. "What is it Sheldon? You need to tell me. Who is Mr. Ken too?" I look down at my feet. I can see specks of red blood splattered on the sides that I didn't notice before. I quickly begin to rub my feet together. "Talk to me Sheldon." I slowly turn my head towards Michelle. Her eyes are wide open waiting to hear my words that could change our lives forever.

"It's complicated Michelle." I keep rubbing my shoes together.

"Sheldon, you need to tell me what's going on right now." She pulls me closer by grabbing my arm. "Where did you get these clothes?" I don't answer. I continue to look down at my shoes. Most of the blood looks like it is gone now.

"I can't. Trust me Michelle."

"No it's not Sheldon. Tommy is my son too and if you're keeping stuff from me, you need to let me know right now." I can't talk anymore. My mind is going back to Sorenson, his lifeless eyes and little girl running through the yard. My heart feels like it's breaking apart. What have I done? I feel my body trembling all over. My shoes are now covered with blood it's seeping all over me. Sorenson is lying in front of me on the floor covered in blood. I think I hear Michelle calling my name, but everything is blurry and spinning out of control. I think I'm on the floor, but I'm not sure. Everywhere I look, everything is covered in blood. I feel like I'm going to explode. I think I'm rolling around, but I'm not sure anymore. The whole hospital is shaking violently, the floor is rumbling, the ceiling looks as though it is going to come down on top of me. I close my eyes as tightly as I possibly can and then there's nothing but darkness and silence.

## Chapter 22

"Sheldon...Sheldon." I open my eyes and I see my mom standing over me. I have no idea where I am. "How are you?"

"Where am I? What happened?" I try and sit up but my body isn't cooperating. "How's Tommy?"



"Tommy's fine." I watch her look behind me. My mom is one of those women that never age. She looks the same now that she looked when she was thirty. Her hair is the same medium length sandy brown style she has always had and I don't think she has gained a pound. "You're in the hospital Sheldon." I slowly pan my eyes around the room and recognize many of the same things I saw in Tommy's room earlier.

"I want to go see Tommy." I feel her place her hand softly on my chest.

"Tommy's home Sheldon."

"What do you mean? They said he couldn't go home until tomorrow." I watch my mom's face tighten up.

"Tommy went home two days ago."

"What are you talking about? How long have I been here?" My mom looks towards the window. The curtains are closed just like they were in Tommy's room.

"This is your third day here." She places her hand on my head and slowly rubs back and forth. "You were exhausted. The doctor said you have been under so much stress that your body just gave in. You needed the rest."

"I can't believe it's been two days. I want to check on Tommy."

"Tommy's fine. Dad, Michelle and her parents are home with him. He's doing much better."

"I want to go home." I try and get up again, but my body isn't moving.

"Just take it easy." She places her hand on my chest again. "The doctor said it's important for you to get as much rest as you can. We have been taking turns staying with you. Michelle is so worried." I slowly turn my head around and see an IV and many other scary machines. I feel my eyes getting heavy. I'm trying to stay awake, but I'm quickly losing the battle. I see a woman walk behind my mom. I think she's a nurse because she's checking the monitors and talking to my mom, but I can't hear anything she is saying. A minute later, everything is blissfully silent.

I have no idea how long ago it was when I saw my mom, but now when I open my eyes again the room is very bright and welcoming. I'm guessing the sun is pouring in behind the curtains. It must be morning. I wish I had a clock. I look all around the room. I find I'm actually able to move my body and sit myself up. I don't see my mom, so I figure she must have gone back home. I smile thinking of Tommy back home at our house with his stuff and his friends. I try and imagine what he's doing now. I wish I could somehow get out of here. I feel much better than the first time I woke up. My mind doesn't feel cloudy at all. I can clearly remember everything that happened. I just can't believe I have been here for so long. I slowly raise each arm and stretch them out fully. The one with IV pulls a little from all the tape, but otherwise it feels good. I'm able to move each leg up and down a few times as well. I notice a little red button wrapped around the side of my bed that says "call" on it, so I immediately push the button. A minute later, a woman dressed in a pink uniform enters my room followed by Michelle. I smile seeing Michelle. She runs over to me and we give each other a long embrace. I feel the nurse checking the IV and adjusting things around me. I'm so happy to see Michelle. I squeeze her hand tightly.

"Hi Sheldon, good morning."

"Good morning." I respond back. My voice feels raspy, so I try and clear my throat. "Is there a clock in here?" I hear both Michelle and the nurse quietly laugh.

"I told you that would be the first thing he would ask for."

The nurse smiles at us. "I'll get one in here for you real soon. Now take it easy Mr. Smith, doctor's orders." I nod my head and watch her exit the room.

"You look much better Sheldon. You really had me worried. All of us."

"How's Tommy?" I adjust my shoulders on the back of the bed.

"He's good. Our parents are taking him to Kings Dominion today. You know how much he loves amusement parks." I smile thinking of Tommy and how much he loves roller coasters.

"Kid has no fear." Michelle nods. "I can't believe I have been here so long."

"We've been through a lot Sheldon." I grab her other hand.

"How are you doing?"

"Much better now. It's been so helpful having our families here. I've been able to get some rest. I am actually starting to feel back to normal. Now if we can just get you back home."

"When can I get out of here?" I rub the tape on my arm above the IV.

"Doctor said it may take another day or two. They loaded you up with some pretty heavy drugs." She taps the IV bag slowly dripping into my arm.

"What happened to me?"

"You don't remember? You just collapsed right in Tommy's room. I pushed the panic button and they whisked you off to another part of the hospital. I was running between the two of you all night." She looks at the window. "But you're going to be fine. The doctor assured me."

"I'm sorry Michelle." She looks into my eyes. I can see the confusion in her face.

"It's okay. When you feel better you can tell me everything, but right now you just need to rest. You heard the nurse. You want something to drink or eat?" I nod my head. I can't stop looking at her. I feel so bad for not telling her anything about Tommy, but I couldn't take the chance of something happening to him. I hope she understands.

"Have you heard anything from Stanton?"

"He's come by several times to check on you. He also talked to Tommy yesterday, but he couldn't remember anything more than what he told us. I think that drug they gave him erased most of it from his memory. The doctor said one day it may come back, so we have to keep an eye on him." She picks up a small folded paper. "So what would you like? Grilled cheese? Soup?"

"I'll take a grilled cheese. That sounds good." I watch her dial a number and place the order into the phone. "How's the media been?"

"It was tough the first day or two but they have backed off. I had to explain to Tommy that he was kidnapped. He had no idea. He keeps talking about some test he had to complete for you and Mr. Ken. I don't know what that's all about, but it probably has something to do with his memory loss." I try and sit up some more. Michelle adjusts the bed for me. "Noreen from the news 7 wants us to go on again with her and thank everyone for searching for Tommy and letting them know he's okay. I said I would wait until you're fully recovered." I watch as she begins to laugh. "Speaking of the news, you should have seen Tommy this morning. I had him wear your dark sunglasses and a hat pulled way over his eyes. You know how

much I hate that look, but I don't want anyone recognizing him at the amusement park." I smile picturing Michelle dressing him up. A few minutes later the food arrives. I eat the grilled cheese like I haven't eaten in years. I even finish a ginger ale. A little while later, the doctor comes in and talks to Michelle. I feel my eyelids beginning to crash again, so the next thing I know I'm off into sleep land leaving Michelle to speak with the doctor. Next time I open my eyes, it's dark in the room so I go back to sleep. I continue doing this until I see the sunlight creeping through the curtain. I slowly sit up and swing my legs over the side of the bed. There's no one in my room, so I just sit and enjoy the quiet until I hear the nurse open the door some time later. I can tell she's startled to see me up. She's the same one that was here with Michelle earlier.

"Hello Mr. Smith. You look like you're ready to go."

"I feel much better." I lift up both of my legs.

"It's going to be a nice today. How would you like to take a walk outside in the courtyard?" I nod my head. I watch as she goes about her normal duties of checking my vitals and monitors. After a few more minutes, she finishes up and Michelle comes in.

"Wow! Anne just told me you were wide awake when she came in."

"I'm ready to get out of here Michelle." She sits down on the edge of the bed.

"She said maybe this afternoon if everything still looks good. She's going to let the doctor know. She did say you could go outside. How about after breakfast we take a little ride?"

"What do you mean a ride?" I look up at her and she smiles.

"On a wheelchair." I nod my head but she ignores me. "Tommy says hi. He wanted to come with me but I think it's best to keep him away from all this. He's been through enough already. The news vans have started to leave, so maybe they are moving on to another story." A little while later, after I finish eating some scrambled eggs and toast Michelle and the nurse get me loaded in the wheel chair and Michelle takes me outside. I can't believe how refreshing the air feels on my face as we wheel into the small cement courtyard. We're the only ones out here. Michelle pushes me in the center near a small bench that she sits on. We just remain that way for a while. She holds my hand in hers. "Are you up to talking Sheldon?" I look at her and then back around the courtyard. There's a small basketball hoop setup on the far side. It's been lowered from the ten foot regulation height but it looks like something I might have to try later.

"I guess so." I turn my head slowly back towards her and look into her eyes. They look so trusting and warm. I just hope she can forgive me. I start out telling her about the first phone call at the field and then the whole bank story. I pause on the part about the teller getting killed and she squeezes my hand a little tighter. Next I tell her about the break in at Sorenson's office and all the messages and videos from Harris. I keep repeating that I couldn't tell her out of fear that Tommy might be killed. I'm not sure if she understands, but she is still listening and holding my hand tightly. I get to the last part about the request to kill Sorenson for Tommy. I stop when I get to the point of going to his house the first time. I can see tears in her eyes, but she wants me to continue, so I tell her I couldn't go through with it. I think she looks a little relieved. I move into the part about identifying the second boy's body and Lawrence being killed. Finally, I talk

about going to Sorenson's house the second time. She is crying uncontrollably now.

"Did you do it Sheldon?" She wipes her eyes with the back of her sleeve. "Is that why Stanton said he found your prints all over the house?"

"When did he say that?"

"I think it was the day after we brought Tommy home. You didn't shoot him did you?" I look down. I can't look in her eyes. She quickly rises from the bench and walks over near the basketball hoop. I'm not sure what to do. I feel like screaming as loudly as I can to make everything go away, but I actually find myself feeling better instead. It feels so good to finally tell someone, especially Michelle. A few minutes later, she comes back to me and sits on the bench. "I love you Sheldon. You know that." She kisses me hard on the lips. I feel tears running down my face, but I'm not sure if there from me or her. "I just wish you had come to me. We could have worked it out."

