

The Abducted

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Vanished

Palm Dale, Florida

School was out, and it was a Friday—a double win for the students of Windcrest Elementary. There was no day of the week more exciting. At the sound of the bell, more than five hundred children poured outside their brick-building classrooms at the ringing of the final bell, eager to get home and get ready for the weekend.

A line of vehicles idled along the parent pickup lane, just past the school flagpole and bike rack. At the bus loop, school buses spewed exhaust into the air, waiting with their doors open and drivers at the wheel. Students dispersed into different groups—some toward the bus loop, others toward their parent pickup.

Janitorial staff entered the recently vacated classrooms with loaded pushcarts, ready to get to work. While the majority of students left without looking back, one nine-year-old girl, Jenny Dawson, stayed behind to help her fourth-grade teacher, Mrs. Ramsey, clean up for the day. Jenny’s mother was running behind, and she was in no rush to leave. She lived close to the school but was forbidden from riding the bus or walking home. Jenny vented her frustrations to her teacher while wiping a large Dry-Erase board.

“I don’t get it. We only live like a half mile away, and they won’t even let me ride my bike home.”

“They just want to make sure you’re safe,” Mrs. Ramsey said, shutting the vertical blinds. Only moments ago, the classroom had been bustling with twenty-five students. Buses trailed off in the distance as the air became still and quiet.

Jenny’s shoulder-length blond hair flew in her face as she whipped her head around. “It’s ridiculous. They won’t let me do anything.”

Mrs. Ramsey did her best to remain neutral. “Maybe next year they’ll change their mind. Are you ready for fifth grade?”

Jenny went back to the board, spraying Windex on its surface. “Not really.”

“Why not?” Mrs. Ramsey asked, surprised. “With grades like yours, you’re more than ready. I’m not even sure why I asked it.”

“I don’t know,” Jenny said, looking down.

Mrs. Ramsey walked to her desk, the bottom of her long summer dress swaying just above the green carpet. She opened the bottom drawer and pulled out a small paper gift bag. "Here," she said, walking over to Jenny. "I wanted to give this to you."

"What's that?" Jenny asked with suspicion.

Mrs. Ramsey handed her the bag. "Just some goodies to show my appreciation for all of your help this year."

Jenny rolled her eyes. "Great, now I'm the teacher's pet."

Mrs. Ramsey patted her head. "You always have been."

Jenny laughed, taking the bag. "That's not a good thing, Mrs. Ramsey. Kids get beat up for less."

"You're a good student, Jenny," Mrs. Ramsey said, still holding the bag out. "And I'm going to miss you."

Jenny peeked inside the bag. There were cookies wrapped in aluminum foil amid some other treats. "Thank you," she said with sincerity. "I'm going to miss you too, Mrs. Ramsey."

The cell phone in her jean pocket vibrated. She took it out and swiped the screen. "It's my mom. She's going to be here soon and wants me outside."

"No problem. We're all done here," Mrs. Ramsey said. "Thanks again."

Jenny grabbed her Hello Kitty backpack and slung it over her shoulders. She waved on her way out.

"Bye, Mrs. Ramsey. Have a good weekend."

"Goodbye, Jenny. See you on Monday."

Jenny walked out of the classroom, squinting against the inescapable sunlight. She continued down the sidewalk past mulch-planted bushes and to the parent pickup area. Most of the children had already come and gone, and the lane was mostly empty. The teacher and faculty parking lot was ahead with only a few cars left.

She could hear wheeled trash cans rolling on the sidewalk in the distance. Cars drove past the school on the main road, but none of them matched her mother's red Jeep Cherokee.

One blue station wagon idled in the middle of the pickup lane. Jenny could see the silhouette of a woman at the wheel but couldn't make out her features.

The driver lightly tapped her horn as Jenny walked past without making eye contact, still shielding her face from the sun. The woman leaned toward the open passenger-side window.

"Excuse me, sweetie," she called. "Do you know a boy named Greg Clark? He's in the third grade."

"Greg Clark?" Jenny said, keeping a careful distance. She could make out the woman's features. She was big, with a chubby face and masculine voice. Her red blush and blue eyeliner looked overdone. "I don't know," she continued. "No... I don't think so."

The woman was dissatisfied. "Please," she pleaded. "I'm starting to get worried. He was supposed to meet me five minutes ago." She stopped and then dug through her purse as Jenny scanned the area for her mom. "I have a picture of him somewhere."

Jenny sighed, hoping her mother would arrive, but not a single vehicle was in sight. The woman stuck her arm out then, holding a wallet-sized photo of a young boy.

“Does he look familiar at all?”

Jenny squinted. The short-haired blond boy looked just like any other short-haired blond boy in school. “Not sure...”

The woman extended her arm. “Take a closer look.”

Jenny approached the car and zeroed in on the picture, flapping in the wind. Before she could respond, the door swung open, and the woman lunged forward. Tight, meaty hands gripped Jenny’s shoulders and violently yanked her into the car as the gift bag fell to the ground.

Jenny opened her mouth to scream but was muffled by a thick, moist rag covering her entire face. The air stung her nose and mouth. Then everything went black.

With an unconscious child in the front seat, the woman looked around nervously. She grabbed the passenger door handle and slammed it shut. No one was in sight. She screeched out of the parking lot, leaving a trail of exhaust. The gift bag lay on the empty sidewalk just as a red Jeep Cherokee entered the lot, driving toward the pickup lane.

Routine Patrol

Sergeant Miriam Castillo was behind the wheel of a 2008 Ford police cruiser, with her newly deputized partner in the passenger seat. Deputy Joseph Lang was still a rookie by any stretch, but he was a fast learner and motivated. They had spent most of the day exploring the sunny Florida landscape of swamps, forests, and wildlife to familiarize him with the area. He had recently moved to Palm Dale with his wife and two kids. Miriam had been with the department for five years and had lived in the area for seven. She was thirty-four and had Lang by a couple of years in age and experience.

She had moved through the ranks fast—considered one of the most promising officers, according to her annual review, anyway. With the arrival of a fresh face, she was at the top of the list to show him around.

“The first thing you need to learn about the area is that people like to keep to themselves out here,” she said with a half-full Gatorade resting between her knees.

Deputy Lang nodded along, surveying the homes set amid the marshlands outside the window.

“Most of them don’t want any trouble. But the ones who do ask for it and then some.”

The dispatch radio crackled as Deputy Lang turned to her. “What type of criminal activity do you deal with the most out here on patrol?”

Miriam took a sip of Gatorade and wiped her mouth. “Domestic calls. Robberies. Bar fights. Nothing too serious.”

They reached the outskirts of town, where there wasn't a home in sight.

"I have to admit, this change of scenery is quite a shock."

"Trust me, I know," Miriam said.

"Angela doesn't like the heat. We're a long way from Chicago, that's for sure," Lang said.

Ahead, on a two-lane state road, a minivan dragged along, going at least three miles under the posted forty-miles-per-hour speed limit. Miriam shifted into the left lane, passing the van.

"Lots of old folks too," she said.

Lang turned to look at the driver and saw an old man hunched over the wheel, wearing a camouflaged-net hat.

"It's not their fault, though. Town started out as more of a retirement community. But you know how that goes," Miriam added.

"Families move in. Suburban sprawl follows. Yeah, I know the drill," Lang said. He then turned to her, speaking more casually than before. "So what do you like to do around here? You know, for fun?"

"Me?" Miriam asked, rotating her slender neck. Her long, black hair was tied in a bun. Her gray eyes, shaded behind dark Oakley lenses, remained ahead on the empty road. "I work."

Deputy Lang laughed. "Come on, Sergeant. There's got to be more."

"Between this job and my daughter, that's enough for me."

"I have a family too, but you still have to make time to do things. Fun stuff. How close is Disney World from here?"

"Not close," Miriam responded. She hadn't been one for theme parks and family outings for some time. Freddy, her ex-husband, had managed to drain a lot of fun from her life over the years.

"How old is your daughter, Sergeant?" Lang asked.

Miriam thought to herself then answered. "She's eleven now."

"Wow. They grow up so fast. My two boys are four and six. How do you like that?"

"They'll be in high school before you know it," Miriam said. "Blows my mind that Ana will be in seventh grade next year."

"Good schools here?" Lang asked.

"Not bad," Miriam responded. "Helps when you have a good kid."

"You must be proud of her."

Miriam smiled. "Well, she's not a teenager yet, and I don't want to speak too soon."

They shared a laugh as the dispatch radio crackled on with cross-chatter.

Surrounding palm trees moved gently in the breeze. They passed the first couple of homes they had seen in miles. A gate blocking a long dirt driveway led to a mobile home. A two-story house raced by, slightly dilapidated, surrounded by an old-fashioned rail fence. Then they came to fields on both sides, thick with underbrush.

"It's kind of peaceful out here," Lang said, looking around.

"About time to head back in. I just wanted to give you the lay of the land."

A dispatch call came over the radio, requesting assistance. Miriam naturally went for the hand mic, not thinking to let the rookie have a chance at it.

"This is Bravo Twelve. Go ahead, dispatch."

"Complaint at the Anderson Auto. Suspects on ground accused of bringing in stolen copper to sell. Owner made the call."

Deputy Lang turned to the radio, carefully listening.

"Copy that," Miriam responded. "Have owner stand by. We're en route, code three."

In the middle console sat a Toughbook laptop on a flat, extended platform. The dispatch radio hung above it, directly below the dashboard. A shotgun rested upright behind Miriam's seat, held in place by a bracket. A cage divided the front and back seats, as in any normal police car. She placed the radio back on its clip and gunned it.

"We get a lot of calls about copper theft at the Anderson Auto Salvage," she said to Lang. "I know a shortcut up here."

Lang nodded, silent. Miriam took notice and felt a tad contrite. "Sorry, I should have let you take the call. Force of habit."

Lang raised his hand in a reassuring gesture. "No, no. Don't worry about it. I'm fine observing for now, Sergeant."

The cruiser sped through a long curve, flanked by palmetto bushes on both sides, and came up suddenly on a slow-moving blue station wagon, right in their path. The double-yellow lines said enough: don't pass. Not wanting to act reckless around the rookie, Miriam slowed as they got closer to the Buick's wood-paneled hatchback.

"Sometimes you just have to turn your lights on to get them out of the way," she said with a laugh.

Deputy Lang took off his sunglasses and squinted ahead. Something wasn't right. "Looks like they have a taillight out."

Miriam sighed under her breath. The station wagon wasn't going a mile over forty-five—usually the case on the open road. On closer inspection, Lang was right. The Buick's left taillight was out.

"What do you say, Deputy?" Miriam asked. "It's your call."

Lang cleared his throat. "I know we're wanted at the salvage yard, but we could take a moment just to let the driver know." He waited silently for Miriam's approval. She found it endearing.

"Good call. That's what we're here for." She raised her hand to the ceiling console and flipped on the flashing lights, absent the siren. Through the window of the hatchback, they could see the silhouetted driver look into her rearview mirror. It looked like a woman. The car slowed and drifted to a halt on the shoulder as they followed, stopping. Deputy Lang grabbed his handle to open the door. Miriam stopped him. "Hold on, now. Let's run the plates first."

"Right, of course," Lang said, embarrassed. "Sorry, I didn't want to hold us up."

"Good policing takes time," Miriam said. "Don't worry about it."

Lang nodded and waited as Miriam checked the license plate database on the laptop. Green text appeared on the screen listing the owner's registration information, not far from where she lived herself. "Car is registered to Betsy Judith Cole. Fifty-four years old. Lives on 2438 Woodshire Drive. About ten miles from here."

"So she's local?" Lang asked.

“Sure is,” Miriam said. “So that’s good. Go ahead and take care of it.”

Lang placed his sunglasses on, smiling. “Will do.” He opened his door and stepped out as Miriam sent the vehicle information back to headquarters. She looked up and called out to Lang before he shut the door. He stopped and turned around. “Yes, Sergeant?”

“Nothing fancy. Get her license and registration. We’ll run another check, tell her about the taillight, and drive on.”

“Unless we find multiple warrants on her,” Lang said, smiling.

Miriam shrugged. “Never know around here.”

Lang closed the door and walked around to the front of the cruiser as blue and red siren lights continued to flash. Miriam watched with a smile as Deputy Lang approached the Buick’s driver’s side. He was young. Twenty-five, she believed. He was polite and eager to learn. His attitude made her feel good about her job—a job largely responsible for the decline of her marriage. Deputy Lang walked with a confident stride in his black short-sleeved uniform. His gun and radio were at his hips. He was thin and fit. His short dirty-blond hair freshly trimmed—a model rookie officer. Miriam had to admit, she liked him. As a colleague of the law, of course.

She watched carefully as he made his way to the window, instructing the driver to roll it down. Suddenly, her iPhone vibrated on the dashboard. She grabbed it and typed her PIN. There was a text from Ana asking when she was going to get home. It was Friday, and Ana wanted to order pizza. The request warmed Miriam’s heart. It had been a while since her daughter asked to hang out with her. She feared by high school, it would only get worse.

Wanted 2 have some friends over & watch a movie, Ana said in her text.

Miriam felt deflated. *Oh. I’ll be home soon and we’ll order it then,* she typed.

Just as she pressed send, a gunshot blasted. Her head jolted up. Deputy Lang collapsed onto the pavement. The Buick engine roared and jerked into motion, peeling out. Miriam was in complete shock, but somehow her mind and body kicked into motion. She grabbed the hand mic, shouting into it.

“Code eight! Code eight! We have an officer down on Route Forty-four! I repeat, officer down!”

She tossed the mic to the side and jumped out, reaching for the pistol at her waist. The Buick spewed exhaust as it sped off, pebbles flying in the air. She raised her pistol and fired three steady shots, traveling straight through the back window. The Buick was undeterred and continued on, too far out of firing range. Lang lay motionless on his back two feet from where Miriam stood. Her face was pale with sickness. She fell to her knees by his side and looked at him as tears streamed from her eyes.

“Deputy Lang! Speak to me!” She could see the hole in his left cheek and the blood pouring from his nose.

She grabbed his wrist, trying to control her own breathing, and felt for a pulse. There was nothing. No breathing. No pulse. Not the slightest sign of life. It was impossible. There was no way.

Her mind raced as the stench of the Buick’s exhaust settled over her like dust. She placed a hand over Lang’s chest as more tears flowed from her eyes. Lang’s

face was already turning blue. She wiped her face as her mind kicked into high gear. There was only one thing left to do, and it didn't involve waiting for backup.

She stood and sprinted to her patrol car, pistol in hand, as the lights continued flashing. She swung the door open and threw herself inside. She turned the ignition, put the car in drive, and floored it as the door flung closed.

"Dispatch, I need immediate air support!" she shouted into the mic. "Suspect is fleeing. Currently in hot pursuit."

The sight of Deputy Lang's lifeless body in the rearview mirror saddened and sickened her. The only hope she had was that she might find the shooter and bring him to justice. The cruiser raced down the barren road at its highest RPMs. She was clocking over one hundred on the speedometer. She could see dust ahead as though the Buick wasn't far off. She looked for taillights, brake lights, anything that would indicate the shooter.

"Where's that backup?" she said.

"Bravo Twelve, backup is on the way," the female dispatcher said.

The cruiser raced ahead as the road became one long, straight line, flashing by in a vortex with no sign of the Buick. There was no way they could have vanished like that. She pressed on as chatter came over the radio, other officers telling her they were on their way. The mood coming over the airwaves was tense. No one was sure yet exactly what had happened.

Miriam couldn't say herself. Her partner had been shot. All she knew was that she had to catch the car before the shooter got away.

Crime Scene

In her five years on the force, Miriam had never witnessed a police shooting within the department. It was new territory for her. She raced down the cracked and faded two-lane road, squeezing the steering wheel with fierce intensity.

Chatter from a dozen different officers consumed the dispatch radio. They wanted answers. Her siren blared at its loudest pitch as the lights flashed wildly. She wasn't going to let the shooter get away. The yellow lines in the road flashed by in a rapid blur as she pushed the car to its limit.

With her eyes locked on the road, she grabbed the hand mic. Her hand trembled as she shouted. "Where's that chopper, damn it?"

"Air support en route. ETA, five minutes."

She could hear a faint aerial rumble closing in, hoping that it wasn't too late to find the fleeing suspect. The barren road sharply curved to the right. She slowed as the tires screeched against the rough pavement, and the heat shield around the exhaust rattled as though it were coming loose. The helicopter was getting louder and closer. There was still hope, and then, after three miles of intense pursuit, she saw it—the blue Buick station wagon—parked to the side of the road, sitting on the grass and slanted on a sloping shoulder.

"Vehicle in sight. I repeat, vehicle in sight!" she said into the hand mic. A blue-and-white police helicopter flew overhead from the distance.

"Zeroing in on your location," the pilot's voice said back.

She slammed the brakes as the station wagon came into view, parked on the side of the road. She skidded to the side and into the grass, stopping right in front of the Buick. She jumped out and went down on one knee, holding her pistol up. She remained crouched down and approached the Buick with her gun in the air. No one was inside the car. It appeared to have been abandoned.

She looked around: nothing but trees and palmetto brush as far as she could see on both sides of the road. It was the perfect sanctuary for anyone to flee into. The helicopter was low and circling. They had to have seen something. She pulled out her handheld radio from her side belt and spoke into it.

“This is Sergeant Castillo. Suspect is not in the car. Preparing to engage on foot.”

She carefully circled the station wagon, breathing heavily. Adrenaline pumped through her veins. Beads of sweat covered her forehead, collecting just below her hairline. The shooter could only have gone so many ways. She examined the ground near the car, looking for footprints leading into the woods. Nothing looked disturbed, and the fact that the car had been so easily and quickly abandoned had her doubting that fifty-four-year-old Betsy Cole was the culprit.

“*Sergeant Castillo, we need you back at the scene. We’ve got an officer down here,*” said a voice through her radio speaker. She recognized the voice. It was her commanding officer, Captain Porter.

“Sir. I am in pursuit of the suspect right now!” she said, ready to storm into the marshy forest to her side.

“*We’re assembling a pursuit team. If you’re at the vehicle, suspect couldn’t have gone too far. Now—*”

She turned the radio off mid-sentence. He’d be upset with her, but she didn’t care. The helicopter was circling the area, aimlessly it seemed.

“Where are you, you son of a bitch?” Miriam said under her breath.

She headed into the forest, swiping at branches and palmetto bushes lined up like crops. She held her gun up, ready to put a bullet into the shooter’s head. Sticks and leaves crackled under her boots. Sunlight flashed through trees as sharp, green palmetto leaves poked her legs. She continued on, pushing her way through the brush, sweaty and exhausted.

She looked up as the helicopter flew past, hoping it would land, but it flew off instead. There was no going any farther. She was already in the thick of it with nothing to show. She turned back and trudged her way through the brush, keeping a keen eye out for anything that moved.

By the time she emerged from the woods, there were ten police vehicles already parked along the road. Blue and red flashing lights reflected against the windows of the empty Buick. She approached a group of officers huddled by her patrol car, oblivious to the dirt and tear streaks covering her face.

“The car’s stolen,” she said as they looked at her, startled.

“What was that, Sergeant Castillo?” O’Leary, an older but boyish-looking detective, asked from the group.

“The car. I’m certain it was stolen...” she said, dazed. She tripped and nearly fell against the hood before O’Leary caught her. The other officers backed away.

“Easy there, Sergeant,” he said. “Looks like you’ve been through enough already.”

Miriam regained her balance and gently pushed O’Leary away. “I’m all right. We don’t have much time. We have to find the shooter.”

“And we will,” he said calmly. He turned to his own unmarked cruiser, a gray Ford Taurus. “Let’s go back to the scene now so you can explain exactly what happened. The captain is waiting.”

Miriam hesitated, looking around. O’Leary put a hand on her shoulder. “Whoever did this is not getting far. We’re mobilizing the entire department. Might even get other counties involved in this too.”

“Okay,” Miriam said, giving in. “Let’s go.”

She followed him back to his car, stepped into the passenger seat, and closed the door. O’Leary backed his car out and sped off, back to where the nightmare started.

Cop cars zoomed past them going the other way, their sirens shrieking. Miriam wasn’t sure how much time had passed since the moment she heard the gunshot. Everything after that—the car chase, the foot pursuit through the thick brush—was a blur. It was impossible to think that the shooter could just vanish like that. She hoped Detective O’Leary was right. She hoped with more than twenty police officers on the ground, they could find him.

