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you can run, but you can't hide

Wednesday, August 4
Washington, D.C.,
Enroute to Franklin, North Carolina

Harry Ashby, Navy Intelligence Agent, pulled the partially filled coffee cup from his chapped lips. He needed water instead of the multiple cups of coffee, but driving from Washington, D.C., to Franklin, North Carolina, without sleep, meant caffeine like a river. He had been driving for hours now. The trip had never seemed so long. What was supposed to take about nine hours somehow felt like an eternity.

Heavy traffic had been avoided by leaving the capitol long before rush hour began, in the dark at midnight. Humidity levels had been steadily climbing as he drove farther south. The summer heat of August was just beginning. For most of the trip, the windows had been rolled down, allowing fresh air to flow through the government issued cruiser. The air conditioning was about to be put to the test as the sun began to climb into the sky. The only

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plus to driving the standard-issue automobile was that it resembled many law enforcement vehicles. That alone had afforded him the ability to drive a little faster without fear of a citation. He had been pulled over once by a North Carolina State Trooper, six years prior, outside Wilmington. The thought of repeating the experience was not one he relished.

Signs for exits in Asheville, North Carolina, were blurs as he continued on. With only another hour, or so, to Franklin, a late breakfast was calling his name. His empty stomach was starting to grumble in protest.

Harry began to recall missions he'd been on with another Navy spook, Caroline Blaine. She'd saved him more than once. Now it was his turn. Heavily imbedded with the remaining Russian mafia in San Francisco, for the last two years, had made for boring detail. But the intelligence he'd managed to garner in the last week, concerning the Navy, made up for it. That information was why he had taken the job to begin with. Caroline's knack for sensing situations had come through again. She'd been the one to talk him into babysitting the last Mafioso.

Free of the hilly confines of the city by the bay, he felt relieved. That relief was overshadowed by the troubling knowledge he possessed. Intelligence given to him before he left Washington, told him Caroline went on morning excursions on a river walk. He didn't want to tip his hand too early in the game and spoil the whole plan. He'd watch first, protect as he could, and save the reveal of his presence for later.

The sleepy little town was indeed as small as Caroline had described so long ago. He had passed only five cars since pulling off the main road into town. Main Street was busy however, the nexus of activity being a coffee shop. Two banks were just opening their doors for the day. Harry slowly pulled through town, circled back around, and finally parked. Sight-lines were checked and

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rechecked. Cars parked on the street were noted, along with all the out of state license plates, Florida being the most predominant. Places to hide and easy exits were found, along with spots that would make good surveillance venues. A diner nearby had his full attention finally.

Intelligence officers depended on their anonymity to survive. Being recognized would get you killed. Fierce independence was a mark of the true spook. With that came isolation, and often time paranoia. Harry had lived with both for a while now.

Summer months in the south meant plenty of tourists, middle class and wealthy alike. But no one looked twice at the six foot tall man with very short, dark blonde, hair as he walked through town in a summer-weight linen suit. Designer sunglasses hid vivid green eyes, serious with expression.

Harry patted his stomach. Southern food was something he enjoyed, apparently a little too much this morning. A full stomach from bacon, eggs, and more biscuits than he should have, was making him lethargic and sleepy. He crossed the street and got back into his car. He left his parking spot on Main Street and found a parking lot behind the main buildings. He was surrounded by local cars that he assumed worked downtown. They wouldn't be moving and he could stay hidden a while longer. Walking was going to be the order of the day. As he checked the Glock, hanging in a holster under his linen jacket, a mobile phone seemingly forgotten in the other cup holder, rang.

"I'm here, Jack. I don't know how much longer I'll be awake though."

"Harry, you know how Caroline is. I told her she had help coming, but she doesn't know it's you. If you spook her, she's going to shoot first and ask questions later. I'm not sure how crazy these guys are or if they've arrived yet. Just--"

"Do my thing. I know. I'll wait and see what happens. Call

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me back in a couple hours. I'm gonna sleep for a little bit and then look for a place to stay."

The conversation was abruptly ended. Despite the need to stay alert, summer heat and a full stomach were doing a number on his concentration. He began to relax further as a breeze continually swept through the open windows. The urge to nap was rising. Harry's head lolled back against the seat and sleep came.