"I had no choice Michelle. I couldn't take the chance." I explain to her about finding all the cameras in the house and how Brian is trying to figure it out. She looks upset. "Please forgive me. I did what I had to do to keep Tommy alive."

"You killed another man Sheldon."

"If not, it would have been Tommy. You didn't see those pictures of those other two boys. I couldn't let that happen to our son." She doesn't say anything for what seems like an eternity.

Finally she speaks. "What are we going to do now?"

"I don't know. My only concern was to get him home and now he's there, so nothing else matters."

"You could go to jail Sheldon." I look deep into her eyes.

"I know and I should. Maybe I'll just call Stanton and let him know what happened. The quicker the better, then you and Tommy can move on." She grabs my shoulder so tightly I cringe, so she immediately lets up.

"No you're not telling Stanton anything. They only have your fingerprints and you can say you just stopped by. You did what any other parent would want to do in that situation. Like you said it was him or Tommy, and you chose your son. No one ever needs to know what happened." She wipes the tears away from her face again. "As far as I'm concerned, you're a hero. You brought our son back. I love you so much." She throws her arms around me and kisses me several more times until a young mother pushes her young son's stroller into the courtyard. We remain for probably another hour or so. Neither of us says anything. We're lost in our own thoughts but tied together forever with our secret bond.

## Chapter 23

I finally got released and Michelle brought me home. I was warmly greeted by everyone and I gave Tommy an extra-long hug and rubbed Buster's back as much as I could. He hasn't left my side since I have returned. My dad had taken over the duties of walking Buster every day, so he joins me on the walks. We still can't take

Tommy outside yet in case a reporter suddenly shows up. It looks like they have all left, but there are a lot of strange vehicles passing by the house at all hours of the night so Michelle and I aren't ready to let him go. A few of his friends have come by and hung out doing normal teenage things, so everything is starting to get back to normal. Our parents are heading back home after Lawrence's service which is scheduled for tomorrow morning. It is going to be tough emotionally, but it is something we need to do for him. I still can't believe he's gone. I feel guilty because if I had acted sooner, he might still be alive, but Michelle keeps telling me I need to move on from what I did. I'm still struggling. I usually only sleep a few hours a night, because every dream I have is about Sorenson's final moments. I can't stop seeing his eyes staring at me as his life drains out of him. Sometimes I wake up and at first I think the whole thing was just a bad dream, but then reality hits me and I go through all the pain again. I don't do too much of anything yet except hang around the house. Michelle tells everyone I'm still recovering, but I'm really just not ready to face the world after what happened and what I did. I have been able to spend a lot of time with Tommy. Usually we just watch a movie together or play video games, but I can't explain the magic I feel just being in his presence. He hasn't remembered anything else and has seemed to move past the whole thing. Michelle did a great job explaining to him that he was kidnapped and how lucky and happy we are to have him back. It's been nice having our parents around as well, giving us time getting back to our lives. I'm going to even try to go back to work next week. Michelle thinks that will help me get over things and move on with my life. She doesn't even seem fazed anymore about me killing Sorenson. Ever since our talk at the hospital, she has bent over backwards to help me. She has been wonderful. Still no word from Brian though. Jim has left a few messages but I haven't returned his calls yet, one step at a time. I decided to take Buster for another walk today. It's his fourth one today and it's only early afternoon. My Dad was busy doing a crossword, so I told him I would go myself. We just turned the corner on our street and are heading towards the house. I watch as Buster takes off up the street and into our driveway. It's like he's lived here all his life. I wonder if he still thinks about his previous owner. As soon as I see our driveway, I see Stanton's car and him leaning against it. Now what? I wonder. Buster runs over to him and Stanton leans down and scratches his neck.

"Hey Mr. Smith, it looks like Buster is doing great. How are things going with you?" He walks towards me and holds his hand out for me to shake it. I firmly grasp it.

"I'm doing much better. So glad to be home and have Tommy back. Thanks for all your help." I watch curiously as he starts to walk back towards the way we just came from.

"What do you say we take a little walk?" I look back at Buster. He has already gone in. He's probably drinking from his water bowl in the kitchen.

"Sure." I turn around and quickly catch up.

"I wanted to update you on where we are." I look over at him. He's dressed in a white button down, his red tie is loose, but he looks much better than anytime I have seen him since all this started. "First of all, we still haven't found our main suspects. In fact, I don't think we are any closer. We have APB's on both, but nothing has turned up. It's like they're ghosts." I remember how easily they

escaped in their BMW a while back. "What I wanted to talk to you about is Douglas Sorenson." I feel a large lump forming in my throat. "How well did you know him?" I'm not sure how to immediately answer this. I feel his eyes boring down on me and the sweat forming on my forehead, so I know I need to answer quickly.

"We talked a few times."

"Where?"

"His office and house."

I watch his eyes focus on something above me for a second. "The reason I ask is because we found your prints all over the crime scene at his house." I feel my heart begin to beat quickly, "And also in his office." He slows down almost coming to a stop, "Any explanation?"

I don't look at him directly. "I saw him in both places. We talked about what he knew and how it might be able to help me find Tommy."

"We also have a witness that claims to have seen gold Chevy Tahoe on his street at about the same time the murder happened." I look back at our driveway. The Tahoe is parked in the garage so you can't see it. "What do you think?"

"Like I said, I did visit with him at his house?"

"On Sunday afternoon?"

"I think so. It was sometime Sunday. I don't really remember exactly. I was a little upset at the time about Tommy being gone."

"I understand. I just need to follow up on everything." I feel my nerves kicking up causing my brain to misfire a little. "Can you try and remember what time you were there? Was it after 1:00?"

"I think it was before, but like I say I really don't remember."

"It could be very important for us to set a timeline if you could remember. The responding officers said he was watching the Redskin game when they arrived. Do you remember if he had the Redskins on?" I'm not sure if I'm being set up, so I try and give a vague answer.

"There was some kind of football on, but I didn't really pay attention."

"Don't tell me you're not a Skins fan?"

"Dolphins." I see him smile which cause my pulse to instantly slow down about twenty beats. He slowly turns around and begins heading back towards the driveway. He doesn't say anything else the rest of the way. When we get by his car, he reaches out and shakes my hand again.

"I'm sure I'll have some more questions for you and I'll need to get a statement, so I'll be back." I watch him back out of the driveway. I take a deep breath and as soon as I turn around I jump seeing Michelle standing right behind me.

"What did he say?" We slowly walk up the driveway.

"He said they found my fingerprints all over the crime scene."

"What do you think he's going to do?"

"I'm not sure. He said he would be back in touch with me." She stops and grasps my hand in hers and lowers her voice.

"We will do whatever it takes to keep you away from all that. I promise." I stop and place my arm around her. I can't believe how supportive she is.

"Thanks, but whatever happens...happens. We got Tommy back."

"And we're going to keep you back too Sheldon." I almost trip over Buster as he comes running out of the garage and lands at my feet, "besides who would take care of Buster." The rest of the day we stay home and relax. The next morning we all attend Lawrence's service. I keep Tommy beside me the whole time in case he has any emotional problems, but we all do well and meet up at local steakhouse afterwards and tell stories about Lawrence throughout the meal, some funny some sad. After lunch, I pay the bill and walk out to the parking lot to get the Tahoe. Luckily, it's big enough to fit everyone in it. As soon as I unlock the door, I notice something isn't right. The back passenger door is slightly open. I know I locked it when we went in because I heard it chime. I have taken to locking everything since all that happened. I walk around the back of the vehicle to close the door and I almost fall over backwards when I see a foot and a leg hanging out the door. I run and open the door and feel my insides begin to rise up seeing Brian's lifeless body hanging on the seat. There is blood all over his face and clothes. It looks like he has been shot, but I can't tell because I quickly turn away. The only thing I remember is seeing a clear tarp underneath his body covering the back seat. I immediately dial 911 and begin walking in small circles besides the truck. I can't believe this is happening again. I thought it was all over after Tommy and Sorenson. Two minutes later, I hear the sirens. I feel my phone begin to ring, it's Michelle. I fill her in and she decides to take everyone home out another entrance in a cab. A minute later, I feel a slight tap on my shoulder and Stanton is standing behind me. I quickly turn around and tell him what happened. He keeps asking me about the tarp and if it's mine. I deny it and tell him I have never seen it before. I explain to him who Brian was and that we haven't heard from him in several days. I watch him go back towards the Tahoe and examine the body. I slowly walk back towards the restaurant feeling a gnawing headache take over inside me. As soon as I get near the door, my phone starts vibrating. I look down and read the text message from the private sender, "that's what happens to your friends when they get too close to my business." I immediately try and think of what Brian must have been doing. I wish I could have warned him. I suddenly feel responsible for someone else's life. I walk back into the restaurant and head to the restroom and end up sitting in a stall. I'm not sure how long I stay in there, but when I walk back out the place is empty and a tow truck is taking my Tahoe away. I watch it disappear down the road. I can only imagine Harris is somewhere laughing about this. There are still several police cars parked in the parking lot and I can see officers inside speaking with employees. I casually walk past them, and no one seems to notice me so I begin walking down the road. I decide to call Jim and let him know what happened. We agree to meet at Brian's house in a few hours. I keep walking ignoring the passing cars and looks until my legs begin to stiffen and then I finally call a cab. I arrive in front of Brian's house a few minutes later. It's a small bungalow located close to the road. I've never been here before, but I'm impressed at how well maintained the place looks. The yard and shrubbery are immaculate and the off-white siding looks new and clean. I walk up the short sidewalk and sit on the steps. I don't see Jim's car yet. I call Michelle and let her know where I am and she seems to understand. She says that Tommy is doing well despite what happened. A few minutes later, I see Jim's Prius pull in front and he slowly gets out. I can see the sadness in his face. I stand up and we lightly

embrace. A minute later, he opens the door and we step into one of the most beautifully decorated houses I have ever laid eyes on. There are Persian rugs covering highly polished hardwood floors and furniture that looks as though it was imported from all over the world. I look at Jim, but he doesn't seem to notice anything. I'm not really sure why we're here, but I figure maybe we can find something to tell us why he was killed. We quickly walk through the three rooms on the first floor. We don't see anything out of the ordinary. It almost appears as if no one lives here, the place is just too clean, but there are a few personal touches here and there. I notice a picture on the mantle of Brian with what must be his parents. I point it out to Jim and we agree to track them down and let them know. Hopefully, I have something at work that lists his emergency contacts. We climb up the small staircase. There are two rooms on the second floor. The first one we enter must be Brian's bedroom, because there's a small bed with the sheets pulled tightly. We fumble around in his room for a minute, but don't see anything of interest.

