

## Chapter 1:

It sounded like a book hitting the floor. A sharp, clear smack that held a metallic echo. Harper Grant glanced at the door, her dark eyes quickly scanning the room. A few of her students glanced up from their work, but most were absorbed in the computers in front of them. Hopefully, they were working on their assignment. Harper listened for the noise to come again, tucking a loose strand of dark blond hair behind her ear. Usually, there was nothing more. Usually, it was just as innocent as something smacking the hard tile, dropped by a clumsy student or over ambitious teacher trying to carry everything in one load. But this time, there was something different. There was a smell. The smell rolled in slowly, like a faint smell of cigarettes on clothes, subtle but obvious. The sound came again. This time, 3 bangs booming down the halls. But it wasn't a book. Or a box. There was something about that metallic ring. An echo.

“Teachers, move into the lock down. This is not a...” the intercom ended with another blast of pops. Harper was moving before she knew it. Training was a wonderful thing. She stepped into the hall, looked left, and saw three students standing paralyzed. She glanced over her shoulder at her crowded class of thirty-seven. The three students were now moving, running towards her. She knew one girl. She had her in Sophomore English the year before. Anna. The girl's brown eyes were wide and her mouth ajar. Behind them, Harper saw 2 more shapes moving methodically, each carrying an enormous gun. From that distance, Harper did not know what kind of gun, but she saw them raise one and the sound of quick pops following the students running down the hall. One of the three, a lanky boy with an Under Armour hoodie, stumbled, then fell.

“Ms. Grant! Ms Grant!” Anna's eyes were pleading, begging for her to keep that door open. Harper's arm hair rose and her stomach caved in a little. The smell coming down the hall was a cocktail of fear and gunpowder. She looked once again at the students behind her, some who were standing on the balls of their feet, ready to run or help or do anything but stand there. Their eyes shone, some with tears. A few were holding each other. Harper closed the door without looking back at the three in the hall. Loud pops. There were screams. Harper's eyes watered.

“Stack those desks against the door.” She blinked back the tears, grabbing a piece of baling twine from the cupboard next to her door. As she wrapped the twine around the handle of the door, the students legged the desks and she wiggled out of the way, just as the desks rammed against the

door. A fake wall of protection. A boy, Trevor, took the end of the twine, pulled hard and did a fancy knot on the cabinet anchored into the wall. He was an Eagle Scout. Always prepared. The lights clicked off, and the movement stopped for another moment. They all looked at her for guidance.

Harper's mouth was dry and her throat felt raw. Her palms were wet and her hands shook. Her stomach had not recovered from the sound of Anna asking for help. *Get it together, Harper. Get it together for them*, she told herself. She took a deep breath. What felt like an hour was actually only a few seconds.

"Silence your phones. Get against that wall. Grab something. A book, stapler, anything. Be prepared to throw that if anyone gets in here. Do not make a sound." Harper was surprised at her own calmness in her voice. Training. All those trainings. Maybe they weren't such wastes of time. Wouldn't the man in charge love to be in that room, with his little clipboard, critiquing her choices?

She moved to the desk as her students picked up tattered dictionaries and old copies of literature books. More students were crying now, clamping their mouths with their hands, leaning against the wall, their knees tucked against their chests. As one, the class moved behind the desks some boys had stacked. Another false barrier of protection. It reminded Harper of the forts she and her friends would build in each other's basements. The forts they would play pretend in with the invisible pirates and sword fights. They always survived those battles. Even when the forts collapsed on them.

At her desk, Harper pulled open a drawer and pushed aside a stack of papers. A shiny safe with a dial combination lock revealed itself. Her voice may have been steady but her hands continued to shake as she attempted once, twice and a third time to turn the code, 12-48-32. After the third attempt, she shook her hands out and took a few deep breaths. *Get it together for them*.

There was a sound at the door. Keys jingling. Harper's hands shot to that black box again, and she spun it to the right 3 times, then stopped on 12. The class heard the door unlock. A girl, who already had her mouth covered, let out an audible sob. Other students quickly shushed her, but the wave of fear that had been building came crashing down on them now. The energy in the room seemed to electrify and Harper felt a humming in her head. *Do it for them. Get it out for them*. Harper spun the lock to the left, passed 48, and landed again. She turned the dial to 32. It clicked.

Harper opened the safe, pulled out the gun as the door burst open and the bailing twine snapped. She turned off the safety and leveled the gun at the door. The desks toppled down and the face of the gunman revealed himself.

“Hello Ms. Grant.” She did not know the kid. He looked normal. Brown hair, brown eyes. His eyes did not look like the crazed eyes she always saw on the news. They looked calm, happy. In front of him, he held Anna. She was sobbing, blood on her face, her hands and her clothes. Harper did not have a clear shot. The irony of the situation, Harper knew, was that not even 2 minutes ago, she had deemed this girl not worth saving and had locked her out of her room. And now, she couldn’t shoot because of her. This girl, who hadn’t been a horrible student but also hadn’t been the greatest, stood in front of her, praying to be saved.

“What are you going to do, Ms. Grant?” The kid’s voice was so calm. It irritated her. It sent a surge of rage down her spine.

“Ms. Grant! Shoot them both! Save us!” A student from her class, the class she had saved, or tried to at least. This was an impossible choice. And it wasn’t fair. She was a teacher, not a soldier. Harper shifted the gun in her hands, closed her eyes against the tears that were trying to leak out of her. There was a pop and a scream.

## Chapter 2:

“End of simulation.” A computer voice sounded in Harper’s head. She opened her eyes to see her classroom disappear, the gun from her hand evaporate. The tears in her eyes remained. She hesitated to remove the virtual reality simulator. She wanted to linger in the blankness for a minute. It was safe.

She heard noises around her. Her fellow teachers at the training. They were all shifting, some were murmuring. Blinking hard a few times and taking some ragged breaths, she pulled off the simulator and did not fix her hair. The others had already taken off their simulators. She took a deep breath and

looked at her hands still shaking. The simulation felt so real. She could still feel the sparks in that room.

“Alright everyone. Let’s talk about what just happened.” A fat, bald man said. His name was Paul Anderson, and he was in charge of the Greenhorn District 71 safety protocols. Harper and many other teachers, especially the ones who had worked with him before he got his “promotion,” were not fond of him. He had just spent who knows how many thousands of dollars on a virtual reality system to help train teachers in case of a disaster. Supposedly, the teachers would not be getting their annual raises because of it. Not only that, but he had a tendency to talk out his ass and only frustrate people instead of providing clarity and help.

Harper liked to call him Mr. School Safety. Which was a lot nicer than some others called him.

“What could we have done differently?” Mr. School Safety said, sitting on the edge of the table, leg down on the floor, his other leg propped up awkwardly.

We? In every training Mr. School Safety had hosted, in none of them was he ever demonstrating what to do, only lecturing. Harper took a deep breath and waited for the criticism. She looked around the room, but no one was looking at her or anyone else. Their eyes were all down. It was like watching the pot of water just before it boils. You could see that they were simmering. One bubble will rumble to the top of the pop, and the rest will follow, angry and loud.

“I think she did everything right until the end.” Mr. Jackson finally said. He shifted uncomfortably and adjusted his glasses. Backhanded compliment. The pot boiled. An onslaught of voices layered over each other.

“How could she not let those students into her room?”

“This just shows that we need to be allowed to carry our guns on us. The safes just slow us down!”

“No, she should have closed the door and gone for the gun. That twine shit to help them.”

“In real life, that twine would have held.”

“In what world would she have even had time to do all that she did?”

“At least the students actually listened to her and weren’t laughing and filming it all.”

“Of course they listened. They weren’t real.”

Harper listened to the bickering, offered nothing to defend her choices or explain herself. She just kept thinking. I’m a teacher, not a security guard or soldier or a police officer. I’m a teacher.

“Ms. Grant,” Mr. Anderson said, silencing the pot. Harper looked up at him. He was assessing her, looking for areas to critique. Make her an example. His eyes differed from the eyes of the shooter. They were more dangerous. They were hungry for a victim.

“Can you explain to us what happened? At the end?” He looked ready to spring, strike at her. She didn’t say anything. “Ms. Grant, tell us. Why didn’t you let those students in? Did you think they were a threat?”

Everyone had gone quiet, staring at her. Arms crossed, some chewing gum, a few men smirking, most teachers frowning, brows furrowed in frustration.

“I had a choice. Let those 3 in, risk them being the threat, or save the 37 I knew weren’t.” Some of her colleagues were looking at her like she was pathetic. Others were nodding their heads. They, at least, understood.

“Yes, well, what if this had been real life?” Mr. Student Safety asked impatiently.

Harper shrugged. Not an acceptable response.

“It is a sad fact, ladies and gentlemen, that we will probably know the students who come into our buildings and threaten to hurt their classmates and their teachers. That cannot stop us from protecting the innocent ones.”

“Sometimes, the innocent-looking ones are actually the dangerous ones.” Ms. Gray, the assistant principal, said. Harper glanced over at her. The woman’s sharp eyes were leveled at the fat man in front of the room. That look made many students tremble, and even some teachers when it came their way. She wore her hair in her tight bun, as she always did but she was dressed a little more casually than usual. Her arms were crossed and one finger tapped her forearm as her eyes moved to Harper.

“Ms. Grant made the correct choice, closing that door. She had no way of knowing if they would be a threat.” Harper tried to give the woman a small smile. Maybe she hadn’t royally screwed up after all.

“Perhaps.” Mr. Anderson pulled up his pants that allowed his belly to hang over the buckle. “I suppose that’s why you volunteered her?” Harper glanced back at Ms. Gray. She had been volunteered for this? Why would Ms. Gray do that to her?

Ms. Gray looked at Harper then back at Mr. Anderson.

“She did exactly what she needed to do, did she not? She was the perfect choice.”

“Let’s just break down the replay, shall we?” He turned away and played the scene again. Harper zoned out, staring at the screen, and saw nothing. Typical of education to put you in unfathomable situations with no measurable goal and then be upset when it didn’t go the way they wanted.

She heard Mr. Jackson comment again, and others pointed out little things. Things they would have done differently.

Harper had become a teacher not to learn to point a gun or to be a hero. She became a teacher because everyone in her family had been teachers. Her mother, her father, his mother and father.

When she told her father that she wanted to become a teacher, he forced a strained smile and said okay. Had Harper known what she was getting into, maybe she would have done something differently. Maybe be a real estate agent or something with a lot more freedom. Like a CIA Agent.