05:37

Summer House Farms

Reese Residence

Franklin, North Carolina

David Reese rolled over onto his back. Partially awake, his hand automatically reached for his wife, Caroline. Instead of finding her next to him, he found empty space for the fifth day in a row. She had been rising early most of her life, the same for him. Lately however, the term sleeping in, for her, meant getting up with the chickens. They had been staying up late moving their things into Caroline's childhood home, located nearby on the farm.

The house was quiet, with the exception of muffled chatter from the next room, their office. It wasn't in English either. Sonny, Caroline's father, was on a trip to Italy, again, on business. Perhaps she was speaking with him. Languages came easily for her. She spoke many.

Listening intently, he recognized it finally. It was Russian. She'd been on and off the phone many times over the last few weeks. From rising early, getting up during the night, to going off to the barn alone, all so she could have these conversations.

David smiled. Caroline wasn't fooling him, not one bit. Despite the fact they had agreed to leave the Navy, neither could

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think of anything else. She was still working, making phone calls to her old colleague, Jack Madison, and many others. She was taking the time to cover her tracks from all the emails and phone calls, but David knew what was going on.

The sheet slid down off of his very tall, muscular, body as he rose from the bed. He crept into the hall and stood with his arms crossed at the open office door. Her short, curly, brown hair was mussed from sleep.

Caroline spun around in the desk chair to face him, smiling as she took in his partially dressed form. His dark hair had grown out, quite a bit in the last weeks. Just having him in proximity made her feel all tingly. She had heard him get up. The phone conversation had already ended.

It was a smile-off from both parties. David wondered if she had gotten up because of morning sickness.

“I reached over to find a cool empty bed again today. Are you alright?”

She rose and came toward him. Her short frame was dwarfed in comparison to his.

“I’m fine. Just woke up early again, a little nauseated. I figured while I was up I’d take advantage of the time difference and make a phone call. I needed to get in touch with someone in Ukraine.”

“I thought I heard Russian.”

“Yes, you did.” She stood on her tip-toes, kissing his nose, his chin, and finally his lips, where she lingered. The fingers from her right hand ran through his longer dark hair. “It’s almost daylight. You want to wait and have breakfast later? We could sit in the swing, watch the sun come up, then take a walk before it gets too hot.”

Her kisses had effectively silenced him. Nothing had changed between them, but the addition to their family that

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would arrive in February. They were still in love with each other, playful, and devoted.

“Nice subject change. I like it.”

She knew exactly how to distract him. David considered trying to force a conversation, but didn't feel it would produce any results. When she wanted him to know who she was conversing with, she'd tell him. Once a spook, always a spook.

“Let me wake up a little more. I'm not ready to find my running shoes just yet.”

His fingers trailed down over the fresh scar on her left shoulder. The bullet wound was healing nicely, along with the gash on her arm, which occurred in the line of duty roughly six weeks prior. Both were equally visible in the Navy emblazoned tank top she had on.

“I'm going to make some tea and cinnamon toast then. Do you want some?”

“What kind of tea?” David's left eyebrow raised up.

“Your choice.”

He thought for a moment. She had managed to turn him from coffee to herbal tea in the morning.

“Peppermint is fine.” He leaned down and kissed her forehead.

She pulled away from him to go down the hall. As she did so, she pinched his behind.

“Hey, hey, hey! No pinching.”

She laughed, “Says who?”

“That's sexual harassment Commander Blaine, of a superior ranking officer too.”

“I'm not in your Navy anymore, Captain.”

“You are for a little while longer. No DD-two-fourteen, yet. Don't push it. I'll have you field-daying the kitchen floor with a toothbrush.”

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“Aye Aye, sir. Now, go check your email. Chad’s waiting.” Grinning like a Cheshire cat, she was off to the kitchen.

She knew him, way too well. He ran a hand over the spot she had just pinched. He zipped into the office, listening for her returning footsteps, and opened an email he had been waiting on. It was from Lieutenant Chad Mason. The subject was simple enough- How are you, Captain? Caroline never opened his email. She would consider that rude.

