



If Something Happens to Me

Author: *Alex Finlay*

Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: For the past five years, Ryan Richardson has relived that terrible night. The car door ripping open. The crushing blow to the head. The hands yanking him from the vehicle. His girlfriend Ali's piercing scream as she is taken.

With no trace of Ali or the car, a cloud of suspicion hangs over Ryan. But with no proof and a good lawyer, he's never charged, though that doesn't matter to the podcasters and internet trolls. Now, Ryan has changed his last name, and entered law school. He's put his past behind him.

Until, on a summer trip abroad to Italy with his law-school classmates, Ryan gets a call from his father: Ali's car has finally been found, submerged in a lake in his hometown. Inside are two dead men and a cryptic note with five words written on the envelope in Ali's handwriting: If something happens to me...

Then, halfway around the world, the unthinkable happens: Ryan sees the man who has haunted his dreams since that night.

As Ryan races from the rolling hills of Tuscany, to a rural village in the UK, to the glittering streets of Paris in search of the truth, he has no idea that his salvation may lie with a young sheriff's deputy in Kansas working her first case, and a mobster in Philadelphia who's experienced tragedy of his own.

In classic Alex Finlay form, *If Something Happens to Me* is told by several distinct, compelling characters whose paths intersect, detonating into a story of twist after pulse-pounding twist. The novel cements Finlay as one of the leading thriller writers today.

Total Pages (Source): 85

LEAVENWORTH, KANSAS

“We don’t have to...” Ryan says in a whisper.

Alison doesn’t reply as she drives her father’s pristine BMW sedan down the dirt road, rocks kicking under the tires. She just gives Ryan a half smile and pulls into a secluded opening in the trees that the kids call Lovers’ Lane in some ironic tribute to teenage make-out spots in old horror movies.

She kills the headlights and they sit there in the dark, the only sound a rumble of thunder in the distance and the chirp of crickets.

Without a word, she reaches to the back seat and grabs the rucksack. It undoubtedly will have a blanket, bug spray... condoms.

Ryan follows her outside to their favorite spot under a large oak tree, the same place where they had their first kiss freshman year, which seems like a lifetime ago—a fog of prom and homecoming dances, football and basketball games, SAT prep courses and college applications. Ali shakes out the blanket and spreads it on the grass. It’s one of those summer nights filled with humidity and hope.

Ryan feels a tiny tremble in his hands, no, in his whole body. He’s been waiting for this night—aching for this night—for so long. Yet somehow he’s reluctant, weirdly hesitant.

That disappears when she leans in, kisses him, and electricity roars through every nerve.

Another rumble comes from the sky. The tree's leaves rattle in the wind.

"I know we don't have to," she says in his ear, as she lowers them to the blanket.

Goose bumps rise on his neck and ripple down his arms, but Ali must sense he's holding back. She pulls away. "Everything okay?"

Ryan examines her face, which is shrouded in shadows, but he can make out her elegant features—the wide-set eyes, angular jawline... those lips...

"It just feels like the end, not the beginning, of something," he says. "A goodbye."

She smiles. One of her exasperated smiles. "You're gonna blow this for yourself, Dodge."

He smiles back in the dark. It was Ali who'd come up with the nickname that will probably follow him the rest of his life. They first met in algebra class in ninth grade. She was the new kid in town. He was the star of the basketball team—a six-four freshman playing first-string varsity, for god's sake—but she wasn't impressed. He asked if he could copy her homework. It was both resourceful, since he doesn't have a math brain, and a lazy effort at flirting.

Ali was having none of it: "Just because you can dodge around that basketball court doesn't mean everything's going to be handed to you." And just like that, he was "Dodge." And every November through March thereafter, the crowd would chant it from the bleachers:

Dodge... Dodge... Dodge...

Her voice breaks the thought. "It's not goodbye, we're just going to different colleges. We'll make it."

They both leave tomorrow. She's headed to Bard to study art; he's off to K-State to ride the bench. He's a great shooting guard—but only Leavenworth, Kansas, great, not Division I great.

“Your parents made it,” she adds. She's always been fascinated by his mom and dad, a couple since high school and still lusting after each other. Ryan once told Ali that for years he thought his father, a factory worker at the Great Western plant, had some type of medical training because whenever his mom had an ailment—a sore back, a stubbed toe, a paper cut—his dad would say, “I have the cure,” and his mother would blush, and giggle, and say, “You do, do you?” Ryan remembers the horror he felt in middle school when he realized what his father's cure referred to.

A large raindrop lands on his cheek. Then another. Then there's a flash in the sky.

“I think the gods are telling us something.” He starts to stand up, but she clutches his arm.

“Stay...”

He's tempted, the blood running hot through his veins at the thought of her naked and dripping wet. But the image is shattered by a loud boom, followed by a jagged stroke of lightning less than fifty yards away.

It would be a good way to die, for sure, but even Ali is realizing that tonight is not meant to be.

As the rain comes down in torrents, they race back to the car. They're both drenched, her vintage Bon Jovi concert tee clinging to her body. They're laughing, a nervous laugh infused with disappointment—and relief, perhaps.

In the car's overhead light, she's so pretty with her hair matted, makeup running, that

he leans over and kisses her.

Ali pulls him close and with yearning. She stops a moment. “You’re shivering,” she says.

“It’s from the rain,” he says, but it isn’t.

She then pulls her T-shirt over her head and says, “I have the cure.”

The next moments remain a haze.

A whoosh of the car door ripping open.

A scream.

A crushing blow to the head.

Then it’s morning.

Ryan is outside on the wet grass.

The car is gone.

And so is Ali.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:07 am

MONTEPULCIANO, ITALY

It's been five years and she's the first woman—first person—to make Ryan smile.

“Why do you want to be a lawyer?” Nora Watanabe asks.

They sit at a tall table at the bar—the only place walking distance from their bed-and-breakfast. It's barely ten o'clock, but the place is clearing out. Everything in Montepulciano closes early, even the bars and nightclubs.

“What, are we on a job interview?” Ryan replies, smiling at her tenacity. It's the third time she's asked. Across the room he sees their classmate Eddie striking out with Italian women who are pretending not to speak English.

Nora narrows her eyes, offers a faint smile of her own.

If Ryan answers her question neither of them will be smiling. The idea to attend law school started five years ago with the criminal defense lawyer Ryan's dad hired when the questions from the police became more pointed: Had you and Alison been fighting? Were you breaking up? Why didn't you call the police immediately? How could you not see anything?

They were fair inquiries. There were no clues, no leads, no trace of Ali or her father's BMW.

Over time, the investigators grew impatient, outwardly suspicious. You're a big guy, why didn't you put up a fight? How could someone just take her?

But it was their last question—What did you do to her, Ryan?—that alarmed Ryan’s dad enough that they hired Marty Salinger. Marty came into the interrogation room, told the police Ryan was done talking, and to arrest him or let him go.

They let him go.

But he wasn’t free. Not from the suspicions. Not from his own guilt over failing to protect her. Not from his inability to deliver the authorities one viable clue.

Ryan even went to a hypnotist. In the session, he’d recovered a nanosecond of a memory. A face. A plain face, one that the sketch artist threw up his hands over. And there was the vision of two hands—each one missing the pinky finger—dragging Ryan out of the car. The therapist termed it more of a nightmare, a guilt-fueled image of a monster, than a memory.

Ryan is spared Nora’s further interrogation when Eddie plops down on the stool next to them. Ryan agreed to come out tonight only because the others in their group are tiring of Eddie. They’re the elite few in their 1L class who made it on to The Georgetown Law Journal, a student-run publication for the best and brightest that no one reads. An alumnus donor funds the summer trip every year as a bonding experience for the new editorial staff members with the highest grades. Ryan initially declined the invitation, he found it all a bit too privileged, but was pressured to come by his roommate. Eddie begged him. Said the others wouldn’t hang out with him unless Ryan came along.

“I hate Italy,” Eddie says, glancing at the women who had shot him down. He’s been grouching this way the entire trip, an example of why people find Eddie annoying, if not problematic.

Nora appraises Ryan and Eddie like she’s unclear why the two are friends. Ryan isn’t quite sure himself. Other than the fact his roommate needs a friend. Ryan’s been

there.

They make the perilous walk back to the B and B along the roadside path. The area has no streetlamps, and cars and scooters drive unreasonably fast on the narrow motorway carved into the rolling hills.

“Is one Mexican restaurant in all of Tuscany too much to ask?” Eddie says as they walk, their shoes crunching in the gravel. “I just want a taco, is that so wrong?”

Nora gives Ryan a sidelong glance but doesn’t say anything.

“And what’s with the no ice in drinks, no air conditioning? It’s so hot.”

Ryan and Nora walk far enough ahead so that they can no longer hear what Eddie’s saying. They climb the steep hill that leads into the medieval town.

Like the bar, most of the restaurants and shops are closed at this hour, but there are kids playing in the piazza. A young boy kicks a soccer ball to Ryan, who stops it with his foot, then kicks it back. Nora laughs when the kid points at Ryan and says, “Gigante! Gigante!”

Ryan holds up his hands and growls, walking at them like Frankenstein. All the kids run away shrieking with delight.

“The giant,” Nora says. “It fits.”

Ryan offers a fleeting smile. He’s used to nicknames. In high school they called him Dodge. Later, in his first game at Kansas State, the opposing team shouted a less friendly name from the bleachers:

Kil-ler... Kil-ler... Kil-ler...

The harassment was unrelenting. And not just from rival teams. From podcasts. From true crime shows. From internet trolls. So Ryan stopped playing basketball, changed his name from Ryan Richardson to Ryan Smith, and transferred to a new college. He thought the public flogging would end last year when authorities announced that they'd found DNA evidence linking Alison's abduction to the Missouri River Killer. MRK admitted to slaughtering eight women he'd abducted in towns along the river but denied taking Ali. Then his fellow inmates shanked him thirty-seven times, closing the case, and leaving that fucking cloud of suspicion over Ryan.

Ryan's phone glows with an incoming call. He scans the notification. It's from his father, seven hours behind back in Kansas and probably just checking in. Ryan lets the call go to voicemail. He'll call him back.

At the B and B, a converted Tuscan farmhouse on a working vineyard, Ryan says good night to Nora. She holds his gaze a long moment, evaluating him.

"You're not fooling anyone," she says at last.

Ryan feels an instinctive wave of panic. His breath is caught in the back of his throat, waiting, praying her next words aren't about his real name, about his missing high-school girlfriend.

"I know why you want to be a lawyer," Nora says, eyeing Eddie, who pushes through the door into the common area. There's another long pause. "So you can help people." She walks down the hallway to her room, calling, "Good night," over her shoulder.

Right behind Eddie a small group bounces inside led by Aiden and Jake, two other classmates on the trip. On brand, they're too loud, too drunk. And they have four college-age women with them.

“Ryan! Bro!” Aiden says. He grabs Ryan’s hand, does the aggressive pull-into-a-shoulder-hug thing.

Aiden gestures to the young women, who likewise have had a few too many. “I want you to meet...” He pauses, like he’s realizing he doesn’t remember their names. “Meet our new friends. They’re from California.”

“We’re hitting the pool,” Jake adds. “You should join us.”

The girls agree.

“Eddie, you too, bro!”

Ryan nods. “We’ll meet you over there,” he says with no intention of going swimming. Nothing’s worse than being with a group of drunk people when you’re sober. But it’s easier to agree than to deal with Aiden and Jake. The duo are Kappa Something-or-Other alums who became fast friends the first day of law school. It’s shocking they’re both so damn smart.

The group stumbles off. One of the young women drags her hand along Ryan’s arm as she walks past. “You should come...”

Eddie shakes his head. “To be you for just one day.”

Ryan frowns.

“Where’s Nora?” Eddie asks.

“She went to bed.”

“And why aren’t you there with her?”

Ryan frowns again.

“I don’t get you, man,” Eddie says, watching out the window at the silhouettes stripping off their clothes as they run through the grass to the infinity pool. “The girls fall all over you, hell, the boys do too. I’d kill for just one day in the life.”

“Maybe you’d have better luck if you let people get to know you. Just be yourself,” Ryan replies.

“Dude, I am being myself.”

Ryan smiles. “Maybe you should be a little less yourself.”

Eddie nods like it’s good advice.

“You should go swimming,” Ryan says, looking out at the group now splashing around in the blue glow of the pool lights.

Eddie thinks about it. “Nah, I’m not getting in the water with the Chlamydia Brothers.” Eddie’s charming nickname for Aiden and Jake. “Not enough chlorine in the world for that.”

“Good night, Eddie,” Ryan says. He starts toward his room.

Eddie calls out to him, “I really gotta see this girl someday.”

Ryan turns, curious. “What girl?”

“The one you’re so hung up on.”

Inside his room, Ryan pulls off his shirt. It’s oppressively hot. Eddie’s not wrong

about the air conditioning. He sees that his dad left a voicemail. The guy still can't send a text like a normal person.

Ryan's about to play the message when he spots something on the floor, an envelope, like someone had slipped it under the door. He opens it and his heart trips:

I need to see you. Tomorrow, 10 a.m. at the Palazzo.

I know who you are.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:07 am

LEAVENWORTH, KANSAS

Poppy McGee wakes with a towering figure glaring down at her. On the frayed poster in her childhood bedroom, Beyoncé wears a sequined mini, holds her legs in a wide stance, hands on hips, casting a sultry gaze.

Poppy used to have that confidence. But after three years in the Army she fears she's lost her groove. It doesn't help that she's back home, sleeping in bright pink sheets with Queen Bey looking disappointed in her.

She gets up, showers, dresses, and stares at herself in the mirror hanging from the back of her door. Her new uniform is an ugly shade of brown and doesn't fit well. At five-one, she looks like a kid dressing up as a UPS driver with a sidearm. She tucks a strand of her long red hair back in the bun, straightens the name tag: DEPUTY SHERIFF MCGEE.

She didn't want the job. Didn't want to come back to this town. But after her abrupt military discharge, her options were limited. And someone needed to take care of her father after Mom died unexpectedly. Poppy had been on the phone with her, their daily call, when her mom said, I don't feel so good. And that was that. A stroke. A year before Poppy's twenty-first birthday; a year after Dad's cancer diagnosis.

The hits, as they say, keep coming.

She takes a last look in the mirror, straightens her spine, and heads out of her room.

In the kitchen, she's surprised that her father is up, sitting at the table. He looks tired

and weak and ashen. Her older brother, Dash, has stopped by too. There's a grease-stained McDonald's bag on the table, and a handwritten sheet of spiral notebook paper that says: Congratulations!

"What's all this?" she says.

"It's your first day..." Dash says.

Her dad coughs, and Poppy gives her brother a look. This is why she came back. Dash has no judgment about her father's health, about anything, really. The first clue is that he's a grown-ass man and still goes by his high-school basketball nickname.

"Let's get you back in bed, Dad," Poppy says.

"To hell with that," her father says, reaching for the McDonald's bag, retrieving a breakfast sandwich, and putting it on the plate in her spot at the table.

"Yeah, chill, Serpico," Dash says.

"Who the hell is Serpico?" She doesn't wait for him to reply. She sits at the table and unwraps the McMuffin.

As they eat, Dash jabbers on, her father laughing. Whatever his faults, Dash has their father's heart, he always has.

When they're finished, Dash piles his plate in the sink. Poppy says, "I hope this celebration includes cleaning up."