They arrived at the crime scene, where even more officers had flooded the area. Two helicopters now circled overhead. The area was being cordoned off with police tape. Yellow numbered markers rested on the ground, around the disturbed area where the blue Buick had stopped before it had fled. A single shell casing lay on the ground next to a fresh pool of blood. Deputy Lang’s body was nowhere in sight.

Miriam exited the car and saw that his body was already concealed inside a zipped-up body bag and resting on a stretcher outside a waiting ambulance, its lights flashing.

“I’m sorry,” O’Leary said, leaning against his car door.

Her heart sank as she rushed over to the ambulance, where two paramedics were preparing to load the gurney inside.

Captain Porter stepped out of nowhere, immediately blocking her path. “Slow down, Sergeant. We need to talk.”

“Sir...” Miriam began. She had nothing to say to him. Nothing she wanted to say to him, anyway. Her partner was in a body bag not five feet from them. That was all that mattered.

“What were you doing out here?” the captain began. “How did this happen?”

She looked up then, past him. His thin, clean-shaven face had a slightly stern but sympathetic expression, clearly evident behind his square-framed glasses. She tried to look over his shoulder toward the ambulance. His white button-down shirt had two double-bar ranks on the collar.

“Sergeant Castillo, I’m talking to you,” he added.

She flashed him a quick glance, verging on anger. “Sir, the only thing I’m interested in is catching the bastard who did this.”

“We’re on it,” Captain Porter said. “The suspect won’t get far. In the meantime, I expect a full report. There’s a lot that doesn’t make sense.”

Miriam looked at him quizzically. “Like what, sir?”

“Like how the suspect was allowed to pull a gun on Deputy Lang, let alone shoot him?”

Miriam felt as if her insides were being pulled apart. The weight of what happened hadn’t fully sunk in yet.

“Now, I’ve got one officer dead and another who fled the scene,” Porter continued.

“I was trying to—” Miriam began. She had yet to even take notice of the dried bloodstains covering her uniform.

“I know what you were trying to do, Sergeant,” Captain Porter said. He looked her over and shook his head. “Are you okay? Why don’t you let the paramedics check you out?”

She watched as they lifted Deputy Lang’s gurney and pushed it into the back of the ambulance. “I’m fine,” she said and then turned to look at the bustling activity—the area filled with police, some taking photos and videos, others looking for blood and other evidence, and looking as if it were some kind of convention. “Any word on the suspect?” she asked.

“Not yet,” he answered with a sigh. “They’re looking.”

The sun was going down—a blurry orange orb in the pink sky. The helicopters in the distance had their spotlights on. Time was running out, and the shooter had vanished even with the number of law enforcement on the scene. She had never witnessed an act so cold, callous, and evil. It made her sick inside. She still couldn’t believe it.

* * * * *

Hours later, Miriam sat across from Chief Walker in his office, with Captain Porter seated next to her. Her detailed report was sitting on the police chief’s desk as he scanned it with quiet interest. The room was quiet, but much commotion could be heard from outside. Chief Walker, a black man with a shaved head and slender build, had a strict, no-nonsense demeanor. He hadn’t dealt with an officer killed in the line of duty in his entire career with the department, which was more than ten years. Such a crime occurring in Palm Dale was as rare as a bank robbery or drive-by shooting would be. He was as shocked and perplexed as everyone else. He placed Miriam’s report down on the desk and studied them both with his dark, inquisitive eyes.

“I’ll go ahead and state the obvious. We’re dealing with a very dangerous individual,” the chief began in his gravelly voice.

He placed a palm flat over the report and then gestured at Miriam with his other hand. “Your details account for most of everything, and it’s nothing short of tragic.” He tensed up and balled a fist. “A sad day for our department. I spoke to the mayor earlier, and he’s already ordered the flags at half-staff for the entire week.”

Miriam stared back at him, nodding. She was cleaned up from earlier, and her face was stone-like, emotionless. Inside, however, she was torn apart.

“A search of the area hasn’t yielded a thing,” the chief said solemnly. “An APB has been issued and proper channels notified. Mayor’s even talking about a curfew.”

Captain Porter cut in. "Sir, it's quite possible our suspect found a home or some kind of temporary sanctuary to hide in. I still believe it's only a matter of time."

"I appreciate your optimism, Captain, but the media are going to have a field day with this either way." He then turned to Miriam. "Sergeant Castillo, your report is vague on descriptions. You mentioned long blond hair. What can you tell us?"

She closed her eyes for a moment. "The vehicle came up on the report as being registered to Mrs. Betsy Cole. Assuming that was the driver, Deputy Lang approached the driver's-side door"—Miriam stopped and rubbed her eyes—"to let Mrs. Cole know that she had a taillight out."

Chief Walker took a deep breath. "What we know is that Mrs. Cole's station wagon was reported stolen outside the Dollar General parking lot at approximately 2:05 p.m. as she was leaving her shift from work. An hour later, that same blue station wagon was seen leaving the parking lot of Windcrest Elementary School by a janitor. A nine-year-old girl, Jenny Dawson, was subsequently reported as missing by her mother after not being there after school. A gift bag given to her by her teacher was the only thing recovered at the scene."

"Just terrible," Captain Porter said, shaking his head.

"As shocking as this is, it gets worse," the chief said. He leaned forward and produced a sheet of paper, handing it to Captain Porter. "This isn't the first time."

The captain turned his attention to the paper. It was a copy of a newspaper story from the year before. He studied the sheet then handed it to Miriam.

The headline, *SNATCHER STRIKES CLEARWATER*, grabbed her immediately. Her eyes moved down the sheet to a second story copied from another newspaper: *CHILD GOES MISSING OUTSIDE OCOEE MALL*.

"What is this all about?" she asked the chief, gripping the paper—though part of her already knew.

"For the past five years, a child has vanished from surrounding municipalities in similar fashion. In each case the circumstances have been the same. The victim, usually six to eight years old, vanishes and the case goes cold. The latest abduction in Palm Dale leads me to believe that we're dealing with a serial predator. And I believe it's this serial predator who murdered Deputy Lang in cold blood."

Miriam's sadness subsided with rage and a sense of vengeance. She didn't say a word.

"Don't worry," Chief Walker said to her, folding his hands. "We're going to find him." The assumption that it was a man just came naturally, despite Miriam's claim of long blond hair.

"That's what I keep telling her," Captain Porter added.

"In the meantime, I need to address our team," the chief said. "The media are going to want a statement too." He looked at Miriam with a veiled look of pity that made her feel even worse. "Why don't you take a few days off? Get your head together. We have to get with the Lang family and... assist with the funeral arrangements."

"Yes, sir," Miriam said in a low tone, staring ahead, dazed. Her head was pounding. She stood up with both hands balled up at her sides. "Requesting permission to join the search."

“Request denied,” Chief Walker said not skipping a beat. “Go home, Sergeant Castillo. We’ll take it from here.”

She turned and left the office, not saying a word. She closed the door lightly and walked out and onto the busy floor, where a number of workstations and cubicles were aligned in tidy rows.

Detectives and patrol officers alike moved about the stations, talking on cell phones and with each other, completely immersed in their work. A few of them paused when they noticed Miriam walking through. She continued without making eye contact, even as the police chief came out to address them.

“Ladies and gentlemen, if I could have your attention please.”

The room grew quiet, with only a few pockets of activity still going on. Miriam passed through the floor and came to a long hallway leading out of the building, where portraits of past commissioners adorned the wall.

“As of 3:45 p.m., Deputy Lang has been reported killed in the line of duty by a single gunshot to the head. The shell casing indicates a .44 magnum round. As of now, the suspect is reported at large, armed and dangerous.”

The chief’s voice trailed off as Miriam made it down the hall, to the lobby, and past the front desk. The desk officer barely got a word out before she pushed open the double doors and went out into the night air.

Her black Honda Accord was parked quite a way from the building, in a lot across the street. News vans were approaching in the distance, getting close to the station. An avalanche of media, swarming the department for the latest scoop. The “Snatcher” was back in the news.

She quickly crossed the street and made it to her car without looking back at the station. She fell into the driver’s seat, unable to muster the energy to so much as put the key in the ignition. Instead, she put her head against the steering wheel and cried in silence.

One Year Later

Detective Dwight O’Leary was at a standstill. His nights, as of late, were haunted by images of nine-year-old Jenny Dawson, missing for more than a year. O’Leary had been one of the first investigators assigned to discover her whereabouts. Weeks turned to months before it became more apparent that Jenny would never return. Many in the department were hoping to at least find her remains. Nothing, however, had turned up.

O’Leary had scoured the records for previous child abduction cases. No such crime had occurred in Palm Dale in seven years. The last case involved an estranged, divorced father taking his son across state lines. The boy was soon safely returned to his mother. She opted not to press charges.

Jenny Dawson had vanished. The abduction was random. There were no suspects remaining. And no closure for the family. Her parents, Ted and Patricia, clung to the hope that she would return. It was all they could do. O’Leary had made a promise to them, albeit foolishly, that he would solve the case and get them the answers they desperately desired.

In his ten years as a detective, he had honed his skills and, since Jenny's disappearance, had dedicated himself to the case, using every resource at his disposal. But finding Jenny soon became a test not just of his ability as a detective, but as a measure of his overall worth.

It was Tuesday, and he woke in the middle of the night with a dry throat and headache. In a cold sweat, he tossed the blankets off him and reached for a glass on his nightstand, only to find it empty. Next to the glass was a half-full bottle of Wild Turkey. Things started to come back to him. It had been another night of drinking himself to sleep.

Too tired to move, he lay in his bed as raindrops beat against the nearby window, providing some odd sort of comfort. He looked at his alarm clock: 3:11 a.m. He was supposed to meet the Dawsons that day and let them know that their daughter's abduction had recently been categorized as a "cold case." He wasn't looking forward to it. Perhaps it was time to move on. There were other cases on his plate too. It had been a rotten year so far, and O'Leary needed a win to change the tide.

By morning, rain had turned to drizzle. Outside, daylight glowed behind the thin, transparent curtains. O'Leary opened his eyes and looked at his alarm clock. It was ten after nine, and he was due at the Dawson house in one hour.

He turned over and sat up, wearing only boxer shorts. His modest bedroom was littered in files, newspapers, photos, take-out boxes, and empty soda cans. He stepped onto the carpet and hobbled over to his bathroom to throw some water on his face. A nice hot shower would do the trick. Some coffee would get him started too.

He splashed water on his stubbly cheeks and cooled his forehead. Living in a one-bedroom apartment following his lengthy divorce had its perks. He never had to wait for the bathroom. The apartment had become a second office of sorts. His job was his life, but lately it seemed that everything had slowed down. He'd grown stagnant, and at thirty-nine years old, the thought was terrifying.

A shower and a cup of coffee later, O'Leary felt refreshed and energized. He grabbed a left-over drumstick and devoured it as local news played on a nearby radio. He threw on a white dress shirt, blue tie, and black slacks, ready to go. His badge rested on top of the dresser next to his holstered 9mm pistol and dark-gray jacket.

Before leaving, he took one last look at himself in the mirror. His short, thick hair was showing some noticeable gray. Never one to shave regularly, he still had a good deal of stubble along his square jaw and high cheeks. He just hoped that the Dawsons wouldn't take notice of that, or his worn and slightly bloodshot eyes. He walked back into the bedroom and put some case files into his briefcase. His ID hung by a lanyard over his tie. His gun was holstered at his hip. Ready for the morning, he left with time to spare.

After a twenty-minute drive down State Route 44, O'Leary's green Ford Taurus arrived at the Dawson home, marked by a long, circular driveway. The luxurious two-story brick house was shrouded by large bushes, covering most windows. Marbled steps led to a pair of elegant double doors. The Dawsons were an affluent family, well known throughout town. Ted owned a chain of appliance outlets, and business had been good over the years.

One look at their thick, weedy front lawn, neglected home, and rusty surrounding fence gave a clear indication that it hadn't been a good year. O'Leary rolled past the front door and parked a few feet from the garage.

The front doors opened, and Patricia Dawson walked out—her silver hair pinned back. She was wearing a red long-sleeved blouse and jeans. A look of perpetual worry consumed her pretty face as always. O'Leary stuffed a piece of Juicy Fruit into his mouth, grabbed his briefcase, and stepped out of the car.

"Good morning!" he said with a wave.

"Morning," Patricia replied. Nothing in her neutral tone belied what she might be thinking.

Thunder rumbled beyond the dark, rolling clouds above. The smell of rain was in the air.

"Better come in before it gets nasty," she said, gesturing with the bottle of V8 juice she was holding.

O'Leary walked up the steps leading inside. She closed the door behind him and asked for his coat. He handed her his jacket, and she offered him a drink.

"Sure. Scotch on the rocks," he said with a smile.

She smiled back. "I was thinking more along the lines of OJ, detective."

"Of course. Orange juice would be fine, thank you."

She led him to the living room, a spacious and oddly furnished room with a dusty, old hotel look. It was clear that the Dawsons were living in a time warp of trauma and emotional toil. She pointed to a burgundy leather sofa in the center of the room. A deer's head, mounted on a long board, hung above the sofa, incongruous among framed paintings of tranquil valleys and ridges. A snake skin, massive in size, hung across the other end. O'Leary took a seat and set his briefcase on the glass table.

"Ted will be out in a minute," Patricia said as she turned toward the kitchen, leaving him alone in the room.

He looked again at the strange taxidermy collection, but he had seen it before and wasn't taken aback as he had been the first time he saw it. Dawson fancied himself some kind of sportsman.

O'Leary opened his briefcase, ready to break the news. How they would respond to their daughter's disappearance being classified as a cold case, he didn't know. Moments passed, and then he heard a bedroom door open down the hall, followed by the sound of flip-flops shuffling across the tile floor.

In the kitchen, Patricia also seemed to have heard her approaching husband. "Honey," she called, "Detective O'Leary is here."

"I know," his tired voice said from the hall.

He shuffled some more and then reached the living room. Ted Dawson slouched forward. Pale, with stringy dirty-blond hair, he nodded and tipped his coffee mug at O'Leary. "Morning, Detective."

"Good morning, Mr. Dawson."

He had on a bathrobe, tank top, and boxers, looking as though he'd just rolled out of bed, but apparently not. He already had coffee. His gaunt, bushy face showed little emotion.

"Yep. So to what do we owe the pleasure of this hastily planned meeting?" he asked, shuffling toward the matching loveseat at the end of the sofa, forming an L shape.

"I just wanted to have a face to face. Share the latest."

"Super..." Ted said, lowering himself on the couch as though it took effort. Patricia joined them with a glass of orange juice for O'Leary.

He took the glass and thanked her as she sat next to Ted. "How have you guys been?" he asked them.

They nodded and feigned smiles. "It's going," Patricia said. "Alex starts tenth grade next year. Pretty excited about that." Alex was their son and now, without Jenny, their only child.

"Great to hear," O'Leary said. "How's the business holding up?"

The couple looked at each other with uncertainty. Patricia turned to O'Leary, partly smiling. "Ted's brother, Steven, has been running things for a while."

"Things could be better," Ted added. "But we're glad to see you. Hoping that maybe you have some good news to share."

O'Leary took a deep breath and took a case file out of his briefcase, laying it on the table. "I have news, neither bad nor good. But it's news, nonetheless."

Ted gestured with his hands. "Might as well just come out with it, then."

"Now, Ted," Patricia said, patting his shoulder. "Detective O'Leary didn't have to come out here, you know."

O'Leary cut in. "It's fine, Mrs. Dawson. Your husband's right. I'll get to the point." He leaned toward with his hands folded. "This past week, our department has officially classified your daughter's abduction as a cold case. Meaning that it's been over three hundred sixty-five days."

Ted took the folder as both parents sank into the couch, expressionless.

"It varies. Sometimes it can take as much as two years for that to happen," O'Leary continued. He held out a hand, trying to raise their spirits. "This isn't necessarily a bad thing. New investigators can jump on board now. They'll reexamine all the evidence. Reanalyze everything."

Ted sighed and leaned forward, squeezing the bridge of his nose between his eyes. "How is it that in a town of two thousand people, no one can find our daughter?" Ted looked up, realizing the weight of his words. "Not like you haven't tried, Detective. We appreciate that. Can't we bring in the FBI or something?"

"We could," O'Leary said. "I'd have to talk to our captain on that."

"Christ, they should have been brought in from the beginning," Ted lamented, rocking back on the couch.

"Perhaps," O'Leary said.

"It's not their fault," Patricia said. "Our own private investigator has come up empty-handed so far too. You know that."

O'Leary narrowed his eyes. "Your own... private investigator?"

Ted held both his arms up, defensively. "What was I going to do? Sit around on my hands? We have to try all avenues. A year later and you're still chasing this Snatcher fellow."

"He is our most likely subject," O'Leary said with conviction.

"*And where the hell is he?*" Ted asked. Patricia touched his shoulder, trying to calm him.

"I've narrowed the list of suspects down to one man," O'Leary began. "But we have no evidence, and there's no—" He stopped suddenly.

"No what?" Ted asked, his eyes livid. "No body? Is that what you were going to say?"

O'Leary looked away, unresponsive. Patricia looked as though she was fighting back tears.

Ted then pointed at O'Leary, jabbing the air. "Until that happens, we're going to believe that she's still alive. Understand?"

"Yes," O'Leary said. "And with new investigators on this case—a fresh set of eyes—I'm confident in the outcome."

Patricia placed her face in her hands and cried. "But you promised us... you can't just walk away now."

"I know. Like you, I was confident in the outcome. I was confident that everything pointed to the Snatcher and that it would only be a matter of time before we caught him." He took a deep breath. "I was wrong..."

Ted scratched the scruff of his beard, lowered his head, and took a change in tone. "Look, I know I can be an asshole sometimes. I'm frustrated, and I've had enough. My wife and I can't handle this fucking nightmare much longer."

"That's why I'm going to recommend a new investigation team. One that specializes in cold cases."

"No!" Patricia said, reaching out as if to touch his shoulder. "You have to stay on the case. We don't have time for everything to start all over again. You can't do that to us!"

"I'm sorry," O'Leary said, rising. "I had my chance. It's time for someone else." He placed his files in his briefcase and stood and nodded at the couple. "Thank you for your kindness and trust. I'll keep you posted to every last detail."

Patricia grabbed his arm as he tried to walk by. He stopped and looked down. Her face was awash in tears and desperation. "Please. Let me show you something first."

"Mrs. Dawson..."

"Just one minute!" she cried out.

O'Leary nodded in understanding. "What is it?"

Patricia rose as Ted watched them both, looking confused. "Follow me."

Though he was eager to leave, O'Leary begrudgingly followed Patricia toward their long hallway, leaving Ted sitting on the couch, staring ahead blankly—clearly in his own world.

The darkened hall had three doors on each side. Framed family pictures of happier days adorned the walls. Jenny was in many of them, blond hair to her shoulders, sparkling eyes, and a white smile. In many of the pictures, her parents looked unrecognizable. Their faces were full of life and vigor—Ted smiling at the barbecue grill, with Alex at his side; Patricia and Jenny with their arms around each other at a school dance recital. O'Leary wondered how they could even stand to look at those pictures, but when they reached the second door on the right, the answer became clear.

Patricia opened the door and stepped aside. "Here, Mr. O'Leary. You might be familiar with this room."

O'Leary looked in. He was. It was Jenny's room, untouched since the day he had first searched it for clues nearly a year ago. A plush pink blanket covered her bed in the corner. A mountain of dolls crowded the pillows. Some posters on her wall were typical of a nine-year-old girl, others weren't.

She had unicorns and *Frozen* characters, but also Beethoven and Albert Einstein. From what O'Leary had heard, she was a bright, promising student. Her dresser, bookshelf, and computer desk were untouched. There wasn't a speck of dust to be seen. Someone, most likely Patricia, was keeping the room tidy. He went to step inside but stopped.

"Why are you showing me her room?" he asked.

"Because this is where she belongs." Patricia stopped and took a deep breath, closing her eyes in anguish. She opened her eyes and spoke calmly. "The fact that her clothes still hang in the closet. The fact that I still haven't looked in her diary after I came across it months ago. The fact that I haven't changed this room one bit. This means that I still believe in finding my daughter, which means that I still believe in you."

O'Leary opened his mouth then paused. "Mrs. Dawson... I don't mean to sound harsh, but you should consider the reality here."

She shook her head in response. "I want you to go into her room. Go in there for one minute and tell me what you feel."