David was just as guilty as she was on the work and Navy issue. He had not let go either. He had been helping Chad with his first trial, set to begin in a few days. Chad’s wife, Cassie, had been the one to convince him to contact the soon to be retired officer, and in reality, his best friend. He relished reading the situation reports that Chad sent him and all the facts from pre-trial discovery. This would be a cake walk, if it were him. Poor Chad had only been a lawyer, officially, for two weeks.

Caroline grabbed the electric kettle. Taking her time in the kitchen would give David some needed breathing room in the office to read his email from the Lieutenant. He’d never severed contact with those in the JAG corps since returning to North Carolina, with her. She wouldn’t begrudge him that. Not letting him in on her actions belied the guilt that was setting in. Trouble was brewing that she was expected to handle, sworn to handle. Although her release from the Navy wasn’t official yet, it soon would be, along with his own. At first she had felt elated about a new life on the farm with David. Now she was having doubts. So much was at stake in the war on terror. Raising a child and having a family was something she had dreamed of, but thought out of her reach. She had that and more. Why wasn’t she happy? It was supposed to work that way, wasn’t it? Then the reality of secrets she still held, and those who would inflict harm, manifested itself again. People around her still looked to her for orders and actions.

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She couldn't let them down. She couldn't let herself down. David would understand. His own doubts had been showing through as well. She could see them plainly in his words and actions, but never in his touch. His touch affirmed his feelings for her, always. They were in new territory with a career that just didn't suit. They still held on to what they knew, to what they were born to do. They needed to talk. Who would start?

Her hip rested against the counter, waiting for the kettle to finish boiling. Her mind was made up. Tonight, after dinner, the cards were going to be laid on the table.

Caroline returned to the office, with a tray and two pieces of toast a few minutes later. The tea tray was placed on the edge of the desk. She sat down carefully on David's lap, pushing a piece of toast into his mouth. He bit down and grabbed the toast as he took a bite.

"So how is Chad?"

"He's fine."

"Uh-huh. How is the case?"

His face felt like it was on fire suddenly. He had nothing to hide from her. She obviously already knew he was still secretly playing his part as a Judge Advocate General.

"He's stuck. He feels he has enough evidence to support the charges. It's the first time he's been up as a prosecutor on his own. There's a new kid in town since I left, some guy from Naples. I've never heard of him. He's supposed to be some hot shot lawyer. Anyway, he's pushing Chad to give his client a deal. Chad says he's not taking the bait because he knows the guy is guilty."

Both reached for their tea at the same time.

"Chad is lucky. He has you to tell him exactly how to run the case. He's sure to win." She took another bite from her toast and a sip of tea.

"I'm not telling him how to run his case."

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“Sure you’re not. He’s new at being on his own. He needs you. You miss it. There’s nothing wrong with that.”

“I don’t miss it.”

She turned slightly to look him in the eye. “Yes, you do. I’ve seen you in the courtroom, remember? You don’t just win a case, you slam dunk it. You’re good at your job. That’s not a bad thing, especially since you’re very passionate about it as well.”

David had a silly grin on his face.

“I miss knowing I made a difference. It’s not about slam dunking a case. It’s about justice and serving my country. It’s not a pleasure most of the time, but it’s always a privilege.”

Her eyes dropped. “I know what you mean.”

“How did you even know about the case?” David washed his toast down with the minty beverage.

“Cassie called. We caught up on gossip last weekend, among other things.” She took the last bite of her toast. “It’s going to be a hot one today. I’m glad we’re going to get the last of the furniture out of here and get this place renovated. Air conditioning is nice to have in August. Plus we need more room for the baby. Lots to do today. I’ve got to go by the bank to sign papers for the new accounts. Oh! I forgot to tell you, the realtor said she has some places for us to look at next week for you to use as a law office. Are you and John going to pull old Bessie out of the cellar today?”

David drained the cup. “Yes, we’re going to try and fix the tractor. I’ll have to wait on you to bring the parts home that we ordered last Monday. They’re in already. Since I know nothing about the vineyard, or wine, the least I can do is get the equipment going.”

“You’re learning. It takes time.”