Dash smiles. It's an endearing smile that has gotten him through life. He is endearing, if she's honest about it. Unreliable, but endearing, with his kind heart and Shaggy from Scooby-Doo persona, complete with the scruff on his chin. And who's she to

judge? Dash makes good money at the car dealership and isn't living in his old bedroom.

"I got ya, Sis. Now get on down to the station house. Before we defund you people."

Her dad laughs too hard, breaking into a coughing jag. The dishes will be there when she returns, she knows, but she decides to let it go.

After getting her father back in bed, moving the chunky cordless landline phone to the nightstand, and telling him to call if he needs anything, she heads out.

The heat hits her like a brick wall. Summer in Kansas would give hell a run for its money. In more ways than one. She drives her father's Ford Escort down the main street and parks in the garage under the station. It's a small force, inexperienced, the sheriff said during the Zoom interview. He claimed she'd be a welcome addition, with her military police experience.

The inside of the station house is even more sweltering. The woman working the front desk seems to know Poppy is coming, stands up. Explains that the air conditioner is out and that it isn't always this awful, sweetie. Margaret is her name. Everyone's so happy Poppy's there, she says. Says that Poppy's sweet big brother—a local celebrity after his single season in the NBA who now uses his charm to sell cars—gave her nephew a great deal on an F-150.

Poppy's office is decent enough. It has pressed-wood furniture, but it's clean, has a window overlooking a parking lot. The computer is old, but it'll do.

She's brought only a few things in her backpack. A Tupperware container with her lunch, a framed photo for her desk—the family during better days, at her goodbye party before she left for basic training—and a charger for her phone.

She stares at the bare white walls, wonders if she should've brought something to make the room less drab, but suspects a Beyoncé poster is out of the question.

Sheriff Walton pops his head in. "Settling in?"

"Yes, sir," she says.

"Whoa, soldier. No need for 'sir' anymore. You can call me Ken."

"Sorry, old habits..." She smiles, tries not to look defeated with where life has taken her. She'd imagined that after serving her country—which, as it turned out, was checking IDs at the front gate to the base—she'd be a G-woman, taking down mobsters and terrorists and serial killers.

A long quiet follows. Sheriff Walton—Ken, she reminds herself—has a friendly-neighbor air about him. Maybe it's his last name, but with his full head of gray hair, crinkles around forgiving eyes, he reminds her of the dad from *The Waltons* reruns Poppy used to watch with her mother.

"How's your dad?" The sheriff and her father served together in the Gulf. Poppy knows it's the real reason she has this job.

"His doctor says he's doing okay, though he's a bit ornery."

The sheriff chuckles. "I'd be worried if he wasn't."

Poppy has only vague memories of the sheriff from when she was younger. But what kid focuses on their parents' friends? There's a photo of a much younger Ken Walton with Dad and another one of their war buddies on the fireplace mantel.

"You started on the right day," Sheriff Walton says. "We've had some excitement

around here.”

“Oh yeah?” Poppy says.

The sheriff holds up his smartphone, gestures with his head for her to follow him.
“Some YouTube jackasses found a vehicle submerged in Suncatcher Lake.”

Maybe this job won’t be all speeding tickets and DUIs.

“Do they think it’s Laura Palmetto’s car?” The local news has been going on about the missing teen who disappeared two weeks ago from Platte County, only fifteen minutes away.

The sheriff shakes his head. “Car’s been down there a long time. We’re gonna catch hell, because our team searched the lake and found nothing five years ago.”

Poppy immediately understands.

It’s Alison Lane’s car.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:07 am

On the drive to Suncatcher Lake, Poppy sits in the passenger seat next to the sheriff and watches the YouTube video. Cold Case Company, which appears to be just a couple guys with pontoon boats and sonar equipment, posted the clip two hours ago.

On the screen, a man with a chinstrap beard sits in a boat and talks in a low whisper. Pointing to a laptop screen, he says, “It’s definitely a car down there. I need to be quiet because the townspeople know we’re here searching for Laura Palmetto’s car, and I don’t want to start a ruckus.” The camera pans to the shore where a few bystanders are looking out at the water. “We know law enforcement has swept the lakes, but we have better equipment, and we’ve got a lot of experience—we’ve helped solve thirty-two cold cases.”

The screen turns black, a time lapse, and then jumps to the man’s partner in a wet suit, emerging from the water. He looks up gravely at the bearded man in the boat and, with some obvious drama for the camera, says, “We need to call the authorities.”

Poppy pauses the video.

The sheriff shakes his head, annoyed. “They of course posted it before they ‘called the authorities.’” He turns onto a dirt road surrounded by woodland that opens up to a small clearing near the lake’s bank. “Oh Christ,” the sheriff says.

Poppy looks out the window. An officer in the same turd-brown uniform as Poppy’s is yelling in the face of the chinstrap-beard guy from the video.

The sheriff jumps out of the car, and Poppy follows after him.

“Kyle, you need to stand down,” the sheriff says calmly.

The officer, Kyle Dobbs—Poppy remembers him from the Zoom job interview—clenches his fists, glowers at the bearded man. Just when Poppy thinks Kyle might take a swing at the guy, he turns and storms off. One of the bearded guy’s crew stands a few feet away filming it all.

Poppy watches the sheriff closely. Ken Walton has a calming presence, not the kind of guy to get worked up about anything, she thinks. In Iraq, Ken and Poppy’s father were on the bomb squad together, which requires an even temperament.

The man with the beard seems flustered. “I told him, we’re not trying to make you all look bad. We just want to give the families some peace.”

The sheriff nods. “Deputy Dobbs is Laura Palmetto’s uncle,” he tells them. “Laura’s his little sister’s kid. Her parents heard you found something, and...”

“Oh shit,” the bearded man says. He waves a hand for the kid with the camera to stop filming. He’s not going to show the video of how Laura Palmetto’s family was led to believe it was her car at the bottom of the lake. The YouTube video didn’t mention that the car was a BMW, and Laura drove a beat-up Honda.

The sheriff puts a hand on the bearded guy’s shoulder, says, “I know your heart’s in the right place, son.”

“You think it’s Alison Lane’s car?” the bearded guy asks.

The sheriff nods. “The bigger question is who are the two dead guys you found in it?”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:07 am

PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA

Shane O’Leary’s phone buzzes in his pocket at the same moment he pushes off the dock in the fishing boat. Gina’s pretty face appears on the iPhone. He’s busy, but he never ignores calls from Gina.

“Hey, beautiful.”

Gina doesn’t acknowledge the compliment, but he can hear her smile.

“It sounds so windy,” she says. “Where are you?”

“Chaz needed some help at his lake house. We’re on his boat.”

Chaz is futzing with the engine, paying O’Leary no mind.

“Tell him hi for me,” she says. “It’s getting dark. You two be careful.”

O’Leary nods, not saying anything. “I may lose the signal soon, hon. Everything okay?”

“I’ve got some good news, actually.”

“Yeah?”

“Anthony got invited to a party tonight.”

Their thirteen-year-old son has acted withdrawn lately, depressed, and Gina's been losing sleep over it.

"That's great news. See, I told you, it would just be a matter of time till he made some friends at the new school."

"I hope so."

O'Leary feels a tiny weight lift. Hope. Like they say, you're only as happy as your least happy kid. And Anthony is their only kid, and Gina's world.

"You tell him to take it easy on the booze," O'Leary says. "And, like my old man used to say about the girls, nothing below the waist."

"Stop it," Gina says, playfully. "He's not that kind of boy."

"I know he's not. I'm just playin'."

"And I don't recall you following those rules when we were kids," Gina says.

O'Leary smiles. "I blame those tight jeans you used to wear."

Gina giggles. "You really think he's gonna be okay? I'm the one who wanted him to go to that school and—"

"Don't start up with that again. The school was the right choice. You're an amazing mom. He's gonna be fine. You'll see."

"What time will you be home? I miss you."

"You shouldn't wait up. But how about we go out tomorrow night? A date."

“I’d love that.”

“Maybe get out those old jeans of yours...”

Gina giggles again. God, he loves that laugh.

“Babe, the line’s breaking up, so I’d better go. Tell Anthony to have a great time.”

“I love you,” Gina says.

“Right back at you, sweetness.”

O’Leary tucks the phone in his pocket.

Chaz is steering the boat, pretending not to be listening. His gray hair blows in the gusts. He’s looking his age, even in the merciful half-light.

“Kids,” O’Leary says to him.

Chaz makes a curious expression. “Something up with Anthony?”

“You know we moved him to the Academy. Fucking rich kids. He’s been having a rough go of it.”

“That’s a damn good school.”

“Yeah, so good they won’t name the school after anyone. At the orientation they said no one person would suffice, if you can believe that tripe. Cost me a new gymnasium and they also made it clear my name wouldn’t go on it.”

Chaz gives a knowing nod.

“Still, can you imagine, my kid, me, the guy who was kicked out of school in tenth grade...”

Chaz chuckles. “I remember that. Your father was pissed. Remind me, why’d you break that gym teacher’s nose?”

“He was always harassing the girls—they didn’t do shit back then for that kind of stuff. Then, he tried to touch the wrong girl.”

Chaz smiles. “I’m surprised Gina didn’t break his nose first.”

“You and me both. But my old man didn’t care about chivalry.” O’Leary reflects briefly on the beating he took for that. “Anyway, some of Anthony’s new classmates invited him to a party. So maybe...”

“That’s great news. He’s a good kid.”

“Yeah, I just worry, you know? I’ve got the biggest estate in the neighborhood and none of these Ivy League fuckers ever invite us to anything. I just don’t want my kid to pay because of where I’m from, because...” He lets the sentence die.

“I’m sure it’s gonna work out.”

Twenty minutes later, far from shore, Chaz slows the boat to a stop.

O’Leary looks at Chaz’s silhouette. “Does it get easier? The worrying about the kids?”

Chaz releases a laugh, shrugs. “You’ve met Patrick, what do you think?” Chaz’s son works for O’Leary and is a hothead. He’s filled with more piss and vinegar than even O’Leary was in his twenties.

“What about my old man?” O’Leary asks. “You were his right hand. He ever wring his hands about us kids?”

Chaz hesitates.

“I’m fuckin’ with you,” O’Leary says.

“It was different back then,” Chaz says, defending O’Leary’s brutal father even now.

“Anthony’s different than we were,” O’Leary says. “He’s a gentle boy.”

“I feel the same way about my grandson.”

“We don’t deserve the gift of gentle boys,” O’Leary says. He blows out a breath.

“Let’s do this.”

Chaz steps to the center of the boat. Yanks off the blanket covering a large mass stationed in the middle.

Even in the dark, the white of the man’s wide eyes is visible. He starts to grunt under the duct tape covering his mouth. Chaz leans down, tests the chains anchored to heavy cinder blocks.

O’Leary nods.

Chaz says, “Allow some last words?”

O’Leary shakes his head. “You work in my territory without permission, you don’t get any last words. You get what’s coming.”

“His people are gonna hit back at us,” Chaz reminds him.

“And I’ll be waiting.”

With that, Chaz and O’Leary each grab an arm and throw the man overboard.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:07 am

LEAVENWORTH, KANSAS

Poppy arrives home from Day One of her new job around 10:00 p.m. She's tired, hungry. She spent the last twelve hours at Suncatcher Lake, helping set up tall screens shielding the area from news and iPhone cameras as the submerged car was pulled from the water by a tow truck. Poppy's feet are wet from slogging around the vehicle, hanging a tarp over it to ensure no one could see what was inside. She didn't want to look herself but couldn't miss the grisly tableau: the remains of two people—by their clothes, they appear to both be male—in the front seat. She couldn't see in the back, but Cold Case Company's third YouTube video—the company doled them out one by one to build suspense—reported finding a woman's handbag. But no Alison Lane.

Despite his professed concern for the families, the bearded guy posted the video before anyone could locate Alison's father. According to the town rumor mill, the father had been devastated by her disappearance and dropped out of public life shortly after she was taken.

Poppy looks in the refrigerator, sighs. She retrieves a meal from the freezer and pulls it from the cardboard sleeve, punctures the plastic with a fork, and tosses it in the microwave.

She hears the television and heads into the living room. Her father has fallen asleep in his frayed lounge chair, fast-food wrappers on the TV tray in front of him. That's what she gets for asking Dash to handle dinner duty. She clicks off ESPN and helps Dad up. He's half-asleep as he zombie-walks to his bedroom.

Back in the kitchen, she eats the rubbery fettuccine Alfredo, then heads to her room.

It's been an eventful first day. Better than boring, she supposes. She takes off her uniform. Her socks smell like the lake. She thinks again about the human remains strapped into the front of the BMW.

Who were the two men? One set of bones wore a business suit, the other a leather jacket. Did they abduct Alison? Were they working with the Missouri River Killer? Or did they end up with Alison's car—and dead in it—for some other reason? And where is Alison?

Alison was in the same class as Dash, two years ahead of Poppy. Leavenworth High cut across all socioeconomic divides. The town, known mostly for its notorious federal prison, definitely has two sides of the tracks. Alison lived on the side with large houses and luxury sedans. Poppy didn't exactly inhabit the other side, though. Her family straddled the middle. Dad made a solid living as a corrections officer at the penitentiary. Dash and Poppy never wanted for anything. She remembers Alison being one of the popular kids. Pretty and smart and from means. But she wasn't like the other girls who cultivated fake glamorous lives on social media. She had a down-to-earth quality.

Did Alison know the men in the car? If so, how? Poppy tries to remember Alison's friends from school. Alison spent most of her time with Ryan Richardson. Whatever happened to that guy? Dash should know, they played on the same team. Both stars: Dash and Dodge. It was only five years ago but feels like longer.

Poppy remembers that shortly before Alison's abduction, a video of her went viral. Poppy reaches for her laptop on the nightstand. She flips it open and googles Alison's name. The first ten results all reference the Missouri River Killer: MRK's Victims—Where Are the Bodies? Was This MRK's First Victim? All the Missing Girls.

She filters the search for images. The top hits are all the same grainy photo of Alison,

a screen-grab from the viral video. Poppy finds the recording and clicks PLAY.

It's a jostling phone video. Poppy recognizes the setting: the patch of grass adjacent to the high school's main building. There's a large group of kids formed in a loose circle. The person taking the video pushes through the crowd. At the center of the circle are three kids—one of them a foot shorter than the others. The larger boys are playing keep-away with the smaller kid's backpack, throwing it over his head to each other. Poppy's mind returns to high school—what were the bigger kids' names? They were brothers, menaces, she remembers. Ben and Zach Something.

In the video, they're taunting the smaller kid, with a growing crowd of classmates surrounding them.

At last, the smaller kid—what was his name?—shoves Zach. Poppy watched this video several times back in the day but never closely examined it. Now she focuses on the smaller boy's face. His expression is part terror, part I've had enough. This wasn't the first time Ben and Zach messed with him. What bravery it took for the small boy to fight back... Poppy flashes to her CO's face when she punched him square in the nose after the months of inappropriate comments, unwanted advances, and the last straw when he grabbed her ass. The Army gave her an honorable discharge, if only to avoid the inquiry about the harassment. But it was devastating.

The video is approaching the part that went viral. Zach clearly doesn't like being pushed. He shoves the smaller boy hard, and the kid stumbles into Ben. They heave the kid back and forth until he hits the ground hard.

Ben kicks him and he's crying and it's heartbreaking. Then from off-screen, a voice: "What's—? Why isn't anyone—?"