"Sheldon, you better come see this." I slowly back out of the bedroom and enter the room next door where Jim is standing. I feel my breath struggling to exit my chest. There are at least thirty computers, a mixture of laptops and desktops placed around the small room making it almost impossible to walk in, and every one of them is smashed to pieces. It looks like someone has taken a sledge hammer and destroyed both the computer and the monitor on each one.

"What do you think happened in here?"

"I know Brian didn't do this. When I came in here before the place was a mess but nothing appeared broken." I run my fingers across the pieces of a desktop next to me.

"Why does he have so many computers in here?" I'm running my eyes around the room amazed at the amount of technology.

"You know Brian. He loves computers. Why are they all smashed? What's going on here Sheldon?"

"I think someone is trying to keep us from finding that out. We need to see if any of these will boot up." We both start trying to piece together the various computer parts, but after several hours we determine they are all destroyed.

"It looks like a magnet was used as well." I nod my head.

"We need to keep looking. There has got to be something here." We both rummage through the room for a while, but there just isn't anything. Jim hands me a floppy drive from one of the desktops.

"We should keep this as a reminder." I toss it back and forth in my hands. "I'm surprised he doesn't have this one at work." I picture Brian's cluttered desk, which is such a sharp contrast to his home and I can see the various floppy drives he has all strewn all around him. We both take one more walk through the house to make sure we didn't miss anything and then head out. Jim gives me a ride back home. I arrive back inside and the only one to greet me is Buster, everyone else is sound asleep. I set the floppy drive down and grab Buster's leash, but then I suddenly stop. There's something different about the drive. I don't know how I didn't notice it before. Buster is jumping up and down pulling me towards the door, but I ignore him. I pick up the drive and push the button that normally



ejects a disk and instead it opens up and there's a small piece of paper and a key inside.

## Chapter 24

I wake to a loud pounding on the door. I look through the window and see Stanton outside with two uniformed officers. I quickly open the door.

"Good morning Mr. Smith. May we come in?" I open the door and allow them to step inside. He hands me a piece of paper. "We have a search warrant for a tarp like the one that was used for Brian's body."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm sorry to have to do this, but we need to find everything we can. This needs to end." I nod and watch them head towards the garage. "Your friend was killed by a single shot to the head. As you know there was a lot of blood, but the weird thing was, there wasn't a drop on your car." I keep my eyes focused on the garage door where I can hear the officers rummaging through our stuff. "Please sit down." He points at the couch. The same one Michelle and I spent many hours on waiting for Tommy. "I'm going to level with you Mr. Smith." I look at the clock it's 3:00 AM. "There are two theories on what is going on around here. Half of the station is convinced you are involved, and the other half like me, are convinced you are just a victim. We're getting a lot of heat to stop this. We've had more murders in the last two weeks than we've had in five years, so clearly we are receiving a lot of community pressure." I look down at my feet. "So if there's anything you're not telling me, now might be the time." I touch my hair on the back of my head.

"There isn't anything else. I've told you everything I know." I can't believe how easily that comes out of my mouth.

"Your fingerprints at the crime scene certainly don't help you. The only reason you're not being questioned is because I am telling them you aren't involved, but I need you to tell me if there's anything else which I think we both know there is." I shake my head.

"Look, his son was taken, his brother was murdered and now one of the guys who works for him was found murdered in his own car. I think he has been through enough don't you?" I watch as Michelle stands directly in front of Stanton.

"I agree. You have all been through a lot, but some of stuff just doesn't add up and we need to tie up all the loose ends. I wouldn't be doing my job if I didn't."

"Just please don't push him. Remember he just came out of the hospital." She sits down next to me and places an arm around me. We both turn our heads towards the garage door. The two officers are carrying two tarps.

"They're the same Detective." Stanton stands up and grabs hold of one of the tarps and looks directly at me.

"Any explanation for this?" I shake my head.

"I'm sure it's the same as everything else. Someone is trying to make me look guilty." Stanton follows the two officers out the door. He stops at the door and looks back.

"I'm sure I'll be back. The tarp connection may put more people over the top. Hopefully, you'll be ready to talk soon. You're only hurting yourself Mr. Smith by not telling us everything." After he shuts the door, I explain to Michelle about the tarps and what happened at Brian's house. She hugs me and heads back upstairs. I pull the small piece of paper out of my pocket and read the address again over and over again. I don't feel like I'll be able to go back to sleep, so I pull up the address on Google and find it. It's about an hour south of here off Route 29. It looks like it's a pretty rural area, though it's difficult to see because the Google imagery isn't really clear, but it looks like small housing development. I fall asleep on the couch and wake up to Buster's wet tongue. Tommy and I take him for a walk up the street. It's early enough that there is no one outside so I guess we won't be bothered. I keep Tommy as close to me as possible. We don't talk about what happened to him. None of us do at all. It's just too painful and he doesn't remember much and Michelle and I don't want to remember. I still can't take my eyes off him. It's still like I'm looking at him the first time. By the time we get back, my parents and Michelle's parents are packed and ready to go home. We say goodbye to Michelle's, and then Tommy and I drive mine to the airport. We don't get out so no one will recognize Tommy. We decide to stop at the ball field and throw the ball around. We end up spending several hours playing catch and hitting balls. Tommy even runs the bases several times and asks me when he can start playing again. I tell him I'll call the coach when we get home. I end up dropping him back off at home. Luckily, a rental has shown up to replace the Tahoe, so I leave Michelle's Honda in the garage and set off for where I need to go. I quickly program the address into the GPS and start following the directions. I'm not sure what I'm going to find, but I know I need to go. I decide to make a stop in Alexandria first and pay a visit to my new rich friend, Mary. I'm able to park the rental right in front of her charity office and I see her seated inside. It looks like she's by herself. I knock on the door and watch her curiously walk towards me. It looks like she recognizes me when she gets closer, but she seems hesitant on opening the door.

"Hi, what can I do for you? You were here the other day asking about the Harris boy's right?" I nod my head. "I haven't heard or seen any sign from them." She is holding the door open.

"May I come in?" She looks back into the office and then steps aside so I can enter. I step inside and don't see anyone else inside. "Is there anyone else here?" She nods her head. "I wanted to let you know you might be in danger." She looks at me strangely.

"What do you mean?"

"Douglas Sorenson is dead." I can't believe I just said that since I'm the one that killed him.

"What? Doug is dead. How?"

"Apparently he was shot at home." It feels so weird saying it. I watch the emotions sweep across her face.

"Oh my God! Doug is gone. I can't believe it. He was such a great guy. What about his family?"

"They're all fine. I think they weren't at home." She leans against her desk.

"Wait a minute. Why are you telling me this?"

"I thought you should know. Especially after you told me your money goes to him if something happens to you." She sits on the edge of the desk and wipes her eyes with the back of her sleeve.

"That's not totally true. It doesn't really go to him. It goes to a trust that he would be in charge of, but thanks for letting me know because this definitely changes things. I guess I'm next."

"Maybe you should hide low until you get everything worked out." I watch as she looks back at her desk.

"That's the thing. I don't think I can work everything out. Doug was in charge of everything. In fact he was responsible for investing the money and maintaining it as well as the charity. I don't know what I'm going to do now." I place my arm around her and she leans into my shoulder. "He didn't do any of this with the firm he's with; it was all on his own."

"There has to be other safeguards." She slowly pushes away from me and walks around to the front of the desk.

"There aren't any. We had to keep everything on the down low because I knew sooner or later the Harris boys would be after it."

"If you don't mind my asking, what kind of money are we talking about here?" She pauses and gives me a hard look.

"Around fifty million," I shake my head.

"How didn't they get anything?"

"Because they're trash, that's why...the both of them. I'd like to see them die a violent death." I watch as she slams her fist onto the desk. "I've got to go. I have work to do." She quickly walks into the back to the office where we spoke last time. I stand and watch her disappear and then I slowly step out the front door and back to my car. I pull out and power on the GPS. It leads me west from Alexandria and eventually onto Route 29 South. I follow this for about an hour until I hear the command to make the next right turn. I turn off and immediately feel as though I have traveled back in time. Everything appears as though it was built hundreds of years ago. There are old rustic farms and bars with cattle and horses running around. I almost can't believe the GPS contains the information for this area. I continue on until I get another direction to turn left. I'm surprised when I enter a small housing development of small one-story homes that actually appear quite a bit newer than the surroundings. I'm not really sure what I'm expecting to find or what I'm going to do, but I think I owe it to all those who lost their lives since Tommy was taken from me to find out, especially Brian since he had this address hidden. I pull down a small road with only a few houses, and I'm startled when I pull in front of a small blue home with two pickup trucks parked in front. The GPS screams out "destination reached". I slowly come to a stop in front and exit the rental. It's a small car, so I'm able to stay somewhat inconspicuous amongst the area. I walk up the driveway past the two mammoth Chevy pickups and step onto the sidewalk. I'm not really quite sure why but I knock on the door. I feel like I'm being compelled by some unnatural force. A minute later, a large bearded man with a shiny golden hoop in his ear holding a Budweiser opens the door.

"What do you want?" I have no planned answer, so I just stare back unsure of what to do.

"I'm lost. Would it be possible to borrow your phone?" He looks at me and steps towards me. I take a step back.

"Don't you have a cell phone?" I look back at the rental.

"No signal."

"What makes you think I have a phone? Does this look like a public place?" He takes another step in my direction and I slowly back up. I shake my head. He stares at me for a long minute. "Wait a minute do I know you?"

"I don't think so. I'm not from around here." I feel the sweat forming on my head again.

"Are you sure?" He turns around and walks back inside. A minute later, he comes back out with another man. He is a little shorter, but much wider. He is wearing a baseball hat backwards with brown curly scruffy hair poking through the front. "Do we know this guy?" I watch him study me.

"He might be one of D's friends. He definitely looks familiar. What do you want?"