"I'm sorry, but—"

"Please... It's all I ask," she said, holding back tears.

He reluctantly entered the room and looked around as she waited in the hall. The beige carpet was freshly cleaned and all the surfaces polished. He approached Jenny's bookcase, where several 3 × 5 framed photos were displayed on the shelves. More family pictures. Pictures of Jenny and her school friends. Pictures of Jenny in her dancing outfit. Pictures of Jenny in the honor club. Trophies and medals sat behind the pictures. O'Leary glanced past the bookcase, not wanting to be in the room any longer.

But then something hit him—a sudden rush of hope and optimism that he hadn't felt in some time, as though she was still out there, waiting for him to finally bring her home. The sudden rush of hope that flowed through him didn't feel misguided. It felt completely genuine.

Patricia leaned against the door frame and spoke. "What's your verdict, Detective?"

"I'm staying on," he answered. "Can't guarantee anything, but I'll try."

Tears ran down her cheeks as she smiled. "Thank you."

She stepped aside as he left the room. He thanked her for the orange juice and walked out the front door, unsure of what had just transpired. He was aware of a newfound vigor, but he couldn't do it alone. He needed the assistance of the only person, to his knowledge, who had encountered the Snatcher; a person who had long disappeared from the public eye.

It had been some time, but he was determined to find her and talk to her. He got into his green Taurus and exited the Dawson estate through the squeaky automated gate. It was time to go to the office and check with Records. He needed an address and was certain that they still had her on file, and he would find her, wherever she was.

* * * * *

Miriam was trying to cut down on her energy drinks, but it was afternoon, and like clockwork, she needed one to make it through the rest of the day. She cracked open a Monster and took a sip while rocking back in her office chair. Things got especially busy later in the afternoon at the moving company in Sarasota, Florida, where she worked as an assistant operations manager.

Her job mainly involved dispatching, where her bilingualism and experience using a radio proved to be an asset. From her single office, she could see the shop floor, where a line of trucks was parked—some with trailers as long as forty feet.

She checked her email, expecting the usual slew of spam, truck requests, and customer complaints. Some of everything awaited her. A mustached associate named Ed passed by and knocked on her window.

“Got that dispatch ready yet?”

“Which one?” she asked through the window.

“The twenty footer. Moving a two-bedroom in one hour.”

She grabbed a clipboard on her desk, the paperwork already complete, and pushed it through a slot for the man to take.

“You’re on it, as always,” he said with a grin.

She nodded back and resumed dealing with her email. Her black hair was tied back in a ponytail. She wore a dark-red short-sleeved polo shirt with the company logo on it and blue jeans—a distinct change from her old police uniform. Still slim and attractive, Miriam often found herself on the receiving end of date requests from her largely male staff. She had given it a shot from time to time, but something in her told her she wasn’t ready, even though the ink on her divorce papers was two years old.

Maybe it was her. She couldn’t figure it out. All that mattered at the end of the day was her daughter. But at twelve, Ana was getting older. “Mommy” had long morphed into “Mom.” Ana was also starting to talk about boys. She was the spitting image of her mom—with a little of her father’s wild streak in her personality. Miriam had an idea of what she was in for. It was inevitable.

She took another sip of her energy drink just when her office phone rang, a single red button flashing on the line, indicating an outside call.

“East Coast Trucking,” she said, taking the call.

A man’s voice greeted her. “Is this Miriam Castillo?”

“Yes...” she answered, holding the phone against her ear with her shoulder while opening some mail.

“Miriam Castillo?”

She paused. “Who is this?”

“Oh. I’m sorry, Ms. Castillo. This is Detective Dwight O’Leary.”

She dropped the envelopes and then grabbed the phone. “Detective O’Leary?” She could feel her heart beating faster. The past raced back to her at the mention of his name.

“Yes. Lee County Crime Investigation Division.”

“Yes, what can I help you with?” Part of her was ready to hang up the phone then and there, but curiosity kept her on the line. “And how did you get this number?”

She heard the sound of mild laughter on the other end. “Well, I am a detective after all.”

“That’s funny, but I’m very busy, so please...”

“Yes, yes. Of course. I apologize. I heard you’re living in Sarasota now?”

Miriam hesitated but answered out of respect for O’Leary. She recalled him as being a good, honest detective. “That’s correct.”

She could sense his own hesitation on the other end. He wasn’t about to offer her a million bucks. He had a motive, and she was curious as to what it was. “Do you think you could give me an hour? Two hours tops?”

“For what?” she asked warily.

“I’m about two hours away now. I could be in your area a little after five. I’d love to catch up, maybe go out for a drink.”

“Detective O’Leary, I don’t know what to say. This is very short notice, and I have plans. Maybe some other time?” She didn’t have plans beyond making dinner for Ana, but she wasn’t up for it nonetheless.

“Listen, Sergeant. I need your help. I’m back in the game, and you’re the only one who can bring the Dawson case across the finish line.”

She felt infuriated by his tone. “I’m no longer a police officer, understand? That’s all behind me now. Good day, Detective...”

“No, no, wait!”

She paused, holding the phone.

“I understand how you feel,” he said. „I know what the department did to you. They burned you, and it wasn’t right. But this isn’t about them. Hell, it’s certainly not about me. This is about Jenny Dawson and her family.”

“What are you talking about?” she snapped.

“I’m talking about meeting up. A brief chat and nothing more.”

She looked at her wall clock and then to the computer screen. Employees passed by her window. One of the trucks in the distance roared to life. Another knock at her window, a driver standing there waiting for a dispatch. His name was Brent, a quiet man with a slight paunch and bored composure.

“Think you could help me out?” O’Leary asked.

She handed Brent a clipboard. He turned and walked away, saying nothing. It was the same thing day in and day out. She had pushed all thoughts of her time on the police force so far back into her mind that she had just begun to realize how boring her new life truly was. Maybe O’Leary could use her help.

“Okay,” she said. “One hour. I live at 2047 Weatherford Lane—”

“Oh, I have your address. Thanks,” he said.

Miriam said nothing. She wasn’t surprised that he had already looked it up.

“How’s your place, five thirty? Or we could just meet up somewhere else.”

“My place is fine,” she said. “I have to be there when Ana gets home.”

“Sounds great. Thanks, and I’ll see you then.”

She hung up the phone and stared at her computer screen. She felt overcome with mixed emotions, simmering just below the surface. All she could do in response was sigh.

The Meetup

Miriam left work feeling a strange mix of dread and anticipation. She had spent the past year getting her life back together, while O’Leary was dredging everything back up. After losing the Snatcher and failing to protect her partner, her face had been all over the news, and her newfound celebrity was not something she’d wanted.

With no viable suspect in the Jenny Dawson case, the blame for the missing girl and the death of Deputy Lang fell squarely on her. The local media were out for blood. They blamed internal incompetence and poor police work. In turn, the department threw her under the bus. She was investigated, demoted, and taken off patrol. The damage to her career was irreversible. So one day, she’d walked away from it all. She left the force and moved away where no one knew her—or so she’d hoped.

But O’Leary had found her. That was no surprise. She was still in the public record. She hadn’t changed her name. She had left to find a fresh start and was content, so far, with her decision. As she drove home, she began having second thoughts about his unwelcome visit.

Her memory of that day came roaring back to her. Her hands shook on the wheel. Her face felt flushed as sweat formed on her forehead. She was ready to turn around and call the entire meeting off. But as she reached the back road of her neighborhood, she could already see a green Ford Taurus at the end of the driveway. As she got closer, O’Leary came into view, rougher looking than she remembered him, leaning against the hood of the car.

“You’re persistent,” she said under her breath.

She pulled into the driveway next to him as he waved and stepped back a bit. Her curiosity was piqued. For him to make the drive, there had to be something worthwhile at hand. She turned off the ignition, grabbed her purse, and got out of the car.

The sky was overcast following a week of showers—which usually started around the time she got off work. She had been spared that today. O’Leary waited patiently at the hood of his car, eyes hidden behind dark sunglasses.

“Hope you don’t mind,” he said as Miriam walked around her Tahoe. “I thought I’d just wait here for you.”

“That’s fine,” she said. But it really wasn’t. She had wanted some time to unwind—a few minutes to take off her shoes, sit down, and relax.

“Sure you don’t want to meet up somewhere else? I passed a coffee shop on my way here about two miles away.”

She considered the proposal but didn’t want to drag things out any longer. It was best to get it all out of the way. The sooner the better. “You’re here. Let’s just talk inside.”

“Sounds great,” he said with a smile.

“This won’t take long, will it? I need to start dinner soon for Ana.”

“How is she doing?”

“Fine. She’s starting eighth grade next school year.”

“You look nice.” He said it out of the blue with a sheepish grin.

“Thank you,” she said, blushing slightly. She looked him up and down, taking notice of the scruffy chin and his disheveled hair. “Wish I could say the same for you, but... well.”

O’Leary’s smile dropped. “Thanks a lot! You know, I had a very long night.”

Miriam laughed as she walked ahead along the cobblestone path leading to the front door. She lived in a modest two-bedroom house, surrounded by similar-looking homes that had been around for decades. “Come on in, Detective Sensitive.”

O’Leary shook his head and waited as Miriam tried the doorknob. It was locked even though Ana was supposed to be home. She pulled the keys from her purse just as thunder faintly boomed in the distant sky.

“Storm’s been following me all the way from Palm Dale,” O’Leary said.

She turned back, opening the door. “Well, if it’s anything like what we had yesterday, you don’t want to stay here too long.”

“I think I get the hint,” he said, following her inside.

Past the foyer, the house was stuffy and old looking but clean. Miriam hung her purse and keys on some nearby hooks and led O’Leary to the kitchen, where she opened a window and turned on some lights.

“Have a seat,” she said, motioning to the kitchen table. She noticed a note from Ana sitting on the red tablecloth.

Mom, @ Jessica’s house working on our geography project. Will be home by 8. XOXO - Ana

“Cute,” she said to herself, note in hand.

“What’s that?” O’Leary said, indicating the note and walking over.

She turned around, startled. “Oh... nothing.” She held up the note with a smile. “Kids... The only time Ana doesn’t text me is when she’s afraid I’ll say no.”

“So she left a note?” O’Leary said.

“You know it.”

“Very clever,” he said, pulling out one of the three chairs at the small, circular table.

“How’s your son? Nathan, right?” she asked, walking to the sink.

“He’s fine,” O’Leary answered. “Living with his mother now.”

Miriam turned and leaned against the counter. “I’m sorry. I forgot...”

O’Leary waved a hand to reassure her that everything was OK. “No, no. It’s for the best, really.”

“I must say, I can understand where your ex is coming from. I wasn’t going to let Freddy have Ana.”

O’Leary stared ahead blankly, nodding.

“Can I get you a drink? Water? Soda?” she asked, opening the fridge.

“Water is fine,” he said.

She got a glass from the wood-stained cupboard and poured some water into it from a jug inside the fridge. As she walked over, O’Leary’s eyes wandered to examine the kitchen. It was quaint and clean—opposite from his man cave back home. She stopped and set his glass down on the table.

“Thank you,” he said, holding up the glass. She nodded, smiling ruefully.

“So what can I help you with?” she asked abruptly. “Better yet, what brings you all the way out here that couldn’t be said on the phone?”

O’Leary thought to himself, searching for the right words. “Sergeant Castillo, I just want to—”

Miriam stopped him. “I left the force a year ago. I’m a civilian now.”

“Sorry. Force of habit. It’s weird calling you anything else.”

“That’s okay. But I’ve moved on.”

He took a long sip of water as the overhead clock ticked. Once the glass hit the table, he began. “First, I want to thank you for agreeing to meet with me.”

Thunder rumbled outside, louder than before. “Not a problem.” She laughed a little to herself. “How about you just spit it out?”

“Fair enough,” he said. His hands went flat on the table as he interlaced his fingers. “Look, I get it. I get why you did what you did. And I didn’t come here to lecture you about any of it. Your superiors left you high and dry. You were a sacrificial lamb, and everyone knows it. But you’re a good cop, Castillo. You still have it in you. One of the worst things to come out of that terrible day, along with Jenny’s disappearance and Lang’s death, was you leaving the force as a result.”

Miriam stared ahead for a moment, not making eye contact. She then looked at him with serious eyes. “I appreciate your understanding, but we’re still not any closer to what you’re doing here.”

“I need your help,” O’Leary stated flatly. “And before you say no, let me explain that I’m not here to make you a cop again. I’m asking for a favor, nothing more and nothing less.”

“What kind of favor?” Miriam asked, pointing her beer at him.

“Help me find out what happened to Jenny Dawson.”

For what seemed a long time, there was only silence. Miriam tensed up and froze. She then turned around and looked outside the kitchen window, not saying anything.

O’Leary continued. “Jenny is officially a cold case now.”

“That’s because she’s dead,” Miriam said, looking down.

“We don’t know that for sure. I’ve seen abduction cases where the victim is found ten, twenty years later sometimes.” His voice rose with passion.

Unmoved by O’Leary’s conviction, Miriam turned around and approached him, leaning against the chair at the head of the table. “Deputy Lang died that day. Jenny Dawson died probably not long after. And a piece of me died with them as well.” Her eyes were glossy and pained with anguish. “You want to know why? Because I could have saved them both, and I didn’t! I can sit here and blame the department for railroading me, but the truth is, they were right. It was my fault.”

“That’s ridiculous,” O’Leary protested. “Come on, you’re smarter than that. You know what you sound like? You sound like a battered housewife making excuses for her husband.”

Miriam released her grip on the chair. “Again, I appreciate your support. I always have. But the truth is the truth. Nothing can change that.”

“You’re the only person I know who has encountered the Snatcher.”

“So what?” Miriam said.

“And that means something. Like you, I’m ready to walk away. But being a detective is all I know. It’s my life.” He leaned in closer, a look filled with shame replacing his schoolboy smile. “I haven’t solved a single case this year. And with this Dawson thing looming over my head, I don’t think I ever will.”

Miriam backed away and went back to the counter. “I wouldn’t be any good to you. Even if I wanted to help...”

“I don’t believe that,” O’Leary said.

“There’s nothing I can do. I’m sorry you came out here for nothing.” She opened the fridge door and started taking some food out, setting it on the counter.

“You were a damn fine police officer. Four decorated years in the Air Force. High marks from your superiors. Police academy test scores that are some of the highest on record. You’re highly skilled, Castillo. And I’ll be damned if I’m going to see it go to waste.”

“Is that what you think I’ve done?” she asked with her back to him. “Let my skills go to waste?”

“Frankly, yes.”

A silence came over them again. The clock seemed to tick louder than before. O’Leary finished his water and set the glass down, searching for the words that could turn the conversation in his favor. “It’s not an indictment, it’s just an observation.”

Miriam turned around and clasped her hands over her thighs. “Well, it’s time for me to get dinner started. Good seeing you, Detective.”

O’Leary grimaced with a knowing nod. He pulled a card from his coat pocket and put it on the table as he stood up. “All I’m asking is that you consider it. My number’s on my card.”

“Again, I’m sorry.”

O’Leary gave her a sympathetic look. “It’s okay. Just think about it. It’s all I ask.”

Miriam turned to the counter and began taking out plates from the cupboard. O’Leary stood awkwardly for a moment.

“Thanks for speaking with me,” he said.

“No problem,” Miriam said in a polite tone.

He left the kitchen, not pushing the issue any longer. Miriam kept her back turned and waited for the sound of the front door closing. The door shut. His engine started from outside and then revved as he backed out and drove away.

She went to the pantry and reached for a box of Hamburger Helper, set it on the counter, and took a frying pan from the cabinet. As she took a package of beef out of the freezer, her movements slowed.

She turned from the counter and went back to the table, where O’Leary’s card still rested. Next to his card was Ana’s note. She held it up and reread it, going over every word. The microwave was beeping. She set the note down and grabbed O’Leary’s card. “*Criminal Investigative Division, Lee County PD,*” it said. She put the card in her pocket and went back to the counter, where the task of making dinner awaited.

Lady in the Big Dress

At first glance, the kidnappings seemed random, but O'Leary formulated a discernible pattern. The unsolved abductions—five total—happened exactly one year apart from each other. This concerned him. If the pattern was correct, the Snatcher was going to strike again very soon.

Lee County had already been placed on high alert following the anniversary of Jenny Dawson's disappearance, but there was only so much law enforcement could do. The vigilance of parents was needed as well. The pattern of disappearances was largely happening in small towns within the county, and there was little doubt the Snatcher would strike again. But where?

At around the same time O'Leary drove up I-75 toward Sarasota to meet up with Miriam, ten-year-old Emily Beckett was at the Palm Dale Safeway store shopping for groceries with her mother, Karen, not realizing that they were being watched closely by someone they did not know.

In the soup aisle, Karen was pulling some cans off the shelves when Emily told her that she needed to use the restroom.

"We'll be over in that direction soon enough," Karen said, exhausted from a long day of running errands.

Emily, fresh out of school for the day, wore a floral-pattern top, jean shorts, and sneakers. Her mother, dressed in a beige hem-sleeve top and blue jeans, pushed the cart down the aisle as Emily swung her blonde pigtails back in the other direction. "But I gotta go now."

Karen glanced at her through her thin, rectangular glasses. "That's enough. No whining or I'll put your fruit snacks back on the shelf."

"Oh, come on!" Emily protested.

As they bickered, Karen noticed what looked like a large woman at the end of the aisle watching them. The person was wearing sunglasses—black as night—and was hunched over her cart, staring at bags of flour. She looked out of place: red-and-white polka-dot dress, blond beehive, and way too much make-up. Karen paid her little mind and moved on.

"Can we hurry up, then?" Emily asked.

Karen turned back to her momentarily. "Yes. Just hold your horses."

They pushed on toward the produce section, leaving the mystery person behind. Elevator music played overhead as customers sifted through produce. A high school stock boy stocked heads of lettuce. An elderly woman broke apart some bananas and put one on the seat of her cart. Karen approached a display of potatoes and grabbed a five-pound bag. She pointed to a restroom sign ahead near the meat section.

"There. Go use the restroom. I'll be right over here," she said.

Emily walked off toward the women's restroom as Karen pushed ahead into the meat section and began looking at packaged ground beef. Behind her, she heard a cart moving with a squeaky wheel and turned to catch a glimpse of the same strange beehive person going down another aisle.

Karen looked back at the rows of ground beef for dinner. A pound would probably do the trick. She looked over at the restrooms, growing impatient.

Moments passed and Karen was ready to move on. She pushed back toward the restroom, ready to go inside and tell Emily to get in gear, when suddenly the door opened and her daughter came out, wringing her hands.

“Let’s go, slowpoke,” Karen said.

“Wasn’t *that* long. Sheesh,” Emily said.

They were headed toward the checkout area in the front when Karen caught yet another glimpse of the beehive person entering one of the aisles ahead. She shrugged it off, but she couldn’t shake an uncomfortable feeling in her gut.

They got to the front of the store, but Emily stopped and turned in a slight panic. “Oh no, we forgot to go down the cereal aisle!” Her braces glistened in the bright supermarket lights overhead.

Karen looked at her watch. They were running behind. She had mail to drop off, and the post office was closing soon.

“Okay,” she conceded. “Go grab a box and meet me down the frozen food aisle, but hurry.”

Emily nodded and ran off toward the cereal as Karen looked for an empty checkout line. Three were open, and each one had a line. Karen sighed and looked to the cereals three aisles down. Something didn’t seem right. Another strange feeling in her gut. She bypassed the checkout line and went to the cereal aisle. Emily was nowhere in sight.

Karen looked at her watch and sighed again. “Emily!” No one answered. She pushed the cart back toward the checkout line, growing nervous. She looked around past the blurry lines of customers in front of her.

She backed away from her cart and began walking past each aisle. “Emily!”

“Mom?” she heard Emily’s voice say. Karen stopped at the frozen food aisle to see her daughter standing there with a box of Fruity Pebbles in hand and looking at the frozen pizzas. “What’s wrong?”

Karen hurried down the aisle and took her by the arm. “You said you were going to the cereal aisle. Let’s go.”

Emily struggled and tried to pull away. “I was just looking at the frozen pizzas!”

“No,” Karen said, dragging her away. “We have pizza rolls at the house.”

Emily groaned again as they went back to the cart all by itself near the first checkout line. Karen told her to help unload the groceries onto the conveyor belt. It had been a long day for both of them, and all Karen wanted to do was get home and relax for a minute. Tom, her husband, would probably get home from the office around the same time, asking about dinner, and she wasn’t in the mood.