A streak of dark hair pushes through the crowd. The girl's back is to the camera, but you can see her confronting Ben and Zach. In response, Ben dumps the smaller kid's

backpack on the grass. He and his brother laugh.

The crowd is buzzing, excited at the drama unfolding.

And then Alison Lane, the pretty, somewhat pettily elegant girl, proceeds to beat the shit out of Ben and Zach. It starts with a knife hand to Ben's throat, which immediately disables him. Then a knee to Zach's groin, followed by a hard stomp to his foot.

She then helps the smaller boy off the ground while some of the other kids—finding their courage from hers—gather his belongings and put them back in his bag. There's no applause, like there would be in the movies. But the scene is as heroic as anything Poppy has ever witnessed. Through the entire episode, Alison's face is shown clearly in only one frame, where she's helping the boy through the crowd and she smacks the cell phone out of the hand of whoever's been filming.

Poppy stops the video. She never appreciated Alison Lane, really. Until she was abducted, the video served mostly as entertainment. There was something exhilarating about watching a young woman kick some bully ass. But now Poppy sees that there was more to Alison than a pretty face and popularity.

The thought is interrupted by the sound of movement. She swings her legs off the bed to go check on her father. In the hallway, she realizes the noise isn't coming from her dad's bedroom. It's from Dash's old room. The one their father turned into a storage closet after Dash moved out. The light is on.

She peeks in the crack and Dash is sitting at his old desk, which is cluttered with her father's junk. He's rummaging through a shoebox.

"I didn't know you were home," she says.

He startles, doesn't turn around right away. He's wiping his face with his shirt.

"Shit, you scared me," he says, finally. When he turns around, she notices his eyes are red, like he's been crying.

"Everything okay?" she asks.

Dash has bouts of depression, but she thought his mental health had improved. That's what her father told her, anyway.

"I'm fine," he says, too cheerful. "I was trying to find some old pictures. A group is getting together for our five-year reunion."

"Already living for your glory days only five years out," she teases playfully. She spies into the box, and it appears to be full of old photos and other mementos.

Dash shakes his head and puts the lid back on the Air Jordans box, tucks it on the shelf.

"You gonna ride the sidecar to the reunion?" Poppy says, eyeing his old helmet. Dash and Dad restored one of those weird motorcycles that has a one-wheeled device attached to the side. Poppy rode in the contraption once, and it was enough.

"Hey, that thing was sweet."

"If you say so."

"How was your first day?" he asks, standing, shepherding her out of the bedroom.

"You heard about Alison Lane's car?"

“Yeah. My phone blew up today. It’s crazy. Who are the dead guys in the car?”

Poppy shouldn’t be surprised that everyone’s talking about it. News travels fast in a small town. And Ryan and Ali were royalty in Dash’s graduating class, literally, homecoming king and queen, though by the time Poppy graduated they’d changed the name to homecoming “royalty” in an effort to be more inclusive. The five-year reunion will be abuzz.

“I can’t talk about an active investigation.”

“Oh, ‘you can’t talk about an active investigation,’” Dash says in a mocking cop voice.

Poppy sighs. “We have no clue who they are.”

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:07 am

PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA

Shane O’Leary stretches his back as he shuffles through the front door. The house is dark, quiet. He kicks off his shoes, which are still damp from the boat, then walks through the overdecorated grand entrance, past the spiral stairwell, toward the kitchen.

He freezes when he passes the reading room and sees the outline of someone sitting in a chair near the tall bookshelves. He’s always imagined it would go down like this, like it did for his old man. Two in the back of the head. By a stranger. Or a friend. He doesn’t know which would be worse.

The lamp clicks on and he lets out a loud breath. “Gina, you scared the shit out of me. What are you doin’ sitting there in the dark?”

It’s then he sees that her eyes are red, swollen.

“What’s wrong, my girl?”

“It’s Anthony,” she says, like she’s trying to control her voice from shaking.

“What—?”

“He came home early from the party, upset,” Gina says. “He stormed up to his room.”

“What happened?”

“He says he doesn’t want to talk about it.”

O’Leary lures Gina out of the chair and gives her a hug. Her body shudders as he holds her.

“He’ll be okay. It just takes some time.”

“I shouldn’t have moved him to that school.”

O’Leary doesn’t say that Anthony was having trouble long before the new school. Some kids just don’t fit in. “Don’t you blame yourself...” He pauses, then adds, “Maybe we should get that therapist you were talking about.”

O’Leary doesn’t believe in shrink and he’s resisted family counseling or a therapist for Anthony. But sometimes you gotta compromise.

“Really? You mean it? You’ll come and—”

“I’ll do whatever you need. Whatever he needs.”

This seems to perk her up. Gina likes to take action: She’s a fixer, a problem solver. But she’s met her match with their son.

“Should I go up and talk to him?” O’Leary asks.

Gina shakes her head. “Let’s give him some time. We can talk in the morning.”

O’Leary sighs. Two in the back of the head would be easier than parenting.

“I wanted to ask you something,” she says.

O'Leary nods for her to continue.

"The accountant. His daughter goes to the Academy. Maybe you could ask him to talk to her, see if she knows what's going on."

O'Leary grimaces. "I don't know. I mean, the guy already helped me broker that donation for the gymnasium, was our reference to get in that school, I don't know if I can—"

"Shane O'Leary," Gina interrupts. Her tone is stern, scolding.

He steps back but is unable to pull away from her hard stare.

"You're doing it again," she says.

"Doing what?"

"You're forgetting that you're Shane Fucking O'Leary. These mutts should want to help you—it shouldn't be a question."

O'Leary instinctively stands up taller.

"Okay, my girl, I'll talk to him."

Gina's right, of course. The accountant will do whatever O'Leary wants. It's not that O'Leary thought otherwise. It's that he's worried that he's not going to like what he hears about their son.

MONTEPULCIANO, ITALY

Thump thump thump. Ryan knows he's dreaming. It's strange how the brain works. You can be on a basketball court about to take the game-winning shot, seconds from your teammates hoisting you onto their shoulders, and it feels so real, yet you know you're sleeping. And what's more fascinating is the nimbleness with which your mind changes the story to react to your environment. If it's hot in your bedroom, you'll be sweating in your dream. If there's a sudden noise, your subconscious integrates the sound into the story. Ryan hears the thump of fans in the bleachers stomping their feet. But at the same time, he knows someone is pounding on the door to his room at the B and B.

His eyes pop open. He's sad for a moment. It's been so long since he's thought about basketball, much less had it populate his dreams. He normally fights the urge to think about that time in his life, but it's probably the note—I know who you are—that was left churning in his mind when he finally fell asleep. He checks his phone: 8:45 a.m.

Thump thump thump.

He climbs out of bed and opens the door a crack. Eddie stands there.

"Did you forget?" Eddie says.

Ryan doesn't understand.

"We've got the wine-tasting thing, then hot-air ballooning," Eddie says.

“Shit,” Ryan says. A five-hour countryside wine tasting followed by a balloon ride over Tuscany. It sounded good a few days ago when someone in the group suggested it for their last day before they head to Rome.

“Well, come on, we have to be there by nine. Everybody’s waiting in the van.”

Ryan has zero interest. He’s tired. Not in the mood. And maybe he’ll go to the Palazzo at ten o’clock like the note commanded. The Palazzo Comunale is Montepulciano’s town hall, an ancient tower that offers some of the best views of the region. They all climbed it on their first day sightseeing.

“Sorry, you all can go without me,” Ryan says. “I’ll still pay my share of the—”

Eddie is shaking his head decisively. “We can’t. You’re the only one who can drive the van.”

The van they rented—like most rentals in Italy—is a stick shift. And despite a combined IQ of more than 1,100, none of his classmates can handle a manual transmission. Ryan’s dad insisted he learn—If you can drive a stick, you can drive anything—which is true but also frustrating, since the antiquated skill has done nothing but turn Ryan into the group’s taxi driver.

“All right. I’ll be down in five.”

“Hurry,” Eddie says, and then disappears.

Ryan splashes water on his face, puts on his clothes and some deodorant, and rushes out. He boards the van, which is like a small school bus with a single driver’s seat and ten-person passenger section behind. Everyone’s waiting for him. Dena, Diana, and Divya have evidently been awake for hours, Instagram ready with their contoured makeup that looks like they applied it while watching a tutorial from a Kardashian.

These women are smart—top of the class at Georgetown Law—but get too caught up in social media, like everybody else, he supposes. Eddie calls them 3D.

Behind them sit Aiden and Jake, the frat boys from last night, looking hungover. To their right are Clayton and Marci, both bookish and who bicker like an old married couple. Eddie is spread out on the long back seat by himself. Finally, Nora is there, looking pretty, if tired.

Did one of them write the note? He appraises each of his classmates searching for tells but sees none. And it wouldn't make sense. The note instructed him to meet at the Palazzo at ten o'clock—the group will be several glasses of Chianti in by then.

So who sent it? Who knows who he is? And why do they want to meet?

After apologizing for running late, he takes the wheel. He drives faster than he should, the group jostling and sliding as he maneuvers the curves and hills. He doesn't want to be here. Not just at this tourist excursion, but on this whole trip. He's feeling that hollowness in his chest again. That sense of impending doom. He tries to reason with himself: So what if they find out who he really is? What's the worst thing that will happen? They won't want to be his friend? They'll think he's a murderer? They'll tell everyone at school? The internet will do its thing again?

The GPS, which hasn't worked well in the region, miraculously gets them to the right place. They're taken to a winery overlooking the Chianti Hills. They start in a rustic structure, then move to a cellar filled with wooden barrels. Ryan doesn't listen as the guide tells them the history of the place, the winemaking process, and other tidbits she probably says dozens of times a week. And as designated driver, he doesn't participate in the tasting.

Soon, they are in the olive groves, then shuttled to a second winery where they taste cured meats and sample olive oil and are served lunch. It should be an experience of a

lifetime, magical. But it's not. Ryan scolds himself at the thought. He's acting entitled. He needs to shake it off. His friends don't deserve a Debbie Downer.

His mind drifts to Ali. She wouldn't be moping, taking selfies, or making TikToks. She'd be drinking this all in. She'd have her sketch pad out, shushing him as she drew the scene. He feels the familiar sting at the thought of Ali studying art at Bard, pursuing her dream. He's tempted to pull out his wallet, unfold the sketch he keeps folded of her grandparents' place in a small town in southwest France. A town on a hill in the middle of a valley that fills with mist so the area appears to be floating on clouds. He's trained himself over the past five years not to think of Ali because the memories lead to nowhere good. But the note—I know who you are—drags him to the past. To the girl who hated the limelight but always glowed in it. The girl who hated social media but could spend hours watching those videos that give you faith in humanity: military parents on deployment surprising their kids at school assemblies, babies getting glasses and seeing their moms for the first time, parents reacting to college admissions letters. The girl who hated to dance but made him an elaborate prom-posal. The girl who loved anything French but—he needs to stop.

Later, at a long table covered in white linen topped with several empty bottles, Ryan is still lost in his head, ignoring the chatter of his friends until Marci's voice pulls him out of it.

"No, you did not just say that," Marci scolds Eddie for something he said, Ryan didn't hear what it was.

Eddie says, "Shit. Nora, I didn't mean—"

"Lighten up, dumb-ass," Nora says. "Unlike some people, I understand that dumbasses say dumb things without menace in their hearts."

Ryan likes this about Nora, her practical, there-are-bigger-things-to-get-upset-about

attitude. She understands that good people sometimes say stupid shit, unintentionally offend because they don't know any better or act or text or post in the heat of the moment. She has three things seemingly lost in this world of social-media outrage: perspective, nuance, and empathy.

“So what are we going to do before the balloon ride?” Divya asks. “We’ve got a few hours. I found us the only balloon company in Tuscany that does sunset, rather than early-ass sunrise tours.”

Aiden and Jake start pounding on the table, chanting, “Darty... Darty... Darty.”

Clayton says, “I don’t get why they call daytime parties a ‘darty’? It’s not like they call nighttime parties ‘nartys.’”

Ryan starts to tune them out again when his phone buzzes, another call from his father. Too distracted by the note slipped under his door, he never returned his dad’s call from last night, so he’d better take it. He steps away from the table.

“Hi, Dad,” he says, looking out at the beautiful countryside. Down a hill, there’s a gravel lot. There’s a line of about ten Vespas, probably for tours, and an old pickup truck. Near the truck, a man stands next to one of those tiny Fiat two-seaters smoking a cigarette.

“Hey, kid. I hope the trip is going well. Your mom and I are so glad you went. Um, so, I wanted to let you know, I got a call from Marty Salinger.”

It’s foreboding, hearing his defense lawyer’s name.

“Um, I’m so sorry to bother you while you’re out having fun, but I didn’t want you to see it on your news feed.”

Ryan listens as his heart beats in his ears.

“It’s about Alison.”

LEAVENWORTH, KANSAS

On the morning of Day Two of her new job, Poppy slows her car, watches the bevy of reporters camped around the station house. Local news vans are parked in the lot across the street. TV reporters primp in makeshift press stations that pepper the sidewalks.

Poppy pulls into the underground garage. It's not like in the movies where the press rushes your vehicle. She drew only a few curious glances. Finding the car in Suncatcher Lake is big local news, but it hasn't captured the attention of national news desks. Probably because they already caught Alison Lane's killer: the late MRK.

In the station, Poppy passes Sheriff Walton's office. It has glass walls, which don't lend to privacy. The sheriff is talking to two other people. A tall man in a dark suit and a woman with severe bangs and prominent frown lines on either side of her mouth.

"Good morning," Poppy says to Margaret, who is shuffling down the hallway. Poppy is quickly learning that Margaret isn't merely the desk receptionist, she's the sheriff's right hand and the office's Yoda.

"Morning, dear." She shakes her head. "It's going to be one of those days."

"What's up?"

"Press conference at nine. The mayor's chief of staff and his public relations lady are

here. They always put the sheriff in a mood.”

Poppy nods. She checks the time on her phone. The press conference is in fifteen minutes. She wasn’t invited, but she assumes there’s no harm in her watching from the back of the room.

Inside her office, she notices the red light on her phone is flashing. In the age of texts and email, voicemails aren’t the norm. But she’s new to the office, so maybe it’s the culture. As she boots up the computer she listens to the message. The automated voice says it came in at 6:37 that morning.

“Poppy, it’s Ken. Sorry to call you so early, but I’m going to be tied up most of the day and not sure we’ll have a chance to talk...” The sheriff pauses, there’s the sound of the phone being cupped and the sheriff’s muffled voice talking to someone. “A couple quick things. Since you’re not plugged into patrol or other duties yet, I think it makes sense for you to focus on the Alison Lane stuff. If you can wade through the tips that come in, I’d appreciate it. Last time, it was a mass of crap, but we need to at least review them. Also, I gave your name to the point person at KBI. She’ll reach out to you if they have any luck identifying the bodies in the car or find anything helpful.”

The Kansas Bureau of Investigation’s forensics lab provides support for other state law enforcement agencies. Poppy knows this only because she applied, and was summarily rejected, for a job at KBI.

“Finally... there was an FBI agent on the Lane case five years ago, a woman named Jane Fincher. If she approaches you, you are not to speak with her. It’s a long story that I’ll fill you in on once things calm down.” More voices clatter in the background. “Anyway, thanks for your help. One hell of a first week,” the sheriff says before hanging up.