Harper felt like her style of teaching, much like her fashion sense, was not with the times.

“Any last statements?” Mr. Anderson said, pulling Harper out of her thoughts. “Ms. Grant? I know this situation is sensitive for you, and I am truly grateful that you were brave enough to endure it for us.”

Harper knew her eyes had narrowed, her fists hand clenched and her usual neutral face had gone cold. Some younger teachers looked at her curiously. The older ones glanced at her, knowing but wise enough not to mention it.

“I hope you can agree that your mother would appreciate what we are trying to do.” Mr. School Safety was sweating a little and talking out of his ass.

“If the law did not require this whole thing, I would not have a gun in my room.” Harper said, standing as she spoke. “And I can tell you without a doubt, my mother never would have either. Having weapons in the room does not guarantee student safety. It only endangers it more. A gun would not have saved my mother that day.” Harper yanked her bag off the back of the chair, causing it to tumble to the floor. She glanced down, considered picking it up then instead, headed for the exit. Halfway out, she stopped and turned to look at the man one more time. “She let the students from the hall in. That’s why I didn’t.” There was silence. Mr. Anderson’s mouth was gapping and the most vocal teachers were staring in shock. Harper scanned the room, looking for anyone who doubted her now, and locked eyes with Mrs. Gray. The older woman gave her a single nod. Approval.

### Chapter 3:

Harper exited her fifteen-year-old car that had an engine light on again. She let the door slam shut, grabbed the bags containing dinner, and hurried up to the sidewalk between the perfectly manicured lawn. Her father had retired four years earlier and now spent his time taking care of his yard, garden, and golfing every Sunday and Thursday with the “Old Farts” club and a standing dinner every Friday night with his daughter.

Harper paused and looked at the house she grew up in. It wasn't big, it wasn't flashy. Just a very traditional ranch style, with a tiny front porch with a green gnome holding a welcome sign and a tired welcome mat. They used to keep fresh flowers from spring into the fall in cute pots next to the gnome, but her father had not continued to do that. It was something he had done with her mother every Mother's Day.

Inside, her father's home had changed little. It remained the same, almost in defiance of the rest of the world-changing. The family pictures hung in the entryway and all the way down to the dining room. The walls were tan and the floor shiny. An HGTV show host would say it was nice, had good bones, but needed to be updated.

Harper had read once that men who lose their wives do one of two things, either get remarried almost immediately or keep their house as a shrine for the woman they loved. Her father had done the latter. For the last 18 years, Harper didn't think her father had gone out on any date, except once. He said that did not count because they set him up and it wasn't his choice. And that is why he doesn't go golfing on Wednesdays anymore.

"Dad?" Harper smelled her father's cooking, shutting the door and removing her coat. Had she been mistaken? Was tonight not her night to cook? Did they discuss that last time? Maybe because of her training? She couldn't remember.

"Kitchen!" Harper slipped off her shoes and added them to the pile by the door before heading down the hall and sliding into the kitchen. She found her father standing in front of the stove, a blue and white striped apron she had gotten him wrapped around his lean frame, holding a wooden spoon and staring at a pot.

"A watched pot never boils," Harper said. Andrew Grant turned and smiled at her. Although he was getting older, he was taking good care of himself. He wore his glasses all the time now and his hair was getting slightly gray, but it was hard to tell in the mousey brown.

"Think the stove is finally going out. Pots been on there for a while, hasn't even gotten warm." Harper stepped past him and looked at the pot, touched gingerly around the burner and felt no warmth. She looked up and saw that the burner was not turned on.

"Got to turn the burner on." Harper clicked the burner on. Her father looked embarrassed for a moment. "Sauce tastes great!" Harper said, dipping her pinky into the red sauce. Distract him. He had been forgetful lately. Probably just his old age and living alone getting the better of him.

"At least I remembered to turn that one on. That stuff takes the longest to make!" Her father stirred the sauce. "How was training?"

Harper sighed. She put the bag of food in the fridge, not mentioning that she was pretty sure it was her turn to cook. As far as she was concerned, it was a load off her shoulders. She noticed her father's spare glasses sitting on the top shelf, next to the eggs. She took them out and set them on the island next to the paper.

Pouring herself a glass of wine from the bottle he had opened by the sink, she told her father about it. He kept a straight face, but she could tell he was jolted by what she was saying. His eyes always gave him away. He finally reacted fully when she told him about what Mr. School Safety had said about her mother. He laughed.

"He worked with her, you know that, right?" Andrew shook his head in frustrated laughter. "The year before it happened, he was part of her department. Your mother used to come home and spend hours ranting about what a loser he was. She called him slimy and said he had the maturity of a preteen." Her father smiled fondly at the memory of his wife. "He had gotten some big promotion and was no longer in the building when it happened. Maybe he feels guilty? He had been in that building for almost 15 years."

"I wonder if he could do any of the things he was telling us we needed to do?" Harper took a sip of the wine, looking out into the backyard.

"Who knows what any of us would do in that situation?" He set the noodles in the pot of water that was now boiling. There was a long pause between them. Harper stared at her wine while her father stared at the noodles.

"Did Mom do what you thought she would?"

Andrew continued to watch the noodles. He had stopped breaking them in half a few years ago, after learning on a cooking show he watched that breaking the noodles ruined their integrity. Who knew noodles had integrity? Harper waited. She and her father rarely spoke of her mother, especially of the day that they lost her.

“Of course she did. I wish she had just hidden in her room. I wish she hadn’t...” Andrew stirred his noodles. Harper felt a pang of guilt. “But I know, if we could ask her, she would say that she would go back and do it again.”

Harper did not push her father and ask for more details. She had enough memories of that day. She wondered sometimes, sitting in this house, surrounded by their things, her mother’s shoes still in their closet and her jacket still on the hook by the door, if all he did when Harper wasn’t there was think about his wife.

“Why did you bring groceries?” He said once the noodles were all submerged and cooking. Harper had gotten her eyes from her mother, but her nose and hair from her father. She knew she wrinkled her nose in annoyance like him and her hair would never hold volume because he didn’t. He had been that stereotypical high school science teacher. She supposed she was the stereotypical high school English teacher. They were both very nondescript.

“I just needed things for this weekend and since I got out of work a little early, I just wanted to stop and get it over with.” Her father nodded, accepting her explanation. No sense in upsetting him.

Harper and her father ate a quiet dinner with some wine. He told her about the latest drama at his golf course and his two friends who he plays with. One was upset over the other’s choice for their golf trip next month.

She cleaned up the dishes while he watched Jeopardy. They watched his favorite Friday night show about a rogue cop and his sassy partner. Harper noted her father seemed a little quieter than he usually was, but she knew it was probably because of her day and the memories it brought up. As she gathered her groceries to leave, her father surprised her.

“I hope what I am about to say doesn’t upset you.” Harper set her things down and waited. “I want you to know that I am very proud of you, and I know you are a wonderful teacher. But I think it is time you considered a new career.”

Harper was stunned. She didn't know what to say. Her father turned his eyes away from her, back to the living room, back to the chair that had been her mother's. There was a book on the table beside it, with reading glasses. The glasses were only 3 weeks old. Her mother had announced she was officially old when she got them. The table was dusted, but he returned everything to its spot. Every week.

"Dad," she said, but she had nothing to finish her thought.

"I just want you to find something else that makes you happy. You aren't happy anymore."

Of course she wasn't happy with what she did. Her friends didn't seem thrilled, either. Not being happy with work is just what being an adult with a job is all about. That's what makes retirement better and worth it. Her father's face was strained, staring at her. She could see strain and stress and worry. Her heart ached seeing that.

"I will consider it," she said finally. She didn't tell him she had had those thoughts already that day. "But I don't know what else I could do?" She picked up her bags.

"You, my darling, can do whatever you set your mind to." Andrew hugged Harper for a little longer than he normally did. She kissed him on the cheek and told him good luck at golf, to call her when he won.

### Chapter 3.5:

The dream itself wasn't unexpected. Harper recognized it when she started. And given the day, she was surprised she had had it.

She was back in her high school, her backpack on her pack, walking in a faceless crowd, heading to lunch. The only face she saw was the boy. His name was Carson. He had been in her gym class. Last semester, she had helped him when there was an accident in the weight room and nobody else noticed him. Carson smiled at her. Her skin crawled. She tried to smile back. Every time she had this dream, she tried to smile, to stop him to talk.

“Hey Mom,” she said, stopping in front of a woman, leaning against the wall next to a classroom. She had dark hair, with dark eyes. She smiled, revealing deep laugh lines.

“Hey, heading to lunch?”

“Yeah, I just forgot...”

Pop, pop, pop. That metallic noise again. Before Harper could react, her mother’s cold fingers wrapped around her and yanked her into the classroom.

“Get into the room, now!” Her mother shoved her forward. Other students tumbled in after her. The room filled with kids, all white as a ghost. Her mother was in the hall.

“Mom!” Harper called. Her mother looked at her, then back at the hall. She waited a split second more before slamming the door shut.

There were more pops, closer now. A few screams.

“Mrs. Grant! Mrs. Grant!” Fists pounding on the door. Harper’s mom turned and opened the door. She gasped and there was a pop. The classroom screamed. Harper watched her mother throw herself into the hall, the door slamming behind her. The door handle moved, wiggled, attempting to break free. But it held.

Harper felt the pain in her chest, the shock, the fear, the hope all again.

She opened her eyes to find tears had stained her pillow. Pushing herself up, she reached for the light by the bed, clicking it on.

Sometimes, her mom looked back at her one more time before she went out. Sometimes she never made it into the room. She had had the dream so many times, she wasn’t sure what actually happened anymore.

Harper lay in the light, pushing down the emotions coming up. Her father had put her in therapy for a while after the shooting. School shootings are traumatizing enough. To watch her own mother die had taken it to another level. The therapist didn’t really help. She wanted her to talk about school and the present and never wanted her to focus on the past. She begged her father to stop taking her, promising she was okay.

She had learned to cope. For the next few years, she was anxious, all of the time. She would have panic attacks for no reason. She never let anyone know. She would sit and silently suffer, digging her nails into the palms of her hands until she bled. She didn’t need her father to have any extra worry. That’s when her love of reading exploded. She found her only escape in a book. So she read everything she could get her hands on. In the world of her books, she wasn’t the girl whose mom died in the shooting. She was Sherlock Holmes or a girl on an English moor.