They exited through the automatic doors with six paper bags of groceries in her cart toward the third parking row, where her blue Nissan Sentra was parked. Karen pulled her keys out of her purse and unlocked the car remotely.

“Can you help me with my homework tonight?” Emily asked, skipping along beside her.

Karen opened the trunk and began loading groceries. “I’ll try, but you might have to ask your dad first. I’ve got a lot of work to do tonight.”

“But he makes it so boring!”

Karen laughed. "That's not true. Your father is a very exciting man."

Emily rolled her eyes as they placed the last of the groceries in the trunk. "Yeah... sure," she said with a laugh. She then placed her hands on cart and began to push it toward the car return. "I'll take it."

"Thanks, honey," Karen said, shutting the trunk.

Suddenly, the mysterious person in the polka-dot dress grabbed the end of the cart, blocking it from moving. Emily looked up as Karen turned around, shocked. She felt a chill and pulled Emily away immediately.

"Excuse me, miss?" The person asked, beehive perfectly still. In one hand she held a tote bag full of groceries. "I can't seem to find my car around here. Do you think you could help?"

Karen pulled Emily closer and inched toward the front of the car. "Sorry, no. We've got to get going."

"Please," she pleaded. "I'm not feeling too well. Eyesight is not what it used to be." Her voice sounded too deep to be a woman's. The makeup was unconvincing. At a little over six feet tall, the "woman" was about the tallest Karen had ever seen.

With Emily at her side, she looked around and inched backward toward the car. There were people in the distance going to their cars, and their presence was reassuring.

"Have you been following us?" Karen asked.

"What do you mean?" the person asked in a surprised tone.

"I saw you in there. Multiple times. What do you want—"

At the tail end of Karen's sentence, a big, meaty fist pummeled her right between her eyes. A pop sounded, and she collapsed to the ground like dead weight. It happened so fast that Emily wasn't even sure what had happened. She turned to see her mother lying on the pavement next to the car, unconscious. And the same woman was now moving toward her as Emily backed away, ready to run.

She opened her mouth and breathed in, prepared to scream, when a cloth came down over her face, followed by a hand on the back of her head, pushing her nose and mouth into the noxious fumes. She kicked and swung, desperately trying to break free, but the woman was much too powerful. She tried to scream but only panicked, and muffled wheezes came out. The sounds of the parking lot—the cars, the carts, and the chatter—began to fade.

She managed to grab the thick, hairy arms holding her and dig her nails into the flesh as deep as they would go. The woman winced in pain and pushed her against the car in a fit of anger, knocking her out.

Emily fell to the ground next to her mother. The woman bent down, picked up the cloth, and then grabbed Emily, pulling her up, lifted her easily, and carried her away. No one, it seemed, noticed anything amiss. Several minutes passed before a car drove by and stopped abruptly when the driver apparently noticed a woman lying next to her car, motionless, and an empty cart wheeling away.

* * * * *

O'Leary got the call around six thirty p.m., soon after leaving Miriam's. Another abduction. A mother assaulted—punched in the face and left stone cold in the asphalt parking lot. Her daughter, Emily: nowhere to be found.

He was on the road when he got the call. "When did it happen?" he asked, holding his cell phone to his ear in disbelief.

"A little after five," said his partner, Lou.

"I don't understand," O'Leary continued. "In the middle of a Safeway parking lot? In broad daylight?" He was beside himself.

"So far, that looks to be the case," Lou answered.

O'Leary pressed the gas, trying to get to the crime scene as fast as he could. He was about an hour away and bound to hit traffic the closer he got to Palm Dale. He felt angry and defeated—like getting a punch to the gut. He was certain that the Snatcher had struck again and infuriated that the bastard had gotten away with it. His head throbbed. He couldn't think clearly. It had to be some kind of sick joke.

Lou told him, "*We knew that he was going to strike again. It was just a matter of time. Until we catch this guy, that's all there is to it.*"

"Not good enough," O'Leary said. "This girl."

"Emily?"

"Yes, Emily. We have to find her, Lou. There's no excuses. Tell them to call the damn FBI. I don't care." He could barely see straight. Panic had seized his heart, almost as though his own child had been abducted. There would be significant fallout over another abduction; that much he knew. There had to be an answer—some way to catch the Snatcher before he disappeared once again into obscurity.

"*The feds have already been called in,*" Lou said. "*Just get here as soon as you can, or we're going to lose this one. We'll be put on backbencher status before you know it.*"

"Don't let that happen," O'Leary said. "Damn it, Lou. Hold out, whatever it takes. Where's the mother?"

"*She's in the hospital,*" Lou said. "*Got banged up pretty bad. Broken nose. Ruptured disc in her back from the fall. She didn't take the news about her daughter too well.*"

"Of course not," O'Leary said. "Who would?"

"*Tried to run out of the hospital. Started hitting walls, kicking and screaming. Her husband just showed up, and he's trying to calm her down.*"

"Listen, Lou. We don't have a lot of time. Make sure they cordon the hell out of that parking lot. I want witness statements, DNA, anything we can find."

"*Sure thing,*" Lou said. "*What the hell you doing out there in the first place?*"

O'Leary glanced into his rearview mirror then at a flashing road sign off to the side that read, "Congested traffic ahead: Five miles."

"I had some business to take care of. But I..." O'Leary paused, lost in his own thoughts.

"*You still there, Dwight?*"

O'Leary slowed down and pulled over to the shoulder of the road as his tires kicked up dirt and pebbles. He braked and stopped the car. Vehicles rushed past him. Then everything went still and quiet.

"*Dwight?*" Lou asked.

"Yeah... I'm still here. Listen, I have to bring someone in on this. That's why I came out here."

Lou sighed into the phone. *"You still wasting your time with that Castillo chick? She's done, Dwight. She quit the force a year ago, and you're not gonna get anything outta her now."*

"I beg to differ," O'Leary said. "I'll be there soon. Get the feds on this thing, but don't let them take it over."

Lou scoffed. *"That's a hell of a contradiction, Kojak. You know that's what they do."*

"I need time!" O'Leary said, frustrated.

"We don't have any time, pal. The media are gonna have a field day with this one."

There was no sense in arguing. O'Leary told his partner that he'd be there as fast as he could and said goodbye. He hung up the phone and sat there in silence, torn between two entirely different options. He still believed in bringing Miriam in on the case, for whatever reason. It just made sense to him, and he didn't see the harm in it. The department frustrated him. He didn't know who he could trust. There had to be a reason that he had come up cold a year later following Jenny Dawson's disappearance. Would things be any different after Emily's?

He held his cell phone in his hand, hesitant. Before he could even make his decision, his phone rang, buzzing loudly. He didn't recognize the number, but he hoped it was who he thought it was.

"Hello?"

There was silence on the other end.

"Detective O'Leary?" A faint female voice.

"Sergeant Castillo? Is that you?"

"It's me," she said.

"There's been another kidnapping."

"I know. I just heard."

"But how'd you—"

"Never mind that. I still talk to people on the force. Another girl. Right in front of her mother..." She paused as if holding back her emotions. *"I don't know what I could do to help you at this point, but I know that I have to do something."*

O'Leary fumbled through his pockets, looking for his notepad. It was an instinct. "I—I'd love to have you on board. What can you do?"

"I'll give you a week."

O'Leary paused. "A week?"

"I'll take the rest of the week off and help you find this girl."

A sense of relief rushed over him. He couldn't explain it. Miriam had a gift. The gift of a skilled outsider. He felt ten times more confident with her on board, but he still couldn't explain why. "A week would be great."

"After that, I'm done with police work, no matter the outcome."

"Of course, no problem. Thank you. Should I pick you up now?" He looked at his watch. "I'm about twenty minutes away."

"I have to get a sitter for Ana and talk to my job."

"I realize that, but I just want you to know why we need to get on this thing fast. They're calling in the feds," he said.

"I can't leave my daughter on the drop of a dime. I understand that time's critical. Just let me do what I need to do," she said.

“Of course. When do you want to meet up?”

“*Give me an hour or two,*” she said.

O’Leary considered the gamble. The first forty-eight hours of any missing persons case were the most critical. He needed to get back to the station fast. But he was seldom one to deviate from an initial plan.

“Sounds good,” he said. “I’ll be over soon.”

Miriam said a quick goodbye and hung up. O’Leary sat in his car trying to think. There was a way to solve the case, he was sure of it. But he didn’t think he could do it without Miriam. She meant something. She had encountered the Snatcher, saw her partner get shot right in front of her, and quit the force soon afterward. She needed justice every bit as much as he did. That was the only answer he could come up with to explain why he was parked on the side of the interstate while a crime scene festered one hundred miles away.

* * * * *

Miriam set her cell phone down on the counter. Ana had not yet been dropped off by Jessica’s mom, and while she waited, her mind was swimming, sorting through all the obstacles the case presented. O’Leary had called her only twenty minutes before—a courtesy call—to let her know that another girl had been abducted. A girl who fit the same profile as the others: ten to twelve years old, pure, and innocent.

Things were different for Miriam after the call. She not only wanted to catch the Snatcher, she also wanted to kill him. That was her purpose.

Her mind raced with questions, mainly: Who could take care of Ana in her absence? Freddy, Ana’s father, entered her mind. It wasn’t the most appealing choice, but it was reasonable, given the short notice. She walked to the stove and stirred the Hamburger Helper, not sure exactly what she had just agreed to.

Another girl had been taken, and Miriam knew she could not let her fade away into obscurity. Her anger, sadness, and shame resurfaced from the year before, though she felt ready. She was going to find the monster who had haunted her dreams and end his reign of terror once and for all.

On the Case

O’Leary stopped at a diner, waiting as patiently as possible to give Miriam the time she needed. He was anxious and unrelenting but had made his mind up and decided to stick with it, waiting. Miriam would be an asset to the investigation. That was what he believed, no matter how impractical it appeared. He took a corner booth and placed his satchel next to him, full of files from the case.

He pulled one file out and examined it carefully—the criminal profile for the Snatcher that he’d initially devised. His suspect was thought to be a Caucasian male in his late thirties to early fifties, average height and build, and someone who could blend into the community without being noticed. He was believed to be an intelligent, cautious man who rarely took chances. A family man, perhaps.

Someone who kept his activities as private as possible. Someone who didn't arouse suspicion. And ultimately a psychopath who would never stop.

In her report, Miriam claimed that the driver who shot her partner had long blonde hair. She assumed the driver to be Betsy Cole, the owner of the vehicle. And no one at the department could blame her for making that assumption.

O'Leary believed that they were dealing with a suspect who frequently changed appearances, even wearing disguises and wigs. The subject fit the profile of a potential sociopath—charming and charismatic. Someone who could manipulate and earn the trust of his captives. Judging by the intervals between the crimes, the lack of evidence, and the baffling disappearance of his victims, O'Leary believed they were dealing with someone who knew exactly what he was doing.

The victims had all been abducted close to their homes and never seen again. And with the exception of Jenny's kidnapping, there were no witnesses. He thought to himself as a waitress came to the table asking him if he wanted another Coke. He shook his head and thanked her. He'd had yet seen a picture of Emily, but he couldn't get her out of his mind.

* * * * *

Ana was dropped off by Jessica's mom around eight p.m. She walked up the driveway with her book bag over the shoulder of her blue cardigan sweater. Her short black hair bounced above her neck, and she quickened her step when she saw two cars parked in the driveway. There was her mother's Tahoe and what looked like her father's Toyota pickup truck. Ana was suspicious. She walked in between the cars and hurried to the front door as lightning quietly flashed above like white electric veins.

She walked inside and could smell the aroma of Hamburger Helper. Her mom's voice sounded from the kitchen. She was talking to someone, likely her dad, and when Ana came around the corner of the foyer into the kitchen, she could see him sitting at the table, just like the old days, his same short, frazzled dark hair and good tan, looking like he always had. He raised his head and smiled at her. Her mother stood against the kitchen counter with her arms crossed, as if Ana had interrupted something.

"Hey there," Freddy said. His thin face looked more sunken than before. He looked tired and overworked. He had issues Ana knew little about. Issues that had driven her parents apart, though her mother wasn't entirely innocent either.

Ana stood motionless for a moment with her backpack still in hand. Her dad pulled a chair out from the dinner table and patted the seat with a smile. "Come sit next to your dad."

She hung her backpack over one chair and sat in the other, next to her father.

"I'll go ahead and make you a plate," Miriam said, turning to the stove.

"I already ate at Jessica's," Ana said.

Miriam dropped the spoon into the pot and sighed. "I told you I was going to make dinner."

"Relax," Freddy said. "You can't expect a kid to wait that long to eat, can you?"

Miriam said nothing as she held the pot up and shoveled the rest of the food into a Tupperware container with a spoon. Ana looked toward the sink and saw two empty bowls. Confused, she wondered what it was all about. Had they eaten

dinner together? Her dad lived close but rarely visited. Why was he there now? When they spoke, their courteous tones made her suspicious.

Miriam placed the Tupperware in the refrigerator and walked to the table. “I asked your father here tonight so we could all talk.”

“About what?” Ana asked.

“Your mom has to do something important, and I’m going to be watching you for a little bit,” Freddy said.

Miriam cut in, as though she didn’t trust Freddy’s assessment of the situation. “I’ve been called back onto a case that’s very important to me. It’s important to a lot of people.” She stopped and placed a hand on the back of Ana’s chair. “I’ll be gone for a week, and I’d rather you stay here and continue school. Your father agreed to stay here and take care of you while I’m gone.”

Ana looked from parent to parent, confused. “So does this mean you guys are getting back together?”

Freddy smiled and shook his head. “No, honey. That’s not it.”

“Why not? If you’re going to stay here a week, you might as well just move in.”

Both parents looked at each other, then back to Ana.

“That’s not happening,” Miriam said, patting her head. “I have a job to do, and I’m leaving tonight.”

In the past, Ana had heard them fighting. She had seen her father drink and drink. She had seen him sitting around the house all day while her mom worked. She had seen him go to jail for driving after drinking. She saw a lot. But the scene before her at that moment was perhaps the most surreal of all.

“Can’t I just go with you?” she blurted out, noticing a disappointed expression cross her father’s worn face.

“No,” Miriam said. “You’re going to school. Nothing changes. Your father is going to watch you, and that’s that.”

Ana looked around, thinking of some way to keep her mom from leaving. “What about my spelling bee on Thursday?”

Miriam nodded with a look of regret. “Your dad can record it for me.”

Freddy took Ana’s hand and squeezed. “It’ll be okay. Don’t you want to see me?”

Ana shrugged. “I guess.”

“Ana, that’s enough,” Miriam said, startling her. “Now go take your things to your room and let us talk this out.”

“Whatever,” she said, without making eye contact with either parent. She grabbed her backpack and left the kitchen, walking toward the hall where her room was. She flipped her light switch on and closed the door. A week with her father. She supposed that things could be worse.

* * * * *

Silence fell over the kitchen after Ana left. Freddy looked to Miriam. “Spunky for her age, isn’t she?”

“You don’t know the half of it,” Miriam said, walking back to the counter. Plates clanked together as she rinsed them, opened the dishwasher, and placed them inside.

Freddy didn’t seem bothered by Ana’s objections to his watching her. “I’m just glad I get to spend some time with her.”

Miriam closed the dishwasher and began to wipe the countertops with a sponge. She was thankful for Freddy coming all the way to their house on short notice and agreeing to watch Ana. She couldn't believe he had actually agreed to it. She wanted to think that he had changed and that he and Ana would have a great time. Part of her, however, remained skeptical.

"And there'll be no drinking during the week, correct?" she asked him.

Freddy pushed his chair back defensively, scraping against the vinyl floor. "Jesus, Miriam. How many fucking times do we have to go over this?"

"Language, please," she said.

"I told you that I'm sober. I have a decent job. Everything is working out now."

"I know, Freddy. But we've had this conversation many times—"

"I didn't come over here to go on about the past. I came here to help with Ana. And you..."

"I appreciate that," Miriam said, opening the fridge and placing various containers inside. She closed the fridge door and lifted her head, listening to the muffled pop music playing in Ana's room. "I should go talk to her," she said, walking out of the kitchen.

Suddenly, Freddy's hand reached out and clasped her wrist, right below her bracelet. She froze in place and looked down, shocked that he would even have the nerve to touch her.

His eyes were serious, and his face was stricken with concern. "You still haven't told me where you're going."

She yanked her hand away but remained in place. "I told you. It's police business."

"So you're doing pro bono work now?"

"The person who killed my partner just kidnapped another girl. Do you get it now?" Miriam's gray eyes were wide with anger.

Freddy nodded, and a hint of sadness crossed his face. "I just don't want anything to happen to you."

"I'll be fine," she said.

"I don't want to see you get your hopes up for nothing."

"Just focus on Ana," Miriam said. "That's all you need to worry about."

Freddy said nothing more, but his eyes remained fastened on her. Miriam walked away, but in the living room, she stopped and turned around again, feeling his stare.

"What?" she asked, annoyed.

"Are you seeing anyone?"

"That's none of your business. We're divorced, understand? As in, not going to happen again."

Freddy rose from his chair and walked over to her with slow, confident strides. "All I'm saying is that you should loosen up a little."

He took her soft hands in both of his, not taking his eyes away from her thinly sculpted face, her red lips and dark brows. She removed her hands from his and put them at her sides. He leaned forward to kiss her, and she didn't pull away. Instead, their lips pressed together as he reached down and squeezed her hands.

He then moved his hand up her back, pressing her closer as she closed her eyes. For a moment, her stress dissipated, replaced by feelings of familiarity and comfort. She didn't see the harm in going further. Apparently, neither did Freddy.

Suddenly a car honked in the driveway. She pushed Freddy away and went to the window to look out. O'Leary had arrived. As if it were preplanned, the news coming from the living room television sounded more urgent suddenly.

Authorities have placed a high alert around Lee County following the kidnapping of Emily Beckett, who was abducted from a Safeway parking lot today after a brutal assault on her mother. Investigators fear that the young girl's abduction is just the latest in the long line of child kidnappings that have plagued the area for the past five years. The suspect, known to residents as the Snatcher, is also a suspect in the shooting death of thirty-two-year-old sheriff's deputy Joseph Lang during a routine traffic stop a year ago.

Miriam went to the living room and stood in front of the television. Familiar images of the school parking lot and Lang's crime scene filled the screen, together with pictures of both victims. Miriam's heart seized as they showed her partner's portrait. Her knees felt weak as she leaned against the wall.

The newscaster continued,

The suspect in both cases has been linked to at least four other child abductions, each within one year of each other. Parents around the community are urged to keep a careful eye on their children, not leaving them anywhere alone. Neighborhoods have also imposed curfews for children twelve and under while the search for the so-called Snatcher continues.

Outside, O'Leary tapped the horn again. "My ride is here," Miriam said, picking up a packed bag sitting near the foyer.

Freddy folded his arms as though everything was kosher. "Why don't you invite this detective in and let me meet him?"

Miriam looked up and sighed. "Freddy. Just stop."

Freddy held his hands out defensively with a laugh. "Stop what?"

"I have to do this. Don't you understand that?"

"Of course I do," he said defensively.

Freddy lowered his hand to touch hers. "When we were married, I always worried about you. You don't understand that, being on the other side, but it never changes. Whether we're married or not, it never changes."

Miriam opened her mouth to speak when suddenly Ana entered the room in her pajamas. "What are you guys going on about?"

"Nothing," they said in unison.

O'Leary's car idled in the driveway. Miriam's phone buzzed again. She looked at the screen. "My ride is waiting."

She grabbed her purse. Freddy followed and took her bag. "Here, lemme get that."

Ana followed her parents out the door.

"You have everything you need?" Freddy asked.

Miriam walked outside and stopped, turning toward the two of them. "I should. Thanks."

Idling behind Miriam's car was a gray four-door Ford Crown Victoria. O'Leary was at the wheel and rolled the window down. "Good evening," he said with a wave.

Freddy's two-door black pickup was parked next to Miriam's. They walked past it as O'Leary unlocked his trunk from the inside. They heard it click open, and Freddy placed Miriam's bag inside and closed it. He introduced himself to O'Leary as Miriam gave Ana a hug, squeezing her tight.

"You be good for your father, and I'll see you in a week."

Ana nodded, seeming upset and despondent. "Where are you going? I want to go too."