At 9:00 a.m., Poppy makes her way to the large conference room. The folding metal chairs are filled. Men balancing large cameras on their shoulders take stations in the corners. Poppy stands in the back, positioning herself so she can see through the gaps between the taller onlookers.

The room is buzzing but dulls to a murmur when the sheriff and his entourage enter from a door in the back.

As the sheriff approaches the lectern, Poppy senses someone sidling up next to her. She takes a quick glance and sees a tall, slender woman with a short haircut. She's in her thirties, wears an expensive-looking blouse and flowing slacks.

Stoic, the sheriff begins: "Good morning, everyone."

There's a smattering of "Good mornings" before he continues.

"As you are aware, yesterday, private citizens using sonar equipment identified a vehicle submerged in Suncatcher Lake."

Poppy scans the room and notices the two men from the Cold Case Company videos in the audience. They undoubtedly will make the interview rounds after the press conference, crowing about their discovery. That's not completely unfair. They've been wildly successful at finding watery graves missed by others.

"The car is a BMW model five thirty sedan. The vehicle identification number shows that the car was registered to Michael Lane."

Another low rumble fills the room. The sheriff doesn't need to add that it's the car Alison Lane was driving the night she disappeared.

"Inside the vehicle were two individuals. Though we have not yet identified either of

them, the KBI's preliminary analysis is that they were adult males, both victims of foul play."

The murmur in the room rises to a buzz.

"We'll take a few questions, but I trust you'll understand that there are limits to what more we can say without jeopardizing the investigation." The sheriff points to a reporter with well-coiffed hair in the second row.

"Sheriff, have you had a chance to speak to Alison Lane's family? I understand her mother passed away some time ago, but we've been unable to reach her father."

"Yes, I've spoken to Michael Lane. He moved abroad and requests that you respect his family's privacy." The sheriff shakes his head, as if the media frenzy were the reason Alison's father fled the country. "Next question," he says, pointing to another reporter.

"Erin Chaney from KMBC Nine. Do we know how long the vehicle was in the lake?"

"We don't have a precise timeline, but it appears to have been submerged for a long period."

"Long as in weeks, months..."

"Years," the sheriff says.

The reporter continues: "We understand that Suncatcher Lake and other local bodies of water were searched shortly after Alison Lane went missing. Do you know why the vehicle was missed in those searches when Cold Case Company found the car in less than two hours?"

The sheriff doesn't show any signs of annoyance or defensiveness. "We don't know why the vehicle was missed, assuming it was in the water when the original search was conducted. It's something we're looking into."

The woman next to Poppy makes a tiny scoffing noise. She looks down at Poppy. "They never searched that lake."

Poppy furrows her brow and turns back to the sheriff, who's pointing at another reporter to take a question.

"You mentioned foul play—how did the victims in the car die? And are there any clues about Alison Lane's disappearance?"

The sheriff frowns. "We can't talk about the evidence in an ongoing investigation. I can say that the vehicle had some personal effects of Ms. Lane that KBI's forensic office is processing."

"The Missouri River Killer has been the lead suspect in the disappearance of Alison Lane," the reporter continues. "Does the presence of the two men in the car call that into question?"

"Right now, we're considering all options. As you know, Ms. Lane's DNA was found at Benedict Cromwell's campsite, so we believe he was involved in her disappearance. None of the thirteen law enforcement agencies working the case have ever found evidence that Cromwell worked with others. But we're hoping that once we identify the men in the car it will provide answers."

The tall woman scoffs again.

Poppy turns her head to the woman. "You mind?" Poppy doesn't like people who talk during movies and this woman is interrupting her boss, so she figures it's an

appropriate response.

The woman offers a smile. “He’s persuasive,” the woman says. “Trustworthy, believable.” She watches the sheriff as he wraps up the questions.

Poppy nods. The woman’s tone isn’t sarcastic, but the comment doesn’t match her other reactions to the sheriff’s remarks.

“And they’re all so tall.” The woman looks toward the podium as the sheriff closes out the press conference. He and his entourage are indeed tall, each over six feet.

“You ever heard of Warren Harding?” the woman asks Poppy, as the crowd starts clearing out.

Poppy examines her. She has a long neck that gives her an aristocratic air.

“You mean like the former president?”

The woman nods, pleased. “The twenty-ninth president. Considered by most historians to be one of our worst presidents. He was an idiot and corrupt.”

Poppy shakes her head, not clear where this is going.

“But he won in a landslide. You know why?”

Poppy says, “I gotta get go—”

“He looked the part,” the woman says. “And he was tall.” The woman stands erect as she says this. “Do you know that about fifteen percent of men are six feet tall, less than five percent are six-two or taller?”

Poppy considers walking away, but is genuinely curious.

“But in Fortune Five Hundred companies,” the woman continues, “nearly sixty percent of CEOs are six feet or taller and thirty-three percent are six-two or taller.”

“And this matters because...?”

The woman eyes the sheriff and his tall inner circle. “Often, those who seem like we should trust them, seem like they are leaders we should follow, are anything but.” The woman reaches into her handbag and retrieves something, which she hands to Poppy.

It’s a business card. It has the blue FBI seal on it, says: SPECIAL AGENT JANE FINCHER. The agent the sheriff warned Poppy about.

“It also means that those who aren’t male who aren’t exactly six feet tall”—she eyes Poppy up and down—“may benefit from working together.”

Before leaving the room, the agent says, “They probably told you not to talk to me. But you should.”

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:07 am

MONTEPULCIANO, ITALY

By late afternoon, Ryan and his classmates stand in a large field. Two giant balloons lie side by side, being inflated like those bouncy rides at kids' parties. The balloon company's safety instructor has twice asked Ryan to put away his phone.

Following his dad's call, he's been down the rabbit hole of stories about Alison's car being found at the bottom of Suncatcher Lake. His thoughts are spinning, anxiety heightened because with every new clue in Alison's disappearance attention returns to the case. To Ryan. The focus on Ryan had died down briefly last year after police announced they'd found Alison's DNA at the Missouri River Killer's campsite where that fiend had been arrested. That didn't get there on its own. But the two bodies in the car don't fit the MRK narrative. Ryan's gut curls thinking of that familiar tone in his father's voice on their call. The circle-the-wagons protective instinct. His dad said that Ryan's lawyer advised that they remain calm, that they shouldn't issue a statement because it would only draw attention, a bucket of chum for social-media sharks. Beyond that, Marty said he'd keep tabs on the situation, call if there was anything they needed to do. But how can Ryan just live his life? How can he do nothing knowing the toll this will take on his parents? Ryan takes one last surreptitious look at his phone before they board the balloon baskets. The internet is already alight with theories. Maybe that explains the note: I know who you are. One of those online sleuths discovered Ryan's real identity and tracked him to Italy. He should've skipped this tourist crap and gone to the Palazzo for the meet. He curses himself for being a coward.

The balloon employee divides them into two groups: Ryan, Eddie, Nora, and the frat boys in one; 3D and Clayton and Marci in the other. The burner in the basket is hot

and loud, the pilot adjusting the flame. Ryan tries to force himself to be present for the sake of the others, for Nora.

As they are about to float off, Ryan notices a small Fiat pull up to the site. The same miniature car from the winery. That's weird. Ryan watches as the driver gets out, looks up at the balloons.

Ryan keeps his eye on the man. More weirdness: The guy's wearing gloves even though it's still scorching outside.

As the balloon drifts closer to the man, Ryan sees his face clearly, and the breath is stripped from his lungs.

It's him.

Ryan feels his knees give, he clutches the side.

"Are you okay?" Nora asks.

The pilot of the balloon, an Australian man with sun-beaten skin, says, "He'll get his sea legs soon, right, boyo?"

Ryan doesn't answer but holds himself up against the edge of the basket, scrutinizes the man below who is now walking back to his car. The sun is starting to come down, casting a yellow glow over the man. It's hard to tell in the light, but the man appears to be staring right at him. Then the strangest thing: The man removes a glove and waves up at Ryan.

He's missing his pinky finger.

LEAVENWORTH, KANSAS

Back in her office, Poppy throws the FBI agent's business card on her desk. It was an odd exchange, unsettling. There's obviously a backstory between the sheriff and Agent Fincher—otherwise Ken wouldn't have told Poppy to steer clear of the woman. The military trained Poppy to stay out of things that are need-to-know. But she wonders what that's gotten her. And maybe there's something she needs to know.

She scans her computer monitor. Her email inbox is full. The website for the sheriff's office has an email tip line, and they've set it up to forward Alison Lane-related tips to Poppy. Already, forty emails have come in.

Time to get to work. Among the first dozen, three mention the JFK assassination, two reference Area 51, a handful bring up the Illuminati. The good news is that the nutty ones are easy to work through. The trickier tips are from people who don't give away any crazy. She makes a list of two potential leads—a woman whose brother went missing and who worries he's one of the bodies found in the car, and a fisherman who says he saw a BMW parked at Suncatcher Lake a couple summers ago. Long shots, but worth following up. By the time she's made the list, more tips have come in. As well as telephone calls.

Shit rolls downhill. The expression, which started in the military, is true.

Anyway, she can't complain. She's the newest member of the office. And she's lucky to have the job. But before delving into more crazy, she decides that she'll pull the Alison Lane file and get up to speed.

Margaret directs her to a musty storeroom. It's a small space that has Home Depot metal shelves filled with banker boxes. It's organized by year, so she walks to the section from five years ago. The shelf is nearly empty. Just two boxes, both with "Lane" written sloppily in Sharpie on the cardboard. On tiptoes, she manages to retrieve the first box, which is light. She puts it on the floor, then jumps up to grab the second box. She places them on top of each other, rams her fingers in the side holes, and balances both boxes, carrying them to her office.

She's excited. It's her first big case. Inside the first box is a single binder. Hardly the most investigated case in the world. She flips open the black cover and finds a few interview notes by an officer named Buckman.

There are notes on the initial interviews of Alison's boyfriend, Ryan Richardson, until he lawyered up. His original story was that they were at Lovers' Lane, someone opened the car door, hit him on the head, and that's all he remembered. He came back with his lawyer a month later with a wild story about a nondescript man with missing fingers taking Alison.

The binder has notes from other interviews, including the two bullies from the viral video, but they had solid alibis. Otherwise, the investigation was thin.

The girl disappeared off the face of the earth.

Poppy remembers the gossip mill at school. The suspicions about Ryan Richardson. But as the years went by, the town seemed to forget about Alison Lane. Until a new boogeyman terrorized the area: the Missouri River Killer. The podcasters and amateur sleuths speculated that maybe MRK had taken Ali. And damn it to hell, they were right. When police arrested MRK, a man named Benedict Cromwell, last year at a campsite along the river, they didn't find Alison Lane. But there was a strand of hair on Cromwell's sleeping bag. It was a long strand, and the sheriff had the wherewithal to run it against Alison's DNA. And there was a hit.

Poppy opens the second box.

Her eye catches on a thumb drive. It has “MRK interview” written on a tag attached to it. Poppy was stationed at Fort Carson when they caught Benedict Cromwell, but she followed the story. Dateline and 20/20 did segments on him. He was the stuff of nightmares.

More out of curiosity than investigative necessity, she plugs the thumb drive into her computer. Up pops a video, the camera mounted in the top corner of the room and looking down on two figures.

“Can I get you something?” a heavysset man asks. Deputy Buckman, Poppy presumes.

Benedict Cromwell offers a greasy smile. “Yes, for the starters I’ll have diver scallop crispy sushi, followed by sea bream ceviche, then the venison loin with smoked bacon. And a glass of your finest red.” MRK, despite his rank beard and unkempt appearance, was raised in privilege. It’s how he stayed out of prison for so long. He abused several girls in high school and then college but somehow always got away with it. Expensive lawyers, hush money, NDAs. But even that couldn’t get him out of the DNA evidence found under one of his early victim’s fingernails, and the matching scars on his cheek. His lawyers negotiated so he could turn himself in, a luxury not afforded to the average defendant. Instead, Cromwell went underground. Became an invisible drifter who traveled from town to town along the river, taking young women.

On the screen, Deputy Buckman sighs. “I can get you somethin’ from the vending machine if you want?”

MRK shakes his head. He’s enjoying Buckman’s clumsy effort at building rapport.

“You know why we wanted to speak with you?”

“Do tell.”

Buckman slides something across the table. It’s a photograph. The video isn’t clear, but Poppy thinks it’s the screenshot of Alison Lane from the viral video.

“We ran some tests on your sleeping bag....” Buckman pauses. “We got a hit on this missing eighteen-year-old, Alison Lane.” Buckman then waits, lets MRK connect the dots.

MRK reaches across the table, his wrist chains clanking. He licks his lips. “Well, isn’t she a tasty young thing.”

“It would mean a lot to her loved ones if you told us what happened.”

MRK smirks, tosses the photo on the table.

“You’ve already confessed to the others,” Buckman says, “so there’s no reason to—”

“She’s not one of mine.”

“Her DNA was found on your sleeping bag....”

MRK shrugs. “Get me the six courses from Jean-Georges and maybe it’ll refresh my recollection.”

Buckman gets up angrily and leaves the room.

On the video, MRK looks up at the camera, offers another sickly smile, and waves.

Other prisoners killed MRK two days later.

Poppy tries to shake off the image of Benedict Cromwell's cold, dead eyes. She thumbs through the rest of the paperwork in the second box. It appears they closed the case after MRK's death. At the time, that might have been a reasonable decision. Cromwell trolled Missouri River towns and Lovers' Lane wasn't far from the river. Alison's DNA was found at his campsite. He probably dumped her in the river, which is why she was never found.

But questions are nagging at her. If it was MRK, who are the men in Alison Lane's car? Was Cromwell working with them? That doesn't feel right. It wasn't his MO with the other women he raped, tortured, and murdered. But bigger, more troubling questions hit her: What if it wasn't Cromwell who took Lane? And if it wasn't Cromwell, how did Alison's DNA get on his sleeping bag? Something's not right. The puzzle pieces are warped, disfigured.

She shudders again thinking about Cromwell. She would never say it out loud, but he got what he deserved: shanked over and over and over in that dreary prison.

MONTEPULCIANO, ITALY

The hot-air balloon lands with a bump in a field, and Ryan stumbles out of the basket. The captain appears to be withholding a smile, clearly amused. Nora clasps Ryan's arm as if she's worried he might faint. They don't understand that his weak knees, his nausea, his fear, aren't about the fucking hot-air balloon.

In the field, the balloon company has set up a table with rows of champagne flutes. The woman who greets them says something about the champagne being a tradition from the days when it could be dangerous to land on someone else's property. A universal truth: It always helps to bring gifts.

Nora still holds his arm, which is strangely comforting. He's recovering. Gaining his footing. Deliberatively slowing the pace of his breathing and racing thoughts.

He notices Eddie walking over. The others are already clinking glasses, taking more photos for their feeds. Ryan pats Nora on the hand to indicate he's okay, that she should join the group. Is he okay? Maybe, maybe not, but he needs to pull it together. Nora heads over to the others, passing by Eddie, who's squinting at the sun.

"What'd you think?" Eddie asks.

"About?" Ryan answers, trying to regroup. His mouth is dry, it's still hard to swallow.

"About the ride, numbnuts. I think the view was overrated."

Eddie is pretending not to have witnessed Ryan's embarrassing panic attack.

Ryan starts over toward the group.

"You sure you're okay?" Eddie asks. "We can just hang back if you need a minute."

Ryan realizes he's being handled, by Eddie of all people.