The anxiety had slowly subsided, as had her grief. Just like everyone said, time heals all. Well, she wasn't healed but she had learned to cope, learned to avoid the wound that was still gapping.

Easiest way was to just cope was never tell anyone about what happened.

The second was to avoid days like today.

Harper reached to her night stand and grabbed the novel she always had there. It was a romance about a woman who fell in love with a spy and the dangers they now face. She loved it.

Just like it did twelve years ago, the book let her escape her racing thoughts about that day. She knew if she stopped reading, the thoughts would come back. So she read until the light was peaking through the thin curtains and she closed the book after the last romantic kiss in the setting sun.

Romances always had happy endings. It was nice.

With no groceries to fetch and a clean apartment, Harper pulled on some jeans before heading down the stairs of her building, her phone tucked in the pocket of her vest.

Harper stepped out into the morning light, a breeze kissing her face. She waited for the door to close behind her, squeezing her keys in her pocket as it did. Two outer doors that had two separate keys to get into secured her building. Some buildings still had doormen that guarded the entry. Not Harper's.

The air smelled like fall. It was crisp and the light dancing on the tops of the buildings had an autumn hue. Harper loved this time of year. The hot summer days and nights were over and she could sleep with her bedroom window cracked, waking to chilled rooms. If she had a fireplace, she would get it ready to light. There was also something about change that excited her. The change of the season, change of the leaves. It made her think she could change. Like going for a walk more often.

Walking down the cracked sidewalk, Harper zipped her vest to her chin, the breeze biting a little harder. She headed towards the bookstore. Like many people, Harper was an expert at avoiding the hungry eyes and dirty hands extended towards her as she walked by. She kept a tight grip on her keys, not sure she would be able to defend herself if any of the shadows on either side of her stepped into her path. Like the crumbling sidewalk, the homeless were just something else the city ignored.

Harper stopped at a light and spotted a young woman out of the corner of her, dirty and shaking, standing underneath the entrance of an old, boarded up building. She was not holding a sign; she stood there, watching the traffic roll by, rocking back and forth, probably about the same age as Harper. Harper wondered what she had belonged to before all this. Did she have a family who missed her? Was she all alone in this world? Harper felt shame. Her biggest problem right now was her job of training her to protect herself and her students. And lack of sleep. This girl's problems seemed far more real. Harper had been trained, though, to assume she had done something to put herself there. Drugs, alcohol or maybe ran from home because they didn't let her party enough. Did anyone actually want to live on the street? The girl seemed to sense someone was watching her. She looked right at Harper, and Harper focused on the walk sign in front of her.

She reached the book store, stepping in just after it opened. She inhaled the smell of coffee and fresh printed ink, one of the few things the crazy would had been unable to change. She smiled at the old man, leaning on the counter, reading a large novel in front of him before heading towards the romance section.

Her fingers trashed the spines and she lingered for a while, gently pulling a book from the shelf before returning it, unimpressed by both the cover and the blurb. She settled for another spy romance by the same author, this time, a male interest falling for a female spy. At least it was a little different. She wandered to the self help section, surprising herself when she was pulling off the shelf books on career change. She skimmed a few

pages, feeling eyes watching her. She looked up and saw a tall man with dark hair watching her. He glanced back down at his magazine when she looked up at him.

Harper's immediate reaction was to blush. Here she was, holding a smutty romance novel, and looking in the self-help section with messy hair and dark circles under eyes after a sleepless night. What a hot mess she was presenting. She slid the book back onto the shelf and headed to the front. She stopped at the hot deals table but nothing stood out to her. The eyes of the man were behind her, watching her again. She glanced over her shoulder, spying the man with the magazine watching her again, smirking. She sighed, going to the register. She paid for her book and went out onto the street.

She was waiting at the light when a homeless man approached her.

"Hey, hey, give me the bag..." he said, his dirty fingers reaching for her book. Harper stepped away, knowing she should give the bag, it was just a book. But her instincts weren't thinking.

"Leave me alone," she demanded. The man looked at her, shocked at her voice. Then he frowned, coming closer.

"Give me the bag," his hand whipped out and he grabbed wrist. She struggled, pulling, unable to break his grasp. She should have just given him the bag.

"Let go of me!" She demanded yanking again. His nails were digging into her and she was panicking. Another hand grabbed the homeless man's and twisted it off of her. The homeless man yelped, being pushed to the ground. Harper pulled her arm to her chest. Standing over the man was the magazine reader from the book store. He was strikingly tall.

"You okay?" He asked, ignoring the cursing coming from the man on his knees.

"Yes...yes." Harper said. "I should have given him the bag..."

"Nah," the man looked down at his subject, a different smirk on his lips. "He can't just take stuff."

"Let me go man! I'm sorry!"

"I'm sure you are..." The man smiled at Harper. He was tall, good looking and technically a hero. But his eyes made Harper want to recoil. There was something off about him. "What would you like me to do with him?" There was a menacing undertone in his voice.

"Just let him go..." Harper said. "He didn't do any harm." Maybe it was just in her imagination but the man seemed disappointed but let the man go who stood and scurried away, shooting a slurry of profanities at them.

"Thank you," Harper said.

"No problem."

In her romance novels, this where they would go to coffee and the two of them would be off on a world wide adventure with steamy love scenes. Instead, Harper wanted to get away. Perhaps it was the residual anxiety of the previous night's dream but she didn't trust the knight in shining armour was as noble as he was trying to seem.

"Can I walk you home?"

"No, I'll be okay." Harper turned in time to see the walk sign and dashed across the street calling a thank you one more time before power walking home.

#### Chapter 4:

Monday afternoon, as Harper entered the grades, Ms. Gray arrived. Harper felt her arrival before she saw her. In the movies, there would have been a flash of lightning, ominous music would have been

playing, and the lights would have faded to show only a silhouette in the door frame. In actual life, Harper saw her out of the corner of her eye.

Harper had been told that she sometimes suffered from resting bitch face, but Ms. Gray took that to another level. Her face was stone smooth, with few wrinkles around her eyes and mouth, despite being in her late 50s. She wore hair in a tight bun on the top of her head every day. She always wore a black skirt with a colored sweater and black heels that clicked menacingly down the hall. Her arms were crossed, her red fingernails standing out against the maroon sweater, and she revealed nothing about what she was going to discuss on her face.

“Ms. Grant,” Ms. Gray said. Harper tried to get a read on what direction this conversation might go, but her stone face gave nothing away. “The events of Friday were reported to Mr. King, and he informed me that since I was the administrator on duty in your room, I would be the one to talk to you about what happened.” Mr. King was their principal and what he lacked in backbone, he made up for in arrogance.

“I understand, but Ms. Gray, that whole situation was complete....” Harper was ready to defend herself. Ms. Gray held up her hand to signal that she was not done.

“I am not here to scold you. Instead, I am here to applaud you.” Harper knew her face must have shown her shock, which was only doubled when the old stone face actually smiled. “It has been a long time since I have witnessed a young person like yourself stand up for something like that. I want to tell you I am in complete agreement with what you said. Those simulations, that gun that you have in your desk, that is not the solution.”

Harper smiled. “Is there really any solution to this problem?” Harper turned back to her computer. Ms. Gray did not move. When Harper turned back, Ms. Gray’s expression had changed. Her eyes drilled into Harper’s, a chill crept up her spine and hair prickled on her arms. Harper stopped herself from rubbing them.

“I think there are things at work, things within our control that will change and help our future.”

Harper kept her face neutral, but she wondered what in the hell this woman was talking about. The union, maybe? Another rally?

“Ms. Grant, would you like to go to dinner?”

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Harper agreed to go to dinner with Mrs. Gray only because she was terrified of her. And a little curious to hear about what solution this woman could have that others had not already thought of. She met her at an Applebee’s, one with decent service and where she could also get a glass of wine to take the edge off of having dinner with an administrator.

The hostess was a squat girl who waddled a little as she walked them to their bar height table. They sat across from each other and gave the server their drink orders. Harper had a glass of white wine. Ms. Gray ordered straight Jack Daniels on ice. She also ordered them the sampler appetizer.

“I have been in education for 31 years.” Ms. Gray started after her first sip of whiskey. “When I started, the parents supported teachers. The government had already failed us, but at least we still had the parents.

“It all changed in the ’90s. Suddenly, parents weren’t interested in being parents anymore. They wanted to be a child’s best friend. So they started allowing their children to question us and they joined in. Suddenly, we were having to defend everything we did. I became an administrator to support the teachers. But that didn’t happen. Every principal I have ever worked for demanded that we support the parents.” Her eyes had gone narrow. Harper always avoided the groups that got together to complain. This lecture was nothing she hadn’t heard before. Her parents said it, she heard all of her coworkers say it. Hell, she had even said it. Although Harper agreed that there had been a shift in parental influence, the school system itself was outdated and is still in need of revamping.

Taking a sip of her stale wine, she did not feel that getting into that debate was the best move at that moment. “Then we started having issues with cell phones and computers, and on top of that, they wanted teachers to be security officers in the classroom. It was beginning to be overwhelming. I watched so many outstanding teachers, young teachers like you, just quit because it was so much more than they had originally signed up for. And I could not blame them when they got into real estate or HR and made more money.” Ms. Gray leveled her eyes at their waitress, who immediately approached them and took her drink to refill. Harper’s wine was still full.

“About five years ago, I was ready to retire and find a straightforward job working in HR for any company that would take me.” Harper wondered why she didn’t. She was currently wondering if maybe she should do the same. “I went to a fundraiser with my partner. She works in politics. While there, I met a man who invited me to join a movement, a group, that wanted to see things changed.” Ms. Gray lowered her voice and leaned in closer. “The Forgotten Fathers.”

Her eyes were drilling into her. She didn’t know what she was supposed to say, but Ms. Gray was looking for a reaction like that name should make her skin crawl or a dramatic gasp escape her lips. Harper thought it sounded like a sad men’s club.

“Who?”

Mrs. Gray smiled. It appeared to give her great pleasure to know she belonged to such a secret organization. A secret, sad men’s club. Or a sad woman’s club.

“I had never heard of them either. And I thought the man was a little crazy the more he talked about it. He talked about plans, about the change they wanted to accomplish. I thought he was crazy. Probably like you are thinking right now.”

Harper sipped her wine and said nothing.

“The idea was too Orwellian. It sounded more like a group of people getting together to complain. Something made me go to their next meeting. I quickly found out that they weren’t complaining. They were actually doing something about it.”