Miriam placed her hands on her daughter's shoulders. "I wish you could, but you can't. It's important police work."

"Does that mean you're going to be a policewoman again?"

She hugged Ana again as Freddy waited patiently, standing nearby. "No, honey. This is just temporary. But I'll be home soon. Promise to do well in school while I'm gone."

"I will."

"I know you'll do great on the spelling bee." She then kissed Ana on the forehead. "I love you."

"I love you too," Ana said, eyes down.

Miriam straightened up, patted Ana on the head, and then turned her attention to Freddy. Static chatter played out on O'Leary's police radio. Miriam gave Freddy a trusting and appreciative look. "Thank you for doing this. Especially on short notice."

Freddy shrugged. "Hey, what are ex-husbands for?" They both smiled.

Miriam pointed at him. "Don't let her out of your sight. You hear me?"

Freddy put his hand over his chest. "I won't. I promise."

Miriam gave him a quick hug and thanked him again. She said goodbye one last time to Ana and then went around to the other side of O'Leary's car, with Freddy following behind her. He opened the car door and closed it gently after she was inside. Ana stood next to him, and he put his arm around her shoulder as they walked back toward the house.

"You ready to do this?" O'Leary asked as Miriam put her seat belt on.

"As ready as I'll ever be," Miriam said.

O'Leary shifted into reverse. Miriam waved to Ana and Freddy, who had turned to watch as O'Leary backed out of the driveway.

"See you in a week!" she said.

"Bye, Mom!"

The Crown Victoria roared off down the street, leaving Miriam's house, daughter, and ex-husband in the distance. She still wasn't sure exactly what she was doing, but whatever it was, it felt like the right thing. If there was any hope of finding the Snatcher before the next girl was taken, she wanted to be a part of it.

Crime Scene

O'Leary merged onto the highway, headed south toward Palm Dale. Miriam hadn't gone anywhere near the town since moving away. There were many unanswered questions to discuss between them. Oddly enough, however, the conversation didn't begin with the case.

"So you and Freddy?" O'Leary began.

Miriam turned to him. It was a harmless question, but she still felt imposed upon. "Me and Freddy what?"

O'Leary shifted in his seat. "Didn't mean to get personal. I was just curious."

"That's okay," Miriam said. "He's going to watch Ana while I'm gone."

"That's good," O'Leary said, ending it there. "So where do you want to start?" he asked.

"We need to get an idea of who we're looking for," Miriam said. "Any witnesses or descriptions they could put an APB out on?"

"Nothing yet," O'Leary said.

Miriam looked at him cockeyed and in disbelief. "What do you mean, nothing yet? This man punched a mother in the face—"

O'Leary cut her off. "In broad daylight, I know. I went over this with Lou. And the mother says she was hit by a woman, not a man."

"A woman?" Miriam repeated, shocked. Though it would make sense. She, herself, could remember the long blond hair of the driver who'd shot her partner in cold blood. The image was seared into her brain and would never fade. But a woman kidnapping children was nearly unheard of. Certainly in Palm Dale.

"I'm not buying it either. Doesn't fit the profile," O'Leary said.

"He's wearing a disguise," Miriam ventured. "A wig, probably."

O'Leary's eyes went back to the road as Miriam thought to herself. She tugged at the sleeve of her jean jacket and adjusted her ponytail. The white-striped road raced by as they continued on rural I-75, thirty-five miles from Palm Dale and closing in.

O'Leary pulled on his tie, trying to loosen the collar of his button-down shirt. It felt as though he had been wearing the same standard shirt and suit for the past decade. The thought came to him that he should have been promoted by now. But that was the least of his concerns. They had a girl to find. One to two days max. Any longer than that, and he was certain that she'd become the next cold case in a long line of them.

He had placed a briefcase containing some of the case files on the passenger-side floor, and Miriam began flipping through them. She pulled out the one marked "criminal profile." She had her own ideas but looked through the faded manila folder with interest nonetheless.

The suspect was presumed to be living in the area, or at least within South Florida. He had staked his claim, and he would keep plundering it again and again until he was stopped.

For their suspect, abducting young girls was an obsession, something he did to appease a sick urge he was unable to suppress. But without recovering a single body, investigators could only presume that sexual assault was central in all the

abductions. Whether he killed his victims or locked them in a basement remained to be seen.

She closed the first file and opened another one, filled with police reports of abductions from Cape Coral, Harlem Heights, Cypress Lake, and McGregor—all cities within the same county. Now Palm Dale had two abductions on its plate.

“We have to consider that these girls mean everything to him,” O’Leary said. “He shot your partner to keep from getting caught. So he has something to lose. A family maybe, or a job. Those are the lengths he’ll go to. And anyone who can pull the trigger like he did has probably killed before.”

“A complete psychopath,” Miriam added. “But he’s smart enough to know how to hide it. He’s not greedy.”

O’Leary nodded. “That’s what I was thinking. He’s got impeccable restraint. But he’s never going to stop.” He paused and looked at Miriam. “What do you think?”

“I don’t know,” she answered with a sigh. “I’ve spent so long blocking him from my mind, it’s hard to get back into this.” She turned to look out the window, thinking, as miles of darkened cow fields passed by. “Maybe I jumped into this too early.”

“Nonsense,” O’Leary said. “It’ll all come back to you soon. I know you have it in you.”

“I appreciate the confidence, but we don’t have the time for things to start coming back to me. I need to get it together fast.” She went to the files on her lap as the police radio crackled with updates on the child abduction case.

“Amber Alert issued approximately one hour ago. Suspect is described by the victim’s mother as a large female, at least two hundred and thirty pounds, with a beehive hairdo and bright polka-dot dress.”

Miriam and O’Leary looked at each other with skepticism.

“Seriously?” Miriam said.

“Stranger things have happened,” O’Leary said.

They passed flatlands of never-ending rivers and marshes—and a sign reading twenty-four miles to Palm Dale—a town Miriam had vowed never to return to. Now they were looking for an obese woman from the 1950s. It didn’t make any sense, but then again it made perfect sense—in line with Miriam’s belief that their suspect wore disguises.

“What better way to gain the trust of young girls if you’re dressed up as a woman?” she said.

O’Leary nodded. “What, like a cross-dresser?”

“Whatever you want to call it. Our suspect is a man. That’s what you need to tell your guys. He’s good at what he does and feels empowered with each new victim.”

O’Leary cleared his throat. “Off topic, I wanted to let you know that you will be compensated for this as an outside adviser, in case you were wondering.”

“With or without pay, my intentions are the same,” Miriam said.

“But you’ll take the money, though, right?”

“I’m not stupid,” Miriam said.

O’Leary laughed. “Of course you’re not.”

They passed fields of orange groves leading into the town. Miriam took a deep breath as the speed limit fell, the buildings were set closer together, and they came

into town. It looked the same as Miriam remembered it. The historic downtown area had its shops, bars, and restaurants—quaint and old fashioned with brick buildings, old signs, and narrow roads with cars parked on the side of the street.

O’Leary pushed a button, rolled down both passenger and driver windows, and leaned his arm out as the cool air flowed inside the car. Beyond the business district, residential neighborhoods had grown by the dozens over the years. Initially a retirement community, Palm Dale had grown into suburban sprawl with modestly priced housing for families that had come from all over. There were schools, a library, lakes, parks, and hiking trails. That was the Palm Dale most people in the area knew. But to venture beyond the suburbs was a different world all together among the wilderness and wide-ranging marshes.

It was late in the evening when they pulled into the Safeway lot. An entire row of spaces had been cordoned off. There were police cars everywhere, their lights still flashing. A news van was parked off to the side. A female reporter stood in front of the Safeway with the bright lights of the camera on her face as she spoke into her microphone.

O’Leary parked near a line of police tape and turned off the ignition. Miriam looked at the police officers standing around—twenty or so of them—trying to see if she recognized anyone. She felt immediately out of place.

“Let’s do this,” O’Leary said, opening his door.

She turned to face him. “What do you want me to do?”

“Just observe. See if you can put some fresh eyes on this scene. Where was he parked? How did he get Emily into his vehicle without notice?”

“What could I possibly find that the twenty officers on site haven’t already?” she asked.

O’Leary offered a smile of confidence. “Plenty. Just stick with me.”

He got out of the car, giving Miriam an encouraging smile, and watched as she pushed open her door, hesitating for a moment before stepping out. They approached the scene unnoticed by the other investigators and officers, who were deep within their own work. The area cordoned off had been cleared, with the exception of Karen Beckett’s blue Nissan Sentra. O’Leary approached one of the investigators there, an older man named Hayes who wore a suit almost identical to O’Leary’s.

He introduced Miriam as his consultant. Hayes didn’t seem to bat an eye or even recognize her, for which she was relieved. Detective Hayes led them to the car, where another investigator was taking pictures, his camera flashing in bursts that came in quick succession.

“Knocked her out right here,” Hayes said, pointing at the pavement next to the car. A helicopter flew by in the distance with its spotlight on. Miriam scanned the area. There were at least a dozen other media vans parked along the front of the Safeway store with their antennas raised high in the air. She could feel it in her bones. They were going to have a field day with this one. The Lee County Police Department had not only failed to catch the Snatcher the first time. He had struck again, and they were no closer to figuring anything out than they had been a year ago.

“I don’t get it,” O’Leary said to Hayes, frustrated. “Not a single witness? How is that possible?”

“So far nothing. But we’re still interviewing a slew of people who were around here when it happened,” Hayes said.

Recognizing her own words in O’Leary’s bafflement, Miriam split from the group, making her way around the scene. Apparently, search teams had already been deployed throughout the surrounding area, intending to search up to a ten-mile radius. Mandatory checkpoints had been put into place. It seemed impossible that anyone could get away so easily without drawing notice—especially given the suspect’s appearance.

Dressed down and looking out of place in her jean jacket and pants, Miriam approached the cart-return slot across from the Nissan and examined the line of carts haphazardly pushed into it. A thought occurred to her as she walked back to where O’Leary was asking question after question of another investigator.

“Excuse me,” she said. “Has anyone looked at those carts yet?”

O’Leary stopped as he and Hayes switched their focus to the cart return.

“I mean, if Mrs. Beckett was just leaving the grocery store, I doubt she had time to return her cart before being assaulted.”

“Well?” O’Leary said, looking at Hayes.

Hayes stuttered. “Yes, that makes perfect sense.”

“So why not dust all the carts for prints?” she continued. “It looks like our suspect took the time to return it for her.”

“But why would she take the risk?” Hayes asked. He seemed to be in the camp that believed the suspect was female.

Miriam took the question. “Because by now whoever we’re dealing with is getting bored, playing games with us. Whenever an offender gets away with his crimes, a part of him yearns to get caught. A part of him desires the closure in it.”

O’Leary watched her, impressed, as Hayes nodded, considering her theory.

Miriam, fully in detective mode now, seemed to reconsider what she had said or how she had said it and backpedaled to a more modest view. “It’s just a theory. I’m thinking textbook criminal here.”

“We should start dusting those carts, don’t you think?” O’Leary asked Hayes.

“Yes. Right away,” Hayes said. He walked over to the group of officers and called out to them, pointing at the cart return. “Fellas, let’s go ahead and dust these for prints. Who’s got a print kit?”

The officers got in gear and approached the cart return. One of them carried a small black bag with him. He unzipped the bag and began brushing each cart carefully with a pair of latex gloves on.

O’Leary turned to Miriam. “I was going to mention the cart thing too.”

“Oh, were you?” she said with a laugh.

“Seriously, though. Good work.” He looked up into the sky, satisfied. “I think this time it’s going to be different. I think we can catch him in time. They’re checking Mrs. Beckett for any DNA left on her from the assault. That plus fingerprints on the cart will help us narrow down the list.”

“But will we do it in time, Detective? That’s the question.”

They looked around, observing the active crime scene. It was strange to think that somewhere, not too far away, the Snatcher might be holding his latest victim.

“You think he wants to be caught?” O’Leary asked.

“I have my suspicions,” Miriam said.

He turned away and walked off toward his car, beckoning her. “Here, let’s go down to the station. There’s some stuff I want to show you and get your take on.”

She followed behind him as a helicopter flew directly overhead, lower than before. She had heard that the FBI was on its way. Could they make any difference? Could she? They got into O’Leary’s car and left the crime scene behind. Every minute mattered. Every hour brought them closer to losing Emily. This time would be different. If not, Miriam wasn’t sure she could forgive herself.

Portrait of a Suspect

Across from the fire station, the Lee County Police Department was in view—one long brick building of multiple departments and sections. The front parking lot was full of police cruisers and unmarked vehicles. The visitor and employee parking lot to the side of the building was reaching full capacity as well. It seemed as though every officer was on call, even from neighboring counties.

O’Leary found a spot at the far end of the employee lot, close to a chain-link fence. Near the side entrance of the building, Miriam saw a group of five men in suits huddled together and smoking next to an outdoor ashtray. As with the officers at the crime scene, none of them stood out. Their faces were a blur. O’Leary turned off the ignition and again noticed Miriam’s nervous hesitation, the same initial reluctance she had shown at the first crime scene.

“It’s going to be okay. The last thing on anyone’s mind around here is giving you the stink eye. Besides, everyone on the force respects you. They know what happened.”

Miriam shook her head. “I walked away. Police have a thing about that. They never forget.”

O’Leary opened his door and shrugged. “You had no choice. Everyone knows that.”

Miriam opened her door slowly. Cigarette smoke drifted past from the group of white-shirt-and-tie smokers. It looked as though they were planning to burn the midnight oil. She still didn’t know exactly why O’Leary was so keen on having her around. She didn’t understand his motivations any more than she understood her own for agreeing to go along with it. She chalked it up to desperation on both their parts.

“Where to now?” she asked as they headed toward the building.

“We’re going to look at some case files and find a link.”

Miriam reached out and tugged on his arm in protest until he stopped walking. They both did. The group of smokers stopped and looked over at them. “Detective O’Leary, do you really think now is the time to be going over paperwork? We’ve got a little girl out there scared out of her mind. We need to be out there looking for her. Taking action.”

O’Leary placed his hand on her shoulder to calm her down. “I understand that, but we already have the whole damn force on it. They’re probably running around in circles. We need to take the little time we have and get it right.”

“So we go door to door, check every house in town,” Miriam said. “How hard could it be?”

O’Leary cleared his throat. “Look, Miriam. In my line of work, I have three main things to go on—knowledge, experience, and instinct.” After counting on his fingers, he looked at her as though the matter was settled. “And I’ve never been as determined to get it right as I am now.”

“Me too,” she added.

“So are you with me?” he asked, signaling to the building.

“As long as you agree to one thing,” she said.

“What’s that?”

“That when we catch this guy, you let me put a bullet between his eyes.”

He said nothing as they walked down the sidewalk, past the smokers, and toward the employees’ side entrance to the building. O’Leary swiped his key card near a sensor. He pulled the door open as it unlocked and held it open for Miriam. She rewarded him with a nod.

A slightly overweight clerk in full police uniform looked up from his desk as they entered.

O’Leary showed him his ID badge hanging from a lanyard around his neck. He then pointed to Miriam. “Need a visitor badge for Ms. Castillo here, please.”

The clerk nodded, took Miriam’s license, and ran her information. As they waited, Miriam looked down the carpeted hall, flanked with offices on both sides. The building itself was old, and some of the wood paneling on the walls looked straight out of the 1970s.

Nicotine stains were still noticeable in areas near the ceiling, reminders of a time when smoking indoors was permitted, ages ago. They had remodeled and added onto the building, but its fifty-year-old character still showed in places. The hall smelled of coffee. Plain-clothed and uniformed officers crossed from room to room, lost in their own work. It was the busiest she had ever seen the place. Only one other time came to mind: last year, following the Dawson abduction.

The clerk processed a visitor’s badge and handed it to Miriam. They continued down the hall to the Criminal Investigation Department, where his desk sat in the corner, with paperwork piled high behind his nameplate. There were people everywhere, men and women in suits mostly, on their phones, gathering in small groups talking, and some typing wildly on their computers. O’Leary didn’t know who half of the people were.

One look at his desk, and he turned away, turning to Miriam. “Let’s find someplace else where we can do this. Somewhere quiet.”

She nodded, and they walked along desks and stopped at a corner cubicle where a tall, mustached detective was at his computer typing with one hand and holding a turkey club sandwich in the other. His sleeves were rolled up. His eyes darted across the screen as he typed.

O’Leary leaned in and slapped the man on the shoulder. “Looks like the circus is in town. All these people coming to see your mustache?” O’Leary said, smiling.

Lou looked up, startled but then amused. “Very funny, Dwight. They’re here to see the Incredible Dateless Wonder, which is perfect now that you’re in town.”

O'Leary tried to get him in a headlock, but Lou backed away in his old-fashioned rolling chair. Miriam stood quietly to the side, amused. O'Leary looked back and signaled to her. "You remember Sergeant Castillo."

Lou gave her a friendly nod and extended his hand. "Yes, of course. Welcome back, Sergeant."

Miriam shook his hand. "Just Miriam's fine."

"Very well," Lou said. His attention went to O'Leary as his tone and expression turned serious. "It's a madhouse here. They brought in two departments from two different counties. This latest kidnapping doesn't reflect well on us, for sure."

"I don't understand," O'Leary said. "This guy has never struck in the same town twice. Why now?"

Lou shrugged and took a bite of his turkey sandwich. "Your guess is as good as mine. Maybe he has nowhere else to go."

"Or maybe he's getting lazy," Miriam said.

O'Leary leaned close to Lou. "We're trying to keep a low profile here with her. Think you can help us?"

Lou seemed confused. "What do you mean?"

"I need some place where me and her can talk in private and go over some files together. Specifically the Gowdy files."

Lou raised both brows. "Careful, Dwight. You don't want to go barking up the wrong tree. Guy tried to sue us before, and he'll do it again."

"I just need somewhere away from all this commotion," O'Leary said.

Lou stood up from his squeaking swivel chair and stretched. He looked around. "You can take the B room. I think it should be open."

"Great," O'Leary said. "Thanks." He looked at Miriam and signaled toward the exit. "This way." They left without drawing too much attention to themselves. O'Leary led her down another hall to a small interview room. There was a table in the middle and a chair on each side—the walls barren except for a clock with a big face and Roman numerals hanging in the middle.

"No one should bother us in here," he said, holding the door open for her. Miriam eyed the room suspiciously.

"If you're so sure that this Gowdy you mention is your man, why haven't you arrested him?" she asked.

"Because I could be wrong. And if I am, that means we'll never find Emily in time."

Miriam pulled a chair out from the table and sat. O'Leary promised to be back quickly with the files and left the room, locking the door behind him. She looked around the small, lifeless room, trying not to feel like a prisoner herself. She pulled out her cell phone and sent Freddy a text message asking how Ana was doing. He sent a message back saying that she had gone to bed. She replied, asking him what he was doing.

"*Just watching TV,*" the message said.

She thanked him again and said goodbye. When he replied with "*good night,*" she said, "*Yeah right.*" She scrolled through the news on her phone, looking for any mentions of the kidnapping, when the door unlocked and O'Leary walked in. He was balancing a box filled to the brim with files and pushed the door shut. Miriam couldn't believe it. *This was what they were going to be doing?*

He dropped the box on the table with a thud and rolled his sleeves up. He began pulling files out of the box and setting them on the table—and appearing out of breath.

“Don’t let that box beat you up,” Miriam said.

O’Leary looked up. “You’ll be saying the same about both of us here soon.” He pointed to the first file, which he had placed on the desk in front of Miriam. “This is Jenny Dawson’s cold case file. We need to look through it piece by piece.”

Overwhelmed, Miriam placed her head in her hands. She still wasn’t entirely convinced that going through files was going to help them find Emily. “How much are you paying me again?”

O’Leary offered a nervous laugh. “We can do this. Just focus.”

“We could be here for days. Why don’t you start by telling me about this suspect of yours? This Gowdy fellow,” she said.

He searched inside the box and pulled out another file, equally thick and secured within a large mailing envelope. He tossed the file on the table in front of Miriam, covering up Jenny’s file.

“His name is Ray Gowdy, and he’s the closest thing to a suspect that I have.”

She looked down. “Gowdy File” was written in black permanent marker on the envelope. Miriam untied the thin string over the seal and pulled the file out. It was packed with reports, statements, photos, and other documents, all providing a glimpse into one of Palm Dale’s most notorious residents.