He shakes his head and they join their classmates. Ryan surveys the area. The scene is from a travel magazine. Tuscany's chamber of commerce. A filtered Instagram post.

Eddie takes a flute and downs the champagne. Offers a nod as if to say, Not bad.

Ryan's stomach is still churning. His head is thumping. But it's also clearing. He's been acting insane. He feels another wave of embarrassment.

"I'm sorry," he says to Nora, who's still eyeing him closely.

"For what?"

He narrows his eyes at her.

She gives the hint of a smile. Many people would be annoyed that he'd ruined the ballooning experience. But she seems more concerned than anything.

"What was it?" she finally asks.

"What was what?"

"It's like you saw that guy at the liftoff site and..." She doesn't finish the thought.

Ryan looks around. Everyone else is glowing. From the adrenaline of floating in the sky, from the Tuscan sun. He doesn't want to bring the mood down further.

"I'll tell you. But later, okay?"

She holds his gaze. "Yeah, sure, of course."

What will he tell her? That he saw an imaginary monster from his past he isn't even sure exists? That he's not who he pretends to be? That he's lied to them all?

After the champagne, the group thanks the crew—even the asshole captain of the balloon—and two vans shuttle them back to the launch site. Once there, they file into their own van. The bus no one can drive except Ryan.

He plops down in the driver's seat, notices that someone has tucked something under the windshield wiper.

His chest tightens at the sight of it: another note.

He reaches out the window and clasps the envelope. Making sure no one is watching he tears it open. In the same handwriting as before it says:

Do I have your attention now? Tomorrow, 10 a.m. at the Palazzo.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:07 am

LEAVENWORTH, KANSAS

Poppy is startled by a hard knock on her office's open door. She examines the young Black woman standing in the entryway. She's pretty, animated.

"You're Poppy McGee?"

"Yeah."

"I could've called, but I was here for something else, and wanted to see what a 'Poppy McGee' looks like."

The woman's quirky, but she's charming and can get away with it.

"I hope you're not disappointed," Poppy says.

The woman's eyes are alight. "Not at all. I'm Chantelle Luna. I work in the lab at KBI."

Poppy examines her. She has an infectious smile. A dimple punctuating her cheek.

"What can I do for you?"

"Margaret told me you're our contact for the Alison Lane case."

Poppy nods. "You've identified the guys in the car?"

"Not yet. There's a DNA test backlog. But we found something we thought you'd

want to know about right away.”

Poppy feels a flutter of excitement.

“You know Alison Lane’s handbag was in the car?” Chantelle asks.

Poppy nods. The Cold Case Company reported this in one of the videos.

“So it was waterlogged, as you’d expect. But Alison Lane had a makeup bag and it had a tight seal and kept pretty dry even after all this time.”

“You found something?” Poppy asks, trying to contain the eagerness in her voice.

Chantelle swipes at her phone, then displays a photo. It’s of an envelope. On the outside it says: “If something happens to me.”

A spurt of adrenaline shoots through Poppy. “Alison had this inside her purse?”

Chantelle nods enthusiastically.

“Did you open the envelope?” A dumb question.

“Yes, and that’s the puzzling part. Inside was a note, but it seems to be written in code.” Chantelle pulls up another photo.

“Code?”

“Yeah.” Chantelle hands Poppy her phone. “We think it’s a book cipher.”

Poppy shakes her head, not understanding. The note has no words, just a series of numbers:

11,5,1—4,4,2—6,1,4—3,4,1

7,4,3—10,2,6

9,5,1—4,2,5

5,1,2—2,1,1—10,2,6

8,3,1—3,5,1—6,2,2—7,3,6—5,3,1—13,2,1

“It’s a simple code made by referencing the page, line, and word in a book or some other piece of writing.” Chantelle puts her finger on the first line of numbers. “So, like, eleven, five, one, means go to page eleven, line five, and the first word on that line in whatever book is the key for the code. You piece it all together and it makes a message.”

“Have you cracked the code?”

“Not yet. We can’t without knowing the source material—the book Alison used to make the code. I want to ask her father if she had a favorite book. And to see if I can get a sample of her handwriting to compare with the envelope. But his contact info isn’t in the file. I’ve left a message for the sheriff since apparently he spoke to the father.”

“What if we can’t find the book?”

“We’ve reached out to experts. There are databases with thousands of works of literature. If she used one of those books, we might be able to crack it. Maybe AI will do its thing. But you could save us time if you can ask her friends or old teachers or any other family if she had a favorite book or poem collection or whatever.”

“Can you send me those?” Poppy asks, eyeing the photos on Chantelle’s phone.

Chantelle nods, then hands Poppy her phone, gestures for Poppy to tap in her number.

“Why would she be using a code?” Poppy muses, more thinking aloud than asking a question.

“She must’ve only wanted someone who knew the source material to be able to read the message.”

Poppy examines the photo of the envelope again: “If something happens to me.” What did she fear would happen to her? Who was she afraid of? Her boyfriend, Ryan Richardson? Someone else?

She thanks Chantelle for coming by. “Can you keep me posted if you make any progress on the code?”

Chantelle nods.

“And do you have a sense of when we’ll get the DNA results from the car?”

“No, but I’m begging them to expedite. I’ll let you know the moment we finish and run ’em through CODIS.”

“Was there anything else that might identify them?”

Chantelle shakes her head. “No wallets. Can’t lift prints—there was nothing left of the hands.”

Poppy winces thinking about that. “No other forensics?”

Chantelle shakes her head. “All we know is they were men, probably in their late twenties, early thirties. Each shot in the head before the car went under. That explains why they were still in the front seat. Folks tend to die in the backs of the vehicles if they go in the water alive. Cars go down nose-first, so they swim up to the back to try to escape.”

Poppy releases a breath at the horror of dying that way.

Before Chantelle leaves, she turns in Poppy’s doorway: “Hey, me and some friends are getting drinks after work if you’d like to come.”

Poppy thinks about this. She’d like to. Her few friends from high school have moved away. But she needs to focus on the case. And she’s not sure of the politics of hanging with KBI employees.

“I’d love to. This week is bad, but maybe another time?”

Chantelle smiles at her like she thinks that’s never going to happen. “For sure.”

After she’s gone, Poppy thinks about Alison’s note.

If something happens to me.

What did you think was going to happen to you, Alison Lane?

PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA

Shane O'Leary eats his lunch in the back room of the bar. His father creatively named the place O'Leary's Tavern thirty years ago. It's Tuesday, the day he listens to community grievances, another relic from his father. He knows the younger guys make fun of the ritual behind his back, but they don't understand: This thing doesn't work without the neighborhood getting something out of it. So far today, there was the guy who runs the laundromat complaining that he'd been robbed, so O'Leary assured him the money will be returned or the robber won't see another sunset. There was the man who owns the bodega asking O'Leary to take care of the guy who was fucking his wife, which O'Leary politely declined. And there was the usual line of gamblers and hard cases asking for loans. He obliged but warned them that they'll get more than a bad credit score if they miss a payment. Usually broken bones or, if they're really behind, a disfigurement that will be a constant reminder of their debt.

"Who's next?" he asks Patrick, who's sitting on a stool in the back, next to members of his crew.

Patrick raises his brows as he steps off the stool to retrieve the next visitor from the bar area.

O'Leary shakes his head. Can't just answer the goddamn question. If Patrick weren't Chaz's son, O'Leary swears...

In walks a woman with legs longer than a carnival stilt walker. The room nearly vibrates as she struts slowly in her fuck-me heels to O'Leary's table.

One of the boys says something under his breath, and O’Leary shoots him and the others a look to cut the shit. It’s not professional.

“What can I do for you, Ms....”

“Sriracha,” she says, with the hint of a smile. She wears bright red lipstick. “Like the hot sauce.”

“Okay, Ms. Sriracha, what can I do for you?” O’Leary takes a bite of his steak. It’s chewy and that’s about his last straw with the cook.

“Thank you for taking the time. I, um, it’s, um, a private matter.” She looks over at the crew.

O’Leary nods, makes a shooping gesture with his hand.

Before Patrick leaves the room, he comes over, runs a metal detector wand up and down the woman, taking longer than he should.

O’Leary rolls his eyes. The kid couldn’t find a fucking nuclear weapon if it was shoved up his own ass. “She’s fine,” O’Leary tells him, exasperated.

Patrick and the others shuffle out.

“So, Ms. Tabasco,” O’Leary says, if only to amuse himself.

“Sriracha,” she corrects, not catching the joke. “So, um. I’ve been working at Bustingham Palace,” she says, referring to a strip club O’Leary owns out near the airport. She looks higher-end than most of the gals who populate the place. “And, well, Mr. Franko, he keeps, like, forcing me to...” She pauses, not wanting to finish the sentence.

Franko is another half-wit on the outer fringes of the organization. He's a creep for sure. O'Leary tries to stay out of the business with the girls, to insulate himself from such distasteful things, but what can you do?

"I'll talk to him," O'Leary says, knowing that it won't be O'Leary making the visit and there won't be much talking involved.

He sees the relief on her face.

"I can't thank you enough." She steps closer, places both hands flat on the table, and leans forward, so her shirt falls open.

O'Leary frowns. "If that's all," he says, gesturing to the door.

She seems surprised at his lack of interest. He imagines it's rare that she's rejected. Shane O'Leary is a lot of things, but disloyal to his Gina isn't one of them.

"Next," he calls out, loud enough for his crew to return.

Patrick escorts a man in a navy suit into the room. The suit makes him look distinguished, professional, unlike Patrick in his expensive suits that somehow still look cheap on him.

O'Leary stands. Comes around the table, grips the man's hand. "Michael, thanks for coming."

"No need to get up," the accountant says. "My secretary said it was urgent?"

O'Leary shoos his men out again, this time to some grumbling at the musical chairs. He motions for his accountant to join him at the table. "Get you something to eat? A drink?"

“Thank you, I’m great.”

O’Leary nods. “I’m sorry to have you rush over here. It’s not urgent. I’m not sure why my people said that. But I’m glad you came.”

Michael seems nervous, which is understandable. An accountant for O’Leary should be worried about so much as a rounding error.

“This is kinda awkward,” O’Leary says. He wipes his mouth with his napkin, throws it on his plate.

Michael holds O’Leary’s gaze.

“It’s about my boy, Anthony.”

Michael immediately relaxes. His nervous demeanor turns curious. “Oh yeah? How’s he liking the Academy?”

“That’s why I wanted to talk to you.”

Michael tilts his head.

“My wife, she’s laying up nights worried about him. Anthony’s withdrawn, not talking to us, and Gina thinks something may be going on at school. She thought maybe your daughter might, I don’t know, have some insights. It being such a small school and all.”

“Taylor hasn’t mentioned anything. But you know teenagers....”

O’Leary offers a knowing nod.

“I’ll be happy to talk to her. If Anthony’s having trouble making friends, I’m sure she can help out.”

O’Leary puts a hand on the accountant’s shoulder and squeezes. “That would mean a lot to me and my wife.”

“I’m sure it’s just a period of adjustment and once he finds his people it will be fine.” He smiles.

Michael Harper is a nice man. It’s a wonder he ever got mixed up with O’Leary. But lots of nice men do.

“Anyway, I’ll talk to Taylor. If there’s any way she can help, I’m sure she will.”

“I will be in debt to you both.”

“It’s nothing.” Michael smiles, shakes his head a little. “Kids, right?”

LEAVENWORTH, KANSAS

Investigation tip: Want to know someone's secrets from when they were young? Talk to their high-school friends. Interviewing Alison Lane's friends is probably beyond Poppy's authority since she's been officially assigned only to weed out crank tips, but she can't take any more fool's errands today. And, besides, the sheriff made her the KBI's point of contact, so she's simply following up on the note KBI found in Alison's handbag. If she can find the book Alison used for that weird code, it might yield a genuine lead.

One thing seems certain, at least to Poppy: Alison was concerned for her well-being, and it damn well wasn't the Missouri River Killer who had her spooked. The media hadn't picked up on MRK's spree until after Alison disappeared. So what was she afraid of? Who was she afraid of? It had to be someone closer to home.

Poppy texted her brother for the names of Alison Lane's friends. Dash texted back three: Ruby Quinn, Juliette Bishop, and Chrissy Roberts. Once she saw the names, Poppy immediately remembered the trio. Three spritely cheerleaders. Popular seniors who didn't give an underclassman like Poppy the time of day. When she asked Dash if he had their contact information, her brother said no but directed her to another key investigative tool: social media.

But it turns out Poppy doesn't have to electronically stalk the women. Ruby Quinn's phone number is in the investigation file. There are no interview notes, but Poppy's predecessor Buckman must've spoken to Ruby shortly after the abduction. It's been five years and Ruby has probably moved out of her parents' house, but they'll have her current number.

“Hello,” a gravelly female voice answers.

“Hi, this is Deputy Sheriff McGee with the sheriff’s office. I’m trying to reach Ruby Quinn....”

There’s a tiny pulse of silence. That’s normal when you get a cold call from a cop. “You just missed her. This is her mother. Can I take a message?” Ruby’s mom’s voice sounds like an ashtray.

“I can call back,” Poppy says, surprised Ruby still lives at home. But who’s Poppy to judge, given that she woke up this morning to Beyoncé staring down at her?

“This is in regards to...?” Curiosity, or perhaps concern, fills the woman’s voice now.

“I’m calling about the Alison Lane case.”

There’s a loud breath into the receiver. “Ruby thought you might be calling, what with them finding the car. What is that about? Do you all think MRK had accomplices?”

It’s a reasonable question. Ruby’s mother has kept up on the case, which isn’t surprising. Poppy remembers the fear that hung over the community like a fog after Alison’s abduction. It had to be even more acute for Alison’s friends. But by Poppy’s own senior year in high school, Alison Lane was largely forgotten. Two years is an eternity to teenagers.

“If you can have Ruby call me when she gets home, I’d appreciate it.”

“Oh sure. She and Juliette and Chrissy just went to some yoga class.”

Of course they did.

“Her friends are all in town for their reunion. I’m watching the baby while Ruby’s at the class.”

Now that’s unexpected. A baby. Dash mentioned the five-year get-together last night. The reunion could prove extremely helpful: more classmates for Poppy to interview. Poppy wonders for a moment about the timing. Them finding the car the same week Alison’s graduating class is getting together.

“Do you know the name of the yoga studio? Maybe I can stop in and talk to Ruby and her friends.”

“Hmm, I don’t remember it. But they said the class is outside. At the park.”

“Landing Park?”

“Uh-huh. It’s ninety degrees out. I said they were crazy.”

Poppy checks the clock in her office. Maybe she can make it before the class ends. She thanks Ruby’s mother and rushes out.

Fifteen minutes later, Poppy’s at Landing Park. She knows the place well. Her dad used to take Poppy and Dash there on weekends to give her mom a break. And in high school it was a popular place to party. Kids would hop the fence that lines the Missouri River and drink cheap beer on the riverbank. The water’s an ugly shade of green today. Trees that have seen better days punctuate the grassland near the bank.

Poppy spies a group in the center of the park doing yoga poses. The class must be advanced, because the students move fluidly. As she walks closer, though, she notices one woman who stands out. When the class warrior-poses to the left, she goes right. When they do upward-facing dog, she’s still in downward-facing dog.

Poppy took a class once herself and was almost equally uncoordinated—almost—so she holds back a smile. But it is kind of comical.