The appetizer arrived at this point. Harper nervously ate a chicken wing, wondering how long she needed to stay before it wouldn't be rude of her to sneak out.

"I've been watching you for a while. I see that you have the desire to see things changed. You fight a system that, as it stands, you have no chance against. But you get it up and do it, anyway."

Harper stopped eating. She didn't realize anyone had really noticed her before. She also didn't realize that she was fighting a system. As far as she was concerned, she was just doing her job. "When you stood up and said those things in that meeting, that's when I really took notice. It is rare to see someone your age have so much ... grit."

"Grit?"

"You have something about your Harper. You see more than you let on. Students trust you and other teachers see what they want to be in you. You aren't afraid of doing or saying the right thing. Even if it is to the best friend of the Superintendent." Harper blushed. She did not know that Mr. School Safety had friends in high places.

"We need more people like you. People who are in the trenches, per se. People who aren't afraid of fighting, who recognize that we need change. People who want to fight and win for once." Ms. Gray downed the last of her 2nd whiskey.

"This all sounds... interesting," Harper said. "But what can we really do? Cause a government coup?" She smiled at the thought. How very 1700s of them. What could they do instead of dumping a bunch of tea in the Boston harbor? Boycott Walmart?

Ms. Gray's lips peeled back with a slow smile. The same smile from the classroom that gave Harper chills.

"Exactly."

## Chapter 5:

Harper left Applebees feeling a little confused. Part of her wondered how on Earth Ms. Gray managed to run the school the way she did because the woman was clearly insane. The other part of her, a little tiny part of her, wondered if she was telling the truth.

“I know you need proof.” Ms. Gray said as she signed the check. “So, this weekend. You will need to watch the news.”

“The news?” Harper thought of the latest news, with the shooting at the mall and the lack of other coverage as they tried to pinpoint the motive. She thought of all the experts and the long-lost friends and 3rd cousins they had on talking about the shooter.

“There will be an incident this weekend. The organization is behind it.”

“A lot of incidents happen. How will I know?”

“You will know.”

The seriousness in her voice left Harper feeling a little worried. Her stomach was knotting as she got into her car. It could just have been the deep-fried appetizers. By the time Harper arrived back at her little apartment, she had to take some antacids to help calm the bubbles. She had also written off the entire experience as the ventings of a slightly crazy, a little drunk, older woman who probably should retire.

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By Thursday, Harper had pushed her strange dinner out of her mind. Joining a group that got together to complain was the last thing she was interested in. As she was packing up some assignments to grade one day over the weekend, Ms. Gray appeared in her doorway. "Remember, watch the news." She did not wait for Harper to respond, just evaporated away.

As she left the classroom, Harper texted Sarah.

"You will not believe what happened earlier this week. Can't wait to explain over dinner."

Harper wasn't even in her car when the phone chirped back. Sarah had to cancel again. Emergency at work. She wanted to try again on Saturday.

At home, Harper flipped through bad TV, she couldn't help but feel she was being watched. She kept glancing at the window, like she was going to see someone standing there, or someone across the way, holding a pair of binoculars. Acknowledging that she was acting crazy, she had to get up and pull the curtains shut. She did not watch the news.

Friday night, Harper went over to her father's. She noticed that his normally perfect lawn was a little overgrown and turning a sickly yellow. She knocked before entering as she always did and found her father sitting in his chair in the living room.

"Darling, what are you doing here?" He asked, standing up to greet her.

"It's Friday night," Harper told him, kissing his cheek. "Dinner night." Her father looked a little confused for a moment, but soon he smiled.

"Well, I guess we better figure out something then!" He set down his book and started towards the kitchen. "Got so wrapped up in my book, forgot what day it was."

“It happens.” Harper said. That was not like her father. They went into the kitchen and found it in a bit of disarray. Also not like her father. Harper could feel her forehead crease and her shoulders instantly tightened.

Andrew Grant was now wandering around the kitchen, humming to himself and ignoring the mess entirely.

“Dad, are you feeling okay?”

“Harper! What are you doing here?” Harper let her father hug her again before deciding they needed to go to the hospital immediately.

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“It’s hard to say right now, Ms. Grant,” the emergency room doctor said. “But your father may have suffered a minor stroke or is exhibiting signs of Alzheimer’s.” The doctor was older, probably in his early 40s, but he was fit and lean. He wore green scrubs and a badge, not a fancy coat. He looked tired.

Harper said nothing. Out loud. In her head, she was asking a million questions. *What? No. Her father was only 68. There was no way that he would have that? A stroke? No. he would have other symptoms. Something about burnt toast and drooping eyes. And maybe his left arm is hurting. No, that was a heart attack.* Her chest tightened and her throat felt raw.

“We will need to run some tests, but I recommend that it be done by an expert.” The doctor handed her a card. “This is the best local guy. I’ve already called. Some will contact you by Monday to schedule his appointment.”

Harper took the card and thanked him. He nodded with a sad, practiced smile, patted her shoulder a few times and moved on to his next patient. Harper went back into the room and found her father sitting in a chair, his face in his hands.

“Ready to go?” Harper asked, picking up his jacket. Her father looked at her and his eyes showed her he was back.

“Yes. We can go.”

Harper waited until she was driving to ask.

“How long have you been misplacing things?” He shifted uncomfortably and ran his fingers through his graying hair. Harper thought back to her earlier thoughts. Only 68. He was 68.

“Misplaced my glasses a few times. Couldn’t remember if I watered the lawn or not. Old man things. Tonight was just a fluke. You should not have brought me to the hospital.”

“Dad, I...”

“It was just a waste of time!” Harper rarely experienced her father’s indignation. 35 years of dealing with teenagers had taught him a great deal of patience. Harper did not respond. She gripped the steering wheel and stared straight ahead. “I’m sorry, darling.”

“It’s okay,” Harper lied. “You just were not yourself. I wanted you checked out.”

“I know, I know....” he sighed and patted her arm. “I just think I had a little fluke, nothing more.”

Harper did not tell him about the specialist. She would wait until they were home, both fed and recovered a little from their ordeal.

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Harper had ordered pizza while her father sat in his chair, picking at the hospital band on his arm. Harper opened the fridge. The fridge was almost empty. Inside, she found a cup of coffee full of coffee and creamer that had separated, a newspaper and his second pair of reading glasses. Harper closed the door. She was at a loss for what to do, what to say.

Harper went into the living room and found her father asleep in his chair, hand on the remote, tv shouting infomercials. Harper turned the tv off and stepped out onto the porch. She would let her father sleep until the pizza arrived. Then she would put him back to bed and stay the night. Tomorrow, she would fix the yard and talk to him about the action plan.

The pizza arrived forty minutes later. Harper had remained on the steps up to the house, scrolling through information about Alzheimer’s on her phone. She thanked the driver, tipped him and headed back inside, a trace of a plan finally forming.

She gingerly woke her father, and they joked about his old man cat napping over pizza and water.

“Well,” her father stretched and stood from his chair. “I think I am going to call it an early night.” Harper nodded, folding the paper plates together and stacking the cups. “You look tired, Harper. I don’t want you driving home tonight.” She smiled.

“Probably a good idea.” She stood and went to the sink, dropping plates into the trash can. She rinsed out the cups. By the time she returned to the living room, her father had gone to bed, leaving the TV on. She turned the TV off and listened to the sounds of the old house. She heard her father’s voice. Curious, she moved as quietly as she could, thinking about the two times in her life she snuck back into the house later than her curfew. She got caught the second time.

“... nothing dear. I swear I am fine. Just a little forgetful.” Who was he talking to? “She is doing fine, dear. I already talked to her about getting out while she still can. You can’t expect her to decide so quickly.” There was a pause, and she heard her father shuffling around, climbing into bed. “Mary, darling, come to bed.”

Harper’s heart thudded into her chest. She backed away and went into the living room. She sat in the chair and looked at the table where her mother’s book sat. Her mother, Mary, was not in that room with her father. Harper did not cry. Her throat ached and her head pulsated with her heart. She sat on the edge of the chair for a long time, staring at the TV but she never turned it back on. She missed the news.

## Chapter 6:

Harper woke up curled up in a ball on top of the covers. Her phone had fallen to the floor, and she sat up, her head blurry as her eyes. She heard movement outside the door and smelled food and coffee. Rising, she drifted down towards the kitchen, riding the wave of smells where she found her father clear-eyed and head, whistling a tune while he scrambled some eggs.

“Morning, darling!” he said. “Coffee?” Harper nodded and plopped into the chair at the island and fingered comb her thin hair. It all fell back into its usual place quickly. Her father poured her some coffee and creamer. She sipped it while he finished breakfast. Did he even remember what happened last night? If he didn't, how could she tell him?

“I've decided that we will face whatever is going on head on. We need to see a specialist, and figure out what this all is.” Andrew finally told her, setting a plate of eggs and bacon in front of her. “I also want to apologize for behaving the way I did last night. You were just doing what you had to do.”

“It is okay, I know you were just as freaked out as I was.” Harper said. She was surprised at how relieved she was. Maybe she had just been overreacting last night.

Andrew sat across from her and they ate breakfast together. They had done this so many other times, but this didn't have the feeling of normal. It reminded Harper of the first time they ate breakfast without her mother. The world had shifted then, and it had once again. Reminding Harper, life was short. Nothing ever stayed the same.

“What do you think we should do?” Andrew asked.

“First things first, we get you an appointment. The ER already gave us a referral, and we should get one scheduled in the next few days. They will run tests and we will just go from there.” Harper took a long swig from her coffee. Her father had always been the organizer of the family. At breakfast, he would announce the plans for the day. Now, the task had fallen to her. The shift. She was now in control.

They spent the rest of the day cleaning and organizing, reviving the yard and shopping. By the time Harper got home it was just after 6. She had a list of her own tasks she needed to do as well, but she

was exhausted. She sat down and turned on the TV and zoned out to reruns of terrible shows. The mindless TV did nothing to distract her from her father.

A little thought popped into her head. The Forgotten Fathers. That pushed the scare of last night right out of her head.

Setting down her untouched wine, Harper retrieved her computer from the kitchen table. She settled back into her couch, opened it and typed in Forgotten Fathers.