He was a man with a record that began with small, petty crimes he committed as a young adult. By thirty-seven, he had been to prison multiple times for battery and assault—among other offenses. His mug shots showed a progression from his earliest years to his latest—from a shaggy-haired, smooth-faced youth to a man with a beard, graying hair, and some noticeable scars on his face.

Things began to come back to Miriam. She remembered Gowdy. He was always thought of around the station as the go-to suspect for any crime in the area. But she never saw him do anything. For the past five years, his record had been clean.

O’Leary provided her further insight as she flipped through his arrest record. Gowdy had come to Palm Dale from Birmingham, Alabama, in his teens with his mother. He befriended the Anderson boys in high school, especially the second eldest, Phillip. The Andersons belonged to a family that owned the lucrative auto salvage and recycling plant located off the last interstate exit out of town.

From the beginning, Gowdy showed early warning signs: fights, suspensions, and eventual expulsion for bringing a knife to school. The years after high school weren’t much better. He and Phillip looted homes and businesses. They sold weed. They got into bar fights. Miriam didn’t want to believe that some people were just “bad,” as she had encountered all kinds during her time on the force. Gowdy, however, fit the description of a bad seed. The question was, what was he still doing on the street?

A year after his latest stint in prison following grand theft conviction, Ray seemed to be getting his life together. He worked at the Anderson yard and had stayed out of trouble for years. He even bought a house, got married, and had two children. While the report stated the bafflement of authorities, Miriam got chills down her spine. *A family man.* He fit the bill perfectly.

The Andersons, it appeared, had welcomed Ray into their family after his own mother had passed away from a brain tumor, and they'd been close ever since. All seemed at peace. Then, however, suspicious things began happening around Palm Dale. People went missing—drug dealers and prostitutes mainly.

The Andersons consisted of Boone and Judith Anderson—a couple in their sixties—and their five adult sons. The entire family was suspected of criminal activities that stretched from drugs to gambling to racketeering—but the investigation had dragged on for years, and no evidence came to light.

Their eldest son, Dustin, was killed in a head-on collision under mysterious circumstances. The 1964 Dodge Charger that had T-boned him and sent him flying through the windshield of his Cavalier had been abandoned in the middle of the road. No sign of any driver. No blood. Nothing.

Two years after Dustin's death, investigators got an anonymous tip about Ray Gowdy: that he had bragged about killing Dustin so that Phil—Dustin's younger brother—could take over the family business. Gowdy was brought in for questioning. He lawyered up with enough money to get him out. The investigation went cold. No one knew where he was getting the money from. He traveled frequently. The authorities knew he was bad, but no one could prove anything.

Enter Rachel, a sixteen-year-old local runaway who Gowdy offered a ride to. She accused him of attempted assault. Gowdy was arrested and his house searched. Investigators found video stakeout footage of schools throughout the area. Gowdy's lawyers argued that their client is trying to expose would-be predators. As the case went to court, Rachel changed her story and gave a completely different description of the man who assaulted her. The case was dropped.

Around the same time, Phillip Anderson took over the salvage yard, and another teenage girl was assaulted at a keg party deep in the woods. She was too intoxicated to provide a description of her assailant. Worse yet, she couldn't remember the incident too well. The kind of "off the grid" parties the Anderson clan was known to partake in.

The police, however, were certain Gowdy was their man. He was arrested after his DNA was found on the girl's torn shirt. Open-and-shut case. But when it went to court, Gowdy's lawyers were able to prove that the DNA evidence had been tampered with. So determined were they to make their case against him that unnamed officers used Gowdy's DNA from a vial of blood that had been in evidence and planted it.

This came to light after an anonymous whistleblower contacted Gowdy's lawyers and revealed the possibility of evidence tampering. The case was dropped, but Gowdy wasn't done. He sued the county in a civil suit, and a judge soon ruled in his favor, awarding him five hundred thousand dollars. Gowdy had everything. He was vindicated. He was wealthy. To some, Gowdy was a hero. To others he was a criminal. To Miriam, however, he was a mystery.

After he won his settlement, things were quiet for a while. But in May 2009, Alaina Hutchinson disappeared outside her elementary school in Cape Coral, fifty miles from Palm Dale. Dayana Corbin disappeared one year later, walking home in the Harlem Heights district, close to town. Julie Ross and Taylor Ackerman soon followed. In each case, they vanished. Their bodies were never found.

Miriam closed Gowdy's file, feeling overwhelmed but more informed than she had been. "I don't know, Detective," she said, pushing the file away. "Like you, all my instincts point to him. Either he's a serial predator, or he's the closest thing this town has to one."

"In a case this important, the worst thing an investigator can get is tunnel vision on one suspect," O'Leary said, sipping a cup of coffee he had gotten earlier. "But I find myself being drawn closer to him just as the department is pulling away. Trust me, they don't want to touch him."

"That's nonsense," Miriam said. "If he's the one, he's the one. I say we go after him."

O'Leary raised his hand to caution her. "It's not that easy. They're drawing up the warrants right now to search his home and the salvage lot but taking their time. There's many on the force who think he did it and just as many who think that he didn't. He's been nothing but a pain in our ass since day one."

Miriam pounded the table and held up a picture of his last mug shot. "Six feet, two hundred thirty pounds. Bring him in, damn it, and put him in a lineup. Have Mrs. Beckett pick him out."

"Miriam, it's not that easy," he began.

"Why not?" she asked in a stark, demanding tone.

O'Leary pushed the many files on the table aside and leaned in closer. "Because he has money. Because he's connected. Because he could bring down this whole department if he wanted to. Same way it is everywhere."

Miriam winced. "Spare me your cynicism. If we do this right, his money and connections won't matter."

"And that's why I need your help," O'Leary blurted out impatiently. The room went quiet as she tried to consider what he had just said.

"To do what, exactly?" she asked, brows raised.

O'Leary sighed. "To take the fall if this goes south." He sheepishly looked at the table then back to her. "I figured you did it before, you could do it again."

Miriam felt confused. Angry. Violated in a way. Her hands dropped as she stared at him with blank, exhausted eyes. "You're setting me up, just in case."

He looked down at the floor then lifted his head and stared right at her. "Yeah."

"What an S.O.B. you are."

"Yeah."

And then she laughed. "Okay," she said, shaking her head at him. "Whatever your screwed-up motivations are, I don't care. I'm in. I just want to find this girl."

Her response surprised O'Leary. He was expecting her to leap across the floor and attack him. "That's all I want too. That's why we're going to have a little fun with Gowdy. I want him to meet you."

She looked at him suspiciously. "What are you talking about?"

O'Leary started to spin out his plan, something he'd been thinking about for a while, it seemed, but also something he seemed to be conjuring on the spot. "If this man did shoot Deputy Lang in cold blood, if he took all those girls, one look at you and his eyes will tell me everything we need to know. He knows you from the news. He remembers you. That I'm sure of."

Miriam flashed a look of skepticism. She wasn't buying it.

“The truth is in the eyes, Miriam. Not even the most hardened psychopath can get around that. That’s what I’m waiting for. Then I’ll know.”

Miriam waited for more details, but O’Leary said nothing else. She held her arms out. “That’s your master plan? Look into his eyes?”

“It’s a start.”

Miriam dropped her head, burnt out beyond words. Her hair hung down in her face. O’Leary waited patiently with his hands interlaced, hoping she would see it his way.

She looked up and shrugged. “Okay. You’re the boss. We do it your way.”

O’Leary leaned back, satisfied, as his chair creaked. “Thank you. If I know this man, it’s that he feels invincible.”

“Which is why we need to either take him down or move on to someone else,” Miriam added.

She looked down and thumbed through some more photos of Gowdy with the Andersons, laughing it up like one of the family. Her attention focused on Phil, in the middle of one particular group photo—tall with a beard, wide smile, and dirty-blond hair. He seemed to tower over the entire family. He was also a very large man. Gowdy looked smaller in comparison. Who was really in charge of that family? She couldn’t tell.

“You wanna grab a bite to eat to clear your head a little?” O’Leary asked. “My treat.”

It was the best idea she had heard all day. She pulled her phone out and saw that it was five after eleven. O’Leary packed the files back up in the box, and they left the room, only to find the precinct still noisy and chaotic.

They carried the heavy boxes to the far corner of the parking lot where his car was parked.

“Feels good to get some air,” Miriam said.

“You said it.”

They loaded up and drove off to a diner around the block where most of the officers went after a long day. The Snatcher had his next victim, but if they played their cards right, they might be able to save Emily before she turned into a cold case like the others.

Day Two

O’Leary picked her up the next morning at her hotel, which was a few blocks from the police station. The plan was simple enough: revisit the crime scene where Deputy Lang had been shot and then swing by the salvage yard for a friendly chat. Nothing serious. The last thing O’Leary wanted to do was give Gowdy the impression that they were closing in on him. They wanted him calm, careless even. Then they’d drop the hammer.

Miriam, however, had another theory, developed overnight.

“What if it was one of the other brothers? Heck, what if the whole family is in on it?”

“Careful now,” he said. “We don’t want to go chasing unicorns. I admit, the entire family is suspect, but I wouldn’t put any involvement on anyone except maybe Phillip and Gowdy himself. Not yet, anyway.”

Miriam tapped the side of the passenger door with her cell phone, thinking. It was early, and the sun was just rising beyond a pine forest on her side. She had already sent a text back home, checking in, though she figured it was still too early for Freddy to respond.

“What about the DNA and fingerprints?” she asked. An obvious question, but one she hadn’t asked before. “That should seal the deal right there.”

O’Leary shook his head. “I checked earlier. No DNA recovered on Mrs. Beckett. The fingerprints taken from the carts don’t match Gowdy, or any of the Anderson boys for that matter.”

Miriam sighed. “How could that be? How could someone be so careful as to not make a single mistake? There has to be something we’re not seeing. Something that will tie all of this together.”

O’Leary laughed ironically. “I’ve been saying that to myself for the entire year.”

The outskirts of Palm Dale brought them to a narrow two-lane road, cracked, with tall weeds on both sides. They had the windows down, but even with the sun not fully risen, the wind felt hot. There were no discernible signs or marks in the road, but Miriam knew they were close. She could feel it. They were almost to the place where her partner had been killed. A few miles beyond was a long dirt road that led to Anderson’s Auto Salvage. O’Leary was paying close attention to the GPS screen attached to his dashboard.

“We’re about half a mile away.”

Miriam stared ahead, saying nothing.

“What exactly do we expect to find out here?” she asked as though the question had just entered her mind.

“Simple,” O’Leary answered with his eyes on his dashboard GPS screen. “We’re starting at the beginning.”

He slowed the car as they approached the spot—the very same barren shoulder where Miriam and her partner had stopped the infamous blue station wagon. The vehicle was later impounded for weeks, and an exhaustive search was conducted for fingerprints, hair samples, and other evidence.

The only fingerprints they found belonged to Betsy Cole and her husband. Two hairs had been recovered. One of them belonged to Jennifer Dawson—definitively proving that she had been abducted by the same individual who shot Deputy Lang. Another hair had been found. But it wasn’t real hair at all. It was synthetic fiber, probably from a wig.

O’Leary went over these details as he pulled the car to the side and parked.

“So we have reason to believe that our suspect was in fact wearing a wig. Obviously to conceal his identity.”

His door squeaked as he swung it open. It was eerily quiet outside, aside from the crickets, and there wasn’t a single car on the road. Miriam followed and stepped outside, onto the patchy grass of a small hill that traveled downward into a long, shallow trench that ran far into the distance along the road. A chain-link fence separated the roadside from the area beyond it. It never surprised Miriam

how much of the seemingly vacant land surrounding them was actually private property.

“So, according to your report, you and Deputy Lang were headed toward Anderson’s Auto to respond to a call about stolen copper?” O’Leary asked as he walked ahead.

“That’s right,” Miriam said, following him.

He stopped at a distinctly recognizable part of the road, pictured in so many police photos, and stood on a faded white line. Chunks of asphalt were missing on both sides of the pavement. Grass, weeds, and sand-spur patches hung over the surface. “You stopped the blue station wagon here, noting a broken taillight. Ran the plates, everything checked out, and Deputy Lang went to talk to the driver. Sound about right?”

Miriam felt a sickness that she hadn’t encountered in some time. She nodded, looking away. O’Leary seemed to get more into the moment, now observing the ground with great intensity. He took a couple of hurried steps forward then stopped and spun around.

“About here, Deputy Lang was shot. One .44 magnum casing was recovered in the middle of the road. Records did not yield any potential suspects for that particular weapon.” O’Leary stopped and looked up to find Marian staring into the forest alongside them.

“Miriam, are you okay?”

She looked over to him, snapping out of her daze. The wind blew a long strand of hair from her ponytail, sending it falling across her tan forehead. “Yes, I can remember clearly,” she said, walking over to him. “I heard the gunshot and jumped out of the car to engage the suspect. I fired three shots, shattered the back window. Tailed him in the patrol car at about a hundred and twenty. Found the Buick abandoned. No kid, no suspect.”

“No one vanishes,” O’Leary said. “There has to be an explanation. For two weeks straight, search teams patrolled the area in a ten-mile radius and came up short. The question is, where did he go?”

O’Leary signaled ahead and pointed to a sign far up the road. Miriam squinted to read it, its words clear as the morning: Anderson’s Auto Salvage and Recycling.

A large semi-truck then came into view with smoke billowing from its exhaust pipes. They stood there on the side of the road watching as it roared past them, leaving a strong gust of wind in its wake and blowing their jackets open.

Miriam suddenly walked off, as though she were under some kind of external control. O’Leary followed, trying to keep up with her fast pace.

“What is it? What do you see?” he asked.

Miriam stopped and turned to him. “Here’s what I’ve been thinking, and it’s something I’ve been thinking for a long time: He was taking the girl somewhere out here, not expecting to encounter any police.” She raised her arms. “And what is out here?” She bit her lip and looked into the distance.

“Swamps. Cow pastures. Acres of land,” O’Leary said.

“Everything and more,” she answered. “The perfect hideout.”

“Yeah, but they’ve searched this area far and wide,” O’Leary said. “There’s no trace of him.”

“Because he’s smart,” Miriam said. “Let’s go to the place where I found the Buick.”

They had begun walking back to the Crown Victoria when Miriam held her hand out. “Mind if I drive?”

“Not at all,” O’Leary said, digging into his pocket. He handed her the keys and walked to the passenger side. Miriam got in and fired up the car, peeling out. Taken by surprise, O’Leary flew back against his seat, struggling to put on his seat belt.

“What are you doing?” he demanded.

Without answering, she pressed on the gas. Inside, she felt as if she were getting into the right state of mind. Images of the Buick flashed in her mind. She searched her memory for clues—anything from the time just before she found the car. Her hands clutched the wheel as she pushed the car past one hundred miles per hour.

“Miriam, can you slow down please?” O’Leary asked, gripping the passenger-side handle.

“We’re almost there,” she said, staring ahead. The car vibrated and motored loudly as exhaust surged out the back, leaving a thick black trail. She inched past the one hundred fifteen mark, feeling as though she were getting a second chance to do things differently.

Suddenly she let up on the gas. The speedometer dropped as the car slowed, much to O’Leary’s relief. She then jerked to the side of the road and slammed on the brakes. O’Leary flew forward but caught himself against the dashboard. Smoke from the tires drifted inside the car along with the smell of burnt oil.

O’Leary coughed. “I hope you enjoyed that little joyride.”

“Calm down, Grandpa,” she said, shutting off the engine and handing him the keys.

She got out of the car and walked along the side of the road and down the grassy slope that led into the woods. O’Leary, looking disheveled and upset, followed a few steps behind her. She stopped where the forest was separated from the slope by the six-foot fence. No Trespassing signs hung from the fence at intervals for miles. None of that had been there before.

“This is new,” she said, pushing against the fence.

“They recently put it up,” O’Leary said, trudging down the slope from behind.

She gripped the fence with both hands, peeking through, but it was hard to see anything beyond the thick brush. She then let go, turned around, and went back to the road.

“What is it?” O’Leary asked, following her. “Do you have something?”

She was looking at the other side of the road, where yet another fence separated it from the vast wilderness beyond. “Not yet,” she said. She stepped forward and stopped directly in the middle of the road, unconcerned about traffic. But there wasn’t any; this was a remote, desolate place. O’Leary seemed to follow her every move, observing the surroundings, just as she was doing.

“So many private property signs. Who owns this area?” she asked him.

“I want to say a land developing company. Their name escapes me.”

“And when did they purchase all this land? And for what reason?” she continued.

O’Leary stuck his hands in his pockets and looked around. “I’m not sure. Why?”

"I just think it's interesting that this is the very area our suspect fled into. I thought about it after you told me that Gowdy had invested in land development."

She went to the other side of the road and looked beyond the fence there, beyond the woods. "With the money Gowdy has, we're looking at some kind of underground lair. I guarantee it."

"Yeah. But this area's been searched within a ten-mile radius, I told you that. They looked for weeks."

"I believe you," Miriam responded. She looked down at a glimmering soda can, flattened against the road. Within the grass ahead, there were cigarette butts, beer bottles, and plastic bags, barely visible—the same litter seen on any open road, and trapped by the fencing. Several thoughts came to Miriam all at once. She felt as though their suspect was very near. Maybe that was the genius of his escape.

"Everyone leaves something behind," she said to herself.

"What's that?" O'Leary asked.

"I don't know," she responded. "Shall we pay the salvage yard a visit?"

O'Leary nodded in agreement. "Sure thing. But just let me do most of the talking."

She gave him a mock salute. "You're the boss, Detective."

O'Leary held out his hand for his keys. Miriam smiled and tossed them in the air. He snatched them as they approached the car, getting in. The car roared to life, and he drove off, ready to get answers.

The sign for the salvage yard was in view. They took a right down a long, bumpy dirt road that went on for at least half a mile. Palmetto bushes and pine trees pressed in from both sides. An eerie feeling came over Miriam, as though they were in some malevolent place and trespassing too—going where they weren't wanted.

Closing In

Anderson's Auto Salvage & Recycling was an old family-run business that operated on the outskirts of Palm Dale. The business covered thirty acres of junk vehicles—mostly stripped but some intact for resale. Cars were often pillaged of their parts and crushed into flat blocks of metal. They also paid for scrap metal and junk of any value. Their main business was in recycling, since they operated the area's main refuse plant for reusable material, allowing them to claim credit as a beneficial green company.

From the outset, business was good, and it had remained that way for over thirty years. The business was owned and operated by the Andersons, who presented themselves as a tight-knit all-American family. Outsiders were rarely seen within or welcomed within their inner circle. And for that reason alone, O'Leary knew that they would immediately be looked at with suspicion as they drove through the front gate and entered the dirt parking lot.

Several cars and trucks were parked near the front office trailer that had a big Open sign in the window. Heavy-duty equipment, from crushers to forklifts to dump trucks to graders, were firing off in the distance—the entire lot a cacophony

of hammering engines and metallic thunder, with a thin cloud of dust and exhaust drifting throughout the premises. There were a few pickup trucks of all types idling at a booth past the front office, waiting their turn to drop off scrap metal raided from some dump or another.

As O'Leary pulled in, he recognized three of the Anderson boys—Greg, Walter, and Jake—at the scrap booth, assisting trucks with their hauls and keeping the line moving. They were big men, tan, bearded, no-nonsense types with cigarettes dangling out of their mouths and tattoos on their arms. They wore lace-up boots and backward mesh hats.

Boone, their father, owned the auto salvage yard with his wife, Judith. Their sons all worked there and had families of their own. They were an all-American family, according to Boone, but O'Leary believed they hid a dark secret. Rumors had long persisted about the family, but now he was ready to put fact to them.

Still in the parking lot, Miriam listened attentively as O'Leary explained more about them. They received suspicious stares wherever they went, he told her, and, always alert, the Anderson family knew an unmarked car when they saw one.

“Phil bought the business a while ago. Boone and Judith still work there to help out. And if you remember, the eldest son, Dustin, was killed in a car crash with his wife and two daughters.”

“Sounds pretty clear to me,” Miriam said. “One of the sons did it. Phillip, probably,” Miriam said.

O'Leary shook his head. “Alibis, all of them. All of them but Gowdy, but he's not quite family.”

“When did this happen?” Miriam asked.

O'Leary lifted his chin and thought to himself as machines chugged in the background. “About two years ago.” He turned off the ignition as they just sat there observing.

Miriam looked around nervously. Men stared at them as they walked by, coming and going from the main building, their faces smudged with dirt and oil. “What's the plan here?”