She waits on the fringes for the class to end. At last, the instructor appears to call it a day, demonstrates final stretches. The uncoordinated woman—she’s the only one not dressed to the nines in Lululemon—is drenched in sweat. It’s then that Poppy gets a closer look at her face. It’s Ruby Quinn. Ruby’s heavier than she remembers.

Poppy retrieves her badge from her handbag. She still hasn’t gotten used to the monstrous thing, which looks like something a pro wrestler would hold over his head.

“Ms. Quinn,” Poppy says approaching the woman as the class disperses.

Ruby gives Poppy a confused look, like she might have misheard. As Poppy gets closer two women from the class walk over to Ruby. Unlike new-mother Ruby, Juliette and Chrissy haven’t changed much since high school—still long necked, high cheek-boned, and glistening, even after yoga in the hot sun.

The three eye Poppy, who feels sweat slide down her side. She hopes it doesn’t bleed through her ugly uniform. As they stare, it’s like they simultaneously understand why a deputy sheriff is showing up to speak to them.

“Can I help you?” Ruby Quinn asks. Her oversized T-shirt is discolored by a ring of perspiration at the neck.

“I’m Deputy Sheriff McGee. I wondered if you—all of you—have a moment to talk about the Alison Lane case?”

“Sure.”

Before Poppy says anything, Juliette says, “McGee... You’re not Dash’s little sister,

are you?"

"Yeah."

"You're, like, the sheriff now?" Juliette asks, smiling. It's a patronizing smile.

"Deputy sheriff." Poppy doesn't add that it's the lowest rank on the force.

"We heard there were bodies in the car they pulled from the lake. Is that true?" Juliette asks.

Poppy's old boss told her you never interview people in a group. They act differently. Their stories tend to morph together. But there's probably no harm here.

Poppy says, "In light of the vehicle being discovered, we just need to follow up on a few things."

"Do they think MRK had accomplices?" Juliette asks.

Chrissy adds, "Or are they wrong about him doing it? He confessed to killing the others, but always denied killing Ali."

Maybe Poppy should separate them; Ruby might never get a word in edgewise.

Time to take control. This isn't high school anymore.

"How can we help you?" Ruby asks again, sensing Poppy could use an assist. She seems slightly embarrassed by her friends.

"I know you've been interviewed before. Although Benedict Cromwell remains the official suspect, since he was killed, there're still a lot of questions. We're awaiting

DNA tests for the two men found in the car. We think they were in their late twenties or early thirties. Can you think of anyone Alison knew who fits that description?"

Now they shake their heads in unison.

"It's a tough thing to ask," Poppy says, "but was she into drugs?" Poppy has racked her brain trying to think of why a teenager might associate with older men, assuming Alison knew the men at all. "I'm not judging."

All three woman shake their heads again.

"She hated drugs," Juliette says. "She barely drank. And you remember high school—that was rare. Not much else to do in this town."

"Another hard question, but I hope you can be honest with me? Did Ali have any secrets? Something you may not have felt comfortable telling the police back then?"

"Secrets?"

"We all have them," Poppy says. For instance, these women probably don't know Poppy was thrown out of the military.

"No," Juliette says, again taking the lead. Still the Queen Bee. "Ali was a Girl Scout."

"No bad habits?"

More headshakes.

"Anyone she had trouble with? Anyone she might be afraid of?" Poppy's mind goes to the note: If something happens to me.

“Not that I know of,” Juliette says. “Have you spoken to Ryan? They were inseparable back then.” She says this with a tinge of annoyance. Like she didn’t appreciate being in competition with anyone for attention.

“I’m having a hard time locating him. Have any of you kept in touch?”

They shake their heads. “People weren’t exactly kind to him,” Ruby says, finally speaking up. She gives Juliette the side-eye.

Picking up on it, Juliette says, “Everybody thought Ryan did it, before they caught MRK.”

“Some people still do,” Chrissy adds.

“Yeah?”

“You know how people are,” Ruby says.

“Do you all still live in Leavenworth?”

“Ew, no,” Juliette says. She hesitates, looks at Ruby, and adds, “You know what I mean. You had to stay since your mom’s here for the baby.”

Ruby’s face reddens, though it’s hard to tell if it’s from anger, embarrassment, or simply the heat.

“You’re back for the reunion?” Poppy asks Juliette.

“If you want to call it that. More like beers at Little Bar. But yeah, the five-year.”

“Other than you three, was Alison close with anyone?”

“Other than Ryan?” Juliette asks.

“Yeah.”

They all think about this.

“No,” Juliette says. “And to be totally honest about it, she wasn’t even that close with us.”

“Juliette,” Chrissy says, with a scolding edge.

“What? It’s true. She didn’t have time for us. Ryan was her world. She spent most of her time with him and she didn’t use social media, so it was hard to stay connected.”

“I noticed she didn’t use social. Why was that?” Poppy asks.

Juliette shrugs. “She said it was fake and just makes you sad.”

Ali was onto something, Poppy thinks, but doesn’t say so.

“Do you have any photos of Ali? I’m having a hard time finding any other than the one from the viral video.”

They all shake their heads. “Ali was, like, phobic about having her picture taken,” Juliette says. “Like she had body dysmorphia or whatever they call it. We all went to prom as a group and she wouldn’t even do group pics with us.”

“Do you know if Ali had a favorite book or a piece of writing that meant something to her?” This is the question Poppy’s been holding back. She’s learned that it’s best during an interview not to go in too hot. Build some rapport, get a feel for the interviewee, then drill down on what you really care about at the end.

The three shake their heads.

Disappointed, Poppy presses on: “If you were me, is there anything you’d want to know about Ali that you’ve never told the police? I know it’s hard, but it’s important.”

They all shake their heads again. It reminds Poppy of a tennis match, heads going back and forth in tandem. But this time she notices a slight hesitation in Ruby.

“You should come tonight,” Juliette says.

“Come where?” Poppy says.

“To Little Bar.”

“At least tell your brother to stop by,” Juliette adds with a wink.

“I think he’s planning on it,” Poppy says. “Thanks for your help. If you think of anything else, I hope you’ll reach out.” She hands each of them one of her new business cards.

Juliette examines it with an amused look on her face, then she and Chrissy give cheek kisses to Ruby. “See you tonight,” Juliette says. “Bring your A game, Ruby. Shots like the old days.”

Ruby doesn’t reply as her friends saunter off. She again looks embarrassed.

Poppy walks with her to the parking lot. It’s a silent walk, and Poppy doesn’t try to fill the void. She senses that Ruby wants to tell her something. So she waits.

When they reach Ruby’s car—a Nissan with a car seat in back—Poppy finally says,

“Congratulations on the baby.”

“Thanks.”

“It was nice seeing you,” Poppy says, waiting one last beat, just in case.

“You asked if Ali had any secrets?” Ruby says.

Bingo. Poppy nods for her to continue.

Ruby opens the car door, gets inside, and looks up at Poppy from the driver’s seat.

“Ask your brother.”

Poppy feels a quake in her chest at that.

“What do you mean?”

“Look, I already gave my statement to your office. It’s all I know. I need to get home.”

Before Poppy can reply, Ruby has slammed the car door and peeled out of the parking lot.

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It's close to seven o'clock on Day Two, and it's been a weird second day on the job. Poppy has continued to go through the tip-line emails and is coming up with nothing but cranks and pranksters. She opens her desk drawer where she'd tucked away Agent Fincher's card. She picks it up, examines it. Fincher has crossed out her office number with an ink pen and written down her mobile. Poppy considers calling the agent. She shouldn't. The sheriff explicitly asked—no, ordered—Poppy to have no contact with Fincher. Poppy retrieves her cell and eyes the card. She nearly jumps out of her chair when the device rings. The universe intervening before she makes a stupid mistake. The screen displays her big brother's goofy mug.

"About time," she answers. She's already sent him several texts, which he ignored. She even tried calling, but it went to voicemail.

"Sorry, Shorty, I've had a crazy day. We've got a big sale going on at the dealership. Where's the fire?"

"It's not a fire. But I met with Ruby, Juliette, and Chrissy today."

"And?"

"And Ruby said something weird. I asked them about Alison Lane. If she had any secrets or reason to be afraid of anyone, and she said I should talk to you."

"Me?" His tone is incredulous. But when they were kids Poppy often heard him use the same intonation when he was lying through his teeth to their parents, so she's not so sure it's genuine.

“Why would she say that?” he adds.

“Well, that’s the question I’ve been trying to ask you, but you’ve been ghosting my ass.”

“I’ve got no damn idea. Ruby never liked me. Other than that, I’ve got no clue.”

If he’s lying, it’s a better performance than when they were kids.

“You’re a cop, make her tell you what she’s talking about.”

“It doesn’t work that way,” Poppy says. “Is there something you’re not telling me about Alison? You hung out with that crowd. And you were on the team with Ryan Richardson.”

“What would I know? I don’t have a clue.”

Poppy thinks about this. “Did you ever talk to the police back when it happened?”

There’s a millisecond of silence. If she wasn’t listening for it, she might have missed it. “Um, yeah, I talked to a cop. Don’t remember his name.”

“Buckman?” Poppy says.

“Maybe, I don’t remember.”

“What did he look like?”

“A good ol’ boy. Big guy.”

That’s Buckman. At least that’s how he looked on the MRK interrogation video.

Poppy has searched the two file boxes with the case materials twice and there's no mention of Buckman interviewing Ruby or Dash.

“Seriously, Dashiell, is there something I need to know?” She uses his full name only when she's angry.

“I told you. No idea. I gotta get back to work. I got a couple on the hook for a Mustang.”

After the call, Poppy collects her things. She needs to get home to make her father dinner. On the way out, she passes Margaret.

“Do you ever leave this place?” Poppy asks.

Margaret smiles. “Good night, dear.”

“Night,” Poppy says. She continues to the door but stops. “Hey, Margaret.”

The woman's eyes widen, inviting Poppy to continue.

“I have the Alison Lane file and it seems to be missing a lot of stuff. I wondered if there might be other records somewhere—like, maybe I don't have all the files?”

“That's not surprising.”

“What do you mean?”

“Daryll Buckman wasn't exactly a workhorse. If you couldn't find him on patrol, you could bet he was at Fatheads bar.”

Margaret continues: “The two boxes are what we could find after he, um, left the

force.” She says the last part like there’s a backstory.

“Is there anywhere else that might have his investigation notes? Any interview tapes?”

“Sorry, dear, I’m afraid you have it all.”

Later, after cooking Hamburger Helper for her father and getting him set up in front of the television, she contemplates what she’ll have for dinner. She can’t bring herself to eat the cheeseburger mac he likes so much.

Her mind drifts back to Ruby Quinn. Ask your brother. What was that about? She’ll call Ruby tomorrow and press her. Ruby’s reaction was unusual, like she didn’t want her friends to know. Look, I already gave my statement to your office. They were going to Little Bar tonight for the reunion. Dash is supposed to go as well. Poppy can show up, ask questions. But she decides against it.

She curses Buckman, the half-assed investigator who apparently spent more time at Fatheads than working his cases—

That’s when the idea hits her and she grabs her car keys.

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PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA

On the drive home from the office, Michael Harper curses himself for ever getting involved with Shane O’Leary. But it’s too late for regrets, and it’s not like he had a choice. He’s in the soup and needs to manage it. And he’s been successful managing it so far. It’s in O’Leary’s interest to keep Michael as legit as possible. As far as the world knows, he’s just an accountant for several respectable businesses—many owned by shell companies that it would take a team of experts to trace back to O’Leary.

At the house, he finds Taylor sitting at the kitchen counter doing her homework. As far as he can tell, anyway. Books are open. A notepad nearby. But her phone—that dreadful device—is in her hand.

“Hey, sweetie.”

“Hi, Dad,” Taylor says, not looking up.

“How was school?”

“Fine.”

Fine. A word that seems to be the only descriptor for a day at school or any other experience in his fourteen-year-old’s life. He examines her. She looks so grown-up. When did this happen?

Michael considers broaching the subject of O’Leary’s kid but stops. It’s the hour of

Fine, so he won't get anywhere. He has to catch her in those rare chatty moments.

"Hey, want to go to Kiku for dinner?" Sushi might draw her out.

Taylor pauses, doesn't look up. "I've got a lot of homework, Dad."

"Ah, come on," Michael replies. "I'll let you drive," he says in singsong.

Taylor's glance raises from her phone, locks onto the keys Michael's dangling in the air. He shouldn't be letting her drive anywhere; she's too young for even a learner's permit; it's against the law. But given that Michael is the moneyman for a criminal enterprise, it's all relative. And it's a manipulative way to spend time with her.

Soon, Michael is in the passenger seat on the short—but utterly terrifying—drive to Chestnut Hill. He tries not to instruct as Taylor drives. It only makes her more anxious. At last, she squeezes the sedan into a spot on South Rosewood. He tries not to exhale too loudly as she kills the engine.

In the restaurant, they're taken to a table in the back. As Taylor considers the menu, Michael finds himself staring at her. She looks more like her mother every day. The dark flowing hair, wide-set eyes. Until her mother lost all her hair, lost all the weight and that glint in her eyes in those final days.

"What?" Taylor says, catching his glance.

"Nothing."

"Stop, like, staring at me."

Michael smiles. "So how was school today?" he tries again.

“I told you. Fine.”

“Very descriptive.”

She frowns. “It was like always.”

“Did you learn anything new?”

She shrugs, keeps her eyes on the menu.

He needs to let it be. He picks up his own menu. It’s pointless because he gets the same thing every time they come. “What looks good?”

“I think I’m going with the shrimp tempura roll.”

He nods. “I’ll have the same.”

“Copycat rat.”

That stings his heart. It’s something her mother used to say to her. If both got up to go to the restroom at the same time, copycat rat. If both said they liked the same book, copycat rat. If both were tired. Same. The expression made no sense and he wasn’t sure where it came from. Perhaps that kids’ movie about the rat that moved to Paris to become a chef that Taylor loved so much.

It’s strange having children. As they get older there’re always reminders of when they were small. When they would rush to the door when you got home from the office. When they would hold your hand and wanted to spend every moment with you. The reminders of Taylor as a little girl are bittersweet because the memories include her mom.

The food arrives and Taylor gets more talkative. She shows him a funny TikTok video, rants about how she can't stand her French teacher, tells him something about a pop singer he's never heard of.

Michael decides it's time: "Hey, do you know a kid named Anthony O'Leary?"

Taylor looks up, eyes to the ceiling as if she's trying to remember. She shakes her head. It's surprising because the Academy is a small school.

"Remember I told you a client's son was starting at the Academy?"

Taylor gives him an expression like she hasn't the foggiest.

"Well, my client's kid started there a few weeks ago. My client says he's having a hard time."

Taylor sips her water like she knows what's coming and is dreading it.

"Anyway, it would be really great if you could maybe reach out. Introduce him to some kids."

"Daaad."

"I know. But he's an important client to me. To us." Michael doesn't add a scary client. "And the universe rewards kindness."

She gives a half eye roll. Then her gaze returns to his.

He doesn't break away.

She lets out an exaggerated sigh, then jabs her chopsticks into the bowl. "Fine. But I

get the last shrimp roll.”

Later, Michael sits in his home office behind the stack of papers he lugged home with him. He’s tempted to get some work done but decides to take the night off. Nothing here can’t wait. He heads over to the bar cart. Pours himself two—what the hell, three—fingers of Scotch.