At first, she found nothing of importance. Google suggested “Founding Fathers” as her actual search. She scrolled for a bit and saw mostly rants about how people had forgotten the founding fathers and the true meaning of the constitution. She took a sip of her wine and was about to give up when a title caught her eye. It was a blog, but she clicked on it anyway. “Beware This organization!” in blood-colored, 1950s horror film inspired font. Off to a good start. She settled back into the couch and cradled her wine to her chest, sipping as she read.

*There is a secret organization working to destroy our way of life. This organization. Never heard of them? Of course, you haven't! But I am here to tell you that they are up to no good. They want to change our society. They want to revamp what we have worked so hard to create. They work secretly, moving pieces into place.*

*I know all this from an informant. He tells me that the group is slowly building a force of allies. They are going to destroy what we love!*

Harper wanted to stop reading. The person sounded insane. How could a group destroy something as massive as their country? Like any train wreck though, she couldn't bring herself to close the tab.

*The group is working to restructure our lives. First, they want to control what we read, when we read it. They also want to control what we watch and restrict our view time. The group wants to make more rules on education and rework the prison system. They also want to rework all of our laws. The informant told me they even want to take away guns!*

Harper rolled her eyes. There would be no way to restrict any of that.

*Forgotten Father's is working to destroy our way of life. Don't let them! Arm yourselves today!*

Beneath the post, there was an emblem. It was a Phoenix, rising from the ground covered in flames, carrying a grinning skull.

*Be on the lookout for this. This is their calling card.*

Harper shut the computer and finished her wine. She knew that the person responsible for this blog was probably one crazy redneck with access to a computer. At least she had successfully stopped obsessing about her father for a moment.

She turned the TV back up and poured herself a bowl of cereal. Her milk was bad, so she ate the cereal without it, hoping she remembered to pick some up tomorrow.

“Breaking news!”

Harper focused on the tv and stopped picking out the not marshmallow of the cereal first. When did the news come on?

“In a historical event, Vice President Wayne Stewart announces today that starting tomorrow, we will no longer have to pay for the internet.” The same news anchor from the mall shooting coverage still had the same expression as he did during the report of the tragedy. Harper wondered if he could even make another face.

“That’s right. This afternoon, the Vice President made an announcement on the White House Lawn, revealing this exciting news.” A female reporter took over the story. She wore high heels, a black, tight skirt, and a loose blouse. She was new, her words trembled still, and she looked at her notes a lot. Wanted to get it right. Good for her.

The TV changed to a clip of the Vice President. He was a tall man; he was younger than a vice president and he was handsome. Some people compared his looks to JFK, and Harper knew she probably would vote for him if he was running for president in the next election. He seemed ambitious, but carried a boyish grin that made him look like he was always waiting for a practical joke to play out. He was naturally tan, and he was well spoken. How he got mixed up in politics and mixed up with such a man as the president he served with, Harper really didn’t know or understand. Not that she really understood politics.

“It is my great pleasure to announce that we will now be able to access the internet anywhere, anytime. Over the past few months, The White House has been working with several internet carriers to make this a reality. Starting tomorrow at 6 AM. The internet will be free to anyone interested in using it.”

Harper was shocked. Internet prices had grown outlandishly expensive over the past few years. She was just barely able to afford basic internet that didn't allow her to stream anything like most people did these days. The free internet will probably be the basic but hey, that might mean the more expensive one will come down in price to be competitive. Harper hoped she could start watching some shows Sarah always told her about. Maybe if she had those shows, she wouldn't miss hanging out with them.

“This internet will be strong enough that everyone will stream whatever service they like, look up any news they like or connect to anyone they feel they need to connect to in this world. It will be crucial in the furthering of our schools and increasing our international connection.”

Harper continued to watch, but really didn't listen to the reporters' questions. She was waiting for a sign. This had to be the announcement she was told to watch for. Deep down, she had been waiting for another tragedy because what else would the news report? This put the group on a different level. This meant that maybe the group wasn't a bunch of crazy people who drank too much whiskey. Right? A camera zoomed in on the Vice President as he shook someone in the press's hand and leaned in to talk to him. The pin on his jacket. It was the symbol of the crazy blogger's site. Harper's phone started ringing. She answered without looking.

“Believe me now?”

## Chapter 7:

Harper felt like she was in one of her spy novels. She had agreed to meet Ms. Gray on Sunday afternoon in a mostly empty parking lot to hear more about The Forgotten Fathers. What a silly name, she thought, chewing gum and making little bubbles that she popped like bubble wrap in her mouth. She wasn't sure what she could learn, but Harper was a little intrigued. Hesitant but intrigued. Ms. Gray could have just waited for something to happen, something that they could have taken credit for.

But there was that pin. Ms. Gray had not told her about the symbol. She found it on a blog. Not exactly a credible source.

Harper leaned against her car, wearing a long black coat and black pants and her only pair of heels. She felt she needed to dress the part, feel like a femme fatale. Not that she felt like she was pulling it off. Her hair had gone flat, and she was regretting the heels. She adjusted her oversized Audrey Hepburn style glasses and waited, her hair somehow getting into her mouth and nose at the same time.

The hair on the back of her neck stood up. She glanced over her shoulder but saw no one. There was a string of empty storefronts with windows that looked like eyes. She shivered again and turned around to see a car coming closer to her. Harper felt a moment of panic. She was in an empty parking lot, alone. No one knew where she was. This was a dumb idea. She tied back her hair. Could they track where texts were sent from? Should she send a text so someone could at least trace her last known location to here?

*Calm down.* She told herself. She focused on the car, trying to make out who was driving. Relaxing, she recognized the red nails on the wheel.

Ms. Gray parked across from her and stepped out. Ms. Gray was dressed as she always was, skirt, heels. Harper was glad to have taken the time to dress the part. Best to make a good impression on this ...whatever this was. Interview?

Harper stood from her leaning position, surprised, when another figure emerged from the car. Harper glanced at Ms. Gray, who was watching the girl. She was a larger girl, with red hair pulled into a messy ponytail. Younger than Harper, much younger. Her skin was smooth and her large brown eyes brimmed with a hesitation. She locked eyes with Harper and seemed equally surprised to see her standing there.

“Harper, this is Claire.” Ms. Gray said. “She is also coming to hear about the group today.”

“Hi,” Harper and Claire said at the same time, causing them both to smile nervously. The three women walked towards a storefront together. Harper and Ms. Gray both wore heels while Claire was in old, worn down tennis shoes and not trendy holey jeans.

Harper felt very overdressed.

“I like your coat.” Claire told her and Ms. Gray unlocked one of the building’s doors. Harper felt she should take it off and give to her. This coat was one she rarely wore. She was rolling around a receipt from two years ago in the pocket.

“Thanks,” Harper said. “How do you know Ms. Gray?” They were in the building now. Claire could not answer. Mrs. Gray was ushering them into the storefront. Harper wasn’t sure what she was expecting when she walked into the room, but she was disappointed. Inside, it was a room was a gym with old, run down equipment. Most of it looked like they did not work. The walls needed fresh paint. They walked through the empty gym to an office off to the side. Inside was a single desk with a couple of metal chairs around it. Sitting in one of the metal chairs was a tired-looking older man. On the walls were old motivational posters. One of a mountain climber, the other of a bull rider. Harper was back in her high school guidance counselor’s office.

“Hey Joe,” Ms. Gray said. It was the most cordial Harper had ever heard her sound.

“Hey Amelia,” the guard sat up and smiled. “What brings you here today?” His eyes scanned Harper, and suddenly, the security guard didn’t look so tired anymore. She forced herself not to flinch, and she stared back. The author of her novel would be pleased with her. He had gray hair, but Harper could see defined muscles under his neatly pressed white shirt and a tracksuit.

“I’m just showing these two bright recruits around the shop. This is Harper and this is Claire.”

“Welcome Harper, Claire, it’s nice to meet you both.” His voice did not reflect enthusiasm. Nor did his eyes. Harper saw nothing but distrust in the older man. She returned the sentiment. Joe moved across the room, pulling out his keys. He pushed aside the motivational poster with a mountain climber on it and revealed a technologically advanced looking panel. Harper thought it looked like something that would show up in Star Trek.

Ms. Gray joined him and placed her hand on the screen on the panel, and Joe inserted a key. Harper knew her eyes were wide, but she kept her mouth closed. Another point from her author. Glancing over at Claire, the girl looked equally baffled, looking at Harper for reassurance. Her protective teacher instincts wanted to tell her to turn and leave and don’t come back. Why should she stay? The

author of her spy novel was probably annoyed with her reaction and wanted her to woman up and see this through. She could always say no, right?

There was a click, followed by a smooth, sliding sound, and the floor opened just to the left of Ms. Gray. Harper could see the beginning of gray metal stairs leading down in a slight spiral.

“Thanks, Joe. We won’t be long. Anyone else down there?”

“Harrison. He’s just training I think.”

“Perfect.”

Harper followed Ms. Gray down the stairs, Claire behind her. Maybe they would meet a man named Q. Instead of a grungy basement, she found clean walls, painted a refreshing gray with blue accents that looked like glass. The floor was large pieces of white slate. It reminded Harper of a beach resort she had gone to with some friends in college.

The sound of their shoes echoed off the walls as they moved. Harper saw a conference room, several offices, an area that looked like a reception area, and another gym. In this gym, she noticed a man hitting a punching bag, practicing ducks and blocks. He had headphones on and did not look up to see them. All the equipment looked top of the line and new.

“That’s Harrison. It is one of our contacts with the police. Former Marine. He’s a good man. He will probably train you. If either you decide to join.”

“What if we decide not to? What will happen to us?” Harper said suddenly, very aware that maybe she was beyond being able to say no. Claire looked nervously at Harper. Perhaps she didn’t want to know these things. Harper probably shouldn’t have included her. Ms. Gray simply smiled and opened the glass door leading into a small media room. Beyond saying no. Claire let Harper go first.

“Have a seat anywhere you like,” Ms. Gray said. Harper sat down in a very comfortable recliner. Claire picked a couch near the door. The room was dark, and a projector hung above them. Ms. Gray took off her jacket and moved to the side of the room. She opened a laptop and clicked for a few minutes, typed a little, and then the screen clicked on. Harper stared at the floor, aware that Claire kept looking at her. Harper was not feeling like a spy, she felt like she was attending a staff meeting.