"I just want to borrow your phone to call my wife." He turns around and walks back inside. "Ten bucks and make it quick." I pull out a ten dollar bill and hand it to him. He quickly places it in his pocket. They both go inside and I follow them in. We walk into a small room with a large flat-screen TV and two worn out couches with old crusty blankets on them. There isn't much else in the room as far as furniture except for an empty bookshelf and a couple of tables with open bags of potato chips on them. I can see beer cans stacked up in the kitchen and empty dishes and cups everywhere. Both of them drop back on the couch and stare at the TV. I just stand there inside the doorway while they both ignore me. Finally, a few minutes later, the second guy looks up at me.

"Use the one in that room, so I don't have to look at you." He points at a closed doorway off the kitchen. I carefully wade through the small kitchen stepping over a litter box and a water bowl much too big for a cat. I'm a little nervous about opening the door, but I slowly do so and upon entering the room I feel my body almost give out. Every nerve inside me is pulsating as I step into the room. I can't believe it. How did I end up here? I try and calm myself down. I peek my head back out and see both of them are still sitting on the couches. I'm in such shock from what I'm looking at, that I don't even hear the large frothy German Shepherd behind me growling. I quickly turn around and shut the door before he enters. I can hear him pawing at the door, but I ignore him and immediately take out my phone and begin taking as many pictures as I can. I'm standing in the same room Tommy was held in.

## Chapter 25

I've been in here for about five minutes now. I actually found the phone and called a wrong number just in case. I hear the German Shepherd outside the door, so I'm a little nervous about opening it. I can't believe I'm in the same room Tommy was. The furniture is set up exactly as it was on the video. There are no windows. I slowly turn the door knob and start to open the door, but quickly shut

it seeing the dogs drooling mouth peeking through the crack. I'm not sure what to do. I feel trapped and immediately wonder if I have been setup and they know who I am. I call out a few times for help, but I don't hear anything except for the claws of the German Shepherd prancing on the kitchen floor. I continue to scream for help until finally I hear footsteps that sound different from a dog.

"What are you scared of? He won't bite." I watch the door quickly open and the next thing I know I'm on my back and the dog has two legs on my chest.

"Get him off me." I feel drool sliding onto my face. "Get him off now."

"I told you he won't bite." It's the second guy standing in the doorway laughing.

"His claws are digging into me. Get him off."

"Twenty bucks and I'll call him off right now." I see the other guy behind him now. They are both laughing hysterically.

"Fine. Whatever. Just get him off." A minute later, I hear him call the dog and finally he removes his claws out of me and then he gets off. I slowly sit up and rub my chest and stomach. I can see small drops of blood on my shirt. I stand up and take out my wallet and hand them twenty dollars, but they don't move away from the doorway.

"That's twenty dollars for both of us." I shake my head and hand the first guy with the beard a twenty and barrel past them directly out the door. I quickly walk to the rental and drive away. I can see one of the men standing in the front door waving at me. I turn my head and continue down the road without looking back. An hour and a half later as I'm pulling back into our driveway, I finally stop shaking.

"Sheldon, what happened to you?" I look down at my shirt, the blood has dried.

"A dog jumped on me." Michelle places her arm around me.

"Please be careful." I explain to her what happened. She can't believe I was in the same place Tommy was held in. "Are you going to tell the police?"

"I can't because then they will know I was involved." She nods in agreement.

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know. I can't just let him get away with this." Michelle lets me go.

"Can't you just let it go? We have Tommy back, Sheldon. That's all this was about anyway. Even you said so yourself." We walk into the kitchen and I take off my shirt. Michelle quickly grabs a wet towel and begins cleaning the blood off my skin.

"I wish I could, but after what he did to Lawrence, Brian and those boys, I need to at least figure out where he is." She pushes in on my chest firmly.

"I don't want you to get hurt."

"I know but he took Tommy and made me do what I had to do to Sorenson. It's not right." She nods. "Who knows what Stanton is going to do? I could be in jail next week anyway."

"Don't say that. Remember what I told you we'll do whatever it takes." I sit down at the table and take a long drink. Tommy walks into the kitchen. Michelle and I tell him I fell down. He doesn't seem to notice any difference, so we leave it at that. I throw another shirt on and take Buster out for a walk. He doesn't seem to want to leave my side again. I have to keep walking to the grass to get him to leave the road. We get about halfway up when my phone begins to vibrate. It's marked "private". I click on the message and open the attachment. I immediately stop,

causing Buster to begin to bark. I'm watching a video of the inside of Sorenson's house. I watch as I take out the gun and pull the trigger. I can see the small explosion and Sorenson going down. I close my eyes as tight as I can. I see Sorenson's dying eyes looking at me again. I feel like screaming. I quickly close the email, luckily it deletes right away. Buster is sitting at my feet looking up at me and wagging his tail. I lean down and rub his back. I feel like I'm frozen. I can't believe what I just saw. A minute later, the phone begins to vibrate again. I answer the phone knowing who it is.

"Sheldon...Sheldon...Sheldon what are you doing snooping around. I thought we had finished our business." I look at Buster, he hasn't moved. His eyes are glued to mine. "You saw what happened to your little friend, I wouldn't want something like that to happen to you or even worse if that little video you just saw ended up in the hands of the police."

"I'm not doing anything."

"I guess it was just a coincidence you ended up in the same place as your property was stored in. I'm actually quite impressed you were able to find it. How did it feel? Had to use the phone huh? That might work on a couple of idiots like that, but don't worry I have already taken care of them."

"You killed them too?" I take a few steps towards the grass.

"Let's just say they are finished. How's your property adjusting back in its proper place? I hope all is well. I can understand why you would want to get a hold of me, but I am untouchable Sheldon, so please leave well enough alone while you still have your freedom." Buster finally takes a few steps away from me and walks to the grass. "I understand our detective friend is trying to build a case on you and I would hate to add to that cause since we are done with our business transaction, but if you insist I'll be more than happy to oblige." I take the phone away from my ear and go to speak, but he is gone. I quickly place the phone back in my pocket and walk towards back towards the house. The next day I wake up early and take the hour and a half drive back south. As soon as I arrive in the small housing development, I can tell something bad has happened. There are unmarked police cars everywhere and yellow crime scene tape strung up around the yard of the house I went into yesterday. I quickly turn around and pull back down the road satisfied that they have been killed. I think about going back to ask about the dog, but the last thing I need to do is draw more suspicion on myself. I decide to go back to work today. I'm not really sure what I'm going to do or how I'm going to do it, but I figure I need to get back to some kind of regular life despite all that has happened. Tommy is starting back at school today. I think he is excited about going back. Michelle and I had a long talk with both him and his teachers on what to expect. She said the police have agreed to have an officer stationed at the school for a few weeks to make sure everything is safe. I pull into my office parking lot and enter through the back door. I can't remember the last time I have been here. It seems so long ago and unimportant now. I head towards my office and see the door is slightly open. I usually keep it locked due to the sensitive equipment I work with. I'm surprised when I step in and Jim is sitting at my desk. He's using my computer.

"Good morning Sheldon."

"Hey Jim, what's up?" I sit down in a chair opposite my desk. At first I wonder if Jim has been promoted in the last few days over me, but then he lifts up a floppy drive. It looks like one of the ones Brian keeps on his desk.

"I was going through all of Brian's things at his desk and I found this." He holds up a blue floppy disk. "Your computer was the easiest one to hook one of drives up to." I lean forward.

"Did you find anything?"

"I'm not sure." I quickly walk over behind my desk and stand behind the computer screen. Jim places the floppy into the drive and a minute later he clicks on a text file. I can't believe what I'm looking at. It's an email trail covering several emails to and from two people. I jump back a slight step when I read the first one. They're talking about a drop off at the baseball field after Sorenson's murder, and the use of a memory loss drug. Luckily, it doesn't mention me as the killer. "What is all this? It has to be important because he had it hidden in a new pack of disks and no one uses disks anymore, especially Brian."

"How did you find it?"

"I figured there had to be a reason he was killed. You know how he is." I nod and look back at the screen. I read the first response and it speaks of Mary being taken and disposed of after the money is gotten. I look at Jim. His eyes are focused on the screen below mine. There is another address given. It's in Mclean, Virginia. I immediately wonder if it's their mother's house. I can't believe how Brian got a hold of this. It goes on to discuss what they will do with the money. There is talk of Bahamas vacations and living the life of luxury.

"Is there any way we can get back into this?"

"What do you mean?" I look back at the screen and watch Jim pop the disk out.

"I mean do you think you can hack into those email accounts?" He stands up and unhooks the drive from the back of my computer.

"I'm not sure. I can try. There might be enough information for me to crack their passwords. I have the addresses." He looks at me. "Don't you think we should go to the police? I mean they're talking about murder here. It sounds like it might be connected to Brian."

"Eventually we will, but I think we owe it to Brian find out all we can first." He seems satisfied with that.

"I'm going to keep looking through his stuff for anything else."

"Please let me know if you find anything right away." I watch him leave my office. I dial home and talk to Tommy and Michelle and wish him a great day. He sounds confident and happy to be going back. I spend the rest of the day trying to catch up on all that has happened since I was gone. I decide to leave a little early. I head directly to Old Town Alexandria and walk into Mary's office. I immediately see the two staff members who were there before. One of them walks up to me.

"You're the one that came to see Mary last time. She isn't around. She hasn't been in all day. We've tried to call her but there is no answer." I immediately feel my pulse begin to accelerate.

"Do you have her home address?" She looks down.

"I can't give you that?"

"I know, but she might be in danger. It would really be helpful if I could check on her."

She fumbles around for a minute and then nods and hands me a piece of paper with an address. I almost lose my balance when I read it. It's the same one we saw on the file Jim found. I quickly thank her and run out the door.