“So you say. We’re going to move our bed and the desk today, too. You need to come home and pack up the rest of the

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kitchen. We will officially spend our first night in your old farm house, tonight.”

They chatted for some time and watched the sun come up on the deck, sitting in the swing. At eight, a nice long walk was agreed upon.

09:47

Walks weren't about a rush to get through, but enjoying the adventure along the way and each other's company. They paused, staring out at where two rivers joined, the Little Tennessee and the Cartoogechaye. Soon they turned and headed back.

David's mind was reeling with questions again. Those questions centered on their new career, taking care of the family vineyard and later, possibly, opening a law firm. He knew nothing about working a farm. He was a squid out of water. He had tried to read a book Caroline had given him on wine making to become enthused about his new job. He didn't have the heart to tell her he hadn't picked it up again after trying to understand the process, described mostly in French. He was a lawyer, not a linguist.

“So what makes a red wine, a red wine? It is just the grape or how it's processed?”

“Reds are reds because of the contact the juice receives from the must. Must is the seed and skin mixture you get when grapes are crushed. That must is left with the juice in a cooled vat for a specific time. Depending on the wine, and who's making it, the time varies. Then it's put into barrels and aged. White grapes are not left with seeds and skins like a red is.”

David continued his pace with Caroline. “Then where do rose wines fit in? They're pink.”

“Ah, yes. Rosé, comes from red grapes that aren't left with the skins. You get a touch of color from the juice only.”

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“What about the varieties? I’ve noticed dozens of grapes out in the fields. You’ve got all kinds of bottles in the house. John has tools in the cellar that look like torture devices - copper pots, barrels, and presses. Some of the words, in the book you gave me, I can’t even pronounce on a good day.”

Caroline laughed, “It’s okay. You’re not going to be tested on it. It’ll come with time. I didn’t learn it all overnight either. I grew up with it. Don’t be so hard on yourself. Ask John about the copper pots. He likes his brandy. I don’t have anything to do with that. That’s his little neck of the woods.”

David nodded and they continued on.

Caroline watched him out of the corner of her eye. She smiled. He was taking this all so seriously. When they neared the last quarter mile before heading back home, she took off in a sprint.

“Race ya!”

He swallowed a gulp of air and took off after her. He had been pushing her a little in the last week, trying to get her into running. Obviously, it had paid off.

She pulled away at first, but couldn’t match the driving force of his long legs. Soon they reached the end of the trail at the edge of the visitor parking lot.

“You cheated,” David stated, out of breath.

“Doesn’t matter, old man. You still won. I can’t out run you. Your legs are too long.”

David smiled, “I’m only eight years older than you missy. Watch it!”

“You’ll be forty three in about six weeks. I have to tease you a little bit. You beat me anyway.”

Checking her watch, it was ten thirty-eight. She bent over to stretch her back out. The trail was mostly paved, but the entrance to it was hard packed sand and soil. There were footprints

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in the sand that didn't belong there. They were of hard sole dress shoes with a small heel on the back. It was a man's dress shoe. You wouldn't wear those shoes to come on the greenway.

The smile on her face dropped suddenly. She stood up, surveying the area.

"What is it, Caroline?"

She didn't answer. She had caught a scent in the air, a familiar smell of someone she knew. The hairs on her neck were at full attention.

Caroline motioned for David to follow and casually walked the length of the parking lot. She peered between each of the cars trying to find what she was looking for. There was no one that looked out of place amongst the sport utility vehicles, bike racks, canoes, kids playing, and a rollerblading couple. None of the visitors had on dress shoes. The prints were fresh though, or they would have been disturbed by all the foot traffic. David stayed with her, but said nothing. She kept turning, and searching the area with her eyes. Finally, she exhaled and bit her lip.

He put his hands on her shoulders. "Tell me."

"I thought I smelled something, well someone. We're being watched."

"We're fine. There's nobody here but joggers and people walking their dogs."

"No. Somebody's here. I can feel it."

"So let's go. It's almost lunch time, anyway. Come on."

She nodded, hesitantly. They left the parking area together, stealing glances around, as they headed back home. No one stood out. Maybe she was just being paranoid.