“We established the Forgotten Fathers in 1976. That year, I don’t think anyone thought it would be more than an activist group. There were many activist groups. Since then, the group has grown from the original 6 members, 2 teachers, a police officer, a doctor, a nurse, and a politician, to over 2,000 members from all walks of life. The group has worked tirelessly to support all areas of common life, ignoring big interest groups. Despite our best efforts, we have continued to see a decline in basic humanity around the country. There is growing hatred amongst races again, a great uprising against police and a rapid decrease in respect or even desire for education.” Mrs. Gray paused but did not look at them. The hair on the back of Harper’s neck stood up. Okay, maybe not a staff meeting.

“It became very clear over the last few years that our organization needed to do something drastic. We began to actively recruit and, in doing so, we have recruited some very high-ranking officials from all over the country. At first, we started with small things. Making sure our people were in positions we needed.” As Ms. Gray was discussing this, a slide show of people was being shown. Most of the people Harper had never even seen. But there were a few congressional representatives, local town officials, and even 2 teachers from her school that she knew. One of the last pictures was of Wayne Stewart. Most of the pictures looked to be taken from the internet, professional headshots for their jobs. Nothing that Mrs. Gray and others could not have gotten and put together to impress ‘recruits’.

“The latest feat was the creation of the free internet.”

“What is the point of free internet?” If Ms. Gray could tell her, maybe this wasn’t all a big lie. This was not a question portion of the presentation and Ms. Gray gave her one of the well known looks from staff meetings everyone dubbed, “The Glare.”

“We will get to that.” Harper knew that meant we would not be discussing that. Red Flag number 100. “For now, ladies, we just want to train you. We want to teach you how to fight, how to investigate, and how to spot a liar. We want to prepare you for any sort of task we might need you to do.”

“What might a task be, for example?” Again, The Glare. People must not ask many questions. Claire certainly wasn’t.

“Mostly gathering information. We would probably send you to parties, give you a target, and have you gather as much information as you can.”

That sounded like spy work. But really, this was not the CIA and there was no way she would ever be smooth enough to gather information from people. Or steal information. Whatever it was, they wanted her to do. Looking over at Claire, the girl looked at the pictures with interest. She was buying into it. Harper continued watching the slide show. Her heart stopped for a second and she knew she had made a very audible noise. Staring back at her was her mother.

“Mary Grant was one of ours,” Ms. Gray paused the slide show. “She also had grit. She joined us about a year and a half before her passing. You remind me of her all the time, Harper.” The older woman paused. Claire peered at her curiously. “She very much believed in this cause.” Harper said nothing. She saw pictures of her mother every time he went to her father’s, but she kept none in her own home. This picture was different. Her mother was not smiling. She looked ready for battle.

“Think about it, Harper. I know that this is a lot to ask you. But you are just as capable of starting a change as anyone else.” Ms. Gray must have seen her doubt. So much for hiding her emotions.

“How long do I have to decide?” Harper asked, pulling her eyes from the image on the board. Claire had asked no questions, and Harper was done asking them for her. Ms. Gray turned on the projector and moved to them.

“One week.” Ms. Gray handed her a flash drive. “Here is some more evidence and information about us. I hope it gives you a little more understanding of what we are trying to do here. Please turn off your internet when you look through it.” She handed an identical one to Claire.

Harper took it and put it in her pocket. As they started back down the hall, the man who had been punching the bag stepped out to join them. Harper felt her insides drop. It was the man who had stepped in when the homeless man tried to take her book.

Claire stared at the man the way her students looked at their phones after having them in their backpacks for the entire class period.

“Hey Ms. Amelia,” His southern accent was unexpected and not something Harper remembered. She had been in a hurry to get away from him then. “What brings you here?” He smiled at Harper, giving her a wink, maybe an acknowledgment. He looked at Claire and there was also an awareness there. They had met before as well.

“Harper, this is Harrison,” Harper extended her hand.

“Nice to meet you.” His hand was warm and firm, a little calloused, and engulfed her own. His shake was firm, but did not crush her like he had the wrist of the homeless man. Maybe she had over reacting that day. She was tired, a little freaked out. The ominous feeling she had gotten from him that day was no longer there.

“Nice to meet you. Both of you.” He smirked at Claire. “I hope you join us. Be nice to have some more young....”

“All right Harrison,” Ms. Gray pursed her lips in annoyance. “Harper is still on the fence. Maybe you could give her your number and if she is needing someone other than her boss to talk to, she can call you?”

“Sure!” Harrison said, pulling out his wallet. He handed Harper a card. Harper took his number, the romance troupe of the lovers meeting playing in her head again. The cute man who stopped a homeless man’s assault showed up again, working for the same organization that she was working for. Not a coincidence at all. Claire watched the interaction, her eyes shining. “It’s an old card, but it has my cell on the back. If you need to talk, ask questions, I’d be happy to help.” Harper looked at the card. Harrison Collins. Sergeant Harrison Collins. He was a cop. He also gave one to Claire, who accepted it with a shaking hand.

Harper knew she was being recruited from some crazy, shady, probably treasonous, and very dangerous work. But everyone around her was acting like they were recruiting her to join a gym. Red Flag one thousand. Time to go.

“Thanks,” Harper said, sliding the card into her pocket with the USB.

“Don’t hesitate now. I remember what it felt like the first time I left that room.” He smiled, and Harper knew it was the first genuine smile she had gotten in a long time. It was goofy and made her relax.

Ms. Gray ushered for them to follow her, pursing her lips at Harrison. He grinned back, winking at Claire again, whose flush engulfed her neck and face.

“Have a good night,” Harrison said as they moved away from him. Harper glanced back once and saw him watching them go, looking puzzled.

“He seems nice.”

“He is very polite.” Ms. Gray walked up the stairs and the floor door slid open immediately.

“Have a good night. Hope to see you again, Harper!” Joe said, holding the door for them. His words sounded sincere, but his eyes told a different story. He didn’t trust her.

“I know that can be overwhelming.” Ms. Gray said as they walked back to their cars. The sun was setting. “But I want you both to reflect on this. I believe you will make great recruits. You could actually do something about this world, instead of fighting against it all the time and going home defeated.” Ms. Gray examined their faces. Her eyes settled on Harper’s, hardening for a moment.

“You aren’t in danger, Harper. Even if you decide not to join us, it is not like you can really go to anyone and tell them about us. If you had never heard of us before, do you really think anyone else would believe you?” Harper blinked, and she knew her mouth was hanging open. “Exactly. Take your week to decide. Then let me know. Decide what you feel is ultimately the best for you. Come along, Claire.” Mrs. Gray opened the door to her nice car. Claire did as she was told, glancing at Harper briefly.

“I will.” Harper just wanted to get into her car and get home. Something about this all seemed wrong. She was just shown pictures of people and told a story. There was no way to fact check, no way to disprove or prove what she had been told. Her excitement had faded.

“Just so you know Harper, there are some very disturbing facts on that USB. Please be prepared for that.” Ms. Gray unlocked her nice car. “See you tomorrow.” She got in her car and drove away, leaving Harper gripping a USB in her pocket.

## Chapter 8:

Harper spent most of her next few days mulling over what she had learned. She had not opened the USB. She threw it in her junk drawer at home and tried to forget about it. The whole thing just seemed off. Yes, she wanted adventure and it would sure be nice to do something and help change. And the gadgets and the flashiness of it all was very James Bond. But Harper knew it could not be that cool or that simple. Where, for instance, did they get the funding for all those things? Harper stared at the drawer whenever she allowed her mind to wander from her book or her TV show. A tingle ran up her spine every time she did.

On Tuesday, her father called her and told her that the specialist had called and wanted him to come in for tests the following day. He wanted her to go with him.

“Maybe make sure I remember why I’m going?” Her father was trying to make light of the situation. Harper did not really like the joke, but she faked a laugh for him. She agreed and put in for a sub.

That afternoon, Ms. Gray materialized in her doorway again.

“Heard you are getting a substitute for tomorrow. Everything okay?”

Why should it matter? Harper knew that this woman was concerned about what Harper was thinking. Maybe she thought she would go to the police? Then why claim no one would believe her, anyway?

“My father has to go see a specialist doctor tomorrow. He wants me to go with him. He called at lunch to ask me.” She said. Don’t worry, I haven’t even looked at your secrets. She wanted to add, but she did not.

“I hope everything is okay,” Ms. Gray said. She looked doubtful and did not sound as if she believed Harper. It did not help her feelings about the group.

The next day, she arrived at her father’s an hour before the appointment. She did her best to act normal, but she couldn’t stop checking her mirrors to see if she was followed, and the night before,

she had closed all of her curtains again. The feeling of being watched had grown worse after her meeting with Ms. Gray. She knew it was probably more to do with her own uncertainties about the group than actually being watched. She was a nobody.

Harper knocked lightly before letting herself into the house. The lawn was revived and everything looked as it should. Harper had dropped her spy look and was in her usual jeans and baggy shirt and old sneakers.

“You are early!” Her father said cheerfully. “I haven’t even finished my second cup yet!” He seemed like his old self today.

“I’m usually almost done with the first hour by now!” Harper said, pouring herself a cup of coffee and joining him at the kitchen table.

“I don’t miss those days,” her father said. They sipped coffee and chatted about the usual things. Harper got the gossip from the old farts weekly golf game and she told him about her current classroom struggle. They did not talk about the appointment or what had happened the weekend before. Her father seemed alert and very much his old self. Perhaps this was all just a mistake.

“Crazy about this free internet?” Her father said. Harper glanced at him. “Wonder what sort of deal with what devil they made to make that happen?”

“Who knows? Seems like they would just lose money?”

“I would think so. But who am I to say. Didn’t have a life for making money.” Her father smiled weakly. “Have I told you how proud I am of you lately?” Harper rolled her eyes. “Really, Harper. You have grown into such an exceptional woman. Your mother would have been so proud to see you battling the way you are now. You are like her so much sometimes.”

Harper suddenly wanted to ask her father if he knew anything about the Forgotten Fathers. If her mother had really been a part of them, if he had. Would he agree with what they are doing? Would he still be proud of her if she joined them and tried to change everything? And if they succeeded? Or if she failed?

“Thanks, Dad.” She kissed his cheek. “Come on, we better get going. Never know what traffic is going to be doing.”

They arrived at the doctor’s office parking lot and struggled to find a spot. Her father had grown quiet as they got closer, and she could tell he was nervous. She was nervous. Harper couldn’t imagine what her father was feeling. Knowing that you were going somewhere to check whether your brain was slowly turning off one piece at a time. And knowing that there was nothing anyone could do about it.