A little while later, I pull onto a street about two miles east of Tyson's Corner in Mclean. It's a very upscale polished neighborhood. The houses are all well over five thousand square feet and have multiple car garages. I park in front of a large brick colonial. There are no cars in the driveway and as far as I can tell all the lights are off. It doesn't appear as though anyone is home. I have no idea if she lives with anyone or stays in the large house by herself. I really don't know much about her. I just hope I'm not too late to warn her that they are definitely coming for her. I slowly walk out of my car and carefully step down the long sidewalk to a rustic colored double door and begin to knock. After a few minutes of no responses, I give up and decide to walk around and look in a few windows. I'm not sure what I'm looking for but I feel like I must at least try. I see nothing but darkness. I continue walking around the house and end up in the back yard. I hear a dog barking somewhere off in the distance, but the houses are so far apart that I have no idea where he is. The back yard looks like a large brightly colored green square surrounded by flowing Dogwood's making it feel as though I'm in a large green cave. There's a small fence running along the back where the grass meets the trees. To my left, I can see a section of the house that is extended off the back. It looks like a sunroom. There are brightly colored pieces of deck furniture filling the room. I step up to take a closer look and see the door on the other side is wide open. I slowly walk towards it. I don't hear anyone, but I keep calling out hello in case she is in there, still no response. I'm a little hesitant to enter the room. I don't want to trespass, but my feet keep moving telling my head someone might be in danger so I keep going. I climb up the two steps and step into a cozy room decorated in bright bluish-green colors with wicker furniture and matching cushions. It has a very relaxing effect on me immediately. I keep calling out hello, but still no answer. Everything seems almost eerily quiet. I decide to continue on. I slowly turn the knob on the door that looks like it leads to the main house and sure enough it's unlocked. I step inside. I can immediately tell I'm in a home many classes above mine. It feels like a museum. There are antiques everywhere from clocks to chairs. I walk very carefully between everything so I don't knock anything over. I keep calling out hello, but I'm not hearing anything in return. I'm thinking I'm going to find her body lying on the floor like from a scary movie, so every time I look in a different direction I try and prepare myself. I suddenly jump when my phone vibrates until I realize what it is. I push the answer button.

"Hello."

"Hi Sheldon. Where are you?"

I lie and tell Michelle. I just left work. I wish I wasn't able to lie so easily, but everything seems to have changed since Tommy was taken, at least that's what I keep telling myself.

"Is Tommy okay?" I stop and lean against a wall near a huge fireplace with mantle full of tiny vases.

"He's fine. He had a great first day back at school. I've never seen him so excited." I take a slow deep breath. "The reason I'm calling you is because Stanton



was just here and they have a witness that saw you and your truck in front of the Sorenson's at the same time he was killed."

"Really?"

"Yep, he's on his way to your office. I think they're going to take you in." I suddenly remember the video file Harris sent me. "What are you going to do?"

"I'll tell him the truth. I'll say I was there."

"But he'll put you in jail."

"I'll say he was alive when I left." I look to my left. I think I hear something bang but I dismiss it as a normal house movement sound. I slowly walk into the kitchen and place my elbows on the large island. It is complete with four burners and double sinks.

"I'm scared Sheldon."

"They can't prove it." I think of the video again. "And even if they can, at least we have Tommy back." I hear the same sound again. This time it's a little louder and a little closer. "I better get going." I keep my eyes focused to the left of me, but I don't see anything unusual.

"Please be careful Sheldon. Remember, I need you too." I quickly say goodbye and tiptoe through the kitchen into the dining room. I slide around the giant mahogany table that can easily seat a dozen people. I'm getting an uneasy feeling that I'm not alone in the house. I look behind me, it's probably too far now to head back out the door so I keep going. I walk into a large family room with a large screen TV and a pool table. I keep walking around and end up in the foyer with a double staircase in front of me. I choose the one on the right and slowly begin my ascent. I'm still convinced I'm going to find her body so my senses are on full alert. I reach the top of the stairs. I pause and look down into the foyer from the second floor and see the remaining sunlight sneaking through the window panes forming a large colorful prism on the middle of the foyer floor. I slowly turn around and continue towards the right side of the upstairs hall. There are many doors on both sides. I begin by opening the first door and look in and see an empty bedroom. I quietly close the door and back out. I suddenly stop. Something moves behind me. I turn around.

"Hello. Who's there?" I stand in place. I'm not moving and I'm holding my breath. I'm not sure if I should run or remain in place. I take two steps towards where I saw something move. Suddenly a man pops out of a door on my left on the other side of the hall beyond the staircase. I recognize him immediately, but my eyes focus on the gun in his hand pointed at me.

"Well...well...Sheldon, what brings you out here?" I remain in place. I can't believe I'm standing in front of him. "Looking for our good friend Mary?" I don't answer. "She is long gone and well taken care of."

"Please don't hurt her."

"Why the sudden interest in her Sheldon?" I grab onto the railing.

"I just think enough people have been hurt."

"I would agree. I thought I warned you what would happen if you didn't mind your own business." I look into his face. I can't see any emotion just blank eyes staring back at me. He's wearing a light blue polo with faded blue jeans and his hair is thick and styled off his forehead. He doesn't look anything like the evil killer that he is. He could pass for a savvy successful businessman hanging out in

his house after hours or a fashion model with his dark features. He is pointing the gun directly at me. We are no more than five feet or so apart. I can see his feet slowly inching towards me. "I think it is too late now Sheldon. You did not take my advice. Wouldn't you agree? I thought our business transaction was complete, but apparently I was incorrect because here you are barging in on my business again."

"Look I know this is all about money for you. Just please leave her alone."

"You do huh? You have it all figured out right Sheldon. You think you're so smart coming here and finding me." I squeeze the rail a little tighter. "So what are you going to do now Sheldon? It seems I have a gun and you are standing on top of the stairs it would be a real shame if you happened to fall down them don't you think so?" I look down. I still see the prism.

"Just please let her go and I promise I'll leave you alone."

"You will huh? But it seems you have everything figured out now, so I can't just let you walk away which is a shame because I make it part of my deal to never cause harm to someone I have had a successful business transaction with. We were successful wouldn't you say?"

I watch him take another step closer to me. "If killing an innocent man is what you call successful?"

"I believe I gave you the choice in pulling the trigger." I laugh.

"Choice? Some choice."

"But I gave you the choice didn't I? Which makes it a decision on your part and I believe it was the correct choice don't you? I saw your property earlier and it seemed to be functioning correctly at the school." I take a step forward towards him, now we are separated by no more than three feet.

"Stay away from him. He already suffered enough. You got me now. You don't need anything else to do with him." I feel my fists clenching into tight balls.

"Relax Sheldon my friend. I gave you my word I wouldn't do any more harm to your property. I was just merely checking." I can see his finger on the trigger.

"Well don't check anymore. Leave him alone." I watch a slight smile form on his face.

"You know Sheldon. I like you. You have spunk. I like that about you."

"I don't like you. If you didn't have that gun, I'd be the one throwing you down the stairs." I hear him laugh.

"But you don't have the gun now do you?" I shake my head. "So here's the question. What should we do now?" I look down again.

"I guess that's up to you." He smiles again and raises the gun and aims at my head. I close my eyes and the next thing I feel is a loud crash and severe pain on the back of my head. I feel myself falling on the floor and then everything goes completely black.

## Chapter 26

I'm not sure where I am, but back of my head feels as though a truck has run over it. I'm able to slowly open my eyes, and as soon as I do, I see I'm lying on a

rug in a large room that looks like it might possibly be a basement. The rug is an off-white realtor's color. It looks fairly new. My hands immediately go to the back of my head. I feel some kind of large bandage. I try and feel how big it is, but it hurts just to touch it so I leave it alone. It feels cold and thick. I wish I knew where I was, I vaguely remember being shot at. I carefully sit up, and as soon as my head becomes upright I feel dizzy so I quickly place my hands under my chin so I don't fall over. I turn my head and look around the room and the first thing I notice is there is no furniture or anything, just four white walls and the tan-colored rug. Out of the corner of my eye behind me, I think I see someone lying down. It looks like a woman, but I can't be sure because my eyes aren't completely focused. I also can't tell if she is dead or alive. I try and get to my knees to crawl over, but the vertigo forces me back on the floor so I continue to look. I think I see her back moving, I'm hoping she is just asleep. I don't see any bandages on her head, but her hair is much longer than mine so I can't be sure. There's a single fluorescent light on the ceiling above me, but other than that there is no way to tell if it is night or day. It reminds me of when I was in the hospital a few days ago. I quickly feel for my phone in my pocket, but it is gone; so whoever has placed me here has taken everything. I turn towards the woman and try to call out, but nothing comes out of my mouth. I keep trying until finally my vocal cords begin to vibrate and after about ten tries, I can actually hear my own voice and she rolls over. It's Mary Clausen. At first I try to smile, but the expression on her face causes me to stop. She slowly stands up and walks over to me and sits down beside me.

"How are you feeling?" I softly place my hand on the bandage.

"It hurts." She leans over me and looks at the back of my head.

"I bet it does. I saw the whole thing happen."

"What happened?"

"You don't remember?"

"A little bit. I remember being shot and then I woke up here." She comes back around and looks at me.

"You weren't shot. You were hit in the back of the head with a baseball bat by Shane"

"What about the gun?"

"That was Frank holding that. He never shot it. You never saw Shane." I try and sit up some more. Mary helps me lean forward.

"Where are we?"

"Remember their mother's house I was telling you about this is it." I look around the room again.

"There's no way out. I've already checked. They have the door upstairs locked and as you can see there are no doors or windows down here."

"How long have I been here?" She looks at her watch. It looks like an expensive Rolex.

"They brought you down here yesterday after Shane hit you. I helped bandage you up with Frank. You were really bleeding. I thought they had killed you." Her hand reaches out and touches the back of the bandage. "I have more bandages and pain killers for you over there." She points to where she was lying down. "Does it hurt?"

"Yes." I nod my head up and down slowly. I can feel the weight of the bandage behind me. She quickly gets up and comes back with a bottle of pills in a small brown-colored prescription bottle and places two in my hand. She hands me an unopened bottle of water that I quickly open and swallow the pills.

"Now turn around and let me check that bandage. You're lucky. I was in nursing school before I inherited the money." I feel her hands carefully taking the bandage off and a minute later, I feel her pressing a new one on. The pain is almost bearable. It stings when she presses, but luckily she finishes quickly. "I made sure Frank got me the pain killers and bandages before he put us down here. I told him you weren't going to make it otherwise."

"You were in the house too?"

"Yes. They were holding me upstairs and then you came in. I couldn't believe it. What were you doing there anyway?" I lean back down on my elbows.

"I was coming to warn you that you were next. I saw an email from one of them."

"Thank you. I'm so sorry this happened. You were really so brave standing there in front of the gun. I wanted to yell and warn you about Shane, but they had tape over my mouth so instead, I just watched the whole thing happened." She rubs her hand across her mouth. "Like I said, I thought you were dead. I kept saying we have to take you to an emergency room, but they said no way. Then they carried you out into the garage and loaded you up in your car." I shake my head. "That's where they let me bandage you. There was blood everywhere. I can't believe you're alive. I've been checking you all night. When I heard you speak just now, I couldn't believe it."