“Just follow my lead,” he said, opening the door. “I'll do most of the talking.”

“Is Gowdy here do you think?” Miriam asked.

“That's what we're going to find out,” O'Leary said, stepping out into the dust-bowl parking lot.

The sun was out in full force, revealing a blue sky with thin clouds drifting like trails of silk. There were people everywhere throughout the yard. It was hard to tell who was who—though most employees shared the same gruff demeanor and outfits: blue, pin-striped short-sleeved shirts with patches sewn over the chest.

Miriam and O'Leary walked with purposeful strides toward the front-office trailer, which had an odd, homey look. It was outfitted with antiques, set out all along the front porch—everything from an old vending machine and jukebox to a vintage gas pump and wagon wheel. There was no denying a hint of charm to the place. It seemed a world of its own—a place far removed from the hustle of the downtown business district.

Here, the work was real: oil-covered hands. Black-streaked faces. Cuts, bruises. Cigarette smoke and empty Gatorade bottles tossed aside in every conceivable

location. Miriam and O'Leary stood out like two tourists in a foreign land, which was their intention. O'Leary wanted their presence known.

They walked up the steps, and O'Leary opened the screen door and held it open for Miriam, who walked in first. Once inside, she stood in a carpeted lobby area next to a bookcase with antique model cars displayed on every shelf. A front counter divided the room. Two men in flannel shirts and billed hats were leaning on the counter, waiting their turn, as a woman, sixtyish, worked the cash register. Behind the counter on a desk were three black-and-white security-camera monitors displaying different grainy images of the vast salvage yard.

O'Leary came in, closed the screen door. The two men at the counter turned around, their wrinkled faces indifferent. They looked Miriam up and down and then turned around as the woman at the counter handed them a receipt.

"Y'all have a good day, now," she said. She was short and frumpy, with gray curly hair, and thick glasses dangling from a cord around her neck. The two men tipped their hats and excused themselves as they passed.

The woman at the counter looked up and eyed O'Leary and Miriam with suspicion.

"Can I help you?" she asked, mouth hanging open, waiting for a response.

Miriam was about to step forward when O'Leary cut in front of her. "Yes, Mrs. Anderson. I'm Detective O'Leary." He stopped and turned to Miriam, introducing her. "And this is my partner, Sergeant Castillo."

The woman narrowed her eyes and walked out of the room without saying a word. O'Leary looked at Miriam and shrugged. They could hear the floorboards of the trailer creaking as Mrs. Anderson approached someone on the other side of the wall, a few feet away, and spoke loudly, as if to someone hard of hearing.

"You got visitors, hun."

"What's that?" a gruff voice said.

"Visitors. The *poh-lease*."

They heard the man groan as he stood. His knees seemed to crack with the strain. His heavy footsteps clomped into the front office from the adjacent room. He was big, at least six feet, dressed in overalls that seemed to cradle his bowling-ball gut. He had a thin gray beard along his chin and jaw line. His bushy eyebrows arched downward as he made eye contact with the two visitors.

"Can I.. help ya?" he asked, approaching the counter. He adjusted his camouflaged hat and folded his arms, displaying neither contempt nor courtesy.

"Yes, Mr. Anderson. I'm Detective O'Leary. We've met a few times. I'm sure you remember."

Mr. Anderson nodded. "Yeah, I remember ya, O'Leary. What do you want this time?" His eyes shifted, studying Miriam.

"I was hoping to have a word or two with Mr. Gowdy."

Anderson took his hat off and scratched his head, looking around. "He's not here yet."

Miriam and O'Leary exchanged glances.

"He's not?" O'Leary said.

"Nope. He don't come around as much. Busy with land deals and all. I'll tell ya, if you guys would get off his back for a bit, you'd see what a go-getter he's become."

"I'm sure of it," O'Leary said with a hint of sarcasm.

Anderson examined Miriam, raising his finger. "Hey, I know you. I remember seein' you on the news all that time ago."

She didn't like where the conversation was going and felt a tight constriction in her stomach. O'Leary stepped in to take the reins. "We're not here on official business. We just came to talk."

Anderson's eyes narrowed in the same way his wife's had moments ago. "Bout what?"

O'Leary drew closer and placed his hands on the counter. "Just some loose ends to tie up. You know when to expect him?"

"Nope." Anderson adjusted his tinted glasses, looking as if he considered the matter closed.

"We can wait," O'Leary said. "You don't mind, do you?"

Anderson shook his head. "Why don't you leave the man alone? He ain't perfect, I know that, but you police done him wrong. Accusing him of kidnapping and murder like that." Anderson huffed as his face turned red with anger. "Just shameful." He pointed an accusatory finger at them both. "You ruined his reputation. Practically destroyed his life."

O'Leary said nothing as Anderson started breathing heavily through his nose, almost like a horse snorting. "You know his wife left, right? After you and the damn news accused him of being a child-diddling cop killer. You have any idea what that does to a man? To destroy him like that! I told him to sue the shit out of you bastards again, but he said no. He was just gonna let it go. Y'all should be kissing his feet!"

Suddenly, Mrs. Anderson stepped into the room. "Boone! Stop all that yellin'. You know you got a heart condition." She ran to his side, placing an arm around him. "Now come take a seat in the other room." She led him out of the front office as O'Leary and Miriam waited.

"I don't see how this helps our case," Miriam said.

"Trust me on this," he answered.

"We're getting nowhere fast," Miriam replied.

O'Leary shot her a blank look, lost in his own thoughts. Miriam felt irritated, trying to see where his head was. If there was some kind of conspiracy involving Anderson Auto Salvage and the kidnappings, it was far too fragmented for her to put anything together.

O'Leary leaned closer over the counter, examining the security monitors, and Miriam decided to look too. Nothing out of the ordinary appeared on the display. A forklift operator was picking up a stack of flattened cars to be transported. The line of scrap turn-ins was moving without a hitch. There was no activity on the third screen—just a line of junk cars—and no sign of Gowdy. O'Leary looked up just as Mrs. Anderson stomped into the room, her face creased with wrinkles upon wrinkles.

"Haven't you done enough damage 'round here, Detective?" she snapped. "My husband and I are fixin' to retire, and we don't need no more of your harassment. Got it?"

"Mrs. Anderson..." O'Leary began.

"No. Ray ain't here, so get on now. Leave!"

O'Leary looked at Miriam and then nodded to Mrs. Anderson. "Very well," he said, placing his card on the table. "Here's my card. We'll be in touch."

She crossed her arms, nothing but disdain on her face. O'Leary motioned Miriam toward the door. She nodded at Mrs. Anderson and wished her a good day. They exited the trailer, not waiting for a response. Once outside, Miriam looked around, seeing employees and customers alike glancing at them and then looking away.

Miriam bit her tongue until they both got into the car. Once O'Leary cranked the ignition, her ponytail whipped around as she turned to him.

"What was that about?"

O'Leary's eyes widened with confusion. "What?"

"You sure have an interesting approach to your investigations. Why don't you just let the whole town know?"

O'Leary paused, trying to choose his words wisely. "Everything is going exactly to plan," he said calmly. The police radio buzzed with chatter. Nothing significant.

"Oh really?" she said in disbelief. "Nice plan. They know we're watching them."

"Exactly," O'Leary said. "And that's what I want. Why do you think I left my card? Gowdy is on edge. He's going to make a mistake, I know it." He put the car in reverse and backed out.

All eyes watched them as the car coasted out of the yard, leaving a cloud of thin dust in its wake. Mrs. Anderson watched them from the window, offering a cold, unfriendly stare. The Crown Victoria jetted off past the gate and down the dirt road leading back onto the deserted double-lane state road. Miriam felt her nervous chills fade away the farther they got from Anderson's Salvage.

"We need to wrap this thing up and find Emily," Miriam said.

O'Leary nodded, gripping the wheel. "Trust me. We're going in the right direction. I can feel it."

He grabbed her hand unexpectedly. She tried to pull away, but his grip was too tight.

"Detective!" she said. His hand was oddly cold.

"You feel that?" he asked, accelerating faster. "We're on the right path."

He loosened his grip, and she jerked her hand away, dumbfounded.

"I think you're losing it," she said, stroking her hand.

O'Leary took a deep breath and pointed ahead. "Look."

She turned to see a vintage '65 Dodge Charger up the road in the opposite lane, heading toward them. O'Leary knew the car all too well.

Both vehicles slowed, and Miriam could see a silver-haired, stocky man. Their eyes locked as though they were moving in slow motion. As they passed each other, Gowdy's expression was at first one of curiosity, changing quickly to one of deep suspicion as Miriam eyed him closely. For a split second she saw something in his face that indicated O'Leary might be on to something.

Dark World

"Turn around," Miriam said as he passed.

O'Leary looked at her, surprised. "Huh?"

"We need to follow him. He's planning to run."

"Miriam, we have to play this thing out carefully. Stake out the salvage yard and see where he goes."

She slammed her fist on the dashboard, startling him. "We're not going to have that chance. You want to talk about instinct? That's what my gut's telling me."

O'Leary slowed down, struggling with the decision. "This isn't part of the plan."

"Just do it. Please," she said.

For Miriam, it was time to make a move. She refused to let him slip through her fingers again. O'Leary braked the car to a stop, pulling over, and asked her what she saw that made her so sure.

"I caught a glimpse of his face," she answered. "He looked guilty."

"That's not exactly a bombshell, Miriam."

"It's something. You want to talk about the eyes not lying? His eyes told me everything we need to know."

O'Leary wasn't entirely convinced, but he trusted her judgment. He had, after all, brought her along for a reason.

He reversed, did a three-point turn, and headed back in the opposite direction until he had Gowdy's vintage Dodge Charger in sight.

"I hope you're right about this," he said with noticeable frustration.

"I'm sure of it."

He gunned it forward and turned on the flashing police lights directly above the windshield. They were closing in on Gowdy's car fast. Miriam imagined his surprise when he looked in his rearview mirror and saw them rushing toward him like a shark at its prey. She hoped he was nervous and scared to death.

"Don't let him get away," Miriam said, clutching the armrest of her door. "He might try to make a run for it."

O'Leary sped up, and within seconds he was inches from Gowdy's bumper. The engine hummed and snarled. Gowdy's brake lights flashed as he pulled over to the side. A cloud of dust trailed him as he slowed down onto the shoulder, coming to a halt. O'Leary stayed on him and stopped, his lights still flashing. Now that they had him, O'Leary seemed more open to Miriam's idea.

"Might as well talk to him now and see how he reacts." He began typing into his Toughbook laptop on the center console, running the plates.

Miriam examined Gowdy as he remained quiet in the driver's seat, watching them through his rearview mirror. For a moment, everything seemed oddly familiar to Miriam. She was re-living it on the very same road with the man she felt responsible within her grasp.

"License plate checks out," O'Leary said. "Raymond Earl Gowdy. Five thirty-one Woodshire Lane." He paused while scrolling down the screen. Multiple priors but no warrants currently out on him." He looked up with a careful eye still on the car. Gowdy was waiting. O'Leary then looked at Miriam. "What next?"

She grabbed her purse off the floor and pulled out a 9mm Beretta.

O'Leary's eyes widened. He extended his arm, blocking her from getting out. "Whoa! What are you doing?"

She held the pistol down with both hands. "Nothing. I'm not taking any chances this time, that's all. Call him out of his car and let's talk to him."

“Again, I think we’re going too fast here.”

“Too fast? A girl is missing! And based off the evidence you’ve shown me, he’s the most viable suspect we have. Like you said, I’ve taken the fall before. If I’m wrong, I’ll do it again.”

O’Leary felt for his pistol in the side holster at his waist. He looked in his mirror. No one was behind them. No cars were coming in either direction. The air was still and quiet. For all they knew, Gowdy was calling his crew at that very moment. O’Leary opened his door and stepped out, leaning behind the open window pane. He pulled his gun and aimed it at Gowdy’s car. Miriam followed suit and took cover.

“Raymond Gowdy, step out of your car!” O’Leary shouted. There was no movement within the Dodge. Gowdy just sat there. “Get out of your car with your hands up!”

His driver’s-side door slowly opened. Gowdy stuck his head out and turned to them, confused and irritated. “The hell’s this all about?”

“Let’s see those hands!” O’Leary shouted.

Gowdy was startled, apparently not expecting a run-in with the law. He looked genuinely surprised, though Miriam wasn’t buying it.

Gowdy stuck his big, tattoo-covered arms outside the car and then stepped out. His hair was short, recently trimmed, and his beard had been shaved off completely. He wore a blue mechanic’s jumpsuit with an auto salvage patch over the chest.

“That’s it,” O’Leary said. “Nice and slow.”

He faced them with his arms halfway up and a face that was hard to read—blank and indifferent, as though he had been through this routine many times before, which he had. O’Leary then told him to walk toward them and get against the back of his car. Miriam kept a careful eye on his car, trying to see if there were any other passengers.

Gowdy leaned forward onto the trunk of his Dodge with his palms flat on its surface. O’Leary made his move and strode over to him with his pistol aimed.

“Not another move,” he said.

Miriam remained at her car door, taking O’Leary’s back. Gowdy was in her sights. Her finger inched toward the trigger, but she fought the urge. Shooting Gowdy would be satisfying, but it wouldn’t get them any closer to finding Emily. She moved closer to them while staying locked on Gowdy as O’Leary searched his pockets and patted him down. He pulled a wallet, cell phone, and car keys out and placed them on the trunk.

“Okay, now turn around.”

Gowdy lowered his arms and looked at O’Leary with an assured cockiness. “What’s this all about?”

“You know damn well what this is about, Gowdy,” O’Leary said, lowering his pistol.

Miriam kept a careful distance in case Gowdy tried anything. O’Leary pointed to her and then looked at Gowdy. “You remember Sergeant Castillo, don’t you?”

Gowdy looked at her and froze. O’Leary studied his face. Gowdy’s left eye twitched in his brief, catatonic state, then his eyes narrowed as he nervously

looked away. He knew who she was. For that split second, he looked as guilty as any man ever could.

“Yeah, you know her,” O’Leary said.

Gowdy turned to him, angered. “What are you talkin’ about? I don’t know her at all.”

Miriam moved on him, raised her pistol, and pressed it against his head.

O’Leary freaked. “Miriam, no!”

“Where is she?” Miriam said, seething. “Tell me or so help me God, I’ll—”

“This is not the way!” O’Leary shouted.

She flinched and backed off, lowering her gun and taking a few steps away.

Gowdy looked at her, both astonished and afraid. “What’s this crazy bitch’s problem?”

O’Leary cut him off. “That’s enough. We want to talk.”

“Bout what?” he said, leaning against his trunk.

“About what you know.”

Gowdy narrowed his eyes at O’Leary and shook his head. “What do you mean?”

“We’re close,” O’Leary said, holding two fingers together. “We’re this close to shutting down the entire operation. Whatever you’re up to, we’re going to find out. So why don’t you do us and yourself a favor and come out with it?”

Miriam circled back around and stood close by, waiting.

“I ain’t got nothing to tell,” Gowdy said. “I’m on my way to work. Is that a crime now?”

O’Leary smirked. “A guy with all your money still works. That’s pretty commendable.”

Gowdy shot him an angry glare. “A man needs to work. Builds character.”

“And we know all about your character, Mr. Gowdy.” O’Leary said.

“The hell’s that supposed to mean?” Gowdy snapped.

O’Leary continued. “If we were to search the salvage yard, we wouldn’t find anything illegal out there, would we?”

“Like what?” Gowdy asked.

“I don’t know. Guns. Drugs...”

“Children,” Miriam added.

Gowdy looked at them, shocked, as his face went flush. “Of course not. Have you lost your mind? Get your heads out of your asses and listen to me! We run a legitimate business!”

“Cut the crap,” O’Leary said. “We know all about you and that family. You’ve got your hands in some pretty shady stuff.”

Gowdy gave O’Leary a long stare then crossed his arms and tilted his head back. “If you know so much, you’d arrest somebody. You’d also know how crooked this whole county is and how they tried to ruin my life. I wasn’t afraid to take ’em to court back then, and I’m not afraid to do it now.”

“I’m aware of the history between you and the county PD. But I’m also aware of a lot of other things too.”

Gowdy rocked his head back and chuckled bitterly. “Hell. If you were so close to taking me down, I’d be in handcuffs right now.”

“Don’t press your luck. I can make that happen real soon,” O’Leary said, pointing to his chest.

Miriam stepped forward. She couldn't take it anymore. She had to ask.

"Did you kidnap those children?"

Gowdy stopped and looked at her, stunned, as the color drained out of his large, round face.

"Did you"—she stopped, looking down—"shoot my partner?"

"I'm not answering anything this crazy bitch has to say," Gowdy said flippantly. "I don't have to say a thing to either of you. I know my rights. In fact, I think I'll just get my lawyer on the phone now and see what he has to say about all of this. County's got deep pockets, and it looks like it's time to cash in again."

O'Leary's cell phone vibrated in his pocket. He pulled it out and looked at the screen. "It's headquarters," he said to Miriam. He pointed to Gowdy. "Watch him."

"I will," Miriam replied.

"Detective O'Leary," he answered, holding the phone to his ear. He turned and walked away from them. "Yeah. Yep. No, we're off Pine Road, out in the boondocks. Anderson country."

Miriam stood with her eyes locked on Gowdy, an arm's length away.

"Y'all got nothin' on me," Gowdy said, shaking his head.

"Shut up," Miriam told him.

"I've been accused of a lot of things, but diddling kids. That's about the lowest thing yet." He spit between his teeth and looked away.

Miriam examined his body language. He appeared nervous and avoided eye contact, looking beyond her toward the empty interstate.

"You remember me, don't you?" she said.

He turned and looked her up and down. "Yeah, I remember you."

Her stomach burned. "I knew it."

He spit again. "You're that cop who got her partner shot. You could have got that child-snatching pervert, but you fucked up."

An urge to shoot him rushed through her. She raised her pistol. Gowdy held his hands up defensively. "Wait, now! Don't go doing nothing stupid. I'm not judging you. That's just what the news said. Don't shoot the messenger!"

Her face went stone cold. She gripped her side with one hand. A panic attack was in the works, but she did her best to stay calm.

A bullet was the only thing that could stop his poisonous words. She'd be doing the world a favor. Who would shed tears for such a monster? But then she thought of Emily and Jenny again, and her anger subsided.

"Just tell me where she is," she said as tears welled in her eyes. "That's all. Tell me, and I won't shoot you."

"You lost your mind? I don't know what you're talkin' about!" he shouted.

O'Leary was deep in his conversation, walking back and forth in the road. "What do you mean you got a match?" he asked loudly. "A DNA match?"

His words caught Miriam's attention. She lowered her pistol and walked over to him. "What? What did they say?"

Holding the phone tight against his ear, O'Leary looked over to her and held one index finger up for her to wait. A semi-truck appeared in the distance, heading toward them. Miriam turned back to Gowdy. He remained standing at the trunk of his car, arms folded. The semi grew louder the closer it got. O'Leary got out of the road and leaned against the side of his car, continuing his questioning.

“The fingerprints? What about them?” he asked, trying to talk over the approaching truck.

Miriam turned back to O’Leary, hoping to catch what was being said.

“We got a match?” he said. “Who? Who is it?”

Miriam turned back to Gowdy just as he grabbed his nearby car keys and pushed a button to unlock the trunk.

“Hey!” she shouted.

The semi-truck veered into the left lane as it passed by. Its engine rattled as it flew past them, sounding like a locomotive. A gust of wind blew Miriam’s hair into her face, obstructing her vision for just an instant. She aimed her pistol at Gowdy just as he pulled an Uzi from his trunk.

“Get down!” she shouted to O’Leary, firing two shots.

Gowdy leapt to the passenger side of the Crown Victoria and sprayed the air with bullets, shattering its windows.

O’Leary looked up in panic and hit the ground. Miriam fired back, blowing out the front left tire. She jumped to the driver’s side of Gowdy’s car for cover just as bullets came in her direction.

She looked over to O’Leary. He was lying on his back, bleeding from his leg. His pistol and phone lay in the road within his arm’s reach but seeming yards away.

“I’m hit! Take cover!” he shouted to her. His leg twitched and oozed with blood from below his knee. Shards of glass were all around him. Her eyes darted back to the car, where Gowdy had taken cover.

“Just stay down!” she said to O’Leary.