They sat in a waiting room, listening to classical music, and pretended to not notice the man in the corner sitting with the woman who was sobbing. Her father filled out the paperwork and Harper paid the extremely high copay. They waited for thirty minutes over their time, Harper read the latest Health magazine and her father flipped through the Golf Digest. They took the crying woman and her husband back first. Harper wondered who was there for the tests and who was the support.

“Mr. Grant.” A peppy voice sounded. They rose as one and walked back with the tiniest nurse in the world. She was as thin as a skeleton, with jet black hair, and could not have been taller than 5 foot. Probably shorter. They took her father’s weight, a little low but not terrible, his blood pressure, his temperature. All normal. They checked his ears, throat, and heart. There was small chit chat, but Harper was trying her best to not let the worry show on her face. After the nurse left, they waited only a few minutes in silence before the doctor entered. He was a middle-aged man attempting to still hold on to his youth by styling his hair the way Harper saw teenagers do so. His light eyes looked drained. Telling people devastating news all day appeared to be taking its toll.

“Hello, Mr. Grant,” He said looking at the chart. “What brings you here to see me today?”

“I can’t remember?” Her father said. Harper snorted a laugh, and the doctor looked up and smiled, trying to assess if it really was a joke. There was a twinkle in her father’s eye that told Harper it was. “I have been having lapses in memory, forgetting things, misplacing items. The most notable one happened last Friday. My daughter will have to fill you in on that....” The twinkle left the eye. “I remember little of that day.”

The doctor turned to Harper, and she explained what had happened. The doctor nodded and took notes.

“Well, we will run some tests, a brain scan, etc and see what we can find out. Sit tight and Jamie will be back to start those.”

“When will we see the results?” Harper asked.

“Today.”

The tests took a little over 3 hours to complete. Harper could not take part in them and sat in the waiting room. She read every magazine and newspaper. How could she have forgotten a book on a day like that? She never left her apartment without a book. Armature mistake. She had gone for a walk in the halls. She encountered few people along the way. Most were elderly and shuffled along the halls, heads down, eyes averted. There was one man who stood out. He was wearing mostly gray, sitting at the end of the hall reading the paper. He didn't look up at her as she walked past. The hair on the back of her neck stood up. Something was off about the man. She retrieved a candy from the vending machine and glanced at the paper the man was reading. It was four days old. She hurried back to the safety of the doctor's office with 2 secretaries staring off into space.

It wasn't until the last hour she remembered that they all had free internet and played on her phone. Harper tried downloading a book from the library, but it kept having an error. Instead, she downloaded an app with card games. That downloaded immediately. She was losing a game of solitaire when the nurse came to get her. They led her down past the first door into the office to join her father. He looked tired.

“Mr. Grant, I'm afraid what I have to say is not good. You have the signs of early stages Alzheimer's.” Those words hung in the air like poisonous gas. Invisible, but still deadly. Harper stared at the doctor, afraid to look at her father.

“What does that mean?” Andrew said.

“Well, it means we can start a treatment, we can slow its progress.”

“But there is no cure.”

“There is no cure.”

More poison. Harper wanted to throw things, she wanted to scream, cry, fight, run. She blinked hard, once, twice, three times. She took two deep breaths and looked at her father. Hadn't she read somewhere that if you pressed your tongue to the roof of your mouth, you could stop yourself from crying. He looked tranquil, as if he had just been told that he was healthy. Andrew smiled at his daughter. Tears were still trying to fight their way out. That tongue trick was a damn lie.

"Okay, let's get started." He said, taking his daughter's hand and squeezing it.

## Chapter 9:

Harper had dinner with her father that night. He was optimistic and lighthearted, and Harper knew he was putting up a facade for her, so she attempted to return the favor. She had taken a few deep breaths in the doctor's office and wiped the tears away. The rest of the day, she kept them at bay, smiling through the fear. The second she got into her apartment, she slid down the door, pulled her knees to her chest and sobbed. She wasn't sure how long she was there, but when she finally got up; she felt no better about the situation and now her throat hurt and eyes were very puffy.

"Crying doesn't fix anything!" Her mother used to say that to her. It never helped her when she was 13 and certainly didn't help her now. She washed her face and blew her nose before changing into sweats. She went to the kitchen, yanked open the junk drawer, pulled out the USB, and slammed the drawer shut.

Going to the table, pulled out her school-issued laptop and plugged in the USB. Harper hesitated, looking over her shoulder at the windows behind her. She had left the curtains closed all day. It hadn't helped with the feelings of being watched. Taking a deep breath, she attempted to calm herself.

Harper was not sure what she should expect to read or discover. She remembered the warning Ms. Gray had given her about the possible disturbing evidence. What sort of things could they possibly trust her with. Was any of it legal? In her spy novels, there never was a lot of actual evidence, just a “Trust me!” from the hero followed by a graphic sex scene. She could use a very graphic sex scene right now.

Nothing on the USB made her feel better. She found reports from what Harper assumed were spies or agents for The Forgotten Fathers. They reported about the rising reports of gun violence being swept under the rug, the knowledge of 2 separate school shooters being on active watch lists. It showed about the rise in hate crimes, race crimes, road rage, and any other offense that they could think of. Basically, a lot of violence and nothing being done to treat the issue. Her head was cloudy, and she was tired of reading tedious reports. Tedious reports were never present in her novels.

She stood and went to the window, opening the blinds. She scanned the dark windows around her. There was the blue flashing glow of a television from most of them, a soft yellow from others. There was no one standing at a window, no man in black with binoculars on top of the building across from hers.

The information on the USB was useless. A scare tactic. The organization itself was blowing a lot of smoke. Perhaps these tactics worked on others. But they weren't going to work on her.

Now she had to decide what to do with the information she was given. She sat at the computer and did a quick search. Much of the information she could find by simply typing it into her browser. The recordings that were dubbed TOP SECRET were not anywhere to be found but Harper knew that she had no way to verify voices. That could be an actor hired to say some lines.

She closed the laptop and looked at the latest romance novel she had purchased. Impossible situations. That's why she liked those books. Because they could never happen to her and she was away from herself for a moment. But even in the middle of all the cheesy action lines and fake gun fire, Harper was always safe in her home, reading away. And she liked that.

Picking up her phone, she texted Sarah.

*Hey, do you know anyone you could set me up with?*

Harper was brushing her teeth when her phone chirped a response.

*OMG, yes!*

Harper smiled.

Chapter 8:

“No hard feelings?” Harper said, sliding the USB across to Ms. Gray.

“Of course not, do what you think is best.” Ms. Gray’s smile did not travel all the way to her eyes. “If you ever change your mind, let me know.” Harper nodded and left the office, suddenly feeling very light for the first time in several weeks. On her way back to her classroom, she texted her friend Sarah. Her boyfriend had a friend. Did she want to meet him?

Why not? Maybe that was the sort of adventure that Harper could handle.

Dinner with her father went as usual. He remembered it was her turn to cook and waited patiently while she chopped up some potatoes.

“I have a date tomorrow.” She never told her father about her dates. She had to be with a guy for a month before she would mention it to her father. And another month before either of them met. Very few of her relationships lasted that long.

“Oh?” Her father perked up.

“Sarah, my old teaching buddy. Her boyfriend is introducing me to a friend of his.”

“Your mother and I met through friends.” Her father smiled and his eyes were back in time, 45 years ago. “It was junior year of college. I was at the bar, there to meet a different girl. A friend of your mothers. But I saw your mother, and I just knew.”

“That’s cheesy.” Harper said. She had heard the story hundreds of times. Both from her mother, who said that it took her months to know her father was the one, but her father’s version never varied. It was not cheesy. Her parents’ love was not cheesy in the slightest.

“Do you know anything about him?”

“Nope, just that he is not a teacher.” Her father didn’t hide the relief that washed over his face. Harper said nothing about it.

“I’m starving! Can you chop any slower?”

Harper checked her face in the mirror one more time before stepping out of the car. She had attempted to do what YouTube called a smokey eye, and it didn’t look half bad. Her hair was curled, and she wore a new dress she picked up that morning for 20 bucks at the local store that was going out of business. She wore her trusty spansks underneath to suck in her wine gut. Maybe she should join a gym. Her time just freed up, now that she would not be committing treason.

“Harper!” Sarah waved at her from across the bar. Sarah had been a first year teacher the same year as Harper. She was the type of girl who would look good wearing a potato sack. Tonight she was in a purple dress with white flowers and wearing impossibly tall heels that she moved in the way Harper moved in flats. She was bubbly and fun and had always been the favorite teacher. It devastated everyone when she left to work with her sister at a new phone company in town in HR. Harper missed her every day.

“You look amazing!” Harper hugged Sarah.

“Thanks! Brand new! Got it online! Don’t you love shopping online?” Sarah took her hand, and they started across the bar.

“Mark is not here yet. But you are going to love him. When I first met him, I thought to myself, ‘This is the guy for Harper’ but he was dating someone, so I couldn’t say anything. And let me tell you, she

was an awful person. But, he dumped her two months ago, and now I can play matchmaker! Just promise me you will name your child after me!”

Sarah rambled a mile a minute, and Harper smiled and nodded.

“How about we just get through tonight and worry about something like that, if anything like that actually happens?” Sarah giggled. She could pull off a giggle and not look silly or immature. “Oh, let me get you a drink. Plus, I want to say hi to someone, go sit with Phil!” She dashed off, her heels drowning out the crowd.

“Hi Phil!” Harper hugged Sarah’s boyfriend of three years from the side. He was a lawyer in the city and always looked ready to melt down. He was handsome when he smiled. Most of the time, he had a very serious Mr. Darcy look on his face.

“Hey Harper! It’s been a while,” Phil tapped her gently on the back with his hands, like she might explode. “How have you been?”

“Oh, same old, same old,” Harper slipped up into the seat and waited with her back to the door. She wanted to be surprised. “You?”

“Same old, same old. Sarah told me about your dad. Sorry to hear about that.” Harper’s stomach caved in. She had texted Sarah about her dad when it all happened. She didn’t think she had to tell her not to tell. But, she supposed, you tell your partner things. She had never been in a relationship that allowed for that.

“Oh, thanks,” Harper smoothed the napkin in front of her. “It is what it is, you know.” Phil nodded, as if he knew. Maybe he did. She wasn’t the only one who had parents. Phil glanced over at Sarah, who was chatting at the bartender. The bartender kept trying to walk away. There was a long pause between her and Phil. Harper knew Phil was the primary reason Sarah left teaching. Harper had a hard time liking him for demanding that his girlfriend give up her career. Perhaps it hadn’t been pushing her but supporting her instead. Harper had been contemplated leave teaching now. Maybe if she had someone who reinforced it, it would be easier to decide.