"Thank you so much. I think you saved my life."

"You were coming to try and save mine. I mean I don't know anyone who would just walk into a house like that not knowing what they were getting into." She softly pats my shoulder. "You're my hero."

"If I had done it right we wouldn't be trapped in here. What do you think is going to happen to us?" She looks behind me towards the stairs leading upwards. "I know I'm not getting out of here. They want me to sign over all the money to them and then they will kill me. I know that is their plan."

"Are you sure?" I look at her closely. I can see the warmth in her eyes.

"That's what they were trying to do before they heard you walking around downstairs in my house. They really had no idea who it was."

"What happens if you don't sign it over?"

"They don't get it, especially now that Doug Sorenson is gone. I really wish he was still here." I look down at the carpet. I see my shoes are all scuffed. "But part of signing it over involves me calling the firm holding the trust fund and giving them my code to release the funds."

"So just don't give it to them."

"I haven't yet, but you don't know these two. They will do anything to get the money. They have been planning this for years and they will use torture or whatever is necessary to get me to make that call." She folds her arms. "It's just a matter of time now. Once Sorenson was gone everything changed because he was the only one that had full control of the money. Strange thing isn't it. My money, but my attorney controls it."

"Why?" I am starting to feel the pain killer start to lower the pain, or at least remove the hard edge.

"It's a long story. It's all in how the money was left to me. At this point, though all that is necessary is me calling and giving that code and the money is free. I used to wonder if Doug was going to be the one who was going to do me in because the way it was set up. He would get all the money if something happened to me." I close my eyes in confusion. I'm not sure if it's the pain killer or if the story is just confusing, but she seems to pick up on my confusion. "Well technically he wouldn't get the money, but the trust would get it which means he basically gets the money, but I can override that with the code." She smiles. "It is confusing I know, but Doug was a good guy because he helped me invest it and put it in charities, which is my real passion." She quickly snaps her head towards the stairs. "Sorry I thought I heard something, I'm a little on edge."

"I certainly understand. Are they up there?" I point at the stairs.

"They were, but they left a few hours ago, I heard their footsteps and then I heard a car engine." I nod.

"So what is your charity that you're passionate about?" I see her face light up.

"It's for underprivileged kids. You know kids that are living in poverty and going to bed hungry, not getting the care they deserve. I love children, probably because I could never have any of my own."

"That's great!"

"I like it. You came to our office a few times. Sorry if we were a little apprehensive around you at first. A lot of times we will have kids in the back who have escaped homes where they were violently abused and one of their parents will come looking for them."

"I can certainly understand. I think that's wonderful you do that."

"I wish I could do more. I think we were just starting to make an impact and now this. It will all be over in a matter of hours once they get a hold of me and get the code."

"There's got to be something we can do." She shakes her head.

"There's not. Now that Sorenson is dead, all we can do is wait. Like I told you, these two guys are the most ruthless people I have ever met. The worst part is Frank is also probably the smartest person I have ever met." I think back to all of our conversations and agree with her. "I don't think he made it past tenth grade, but he didn't need to. He could probably complete high school in a few months if he wanted to. He's that smart. That's why I know he'll get the code from me. I might as well just give it to him to save myself the pain." I shake my head.

"We need to think of something. We have to for all those kids you have helped."

"I agree, but we better think of something quick because our time is running out." I look towards the stairs.

"What time do you think they'll be back?"

"I don't know. I suspect it will be soon. I know they were involved with Doug's death, so they'll want to get out of here before the police catch on. They were so surprised you found them at my house that you probably scared them. By the way, you never told me how you know them?"

"I don't actually know them. The first time I met them was the other night they bashed me with the bat." I feel the back of my head again.

"You came to my office asking about Frank." I look up at the ceiling and then back at Mary. Her long dark hair has fallen over one of her big brown eyes.

"I was there when Frank was killed. I didn't see it, but I know they did it." I look up at the stairs again.

"Did he suffer?" I see tears welling in her eyes.

"Not that I could tell. I think he died quick. I actually have Buster at my house." She wipes her eyes and tries to smile.

"Buster...how is he? Frank loved that dog. They were best friends."

"He's doing well. He's bonded with my son"

"Wait a minute. We're Frank and Shane involved with your son?" I nod.

"Frank had him hidden an hour or so south of here by two guys."

"We're they rough looking and big?"

"Yes."

"Those were probably his brothers. I think there are five of them." She looks at me closely. I touch the back of my head again. "How's the pain?"

"Much better, thanks. I think he killed his brothers because I found the house." She shakes her head.

"Doesn't surprise me, he'll remove anyone that's in his way. He always has ever since I have known him. You should hear what he did to his own mother."

I shake my head. "I heard, with the car right?"

"Yep, so now it sounds like he's killed both his mom and our dad...Oh do I hate him. Frank did not deserve that, he was just trying to live a quiet life. I was just there a few weeks ago for dinner. He was so nice.

"I'm glad your son came back safe and sound. You're lucky." I nod. "I remember reading about that, I had no idea it was Frank and Shane's doing. Even after you came by, I didn't pick up on it."

"How would you know?"

"I just feel bad. I probably could have helped more. So tell me the whole story. It looks like we have some time to kill." I spend the next hour or so explaining everything from how he was taken at school to the calls I received on my phone. I left out the part about killing Sorenson. She listens to the whole thing with great intensity. I see how the kids are lucky to have someone like that working for them. She gets us both another bottle of water and we drink silently until we hear the sound of a car engine and loud bang above us.

## Chapter 27

"They're back." We both look up towards the stairs. I can hear loud footsteps pounding on the ceiling above us. I watch as the softness leaves Mary's face replaced by tension. I'm not sure what's going to happen to me, but in some respects I feel like I probably deserve anything that happens now that Tommy is safe, so I don't care that much anyway, at least that's what I'm telling myself. I'm sure Michelle and Tommy are home worried sick about me, but there is nothing I can do. Everything is out of my control. My life is in the hands of the monster

upstairs. I'm finally able to sit all the way up straight now that the pain killer is fully functioning in my system. I watch as Mary jumps when we hear a click at the top of the stairs and the door opens. I can't see the door because of where I am, but the light from upstairs beams down the steps from the open doorway. We both turn our heads. I watch as Frank Harris slowly descends the stairway. He has a small gun out in front of him. I watch his dark eyes focus first on me and then Mary.

"Why good to see you up again Sheldon. Sorry about the blow to your head, but it was the only way." He reaches the bottom step and slowly walks over and stands in front of us. He's holding the gun out in front of him, but it's clear we are no threat so his hand relaxes a bit. "I hope the pain is at a comfortable level. I'm sure my sister has provided you with plenty of medical care. She was quite adamant we do so." I watch his eyes glance towards my head. "It looks quite well from here I must say." I nod my head.

"Don't call me your sister." I can see the anger streaking across her face.

"Mary, we are related as you know. You're mother married my father. I'm sure you have heard of the terrible demise of Frank Harris Sr."

"He was a good man. You didn't have to do that." He looks back at me.

"So I see you two have been talking. Don't get too comfortable because you won't be staying too long. Sheldon you will be going back to where you belong and Mary you will be moving on to another place."

"Please. You don't have to hurt anyone else. Haven't enough people suffered already?" I look back at Frank. He's leaning against the railing. He looks so relaxed. He's wearing a dark button down shirt with dark pants. He could pass for an Italian mobster in a movie.

"Remember what I told you Sheldon. Every battle has unintended casualties."

"We don't need any more casualties." He taps the gun between his hands.

"I wish that were the case, but this should be over quickly. We have a few more things to get together and then we'll need your services for a little while Mary. After that we will be on our way and Sheldon you will be free to go." He takes a long look at me. I can feel his evil eyes boring into me. I want to reach out and strangle him, but I'm unable to even move. "By the way, your wife and son are doing fine. A little concerned but fine." I try and stand up. "Take it easy Sheldon. You suffered a big injury."

"Stay away from my family."

"Sheldon, I promised you I would return him unscathed. I'm sorry about the condition he was in, but I didn't want the boy to remember anything. I don't need him anymore. I just have eyes and ears everywhere and I have simply heard they are doing fine." I sit back down. I can feel the back of my head begin to throb. "I can assure you, you will leave here unharmed very shortly as well as your family." He looks towards Mary. "On the other hand, my dear sister Mary may have a different consequence due to other circumstances, but she can make things much easier if she decides to cooperate." I look at Mary. She is looking down at her feet.

"I'm very impressed you found my sister and even more you found her house. Very nice place wouldn't you agree?" I don't answer. "I would be very interested in hearing how you came upon this information. Did it have to do with your friend Brian?" I feel the throbbing becoming more intense. "Poor fellow just got in over

his head." I want to lash out with my arms. "Don't worry Sheldon. It is almost all over. If you had just minded your own business like we spoke about you wouldn't be in this position and have that awful gash in the back of your head."

"Just please let her go." I look at Mary. Her face has lost all expression.

"I'm sorry I can't do that until I get something from her. She knows what I want and she'll give it to me. Like I said before, how much she suffers is in her hands." He looks at me. "As you know Sheldon, I like to give the control to others and let them make their own decisions." I feel myself fuming. I scoot myself over towards Mary and end up between both of them." A slight smile overtakes Frank's face.

"I see you two are bonding. Don't become too attached Sheldon this one won't be around for long." He steps towards the stairs. "I must be going. I have to get a few more things and then we'll be ready for the last phase." He begins walking up the stairs. "Oh I almost forgot. I have some food for you. I'll be right back." Mary and I look at each other. She looks numb. A minute later, Frank returns and places a pizza box in front of me. "I'll be back tomorrow to get what I need from you." He looks directly at Mary. "Enjoy." He runs back up the stairs and the light disappears and then I hear the click of the lock.

"You need to eat Sheldon. Please have some pizza." I shake my head. "You're going to need all the energy you can if we're going to have any chance of getting out of this." I slide the box over to me and open the lid. I immediately take in the aroma and my senses remind me of how hungry I actually I am. I eat a few slices and quickly feel much better. The throbbing lessons some. I finally convince Mary to at least eat a few bites and she does so reluctantly.

"We need to figure out what we're going to do." We both look up when we hear the car engine. A minute later it is gone.

"I think it would be best if I just let them take me and I'll tell them what they need to know then you can go free." I shake my head.

"I didn't come all this way to give up that easy."

"In your condition Sheldon, there's not much you can do. Remember they have guns."