She couldn’t see Gowdy, but she knew he might strike at any moment. Crouched down, she inched toward the rear of his vehicle and looked under both cars to see where he was. Suddenly another hail of bullets rang out. She lowered herself to the gravelly pavement, hands on her pistol, and fired a few more shots toward the car. A gust of wind from another semi-truck blew past, apparently unaware of their predicament.

Miriam looked again under their car for signs of Gowdy, but his feet and legs weren’t showing. Must be hoisting himself up somehow, she thought, or possibly inside O’Leary’s car. O’Leary cried out in pain and tried to push himself up. His leg had taken some damage and was bleeding profusely.

“Son of a bitch!” he shouted. “Where is he?” He reached for his cell phone and managed to grab it by the tips of his fingers and make a call. “Shots fired! I’m hit. Need backup!”

Like a nightmare repeating itself, Gowdy was nowhere to be seen. Miriam got up just in time to see him running off, down alongside the fence that separated the road from the endless forest. Miriam sprinted ahead and fell on her knees at O’Leary’s side. She grabbed the phone from his hand.

“Hello? This is Sergeant Castillo. Is anyone there?”

She glimpsed Gowdy just as he jumped the fence and ran into the woods.

“*Who got hit?*” the voice asked. It sounded like Lou.

“Lou?” she said, too distraught to notice her own injuries: the torn pants, the cuts on her knees and elbows.

“*Yeah. What the hell happened?*”

“We’re out here by the Anderson property and need immediate backup. Gowdy fired at us. Dwight’s hit in the leg.”

O’Leary’s hand reached out toward her, bloodied from his leg, trying to take the phone.

“*We’re on our way,*” Lou said.

“Wait,” O’Leary said, coughing. His face had gone pale and was drenched with sweat. “Tell him to bring the warrant. Time to turn that place upside down!”

Miriam held the phone up as O’Leary spoke. She then put it to her ear. “You hear that?”

“*Yeah, I got it,*” Lou said. “*We’re on our way.*”

Miriam looked up. Gowdy was gone, but there was something she had to find out first. “Whose fingerprints did you find?”

“*Fingerprints?*” Lou asked, obviously rattled by everything going on.

“Yes!” Miriam shouted.

“*Phil,*” Lou said. “*We got a match on Phil Anderson.*”

His words were surreal. She was confused. It wasn’t the name she expected or wanted to hear. But the more she thought about it, the more it all made perfect sense. She placed the phone back in O’Leary’s hand and brushed his hair back, trying to comfort him, hoping he wouldn’t go into shock. His blood was everywhere now. She took off her jean jacket and wrapped it around his leg, propping it up with a block of wood nearby.

“I have to go,” she told O’Leary, trying to put on a strong and reassuring face. “You’ll be okay. Help is coming, but I can’t let him get away.”

“Don’t... go,” O’Leary said, shaking.

“You’re going to be okay,” Miriam repeated. “They’re on their way, and they’re going to take care of you.” He reached for her as she stood up. Any further delay, and she was sure Gowdy would disappear. She held O’Leary’s hand and squeezed it as tears welled in her eyes.

“I’ll be back. I promise.”

With that, she took off, determined to catch Gowdy, dead or alive. She ran to the fence and climbed over it, falling to the other side. Everything seemed like a repeat from before. The mosquitos. The palmetto bushes. The weeds and thick brush hampering her view. Her mind raced as her heart beat rapidly. She was tense and shaky. She might never make it out alive, but she pressed on.

Pistol in hand, she pushed aside branches while trying to hear anything beyond the crackling of leaves and sticks under her own feet that would alert her to Gowdy’s presence. She continued on, wrestling with the fingerprint revelation. What did it mean? What was Gowdy’s part? She was determined to find out.

She came to a clearing, sweaty and out of breath, with adrenaline pumping through her veins. A figure ran by in the distance. It was Gowdy. There was no mistaking it. He limped along as though he had twisted an ankle. She bolted forward, closing in.

He was close—about one hundred feet ahead. Miriam took a knee, raised the pistol, and steadied her breathing. She took the first shot and missed. Gowdy dropped to the ground. He rolled to the side, taking cover behind a tree. She kept her aim tight and waited. Then Gowdy, maybe feeling trapped and too eager, fled from the tree and tried to make a run for it. “Gotcha,” she said.

With one eye open, she locked on her target and gently squeezed the trigger. The gun blasted. A shell was ejected to the side. Gowdy collapsed immediately. She ran forward, staying low. Her insides were filled with elation and fury, and just then, she heard sirens blaring in the distance.

She stopped inches from Gowdy as he writhed on the ground, reaching for his Uzi. He was hit behind his right thigh and desperately struggled to crawl away, digging into the ground and clawing at the dirt like a madman. As his fingertips inched toward the Uzi, she fired another shot into the ground near him. A clump of dirt flew up into his face, and Gowdy froze. Miriam walked over to him and kicked the Uzi away. He ended his attempt to escape and fell back on his stomach, wailing in pain.

Miriam said nothing as she stood over him and pointed the gun at the back of his head. Gowdy grunted and then rolled to his side, holding one arm out in a helpless plea. His previous cockiness was gone, and only fear and desperation remained.

“You knew, didn’t you?” she said. “Why?”

Gowdy looked up at her and tried to speak, spittle flying from his mouth. “Kn-Knew what? That he’s royally fucked in the head? That he takes young girls and locks them up?” He cried out in pain after moving his leg.

“Spare me your tears,” Miriam said. “Just tell me where Emily is.”

Gowdy bowed his head, murmuring in exhaustion.

Miriam fired the gun, hitting the ground right by his head. He fell onto his back, terrified. She crouched down and put the hot barrel against his forehead. “Here we are again, only this time, I’m not going to hesitate.” She looked him in the eyes. “Tell me!”

Gowdy opened his mouth and cried out. “He’s got a bunker out here! I take them food and supplies. He keeps them locked up.”

“The girls?” Miriam asked in wonderment. “They’re still alive?”

Gowdy paused, not wanting to answer the question. She couldn’t kill him now, and he knew it. Not with her being so close to the truth. Instead, she pressed the pistol against his other leg and fired. The blast was deafening. Gowdy fell back, screaming at the top of his lungs, a high-pitched, piercing squeal.

“You crazy bitch!” The open wound on the back of his thigh pulsed with blood as the fresh hole in his other leg started to bleed—slowly at first, then with a steady flow of dark red.

She pressed the gun back against his forehead while he cradled both legs in agonizing pain.

“I have one bullet left, and I’m not going to waste it trying to scare you. The next one goes in your head.”

“Two of them are still alive!” he shouted. “The others... well, they got sick of playing with him after a while, and he...”

“He *what?*” she said in a venomous tone.

“He had me get rid of them.” Seeing her finger on the trigger, he raised both hands defensively. “I’ll take you to them. Just don’t shoot me!”

“Where’s the bunker?” she asked.

He hesitated. She brought the pistol back and smacked him across the face. He cried out as a chunk of skin opened on his cheek, pouring blood.

“You’re standing on it!” he said.

She stopped and slowly stood up, looking around.

“Twenty feet underground...” he continued. She backed away as he cried to himself—one sad, helpless sack. She went to her knees and started digging, tossing dirt and debris frantically out of the way. The sirens in the distance got louder and louder.

After frenzied digging, she felt a metal surface. She brushed the sand away and found a huge latch. It was an entrance—that much she was sure of.

“See...” Gowdy said with bloodshot, tearing eyes. “I told you. There it is. The girl’s underground. I think she’s okay. I-I was gonna check on her today.”

Miriam said nothing but kept her eyes locked on his. She walked over to him slowly. Her words were calm and measured. “So he shot my partner? He shot Deputy Lang, leaving his wife without a husband and his children without a father.”

Gowdy’s eyes darted in all directions, panicking. “He didn’t mean to. The cop just got in his way.”

“And again, you helped him.”

“I had to!” Gowdy shouted out. “After all he’s done for me, I owe him. I was nothin’ before I met him. No one wanted me. He took me in. His family took me in, and they made me one of their own! Do you understand that? You understand what it’s like to be unwanted and unloved?”

Miriam raised her pistol, aimed squarely for his head. He covered his face with his hands, shaking and crying out. “Do you understand what it’s like to be a terrified young girl?”

“Please... I’m sorry,” Gowdy said. “Don’t shoot me!”

She hesitated. Gowdy clenched his eyes shut, blubbering and crying. For a moment, she just stood there with her pistol aimed. She closed her eyes and took a breath. Her last bullet wasn’t for Gowdy. It was for Phil Anderson—the man responsible for it all. She lowered the pistol as his eyes slowly opened. His hands shook as he continued to shield his face. She looked down and noticed a ring of keys on his belt.

“Are those for the bunker?”

Confused and shaken, he lowered his hands. And looked down. “Yeah...” he sputtered. His legs twitched as he winced with every move.

“Toss ’em here,” Miriam said, holding a hand out.

Without a second thought, Gowdy reached down, unhooked the key ring from his belt, and tossed the keys inches from her shoes. She picked them up and walked toward him. His hands went back to his face as he pleaded with her not to shoot him. She ignored his cries and picked up the Uzi that was just out of his reach. She put her pistol in her pants pocket and took the clip out of the Uzi.

She shook her head and looked at Gowdy, displaying the empty magazine. “Not a lot of good this is going to do you.”

She swung her arm back and threw the magazine into the bushes while holding onto the Uzi. Gowdy looked at her, stricken with fear. He had no idea what she

had planned next. She studied his pale, frightened face and then gave him an answer.

“You better hope those girls are still alive.”

“I’m sure of it!” he cried.

She said nothing else and kneeled down next to the trapdoor, pulling it up by the handle. The door was heavy, nearly impossible to budge. She clenched her teeth and pulled again with all her might. Nothing mattered more. She pulled until the heavy door began to lift. She screamed out and used every last ounce of energy to get it open. Halfway there, she pushed it open on its hinges, and it slammed open onto the ground, exposing an underground tunnel leading straight down.

“Down there,” Gowdy said, in a strained, exhausted voice. “That’s where they are.”

She saw a ladder and began climbing down into the darkness. Her eyes took a while to adjust the farther down she went until finally she reached the bottom, where a door, set into a heavy frame, blocked the way. There was just enough light coming in from outside to let her see what she was doing.

The thick metal door was locked, but she managed to fumble through the keys, trying each one, sometimes too hurriedly and having to try again. By the fifth key, the door unlocked with an almost magical-sounding click, and then she felt the door handle turning in her hand. She swung the door open and called out, her voice faltering and high pitched.

“Hello? Is anyone in here?”

She nearly tripped on a small battery-operated LED light that illuminated the long hallway, with its catacomb-like rooms arrayed off to the sides. She grabbed the lamp and walked down the hall.

Each room was the size of a broom closet, with chains mounted to the wall and a small mattress on the ground. There were board games and toys everywhere. One of the rooms even had a tea set and table. The sight made her sick to her stomach.

“I’m here to help you. My name is Miriam. You can come out now. The bad men have gone away.” She came to the last room on the left and saw a young girl crouched in a ball in the corner of the room, sniffing.

Miriam stepped closer, inches from the girl. “It’s all right, honey. Don’t worry.”

The girl looked up, beyond her matted hair, and backed farther into the corner, screaming.

Miriam set the lamp on the ground. “It’s okay. My name is Miriam, and I’m going to get you out of here.”

The girl looked up again, a little less afraid when she got a better look at Miriam.

“I want my mommy...” she said, crying.

“What’s your name, dear?” Miriam asked.

“Emily,” she answered and wiped her eyes.

Miriam swooped down and picked her up. Emily buried her face in Miriam’s chest and cried, her thin body shaking. She was wearing an old nightgown at least three sizes too big. Her feet were bare, and she was trembling. Miriam stroked her head repeatedly, trying to calm her as they made their way back toward the ladder, but first, there were other rooms to look into.

“We’re going home, Emily,” she whispered. We’re going home.”

With Emily in her arms, Miriam began searching the rooms on the other side. They had obviously been occupied at one time but now were empty, and she felt a sense of overwhelming defeat. One more room, and there in the corner, she saw another girl lying on a mattress. She was dressed in tattered pajamas and would not look up when Miriam called out. Her tangled hair went all the way down her back, beyond her waist. She made no movements. One arm was chained to the wall.

Miriam set Emily down carefully on the ground, placing the lamp next to her. “Just give me one minute, honey. We’re about to leave. Just wait here.”

Emily curled into a ball as Miriam crept into the small chamber, where she hoped and prayed that whoever was lying on the bed was still breathing. She lightly touched the girl’s back and could feel it rising and dropping. She looked to the young girl’s wrists. They were covered in cuts and bruises from metal clamps. Miriam dug furiously through her pockets for the keys. Pulling them out, she tried each one on the padlock that connected the chain to the clamp. Emily began crying again, causing Miriam to hurry and fumble.

By the third key, she heard a click and opened the padlock. She removed the wrist clamp, tossing the chain aside, and gently helped the girl up. She could hear faint breathing. The girl’s face was dirty. Her skin looked ghost pale. Her long hair was a knotted tangle.

The girl groaned. Miriam spoke softly, bringing her lips close to the girl’s ear. “My name is Miriam, and we’re getting you out of here.” She could feel the girl’s rib cage. She was sickly thin and malnourished. “Can you hear me?” Miriam continued.

“Mm-hmm,” the girl moaned.

“What’s your name?” Miriam asked.

The girl paused, and faint breath came from her dry, blistered lips. “Jenny...”

An overwhelming relief swept over Miriam, almost sending her onto the ground in tears. She couldn’t believe it. Finding both girls, nothing short of a miracle.

She picked Jenny up, cradling her long, skinny body in her arms. “We’re going home, Jenny. Hang on.”

She faced a dilemma: two girls and one set of arms. But Jenny’s condition was ten times worse than Emily’s.

“Emily, can you stand and walk, honey?” she asked.

Emily nodded between sobs.

“Strong, brave girl,” she told her. Miriam took her hand and helped her up. She then picked up the lamp and walked to the exit with Jenny in her arms and Emily at her side.

Miriam climbed the ladder, slowly and carefully, with Jenny in one arm, balanced on her hip, and hanging onto the lamp and the ladder with the other. Emily, now the strong girl Miriam had told her she was, gathered the strength to climb by herself. Miriam was behind her, helping her along. By the time they made it to the surface, Miriam had to shield Jenny’s eyes from the blinding light of the sun. They had all made it above ground. Miriam took a knee and set Jenny down, exhausted, her muscles shaking from the strain. She explained to both girls that they only had a little more to go.

She stood up and noticed Gowdy watching them, cradling his legs in pain. "You're-you're not gonna leave me out here are you?" he asked. The color was completely gone from his face.

"No," Miriam said. "I'm going to tell them exactly where they can find you."

Gowdy's head fell back to the ground. In his moment of delirium, he wasn't sure what would be worse: facing the consequences and losing his pose as an innocent man persecuted by the system or simply dying. Either way, Miriam left him there to ponder his fate.

* * * * *

Miriam and the girls arrived back on the scene to find it swarming with police cars and paramedics. Two helicopters flew overhead, circling above the auto salvage yard. Miriam rushed to the first ambulance she saw, and paramedics quickly took over, bringing gurneys, talking to the girls and reassuring them that they would soon be going home to be with their parents. But first, a short trip for a little checkup. The girls were reluctant to separate from her, but Miriam managed to convince them that she would be along in just a few minutes. The paramedics strapped them down, lifted the gurneys into the vehicle, and promised Emily and Jenny a ride like no other they had ever had, with lights whirling and sirens blasting. Even Jenny seemed to manage a faint smile.

"I'll be right back," Miriam said, brushing back Emily's hair. She then turned to Jenny. "Then we'll all ride to the hospital together."

The paramedics took over from there as they set both girls down and began measuring their vital signs. Miriam saw them loading O'Leary into another ambulance as she rushed over. Lou stood by, overwhelmed by all the activity. O'Leary took one look at her dirtied face, dried with tears, and couldn't resist a mild jab.

"What the hell happened to you?" he said, trying to fight the pain of his gunshot wounds. They had an IV hooked into his arm and were frantically cleaning and dressing his leg.

"I found her," Miriam said with a breath of relief.

Both O'Leary and Lou looked stunned.

"The girl?" Lou said.

"Emily Beckett and Jenny Dawson. I found them both."

A smile spread across O'Leary's face. Lou clutched his side and coughed.

"The Dawson girl too?" he said. "I can't believe it! Where?"

Exhausted, Miriam pointed to the forest, where for the first time she noticed the sign on the fence that claimed the land as being owned by Anderson Properties.

"They had them in a bunker. They were the only ones I could find. Gowdy said the others were killed."

"Gowdy?" O'Leary said, between heavy breaths. "Where is he?"

"Still back there. Shot him twice in the leg. I already pointed some officers in his direction."

Lou's eyes widened again. O'Leary tried to follow along the best he could despite his injuries.

"But I don't understand," Lou said. "Phil Anderson is the one you're looking for. Not Gowdy."

Miriam's eyes narrowed. "You mean you haven't got him yet?"

"He disappeared," Lou said. "Vanished like a bat out of hell. They just raided the place, got everyone on site except Phil."

"How?" Miriam shouted.

Lou backed up and held out an arm, trying to calm her. "We don't know. He made us somehow. But this bunker. That changes everything!"

Miriam shook her head, feeling defeated.

Lou touched her shoulder. "Chin up there, Castillo. We got an APB on him. He won't get far."

Miriam looked to the ambulance where Emily and Jenny were being attended to. "We need to contact their parents."

"Already on it," Lou said.

"Get me out of here," O'Leary said, in pain, from the ambulance. Miriam and Lou turned and waved as the paramedics shut the door.

"We'll see you soon!" Miriam said. She then looked to Lou, her expression changed. "Find Phil Anderson. And let me know when you do." With that, she walked away to the other ambulance and got in, taking Emily's hand.

Its sirens and lights went on as the ambulance roared down the road, away from Anderson country and back to civilization. Three combined county police departments had descended on the area in the largest case in Palm Dale's history. The bunker, apparently, was just the tip of the iceberg.

Miriam stayed with Emily and Jenny at the hospital until their parents arrived. Both the Beckett and Dawson families had come alive with joyous rapture upon learning that their daughters were alive. It was the most incredible thing Miriam had ever seen. The parents called her a hero, a godsend, but she didn't want any of it. The girls were alive, and that was all that mattered. She stayed with both families overnight at the hospital, laughing and talking as both children recovered throughout the night. Eventually, however, it would be time to go home.

In all of the commotion, she had forgotten to even call home. But she was certain Freddy could hold things down in her absence. The next morning, Lou himself offered her a ride back home. They took the long drive as she repeatedly tried calling Freddy and Ana. It was a weekday. Ana was at school and Freddy was probably asleep in front of the television—a little part of why they had split in the first place. She finally arrived home and found both her car and Freddy's still in the driveway.

"Need me to come in with you?" Lou asked.

Miriam looked at him with tired eyes and smiled. "No thanks. I'll be fine. Thanks for the ride."

Just as she opened the door, Lou stopped her with a hand on her shoulder, calling her back.

"You know, O'Leary was right about you. You're a hell of an asset to law enforcement."

Miriam waved him off. "I'm just glad we were able to find Emily in time."

Lou looked at her and smiled. "You did well, Sergeant Castillo. We're all proud of you."

Blushing, she said no more and got out of the car. She walked to the front door, purse in hand, gym bag over her shoulder, and waved to Lou as he backed out and drove away. It was still early.

Only a little after eleven in the morning, and she figured she would spend the rest of the day in bed. Who knew? Maybe she could convince Freddy to fix her something to eat. It would take at least a good hour to tell him the whole story. That much alone was worth a meal, she thought.

She turned the key and entered her house. The television was on in the living room, with ongoing coverage of the Anderson bust. The news had already traveled to her neck of the woods.

“Freddy?” she called out. She set her bag down and placed her purse on a nearby nightstand. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see him sitting at the kitchen table with his back turned toward her.

“Freddy? Hello?” She walked over to him with a smile and then froze when she saw his face staring down, his eyes still as glass with dilated, lifeless pupils. A large gash ran across his throat from one end to the other. Blood spatter ran down his white T-shirt.

She jumped back in shock as fear gripped her. She screamed in terror. There was no way to comprehend what had happened. Her body shook, and she was losing control. Then her eyes caught a note waiting for her on the table, written in crayon:

You took my playmates, Miriam. Now you and your daughter are all I have left to play with. Love Phyllis.