He takes the first drink, the booze hitting his sinuses. He takes another, picks up the phone, and makes the call.

“Mr. O’Leary, it’s Michael Harper.”

“Michael... Hold on a sec.” O’Leary tells someone he needs a minute, clearing the room so he can take the call in private.

“I’m back.”

“I spoke to my daughter. I’m sorry I don’t have much to report. She hasn’t met Anthony yet, and hasn’t heard anything.”

Silence.

“But she said she’s going to reach out. She’s been at the Academy for a long time and knows lots of kids. She’ll help him meet some people.”

“That’s kind of her. I owe you both.”

Michael doesn’t protest again about the debt. In O’Leary’s world, he knows, no one does anything for free.

“She’s happy to do it. When my wife died, Taylor had a rough go of it and I felt

really powerless.” It’s odd sharing this with O’Leary for so many reasons. “But the good news is that kids are resilient and get through things.”

“I won’t forget this,” O’Leary says. Then the phone goes dead.

Michael takes another pull of the drink. The chore is done. He feels a pang of guilt bringing Taylor into even the periphery of Shane O’Leary’s world. But it’s not like Anthony O’Leary has anything to do with his father’s business. He catches a figure in the doorway.

“Dad...”

“Hey, sweetheart, what’s up?”

She walks slowly to him. Head down.

“Something wrong?”

She bites her lip. “It’s about Anthony O’Leary.”

Michael feels his guts roil. “What about him? I just spoke to his dad. Told him you didn’t—”

He’s interrupted when Taylor thrusts a phone into his hand. It displays a video.

He feels his pulse accelerating as he watches.

“Oh shit.”

LEAVENWORTH, KANSAS

Fatheads is part pool hall, part dive bar. And obviously named before the world got enlightened, or too sensitive, depending on your worldview. When Poppy enters there's a momentary silence like the patrons are taking note. It's a cop and corrections officer bar, but she's a new uniform in town. There's the requisite pool table with burly men cracking eight. A dartboard. Those neon beer signs. Mumbled laughter, she suspects directed at her.

She scans the room. There are few women in the place. Her gaze stops on a heavysset man at the pool table with two other dudes. He looks much as he did in the Missouri River Killer interrogation video. He wears a flannel shirt even though it's summer.

Poppy heads over. She hears someone say "blow job height," which she ignores. The old Poppy would've confronted the guy. Maybe she's matured.

"Mr. Buckman," she says.

He doesn't answer. He clasps the pool cue and bends down to take the shot. He misses and curses to himself.

"Mr. Buckman," Poppy says again.

"What is it, sweetheart? Am I illegally parked or something?"

He's showing off for his friends at the pool table. Poppy swallows down the anger rising in her. See, she has matured.

“I’m new to the sheriff’s office,” she says. She knows he’ll recognize the uniform, the rank on her nameplate, so she doesn’t need to say more.

“You don’t say,” he replies, thick with sarcasm.

“I hoped you might be willing to talk about one of your old cases.”

He takes a swig of beer. “I’d love to, dear.”

“Excellent,” she says, surprised, and gestures to a wooden booth where they can talk in private.

“But I’m afraid I can’t.” He takes another drink, watches his friend hit a striped ball into the side pocket.

“You can’t?”

“After my case against the sheriff’s office, I signed an NDA as part of the settlement. You know what that is?”

She knows what a nondisclosure agreement is. And she knows a patronizing ass when she sees one too. She also knows Buckman left the force on bad terms. Margaret said as much. But Poppy didn’t realize there’d been a lawsuit.

“I doubt an NDA covers a prior case,” she says. “You may have heard that we found Alison Lane’s car in Suncatcher Lake?”

He doesn’t respond.

“I just have some questions. About the file. I wondered if you spoke with—”

Buckman holds up a hand. His face has reddened.

“Let me guess, you heard ol’ Daryll Buckman was a lazy, incompetent investigator? Didn’t work his cases.”

“I never heard that,” she says.

He shakes his head. “If you’re gonna have a career in this business, little lady, you need to learn to lie better.” He then looks at his friends. “Can you give us a minute?”

Poppy views this as a good sign. He’s willing to talk.

“I won’t take notes. Won’t tell anyone you spoke to me. The NDA won’t be an issue and—”

Buckman cuts her off: “Look, you wanna know why the investigation was crap, look in your own house.”

She blinks. “I don’t understand.”

“Ask yourself who they’re protecting.”

“Who? Who’s protecting someone? I don’t understand.”

Buckman shakes his head. “Three words: Not. My. Problem.” He looks her directly in the eyes. “Be gone when I get back with my drink.” He then marches off to the bar.

She watches him. He’s pissed off. The bartender pours him a shot and he kicks it back.

Poppy feels a churning in her gut. Look in your own house.

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PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA

“Mr. Harper, I understand you think this is important, but I’m sure this could wait until regular school hours,” Headmaster Pendleton says into the phone.

Michael grips his iPhone, takes a cleansing breath lest he finally tell the pompous head of the Academy what he really thinks of him. “I’m sorry for calling so late. But as I said, there’s a level of urgency here.”

The headmaster must hear something in Michael’s voice, because he pauses, then says, “What can I do for you, Mr. Harper?”

“There’s a situation with the kids I thought you should know about.”

“A situation,” Pendleton repeats.

“A serious bullying incident.”

“I see.” His tone is calm, the response of a man who’s heard many affluent parents claim their kids were “bullied,” which probably involved only slights such as not being invited to a birthday party or sleepover. “Is everything all right with Taylor?”

“It’s not about Taylor. Well, not directly but—” Michael stops himself. Decides to get to it. He pulls up the video Taylor sent him, sends it to the headmaster’s phone.

“I’ve just sent you a video that is making the rounds with the kids.”

There's a long quiet as Pendleton pulls up the clip. Michael can only hear the video in the background, but he's already watched it so many times, he can follow what's happening.

It's a house party. Teenagers chattering and sipping from red Solo cups. Then a voice cuts through the music. One of the kids tells Anthony O'Leary that Isabella, Taylor's best friend, wants to make out with him. She's in the back bedroom.

Anthony goes into the room, the jostling phone camera following after him. The music quiets as the door closes behind him.

The lights go out. Then there's an unusual sound, like a large roll of tape or cellophane being stretched, the kind when movers wrap your furniture. There's the sound of a struggle.

"What are you—Stop!"

More unusual sounds.

Then the light clicks on.

Anthony O'Leary's on the floor. He's wrapped in plastic, like a mummy or a burrito. He's flopping around, trying to free himself.

Someone says, "He's a fucking seal," and there's a boom of laughter.

"Get the seal his dinner," a voice says.

Anthony keeps moving, struggling futilely to get out of the plastic.

Then sardines from tins are thrust at him, splatting against the plastic, hitting him in

the face, the only part of him not covered.

Then one of the boys, his back to the camera, starts urinating on Anthony.

The scene is more grotesque because of all the laughter in the background.

The phone line goes quiet. Like Pendleton is digesting what he watched.

Michael finally says, “Taylor says that this isn’t the first time. That Anthony O’Leary has been bullied since his first day.”

“Was Taylor involved?” Pendleton asks.

“She says no. But it’s her circle of friends. She says she told them to lay off.”

Pendleton clears his throat. “The video doesn’t show anyone other than the O’Leary boy. And this doesn’t appear to be on school grounds.”

Michael shakes his head, pulls up the video on his own phone, finds the section. “Watch it again. At thirty-seven seconds in. Look at the reflection in the mirror.”

In the last nanosecond of the clip the camera catches a mirror hung on the bedroom wall. Four kids’ faces are shown, three with mouths open, laughing. Among them, the governor’s daughter, the attorney general’s son, a billionaire’s daughter... and Taylor.

There’s noise on the other end like Pendleton is finding the clip. There’s a heavy sigh in the receiver now. “I knew I should’ve never admitted someone from that family to this school.”

“That’s your takeaway?” Michael says.

“This is a sensitive matter. It has to be handled discreetly.”

On this much, they agree.

“There’s something else you should know,” Michael says.

Another long silence. Michael imagines Pendleton standing in his nightclothes, looking like the portraits of Academy Men that fill the halls of the school.

“Shane O’Leary came to me because his son has been upset. It’s only a matter of time until he finds out or gets hold of this video and—”

Pendleton cuts him off: “That’s why I said we need to be discreet.”

LEAVENWORTH, KANSAS

“Deputy Sheriff McGee.”

Poppy looks up from her Chipotle burrito. There are few things sadder than eating alone at Chipotle at closing time. But after leaving Fatheads, she couldn’t ignore her growling stomach any longer, so she stopped at her go-to for indigestion.

It’s the FBI agent. The one from the press conference. The one the sheriff warned her about.

The agent slinks her slender frame on the plastic seat next to Poppy and smiles. “How’s the investigation going?”

Poppy shrugs. Takes a bite of her burrito.

“Identify the men in the car yet?”

Poppy takes a sip from her straw. Makes a loud slurping sound.

“Ah, you’ve been told not to speak with me. But we’re all on the same team, aren’t we?”

Poppy again doesn’t answer.

The agent sits there appraising Poppy, watches her eat. Eventually, she says, “Are you familiar with Russian folklore, Deputy Sheriff McGee?”

This is too much. Poppy gives the agent a lazy-eyed stare. “Do I look like I’m familiar with Russian folklore?”

Agent Fincher allows herself a smile. “In Russian folklore there’s someone called the Holy Fool.”

The woman is an oddball or genius, Poppy can’t tell which. It’s possible her schtick is just a tactic to get Poppy to talk.

“The Holy Fool is an outsider—sometimes an eccentric, sometimes crazy, sometimes just a child. But it’s their outsider status that makes them a truth teller.”

“I’m not sure where this is—”

“You heard of the story ‘The Emperor’s New Clothes’?”

What the hell, Poppy decides to bite. “The story about the emperor who’s told he has a magical outfit and everyone plays along even though he’s naked?”

Agent Fincher snaps her fingers. “Everyone except a little boy. He’s a Holy Fool—someone who’s free to state the truth.”

“What’s this have to do with anything?”

“Oh... I don’t know. After you punched your commanding officer in the nose, I was hoping you were one.”

“One what?” Poppy asks.

“A Holy Fool.”

Poppy shakes her head. This lady's been looking into Poppy's background. Following her. What's her deal?

"In real life, our Holy Fools are whistleblowers. People willing to sacrifice loyalty to their job or institution to expose the truth."

"No offense, lady, but what in the hell are you—"

"The men in the car," the agent interrupts, abruptly changing the subject. "Let me guess, one of them was dressed to the nines. A high-quality, tailored suit. Am I right?"

She is, but Poppy doesn't show it.

"A three-piece suit. Like an old-time banker."

Poppy holds her gaze, confirming without saying anything.

"They don't make suits like that off the rack. Probably a custom tailor... A business that may keep records of its customers."

Poppy feels a jolt of exhilaration. She wonders if the KBI has thought of this—tracking the man from his clothing. They have to have considered it. She'll call Chantelle Luna in the morning to check. Now a question: How does Agent Fincher know this? Is there a leak? Does she already know who was in that car?

"Who are they?" Poppy asks, taking the chance.

"It's a shame we're not sharing intel." The agent stands, dusts off her hands, heads to the door.

“Seriously, if you know who they are...,” Poppy calls after her.

The agent turns, stops at the door. “You’ll figure it out. Your bosses don’t think much of you, but you’ll surprise them. And, who knows? Maybe you’ll be a Holy Fool after all.”

The FBI agent then pushes outside and disappears.

MONTEPULCIANO, ITALY

Back at the B and B, the sun has disappeared and the stars twinkle in the inky summer sky. Ryan sits in an Adirondack chair overlooking the sprawling vineyard. He feels like he's in a fever dream. From the heat, from the sudden reappearance of The Monster.

Nora arrives, carrying a small cooler. She pops open a Peroni and hands him the green bottle. She doesn't remind him that Ryan promised to tell her what's going on. She just sits quietly, drinking her beer, waiting.

After the long stretch of silence, he takes a swig and he tells her. About two high-school kids in love. About that night at Lovers' Lane. About suspicions that have followed him like a stink. About the notes. About seeing The Monster.

It feels good, telling someone. It's the first time. Because of the pain and guilt, but also the fear. He's lost so much already. Friends. Basketball. His name, even. But he's tired of being afraid. And telling Nora feels both safe and like something he can only describe as relief. Still, there's terror bubbling inside him. Not about the others knowing who he really is, but in the revelation that The Monster is real, not an imaginary boogeyman conjured from the dark recesses of Ryan's mind.

"Tell me you're not going to meet him tomorrow," Nora says after listening quietly.

Ryan shrugs, takes another sip of his beer.

"If he's a killer....," she says, clearly worried.

“It’s a public place. Lots of people will be in the town square in the morning.” He’s trying to convince himself more than Nora.

“You’ll miss the train.”

They’re supposed to head to Rome tomorrow morning, where they’ll meet with the donor alumnus who funds this annual trip. The professor who oversees the law journal warned that they cannot miss the meeting.

“I’ll catch up with you all, take a later train. I’ll make the meeting.”

“You should call the police or your parents.” There’s a pleading in her tone now.

Ryan has been debating doing just that. But there’s nothing his parents can do more than five thousand miles away. He can’t put them through more worry. And the police will think he’s insane. His chest is tight, he squeezes his beer to steady his hands.

Nora is quiet for a long while. “Fine,” she says at last. “Then I’m coming with you.”

“No,” Ryan says, shaking his head.

“Why not? You said it’s safe.” There’s a challenge in her tone now.

“Because this is something I need to do alone.”

Nora thinks on this. “I’m coming,” she repeats.

He’s spared further debate when they hear voices coming up the hill.

Diana sees them first. “Oh, sorry. I didn’t mean to intrude,” she says, her words

slurred. The others are behind her.

“You’re not intruding,” Ryan says. “Join us.”

Nora’s mouth pinches tight, she folds her arms across her chest. Aiden, Jake, Eddie, and 3D sit on the grass facing them. They’re all tipsy, if not sloppy, from all the wine, the champagne, the heat.

Eddie in particular looks like he’s been hit by a garbage truck. “I’m gonna get vulnerable with you guys,” Eddie says, sitting cross-legged in the grass.

The group waits, like they have no idea where this is heading.

Eddie continues: “I haven’t taken a shower since we got here.”

Divya wrinkles her nose. “Got where?”

“Since we got to Italy. The showers, they’re so small. Like vertical coffins. I get claustrophobic.”

Divya scooches away from Eddie.

“I said I was being vulnerable.”

Aiden is grinning now. “Good job, man. Girls love vulnerability,” he deadpans.

There’s more small talk. Gossip that Clayton and Marci, whom no one’s seen since they got back from ballooning, are hooking up. Chatter that they all should be going out tonight—doing something!—before they leave in the morning.

“I have an idea,” Aiden says. “Truth or dare.”

Dena says, “Ugh, no one is going to accept a dare to make out with you, dude.”

Nora interrupts. “I’ll play.” Her tone is stern. Ryan doesn’t look over at her but can imagine her eyes shooting lasers at him. It’s confirmed when she says, “Ryan: Truth or dare?”

Ryan turns to her, locks eyes in the faint light. He can’t risk picking truth in case she asks him something that will tell the others who he is. What he’s going to do tomorrow.