“So this Mark guy,” Harper glanced at Sarah again.

“Good guy. We play racquetball together. He works in my office. He just got a promotion.” Phil took a sip of his beer, but never took his eyes off Sarah to look at Harper. Sarah finally appeared at their table with two wines. Phil smiled. He always smiled when Sarah appeared.

“Whoa, that bartender was chatty!” Sarah handed Harper one wine. Phil and Harper exchanged glances. “Did you tell her about Mark?”

“I did,” Phil said. The threesome sat for another twenty minutes, Sarah taking up most of the conversation. Harper knew Mark was not coming after 15 minutes. She had already been 10 minutes late. Sarah urged Phil to check his phone, because something had to have happened. She looked flustered. No message from Mark.

“I’ll get the next round,” Harper suggested, heading to the bar. She could hide the disappointment until home. She leaned against the bar, waiting for the bartender to notice her. Maybe the gym would be a better new adventure.

“Bad date?” A voice next to her asked.

A tall, lean man with curly red brown hair and green eyes was sitting on a barstool, a half empty beer in front of him. He was lean but not super muscular. He smiled at Harper, felt herself melt a little.

“Uh, can it be a bad date if they don’t show up?” Harper smiled back, shrugging, tossing her hair the way she had seen girls do. Hopefully, she did it right. The bartender left a group of people and asked for her order. She ordered two wines and a beer.

“I’m counting my no show as a bad date.”

Harper looked back at the man, and he was swirling his beer around.

“Your name isn’t Mark, is it?”

He laughed, shaking his head.

“No, I’m Tom. Your name isn’t Megan, is it?”

“No, Harper.” They exchanged smiles again and Harper looked back at the bar, twirling a small napkin while she waited. She needed to think of something to say. The bartender set the bottle of wine and beer in front of her before any conversation epiphany could occur.

“Well, I hope your date shows.” Harper looked at the man. He was very cute. Her date wasn’t there, his wasn’t there. Maybe she should invite him to the table.

“It’s been 40 minutes. I should probably finish this beer and head home. Delete that dating app.” He downed his beer and stood to go.

“It is nice to meet you.” He extended his hand to her. His hand was smooth and warm.

“You too.” He dropped her hand, but didn’t turn to go. Their eyes locked again and Harper felt her heartbeat pick up.

“This might sound crazy, feel free to say no. Would you like to be my blind date?” He asked, smiling at her one more time.

The date went well, despite Sarah doing most of the talking. Tom seemed intelligent, well adjusted and normal. He had a sense of humor, and after coming back from the bar with a fresh beer with her, sat at the table like he had known her and her friends for years. She really doubted that Tom, someone who was lively, would want to be with a girl like her.

After Phil decided Sarah was tipsy enough, the group disbanded. Sarah hugged Harper, whisper giggling in her ear, “Way cuter than Mark.” before leaving with Phil. Harper let Tom walk her to her car, purposely walking slow, and he seemed not to be in a rush either.

“Do not take this the wrong way,” he said. Ah, here it is. The big let down. Harper smiled politely and gripped her keys in her pocket, ready to bolt to her car. “Your friend Sarah can be, really...” he stopped and Harper saw him blush a little.

“She’s a bit much sometimes.” Tom smiled at her.

“She just doesn’t stop talking!” He said, laughing. Harper joined him.

“When she is nervous, or excited or happy... she just talks all the time.” Harper had gotten used to it. She never had much to say, and Sarah always did. Sarah was one of the few people in the world who knew about her past, about her mom, about how she felt about politics and summer and winter and all the little things that mattered. She could handle the talking.

“I guess with all of her talking, I learned a great deal about you. I like when the beautiful girl in the bar comes with five star reviews from friends.” They were at Harper’s car. Her neck and cheeks were getting hot. Beautiful was not an adjective she would use to describe herself. Not ugly, but not beautiful. Beautiful women were Sarah and the blonde psychologist from her district and Emma Stone.

“Maybe I could take you out again? Soon?” Tom asked.

“Sure!” Harper looked down, hiding a smile that she knew he saw. “I’d love to talk to you a little.” He laughed. She looked up to find him watching her. She didn’t turn to her car, and he didn’t walk away. “You know, I always have a bit of a sweet tooth after salty bar food. There’s a frozen yogurt place just a couple blocks up.” Was she really being brave and suggesting they continue this night? What if he is put off by forward women? What if he says no and was just really being polite?

“You know, I’ve never had frozen yogurt before. Tonight seems like a good night to try something new.”

Harper smiled, made her car alarm beep once.

“I couldn’t agree more.”

## Chapter 10:

Tom had a lot to say. He and Harper sat at the frozen yogurt place until it closed two hours later. She learned he worked at a bank, had a cat named Milo, and both his parents were alive but divorced. His father remarried twice, and he had three step siblings whom he never spoke to. His mother lived a few hours North and seemed to enjoy the independent lifestyle.

“She’s a little crazy.” When he laughed, Harper could see him picturing his mother, seeing her or hearing her say something he deemed outrageous. Harper enjoyed watching him laugh.

“I feel like we’ve talked all about me now,” He said, sliding his empty frozen yogurt cup away. He had piled it high with gummy worms and sour patch kids and tried an odd mix of candy cane and mango. He seemed to have enjoyed it. Harper had stuck with vanilla bean and chocolate with some simple chocolate chips. Classic, simple. Not dangerous. They had been speaking about him all night, but that’s what Harper was good at. Letting others talk about themselves. She wasn’t interesting.

“I had to get your five star review. Although, you’re probably biased.” She teased. He laughed.

“Tell me something about you,” he said. His eyes fully focused on her and she could see his thinking again. He was serious. He wanted something more than a first date, superficial things you could google about a person.

“What do you want to know?”

“Anything, favorite food, favorite booze, favorite movie, favorite book?” Harper relaxed. Maybe she was reading into it too much. He did just want the surface stuff. “Have you ever danced with the devil in the pale moonlight?” She laughed. What an odd question.

“No devil dancing. Uh, my favorite food is waffles. Favorite booze is wine, any wine, my favorite movie is *Lady and the Tramp*, and I don’t even know how to narrow down favorite books. Too many to count.”

“Probably a silly question to ask an English teacher, anyway.” He moved closer to her. “Do you kiss on the first date?” Harper smiled.

“Not usually.”

“Damn,” he didn’t pull back. Suddenly, Harper was in the part of her spy novels she enjoyed. The seduction part. She failed at the spy part. Maybe she will be better at this.

“But, I could argue, this is our second date. First the bar, then the yogurt. Two separate places, two separate activities.” He moved in for the kiss and she did not pull back. It was a perfect kiss. Warm, solid, no tongue, although she could part her lips slightly and she knew it could turn into that. He pulled away when something vibrated.

“Never made a man do that before,” Harper said. Tom smiled, pulling his phone out of his pocket. His eyes shifted, and Harper knew their date was done.

“I have to take this.” He stepped away and answered at the same time. Harper sighed and picked up their cups, tossing them in the bin nearby. She realized they were the only ones in the place, and the two workers behind the counter were glaring at her. Closing time.

“Sorry, that was work.” He sat again, but she rose.

“I think we better go. I think they are closing.” She pulled on her jacket. Tom glanced over his shoulder and as they moved towards the door, he dropped ten in the tip jar. Harper smiled and pretended not to see.

Tom was quiet as they walked the two blocks to her car again. The streets were loud, music spilling from bars onto the sidewalk, giggling and shouting girls in heels staggering by to their next party. One couple fighting. Tom didn’t appear to see any of it.

“Bad news?” Harper said, breaking the awkward silence. Tom glanced over at her.

“Not really. Just a boss who likes to work 24 hours a day, forgets that some of us don’t.” Tom shrugged.

“Oh, I’m sorry.” There was an awkward tension between them now. She stopped in front of her car.

“Not your fault. I should learn to not answer.” His eyes shifted again, and he was back in the moment with them. His hand came up to the side of her face, brushing back some hair. Then he gently pulled her to him and kissed her again. A little longer and a bit more tongue.

“Can I call you?” He said. She laughed.

“How was your date?”

Her father always called her on Sunday mornings, but Harper was usually awake. Instead, she had gotten home from her first night out in a long time and had a hard time winding down. The new free internet gave her unlimited options in distractions, none of which actually helped her sleep. She finally passed out on the couch around 4.

“It was great. I think you would like him.” Harper yawned, looking at the clock. It was 9 am. She didn’t remember the last time she had slept in like that.

“When do I get to meet him?”

Harper laughed, rubbing her eyes.

“Let’s just see if things go well for a while first.”

“I better meet him soon. Might not remember him later on.”

“That might be a good thing.”

Her father laughed. She guessed it was a good thing that they were laughing about it now. It made it better somehow.

“In all seriousness, darling, how was it?”

“Honestly, it was the best date I’ve been on.”

“That’s all I need to hear. Better go, time to beat some old farts in a round. Talk soon. Love you!”

Harper made a cup of coffee and dumped the contents of her night out purse onto the table. She was putting her ID cards and chapstick into her everyday purse when her phone rang again.

“How cute are you and Tom?” Sarah squealed over the phone. Harper let her friend ramble for a while, agreeing and giggling. She told her they kissed and had plans to see each other again.

“Remember, first kid, named after me!”

“That was for me and Mark. I found Tom all on my own.” Sarah laughed and demanded updates before hanging up. Harper twirled the USB drive in her fingers. The date had been a pleasant distraction from the odd occurrences of her life over the past few weeks. She had given the original back. Before she had, something had compelled her to make a copy. She wasn’t sure why. Collateral maybe.

The last few days, she had been carrying it around with her in her purse. Waiting for someone to approach her and demand evidence that she was not a traitor. She opened the drawer in the cabinet by the front door and dropped it into. She pushed it shut, closing her thoughts about the group.

As she walked away from the drawer, her phone rang again.

“Hello?”

“Is it lame that I didn’t wait 3 days to call?”

She smiled, recognizing the voice.

“Not at all. I hate that rule.” She plopped down onto her couch.

“I just wanted to see when you could go out again. Monday after work?”

“Sure!”

Forget about the Forgotten Fathers. For the first time in a long time, she had something to look forward to and even hope for.