"There's got to be a way. Tell me what else you know about them." She looks to her left.

"I met them when my mom and their dad got together. They didn't really come around at first. I didn't really think about it much then but now it makes sense."

"What do you mean?" She takes another bite.

"I think once they found out my mom had money, they decided to start hanging around hoping they would get some of it."

"How did your mom make all her money?" A large smile overtakes her face.

"She started her own company, "Child's Play"; you've probably seen them in the malls." I close my eyes and picture the store front. I remember going in them with Michelle and Tommy. "After they became successful, she sold it and wound up with all that money." I watch as her face changes from happiness to sadness. "Then she passed away about two years later. A hundred million dollars couldn't save her."

"A hundred million?"

"Yep, I say it's fifty, but it's really a hundred. I'm not even sure if Frank and Shane know that. I have about ten million tied up in the charity and the rest is in



the account and being invested. I could easily live off the investments and never work another day in my life, but I couldn't stand myself with all that money while kids are starving so I started the charity. I love it so much." I smile. "My mom was the one who got me into it. She used to donate clothes to needy children all the time and I used to go with her and see how they lived. It made me cry every night." I slide closer and place my arm on her shoulder.

"You're a good person and you've already done so much goodness in this world."

"I would give up all the money right now if it meant I could walk out of here and go back to what I like doing. I know my mom would be so happy. She was a single parent and all she wanted to do was make us a decent living and she ended up successful beyond her imagination then she met Frank." She throws the crust back into the box and closes the lid. "He was the sweetest guy. They met while she was settling a lawsuit of a customer who slipped and fell in one of the stores and they just fell in love. They only had a few years together, but they were like soul mates. I had never seen her so happy, then she passed away." I rub her shoulder again. "She died so quickly. She was diagnosed one month and then three months later she died." She wipes tears from her eyes. "I can't believe it has come to this." I feel her shaking under my arm. "If only I had been aware of these two kids. How can two kids be so different than their father?"

"It happens."

"I guess so. There's not much to tell you about Frank and Shane that you don't already know. I told you how smart they are or at least Frank is. He is on a much different level than Shane. Shane just barely gets by and does what Frank tells him too, from what my mom said it has always been like that." I nod. "So if you're going to try and do something, I would try it with Shane not Frank. Frank is too smart to fall for anything, but you must be pretty smart too, you were able to track me down and found Frank and Shane at my house." She smiles. "And you got your son back from them so you must have done something right." I think about telling her about Sorenson, but I decide to wait until the right time. "They're both very strong as you can tell, and in your condition it probably wouldn't be a good idea to try and take them out, so I really don't know what we can do except let me give them the codes and you can walk out of here."

"I refuse to stand by and let them do that to you. You have done too much good in this world and they have killed too many people. We need to stop them." She slowly wiggles away from my hand.

"Okay. Why we don't take some time to think about what we can do and get some rest. We have until tomorrow." I agree and roll over on my side. I roll my sweater up into a ball and use it as a pillow. I can feel the effects of the pain killer making me a little bit drowsy.

A while later I wake up, and the first thing I notice is how much my head hurts. I look around and I don't see Mary anywhere. I quickly sit up. I don't feel as stiff, just pain in my head. I immediately think that Harris has already taken her and I slept through it. I'm able to get to my feet. I slowly walk around the room. There's a small bathroom to the far right that I didn't see before. I quickly look in. She's not in there. I look towards the stairs and hustle over to the bottom. As soon as I look up, I see her seated on the top step. Her head is buried in her hands. I

carefully climb the stairs and sit on the step below her. She removes her hands and I see her face blotted from her hands and her eyes red from crying.

"It's okay."

"No it's not. It can't end like this. You're right. We need to try and do something anything to stop them. You tell me what you want me to do and I'll do it. I'm going to die anyway." I touch the back of my head.

"No you're not. We're going to try and surprise them. I've been thinking about it."

"Oh my God you poor thing, your head must be killing you. Let's go get you some more painkillers and I'll change your bandage. It's got to be killing you." She stands up and softly pushes me towards the next step. I reluctantly stand up and slowly head back down the stairs. I follow her to the far side of the room and she has me sit down while she changes the bandage. I quickly swallow two more pills and an entire bottle of water. I even chomp on a piece of cold pizza. I try to get Mary to have some more but she declines. "They'll be here anytime. I've been waiting for them."

"Is that why you were at the top of the stairs?" She nods.

"I just want them to take me and leave you alone. You really need to get back home for your family. I don't have anyone now. You've seen my family." I shake my head.

"Is it really the next day? Have I slept that long?"

"Yep, and you need the rest. I couldn't sleep. I just did a lot of thinking. I guess I have had a pretty good life so I shouldn't be too upset." I hold my finger to my lips.

"You just gave me a great idea." She turns and looks at me. "We should wait up at the top of the stairs, and when they open the door we'll surprise them and jump on them. It's the only advantage we can get." I watch her mind as it processes it.

"What if they are ready and start shooting?"

"What have we got to lose, as you say we're going to die anyway at least we can go down fighting?"

"I can't take that chance with you. You heard what he said."

"You believe him?" She shakes her head.

"How's that feel?" She pats the back of my head softly.

"Much better, thanks so much for caring for me."

"Any time, if you really think it will work I'm up for it. What will we do once we surprise them?" I spend the next ten minutes going over my plan. I mostly make it up as I go, I don't think we have much of a chance but I don't tell her that. We both give in and eat another slice of pizza and bottle of water. I am actually starting to feel somewhat back to normal with the help of the pain killers. We spend the next several hours discussing our pasts until we both stir when we hear the car engine again and what sounds like more than one set of footsteps above us. We quickly tiptoe up to the top of the stairs. We are both on each side waiting for the opportunity to try and save our lives or end them quicker. I'm not sure which one it's going to be. I look at Mary and she nods. A minute later, we hear a sharp metallic click to unlock the door.

## Chapter 28

As soon as the door opens, I spring off my legs and leap into the large surprised body of Shane Harris. I feel him go down below me and land on the hard linoleum kitchen floor. His gun flies out of his hand and slides across the floor towards the cabinets about five feet away. I don't see Mary, but I feel someone behind me pushing me towards the floor, so I figure she must be there. I feel Shane's large hands digging into my shoulders as he tries to push me off. I try and reach out for the gun but it's too far away.

"Get the gun Mary...the gun." I scream but I don't see her moving towards it. In fact, I don't see her moving at all; instead I just feel her weight on my legs pinning me down. I try and start punching my hands into the face of Shane but it doesn't seem to have any effect. He is trying to roll over and get out from under me, but I'm pushing down as hard as I can. We remain like this for a few more seconds until I feel a hand clawing at my bandage. I have to stop punching and reach back with my hands to keep the bandage from falling off. The pain is too much for me to bear. I feel Shane sliding out from under me as I try and ignore the pain in my head and go back to fighting, but it's too late. He is already out from under me and sliding towards the cabinets. I kick out my foot and strike him in the stomach. I see his face grimace and he immediately turns back towards me and lunges with his right arm. He catches me on the thigh with a quick punch that forces me to catch my breath. He turns back towards the gun and begins to crawl towards it. I quickly give everything I have, get to my knees and dive on top of his back causing him to fall back to the floor. He turns around and tries to strike back at me, but misses with a swing towards my face. I connect with an elbow to the side of his head which causes him to buckle for a second. He quickly recovers and kicks out with his foot catching me in the side of the neck. I drop down to the floor and grab his ankle so he can't crawl anymore and get to the gun.

"Are you guys done yet?" I quickly turn my head and see Frank standing behind me. He is pointing a gun at Mary's head. "Get up Shane. The fun is over." He looks at me. "I'm disappointed Sheldon. You continue to not follow my directions. I don't know what I'm going to do with you now. Please stand up, both of you." He aims the gun in my direction. "Shane go get your gun and please don't let it out of your reach again." He shoves Mary in front of him towards the open basement door. "Okay. Let's go downstairs and get this over with since you don't seem to want to listen." He looks back at Shane. "Do you think you can handle him Shane?" I hear Shane grunt some kind of reply. "Here, I'll make it easier for you." I see his hand quickly move past my eyes and land on the back of my head. I fall to the floor grimacing in pain. Everything is spinning and lights are flashing in my eyes. A minute later, my eyes come back into focus and I feel Shane picking me up and dragging me back down the stairs. I grab hold of the rail and slowly go down the steps. My legs feel wobbly. I feel the gun in my back. The hard steel is nudged directly on my spine and digs in a little every time I reach another step. When I get to the bottom, Frank is standing over Mary who is sitting in the same place where

I was sleeping. He has his gun aimed at her head. I can see tears in Mary's eyes as she looks at me. I think she actually tries to smile.

"Sit him down over there," Frank points at a spot about ten feet away from Mary. "I want him to see this." I feel Shane's large hands direct me to the spot Frank pointed at. He gives me a nudge on the back of my head as I start to sit down. I cringe with pain and feel my eyes blur. I need to come up with another plan real quickly or we're both going to lose. Mary is looking at me. I feel as though I let her down. "Okay sweet sister, give me the codes." Her eyes are still glued to mine. I think she winks, but I'm not sure because the next thing I see is Frank's hand sweep across her face and slam into her nose. Blood squirts everywhere. I start to move towards her, but Shane presses on the back of my head again and I land on my stomach. "How about now?" She doesn't respond. She continues to look in my direction. I wish there was something I could do, but with Shane behind me with a gun pointed at the back of my head my options are somewhat limited. I watch as he lifts his foot and lands it directly in her gut. She hunches over and vomits on the floor in front of her. I can see the pain and agony in her face. "Just give me the damn code and this will be over." She doesn't respond. He quickly connects with her chin with the butt of the gun. I watch her head rock backwards and a deep dark red line forms on her chin. Her hands move up to her chin and nose. They are covered in blood. "I promise this will stop if you just give me what I want. Isn't that correct Sheldon? I am a man of my word." I quickly look away. I feel the pressure from Shane's hand and gun on the back of my head increase. I try and lean forward but he stays with me. I look at Mary and she is quivering in pain. There is blood all over her face and hands. I can only see her eyes. She continues to look in my direction, but I can't tell if she's looking at me anymore because of all the blood. "Let's try this one more time sis then we'll move on to some harsher tactics." I watch in disbelief as Frank cups both of her ears at the same time. Mary falls forward her hands clasping her bursting ear drums. I can't take it anymore. I jump up onto my feet, but I am immediately pushed back down on the floor by Shane. I feel my eyes become blurry again and my equilibrium shift. "Now are we ready?" Mary doesn't answer. She is lying on the floor in pain. I can see her eyes closed tightly and her mouth full of blood clenching her jaw from the intense discomfort she is suffering. Frank looks at me. "Okay let's try him. Start slamming the back of his head until she talks." I quickly duck my head towards the floor anticipating the pain that is about to come. I feel the thrash of Shane's fist crash into my skull. Everything goes black for a few seconds and the next thing I know I'm face down, when my eyes finally open. I look towards Mary and she is lying on her side staring at me with fearful eyes. I try and reach out towards her but my arms and hands aren't cooperating with my brain anymore. "Shall we give Sheldon another blow to the back of his head? I don't know how many more he can withstand." Mary doesn't respond at first, but then somehow she slowly rises up and comes back to a sitting position. She is holding her head up with her wispy arms. She tries to speak but it is too soft for anyone to hear. Frank leans in towards her. "What was that?"