Harry Ashby was out of breath as he crouched in the picnic shed on the edge of the parking area. He looked down at his shoes. Caroline had noticed the prints in the soil. He had narrowly avoided being seen. He was getting sloppy, obviously from lack

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of sleep and only a one hour nap.

13:30

Summer House Farms

Franklin, North Carolina

Coughing and wheezing broke the silence in the barn. David and John were trying to gain access to Bessie, the old family tractor. David had wormed his way around the old girl days before, and discovered she was in need of some new parts. The tractor had been shut away since Caroline's brother, Mark, was gravely injured in the fields while on the red machine several years before. Bessie served as an emotional reminder to the family of his death, one they would have liked to forget. They had all agreed to repair her and give her to another farm for use.

Barrels of aging brandy blocked their way and had to be moved outside before Bessie could be pulled free. David waved a hand in front of his face, swatting at the dust cloud that erupted from moving the barrels.

"How did you get into making brandy, John?"

"It's a family thing. Tradition is for the son to hand it down to the next generation. Daniel already knows how. He's been watching me since he could walk."

"Caroline's family didn't make brandy at all until your Dad moved east, with you and Noah?"

"Nope. We moved out here from California after my Mom died. Sonny knew that my father, William, had the knowledge to turn the farm around. Dad picked out all the grapes that are here now. They were planted when Caroline and Noah were babies. My Dad passed on and we stayed here with Sonny and Lizzie. Noah left after college. He was never interested in wine or brandy. I always knew he was different. He believed in serving his country,

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like the rest of the family, but he did it in his own way. I continued the brandy tradition on my own.”

David nodded, “So is that what that copper contraption in the corner is for?”

“You got it. Brandy is distilled twice. It’s pretty potent, very high alcohol content. Then it’s aged in these heavy oak barrels we’re huffing over.”

David laughed and began rolling the next barrel out of the cool cellar and up into the barn yard. The tractor was uncovered finally and pushed out into the open yard.

John climbed up into the seat and turned the engine over. Nothing.

“Think it’s flooded?”

“I don’t know, John.”

David wiped the sweat from his face with the edge of his shirt. He had decided it was warm enough to divest the offending garment. He pulled it off, tossing it down on the drop cloth they were working on. John had removed his t-shirt shortly after they had begun.

John noticed the pinched look on David’s face. The tractor was trying his patience, but his mind wasn’t on the tractor. It was obviously elsewhere.

David dropped down, climbing back under the tractor. He reached for the socket wrench he knew would be there above his head. His hand groped around looking for the tool.

Holly had walked down to the barn with a pitcher of iced tea and glasses on a tray. She quietly handed a full glass to John in the tractor seat while planting a kiss on his dusty cheek. There was a dirty hand below her feet looking for something, just out of his reach. She bent down, placing the tray on the ground. David’s eyes

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rolled up to look through the gap in the tractor body to see her.

"I brought you something to drink. You look like you could use it." She picked up the wrench, placing it in his hand.

"Thanks, Holly."

"I'm almost finished with my catering job for Mrs. Barnable. I don't have enough watermelon to finish up the fruit tray. I'm heading into town to get more. Let me know if you want anything. I'll take my phone with me."

"Will do. I'm waiting on Caroline to get back with those parts. She got a late start after finishing the boxes from the kitchen. I actually thought I could get it started before she got back.

John hopped down from the tractor with his glass, draining it quickly. "I don't think it'll be much longer before she gets back. Thanks for the tea, honey."

"You're welcome." Holly smiled and left them to their task.

John knelt down, glass in hand, to look under the tractor. "Your mind's not really on this tractor right now. So why don't you climb out from under there, have some tea, and procrastinate in the shade with me for a few minutes."

David wiped his hands and joined John in front of the barn. Despite the sun being high in the sky, the barn had shade off to one side now. Barrels of brandy were used as makeshift chairs. David swallowed the last gulp from his glass and rested it on his leg. His long limbs dangled over each side of the barrel.

Several minutes had passed. John eyed David, shaking his head and chuckling.

"You're just like Caroline. You're both stubborn, for one. Two, you're focused on what's in front of you, but you're not really here."