She whispers. "I'll tell you just leave him alone." Frank pulls a small notebook out of his back pocket. It looks similar to the one Stanton always carries. I see her

mouth moving, but I can't hear what is coming out. Frank is writing things down in his notebook.

"I got it. We've got what we've always been owed brother." He looks at Shane and nods. I watch as Frank takes a step back. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Shane raise his gun and point it towards Mary. They're going to kill her. I try and sit up to stop him, but I can't move. I close my eyes, take a deep breath and with all my will I jump up and grab Shane's arm. The gun rings out and I see the small explosion at the muzzle. I take his arm and twist it around and end up pointing the gun back towards him. I shove my finger into the trigger and push it forward causing it to fire into Shane's chest. I keep pulling the trigger until it doesn't fire anymore. I see him fall backwards. The same empty eyes as Sorenson's stare back at me. I quickly turn around. Frank has his gun aimed at me. I see his finger moving on the trigger. This is it. I prepare to die. I look over at Mary and she is laying on her back a few steps away. There's blood flowing out the back of her head. I was too late. The bullet from Shane's gun struck. I look back at Frank. He has an odd look on his face. I close my eyes and think about Tommy and Michelle and how I'll never see them again. I hope they understand. I hear the loud explosion of the gun go off and I prepare for the impact, but instead I hear a voice behind me. I slowly open my eyes and Frank is lying on his back. His gun is somewhere behind him and there is a pool of blood on his face. I turn around and standing on the bottom of the stairs is Stanton. I try and smile, but he holds his hand up in the air and brushes past me towards Frank. I watch as he reaches down and checks for a pulse and breathing. Satisfied, he gets up and repeats the same thing with Shane behind me. I watch as he makes his way to Mary and shakes his head after checking her. I feel my insides explode and I begin to vomit.

"Mr. Smith, are you okay?" I nod and turn my head as several uniformed officers storm down the stairs with their guns drawn. Stanton quickly waves them off and they lower their weapons.

"Is she dead?" Stanton turns his head towards Mary and nods.

"I'm sorry." I hear sirens and engines blaring away upstairs. I feel one of the officers place his arms underneath me and lead me up the stairs. We step out into the kitchen where I fell on top of Shane. It's a small outdated kitchen. There's a small oak table pushed off towards one side in front of a window with a couple of chairs. The officer leads me to one of the seats and I sit down. My head is throbbing profusely and the room is moving slightly. I watch as more police officers shuffle past me and rush down the stairs. A few minutes later, two paramedics are standing in front of me. One of them immediately goes to work on the back of my head. I feel him removing the bandage and applying some kind of ointment. It feels cold and wet. I feel myself go in and out of conscious several times, but eventually I come back and everything seems to steady out. They have me swallow several pills. I don't even ask what they are. I hear them mumble something but I don't even pay attention. I look around at the small kitchen. The walls are empty and painted in a faint yellowish hue. It looks like nothing has been touched up in years. I wonder if this is where Shane and Frank spent their time hoping to land the money. Maybe this is where they plotted out the whole thing to capture Tommy. A few minutes later, the paramedics walk me to a small room off the kitchen that has a couch and a small TV. I lie down and watch as

they check my blood pressure again and perform their routine checks. They assure me I'll be okay and that my head doesn't look too bad. They tell me the pain killers will start working shortly. I lie back and close my eyes and try and imagine none of this ever happened. I do feel some relief knowing that Frank and Shane are gone forever. I just feel bad that Mary had to join them. She had so much to offer. I wish I could have done more. I hear Stanton's voice a few minutes later in the kitchen. I look up and see him speaking with two police officers. A minute later he walks into the room and stands in front of me.

"How you feeling?" I slowly sit up.

"Much better," I look at the two paramedics who nod their heads.

"Can you take walk with me outside for a minute?" We both look back at the paramedics. They nod again. Stanton reaches down and helps me up. He keeps a hand on my shoulder and leads me through the small room and back into the kitchen and out a door that I didn't see before and onto the driveway. I slightly close my eyes as soon as I step outside from the bright sunlight. I see at least a dozen police cars with their blue lights circling and a few ambulances behind them. We're in an old-looking neighborhood. I can see two or three houses across the street that are similar in style to the one I just came out of. They all are small one story homes with faded siding and overgrown yards built sometime after or during World War Two for all the returning soldiers in this area. Stanton leads me down the driveway. We walk past a dark BMW, it looks like the one I saw the first time I ran into these guys. We keep walking until we get to what must be Stanton's unmarked cruiser because he slows down and walks me towards the front passenger door and helps me inside. I close the door and watch him walk around the front of the car. He sits down and closes the door next to me. He pushes a few buttons that deactivate the flashing lights.

"I'm glad you're okay Mr. Smith, you had a lot of people concerned, especially your wife and son." I nod my head and scoot back against the large seat. "I'm not sure if you know this or not, but right before you disappeared we issued an arrest warrant for you." I quickly turn my head in his direction. "We thought you had gotten word of the arrest warrant and left the area, but I see that isn't really what happened." I nod.

"How did you guys find me here?"

"Jim Lawson, your co-worker called me a few hours ago and said he found this address on an email he got a hold of. I didn't ask how he got it, but I figured I better go check it out and I'm glad I did."

"Me too," He smiles.

"There are a few things I found out this morning that you should probably know about." I look at him curiously. "For one, Sorenson was involved in this whole thing from the beginning."

"What?"

"Yep, apparently he and the Harris boys planned to kill off Mrs. Clausen and keep all her money, but then Frank Harris found out about Sorenson having some authority over the money and had a falling out and that's when they kidnapped Tommy and I think you know the rest." I look at him and watch as he nods his head. "Yes, Sorenson was crooked. He took part in some of the recent killings as

well. We think he may have even pulled the trigger on one of those boys that I had you identify." I swallow a big mouthful of air.

"Sorenson?"

"Yep, and apparently your son was chosen as the target because there was a third brother named Mark Harris." He looks towards me. "Does that name mean anything to you?" I think about it for a minute and shake my head no. "He used to work for you at least temporarily."

"That Mark Harris?"

"Yep, he's the one. I think you had him fired."

"Yes, he was rude and we suspected him of stealing things from the office."

"Well he ended up committing suicide and his brothers blamed you and your company for that. I heard about the virus." I nod. "There's one other thing." I suddenly feel sweat begin rolling down my forehead and my hands begin to fidget. "I think you know what I'm talking about." I nod. "Well for some reason I deleted it by accident and now it's gone." He winks, then puts his hand in his pocket and pulls out a phone. "This is Frank's phone. I found it on him. It had a copy of the video. I figured I would give it to you so you can destroy it or whatever you want." I nod my head. "I also have his computer sealed up to be given directly to me. I can assure you the hard drive will accidentally be broken or missing. Just so you know, I would have done the same thing if I had been in your place." He places his hand on my shoulder. "No point ruining any more lives."

"Thank you...thank you so much for everything." He smiles.

"Just tell me one thing." I look at him. "How was he communicating with you?"

"My iPhone."

"That's what I figured." He shakes my hand. "I would offer to give you a ride home, but I figured you might prefer to go home with those two." He points towards the window besides me. I see Michelle and Tommy pulling up next to us. They are both waving frantically.

"Thanks again." He nods and points at the door. I quickly open the door handle and push it open.

"Actually Mr. Smith there is one more thing." He reaches in his coat pocket again and pulls out a crisp white envelope. "This is for you. We found it on Mrs. Clausen downstairs." I grab the envelope in my hand. It is unsealed. I quickly open it up and read it. It is a signed note with codes on the bottom giving me the legal right to all the money, all one hundred million dollars. "It's legal. It's all yours. Don't worry you deserve it." I don't say anything. I slowly get out of the car and run towards Michelle and Tommy's open arms.

## **Epilogue**

It's been six months since Detective Stanton saved my life. It seems like a lifetime ago now. Tommy is doing great and has seamlessly moved past all that happened to him. We have him see a counselor once a week, but she assures us he is fine and will probably no longer need her services very shortly. He is back

playing baseball and I am one of the coaches. It feels odd going back to Lee Field. Michelle happily comes and cheers us on during every game. We have actually won two in a row thanks to Tommy's clutch hitting. I am no longer working as an IT manager. I am now President of Mary Clausen Charities in Old Town Alexandria and I love it. I spend my days seeking children that need help and then we reach out and provide for them whatever we can. We have actually set up Mary's big Mclean house as a temporary place to keep children that we have determined can no longer live in their own homes. We have a whole staff and even Buster is a member. Turns out he loves children. It has been very rewarding and challenging to try and live up to Mary's name, but with the help of her staff and our many volunteers we seem to be holding our own and hopefully we won't let her down. I still haven't gotten used to having a hundred million dollars in the bank. I don't think we have actually spent any of the money. We did purchase a new roof for our house and took a small vacation to the North Carolina shore last month, but other than that nothing has changed. I made three anonymous donations to the families of the two boys that were killed by Frank and also to Sorenson's wife and daughter. I promised myself I would look out for them as long as I live. Michelle certainly agrees. I also sent a few donations to the police department. Jim is still working at the company and was actually promoted to my old job. I am very thankful to him for providing the information that saved my life. And even Detective Stanton stops by Lee Field every once in a while to see how Tommy is doing. He has cut back his hours some to spend more time with his family. He has never looked better. I'm thinking he is probably due for a nice vacation soon.

*[Note: The text, containing very many errors, has not been amended.]*