"Am I that transparent?"

"Look, I know we're not that far apart, as far as age goes, but I've been married a lot longer. I've also known your wife a

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long time. She's my adopted family. Both of you said you were leaving the Navy. Both of you have been giving this farm a lot of attention. Both of you are miserable and making the rest of us crazy trying to help with everything."

David's brow creased. Then it relaxed and he began to laugh. After a moment, he sobered. "In theory leaving the Navy sounded good. We both needed some time to process what happened. But I don't know, John. Something just doesn't feel right. For the last three weeks I've had more free time on my hands than I've had in twenty years. I'm not saying I haven't enjoyed spending it with her, because I have. I just feel...I don't know."

"Bored?"

"Yeah. No. Well..."

It was John's turn to laugh now. "I know what you mean. When I left the SEAL's and came home I felt out of place. But I had something to come home to. I had Holly, a new baby, and this farm. It's what I knew before I had the Navy. It was something comfortable for me to fall back into. It's different for you. You grew up with the law in the big city of Atlanta."

"I can remember sitting in my Dad's chair at his firm, thinking, one day I'm going to be a lawyer. It's all I ever wanted to do besides fly and cook."

John cut him off. "That explains the fancy kitchen in your apartment in Washington."

David continued on. "My Aunt Margie owned a specialty foods business and catered. I used to help her all the time. It's how we made it. I had life insurance money after Dad died, but she wouldn't let me use it. She told me I had to keep it for college. So when I graduated college, before I shipped out to OCS, I paid off her house with what was left. After I crashed, I thought for sure I was going to be a burden on her again. Then I regrouped, stayed in the Navy, went with the J.A.G. Corps, and it was like I was

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home again. I was where I was supposed to be and I could still serve my country doing it. I looked forward to going in to work every day, despite the long hours and the caseload. I love my wife. I can't wait to be a father. But I feel like I'm lost again, trying to find 'me' underneath the Navy uniform."

"Your job is what you do. In your case, you are your job. Just like Caroline. It's not something you can separate and compartmentalize. That's one of the reasons why you understand each other. You accept it. You know it's who she is. Just like she realizes that about you. She's just as miserable as you are."

"You think?"

"Yeah. I know her. I've been looking after her since she was ten years old. I wasn't always there, because I was off being a squid, too. She knows how to run this farm. She'd be great at it. She would tuck her chin down and stay here if that's what she thought you wanted. But it's just not where her heart is."

John got up from the barrel to return to the tractor.

"Tell her, David."

David sat there thinking as he watched John's retreating form. Tonight he would be making a confession to his wife.

14:20

Main Street

Franklin, North Carolina

Caroline was speaking rapidly in Italian with her father, Sonny, as she crossed the street. She was due at the bank in five minutes. As she breezed past those on the sidewalk, she caught the same scent she had smelled on the greenway. She stopped and surveyed the sidewalk traffic. No one appeared conspicuous.

She chastised herself for running late and hung up with her father. The branch manager met her as she entered the bank lobby.

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In only a few minutes, she had a new trust established for Daniel's future; a transfer to John and Holly's account, to help them run the farm; money wired to her father's account in Italy; and a new joint checking and retirement account with David. The insurance money from her brother's policy had been divided. Mark, her late brother, and Caroline had taken out large insurance policies after their mother, Lizzie, had a horrific, but suspicious, car accident years prior. Experience had taught them to plan ahead.

Satisfied that everything was in order she walked back to the Acura, parked in the town lot. Several minutes later, and well away from the bank, her cell phone rang. She had forgotten to sign the signature card on the new checking account.

"I'll come back later, Kathy. David's waiting on me at home. I have tractor parts to deliver. Is it okay if I just bring him back with me later today?"

"I'll sit them aside on my desk. Just call me—"

The banker had been cut off by automatic machine gun fire. Caroline recognized the sound.

"Kathy?" Caroline could hear Kathy's shallow breath.

"There are men at the teller line with guns."

Gunfire cut through the silence and the connection with Kathy was severed. Caroline was three miles from town already, stuck behind a tractor trailer, currently blocking her path at the hardware store.