“I’m not in the mood to—”

“I’ll go,” Eddie butts in. Ryan could hug him right now. Except for that whole not-showering confession. “But forget truth or dare. We’ve had too much to drink for dares. Everyone do truth, but answer this question: If you weren’t going to be a lawyer, what would you be?”

This quiets the group, like maybe they’ve all asked themselves the same question following the intensity of their 1L year.

“I’ll go,” Jake says. The women groan, thinking he’s going to say he’d be an exotic dancer like from Magic Mike or something similarly ridiculous. But Jake says, “I’d work with kids with intellectual and developmental disabilities.”

There’s a moment of quiet again, this time as if no one is sure if he’s made a bad joke.

“In high school,” Jake continues, “I was president of the Best Buddies club. It’s an after-school club that matched kids with IDD with peers who didn’t have those struggles.”

“Aww,” Dena says.

“I’d work at a gallery,” Divya joins in. “I was an art history major. But I plan to use my law degree to help recover art stolen blood antiquities.”

“Easy,” Eddie chimes in. “Video game designer.”

Aiden says, “I don’t know. I can write code, but hate it. Maybe I’d be an environmentalist. Some fucked-up shit going on in the world.”

Dena would run an NGO; Diana would be a veterinarian.

In the ambient light, Ryan has a revelation that should’ve been obvious. Or maybe not. These classmates—these friends—are more than the sum of their cultivated social-media personas, more than the roles they play, more than the stereotypes. They’re like him. Trying to find their way. Trying to find out who they are. They party too much—are maybe too privileged—but they want to make the world kinder, better.

The group never turns to Nora or Ryan for their answers. Maybe because they know that Nora was born to be a lawyer. As for Ryan, well, maybe they’ve just come to expect him keeping things close to the vest, not giving any real insights into himself. Which is fair.

But in this moment, he decides he’s not going to run from himself anymore, not going to be afraid anymore.

Tomorrow morning, he will confront The Monster.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:07 am

PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA

“That was a great meal,” Shane O’Leary says to his wife as he zips through the streets of Philadelphia in his Mercedes. They get treated like royalty whenever they dine at Del Frisco’s. Even after all these years, he still likes to impress Gina.

“I’m stuffed,” she groans.

“Hopefully not too stuffed...” O’Leary cocks a brow.

“We’ll see....”

He approaches the front checkpoint to their estate. He clicks the opener and the iron gate creaks to life. He’s got no security detail at the house. Nobody is fool enough to mess with O’Leary, much less his family. But he’s gotten word that the Sabatino crew isn’t too pleased that one of their lieutenants is rumored to be wearing concrete shoes—a rumor O’Leary himself started—so maybe he should have a couple guys stationed at the place tomorrow. There’s an unwritten rule that you don’t go after family, but the Sabatinos have shown that they’re willing to test boundaries.

“What time does Anthony get home from karate practice?” O’Leary asks. If he’s gonna jump her bones, he knows he’d better do it before she’s distracted by their son.

“Nate’s mom is picking up tonight. She usually takes them for ice cream after, so you’ve got about, I don’t know, a half hour.”

“Plenty of time.” He flashes a smile.

He pulls onto the circle drive in front of the house, and races around the sedan to open Gina's door. She starts to step out when a shot rings out.

O'Leary pushes her back in the car, shuts the door, then crouch-runs to the other side of the sedan. He opens the driver's side door, reaches under the seat for his gun. Gina's eyes are wide with fear.

"It's gonna be okay. Call Chaz. And stay inside the car. This thing can take a hit from a grenade launcher." He had the sedan fitted with bullet-resistant glass and Kevlar panels.

"Don't go, wait with me, don't—"

But O'Leary's already slammed the door and is racing to the side of the house. No one comes after him in his own home. No one takes a shot near his girl.

He heads to the back, mounts the steps to the patio, ducking behind the outdoor fireplace. He checks his ammo. He has four in the magazine, one in the chamber. Five shots. He won't need more.

He runs to the large French doors, staying low. The doors are covered with blinds, but there's a small opening in a window nearby. He crawls over, raises his head quickly, looks inside. He doesn't see anyone. But the shot came from the front of the house... he knows it. It was faint like the shooter was inside.

On his phone, he pulls up his security system. He has a camera in all the main rooms.

Nothing.

He slowly opens the door. The lights are on, television left on. If this mutt watched his TV while waiting to take out O'Leary, he's gonna go medieval on him.

O’Leary listens. It’s quiet.

Then there’s a loud noise. The front door bursting open.

It’s Gina. What in the—

He sprints over, shields her with his body. “You need to get back to the car, it’s not—”

It’s then he sees it in her face. White-hot panic.

“What is it?”

“I texted Nate’s mom to see if she could keep Anthony for tonight.”

O’Leary doesn’t understand.

“She said Anthony told them he needed to miss karate tonight.”

An icy finger races up O’Leary’s spine. Without saying a word, he vaults up the stairs, two at a time.

Anthony’s door is locked. O’Leary bangs on the door. When there’s no answer, he shoulders it until the jamb splinters away and the door cracks open.

“No. Please, God. No!”

MONTEPULCIANO, ITALY

They leave the B and B at 7:45 a.m. and arrive at Arezzo train station about an hour later. Ryan jumps out and starts unloading everyone's bags from the back of the van. The station is a squat building in a dreary part of town. He's got about an hour to make it to the meeting with The Monster and he's trying to hold it together. He lied to his friends and said he's got to return the van to the rental company and will meet them on the platform.

As his classmates meander inside the station, Nora doubles back. "I told you, I'm coming," she says.

"We talked about this. It's not a good idea."

"Oh, that's not a good idea."

"Seriously, Nora. I can't put you in that situation."

"You're confused," she says.

He shakes his head, not understanding.

"That you have any control over what I do. Now, let's go before I call your parents and tell them what's going on."

At quarter to ten, they're walking through the archway that leads into the medieval village. A smattering of tourists ambles about with backpacks, water bottles, and

dumb wicker hats they'd only dare wear on vacation.

The narrow road soon opens up to the town square, which is bathed in sunlight. Ryan looks around. There's no sight of the man.

This is crazy. He's about to meet with The Monster, someone Ryan has long believed was a figment of his imagination. And if he is real, Nora's right: He's dangerous.

Ryan points to a café. The outdoor tables are filled with people having coffee or breakfast. He spies a table that's empty and provides a nice line of sight to the Palazzo where he's supposed to meet the man. The note said ten o'clock. He has ten minutes.

On the first day of their trip to Montepulciano, Ryan and the others climbed the narrow stairway to the top of the bell tower, which provides an amazing view all the way to Lake Trasimeno. He glances up at the terrace, the sun stinging his eyes. He doesn't see anyone there.

"You can watch from here," he says to Nora, directing his chin to the table.

Nora frowns but doesn't fight him. She speaks to the host in Italian and is ushered to the table that's not covered by an umbrella—the only reason it's vacant. Before she sits, she hands Ryan something.

He looks in his palm and there's a small fob, the size of a quarter.

"What's this?"

"One of my AirTags," Nora says. "From my luggage."

"What am I supposed to do with this?"

“Put it in your pocket, I don’t know. I mean, you said he took Alison, so if...” She doesn’t finish the thought.

It’s a smart idea. If he doesn’t emerge from this meeting Nora will at least have something to give the police. The location of the AirTag.

He studies the pod in his index finger and thumb, then pockets it. Then Nora hands him something else: a tiny Taser, by the look of it. Some kind of miniature stun gun.

“My dad got it for me. Our neighborhood in Georgetown is safe, but it has sporadic crime.”

Ryan decides it can’t hurt and tucks it in his waistband.

His heart is pounding now. He’s really going to do this? He’s really going to do this!

As if sensing that he’s freaking out, Nora stands, faces him, like she’s going to give him a pep talk. Instead, she tiptoes up and kisses him.

“Be careful,” she says softly.

He shakes off the electricity from the kiss and takes one last look around the café. Plenty of people are around, so she should be safe. He checks his phone for the time, seven minutes until ten, and fast-walks to the tower.

On the main floor, he buys a ticket. The woman warns him—probably because of his height—that the steps to the tower are steep and the ceiling’s low. The stairwell to the terrace is a sweatbox. There’s no one in front of him. No one behind. Less than five minutes until the meet. Is The Monster already up here?

At the top of the stairs is an old wooden door that he pushes open. He’s assaulted by

the bright sun again. He's sweating from the heat and anxiety.

When his eyes adjust to the sun, he's startled. Two muscular men—they're around his own age, Italian—stand facing him. Behind them a figure emerges. Before Ryan can scan his face, his eyes jump to the stranger's hands. His breath catches in the hollow of his throat because no question remains now:

It's him.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:07 am

LEAVENWORTH, KANSAS

Day Three on the job, Poppy receives a morning visit from Sheriff Walton.

“Deputy McGee,” he says, coming into her office.

“Poppy,” she says. “We’re both civilians now, Ken,” she adds in a playful tone, mimicking his comment from her first day.

He plops down in the chair opposite her desk, like he’s already had a long week.

“Settling in okay?”

Poppy nods. “Everyone’s been really helpful. And I’m making good progress on the Alison Lane tips so far.”

“Yeah, sorry about that. Somebody has to do it.”

“No, not at all. It’s quite, um, fascinating.”

“‘Fascinating’ is a nice way to put it. I’m always amazed how many citizens we have who, let’s say, could use some mental health intervention.” He says this with no menace. “That note they found in Alison Lane’s car is somethin’ else, right?”

“Yes, any luck breaking the code?”

He shakes his head. “But Chantelle Luna’s tenacious. I imagine she’s got every

cryptography expert in the state working on it.”

Poppy nods.

The sheriff hesitates, like he’s building up to something. “So, I understand you were at Fatheads last night…”

Now she understands the reason for the visit. The sheriff knows about her attempt to interview her predecessor on the Lane investigation, Daryll Buckman.

“The investigation file is so thin,” she says, “I thought Buckman might be able to—”

“I appreciate the gumption. I do. But when there’s been litigation, these things get complicated.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t know about the litigation when I went there and—”

The sheriff holds up a hand. “You’re like your old man. He had gumption. It saved our asses in that desert more than once.” He smiles. “But like our CO used to say to your dad, you can’t always be a bull in the china shop. Particularly when we’re dealing with a bomb.”

Poppy swallows. She doesn’t know if the “bomb” he’s referring to is one of the explosive devices the sheriff and her father diffused in Iraq or Daryll Buckman.

“Understood,” she says.

The sheriff stands. “Well, I’ll let you get back to the fun.” He eyes her computer, then heads out.

Poppy curses at herself. It’s her third day and she’s already getting a lecture for

violating protocol. And if the sheriff learns she's talked to Agent Fincher—even if it wasn't Poppy initiating the discussions—he might not be so nostalgic about Poppy's father. She needs to keep her head down. She needs this job. At the same time, she can't ignore what Buckman said, can she? Look in your own house. She can't ignore that Fincher also suggested that Poppy's office is hiding something. That her dad's old friend Ken Walton is hiding something. She decides: She's going to follow the clues wherever they take her, do her job. She'll just need to be careful about it.

So, for the next few hours she works the new tips. Makes follow-up calls. Cross-checks the office's crank file for repeat offenders. Researches the databases. And each and every one turns out to be a complete and utter waste of time. She finally reaches the last tip in the batch. She rubs her temples and reads the email.

My name is Ziggy de la Cruz and I run a true crime podcast called theTreehouse. I've uncovered some new evidence on the Alison Lane case. I'm going to run a segment on it tonight, so if you'd like to hear about the evidence before the public, please come by my studio locatedhere.

The message is odd. Why ask for an in-person visit? Maybe the podcaster wants to lure someone working the case there for an interview. Poppy googles the podcast name and reads enough to discern that it's the real deal. It's ranked a top true crime podcast and has helped solve three cold cases. Everybody's an investigator now.

The message says he's doing the show tonight. If it's something important, she'd like to know about it before the public. She's caught up on the tip line, so what's she have to lose? She clicks on the link to the address. It's in Kansas City, forty minutes away. Yeah, she needs to do her job.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:07 am

PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA

“Mr. and Mrs. O’Leary, please, take a seat.”

Gina grips O’Leary’s hand tight as they are shuttled into the headmaster’s office. There’s the requisite dark wood, old portraits of old white men, classical music floating in the background. Headmaster Pendleton walks with that slow, nothing-is-that-urgent gait of old money before sitting behind his antique desk. O’Leary remembers the first time he visited this space. Pendleton acted as though he’d have to have the office fumigated when O’Leary left. Not that it stopped him from taking the “donation.”

Gina says nothing. She hasn’t said much since her world ended.

“You have our deepest condolences. Although Anthony wasn’t with the Academy long, he’s part of our family. The outpouring from his classmates has been uplifting.”

O’Leary nods. What else is there to do? He could point out that not one of those classmates ever came over after school, invited Anthony to their houses. That the guidance counselor brushed off Gina when she called to raise concerns about their son. Lashing out won’t change anything. It will only upset Gina more.

Pendleton waits for them to say something, as if unclear why they’re at the school.

Finally, O’Leary says, “We’re still in a state of shock. We just can’t understand why Anthony would commit suicide and—”

“We don’t say ‘commit suicide,’” Pendleton interrupts. We say ‘died by suicide.’”

O’Leary feels his blood turning hot. “Excuse me.”

“At the Academy, I mean. We teach the children to not say ‘committed’ suicide since it evokes associations with a crime and fosters negative stereotypes about mental illness.”

Gina sobs lightly. O’Leary needs to get control of his emotions lest he commit a crime himself.

“We just want to know why. We hoped his classmates might know something.”

Pendleton lets out a loud sigh. “I know this is hard. But, from my experience with the mental health of our students, I can tell you there usually isn’t a clear answer. Did Anthony leave a note?”

Gina releases another sob. O’Leary pulls out the sheet of notebook paper. Pendleton watches as he sets it on the desktop. “Yes, but it doesn’t tell us anything.”

The headmaster puts on his reading glasses and examines the note. He doesn’t pick it up but leans in close enough so he can make out the words:

I’m sorry.

I tried.

I love you.

O’Leary continues: “Have any of the students said anything? Any of his teachers?”

Pendleton shakes his head. He gestures to a file box sitting on a wing chair. “We have Anthony’s things from his locker. I’m not sure if they will provide any answers...” He lets the sentence fade.

“So, you’ve heard nothing? Nobody has any clue why my son committed suicide,” O’Leary says, daring Pendleton to correct him.

“I spoke with the students before and after this tragedy about Anthony,” Pendleton assures him. “And I’m sorry, no. He was new at the school. He was quiet, still acclimating, but no one had any idea he might do this.”

This is going nowhere. O’Leary stands, gently helps Gina out of her chair. Without saying anything more, O’Leary takes the file box and they leave.

After getting Gina buckled up in the car—she’s still in a near-catatonic state—O’Leary picks up the phone, dials Chaz.

“Hey, boss.”

“You hear from the doctor?” O’Leary’s concern about Gina’s mental state is growing.

“Yeah, he’ll come to the house whenever’s convenient for you.”

“This afternoon, before the wake.”

Chaz nods.

“And how about the tech guy?”

Anthony’s cell phone and laptop are password protected. Chaz took them to one of

the tech scammers they work with to see if he could get inside. It's their only chance for real answers. O'Leary knows it won't bring him back. But maybe understanding will help Gina.

"I'll let you know as soon as I hear. This guy's good. If anyone can get inside, he can."

"Well, tell him to step on it," O'Leary says.

"Yes, boss."

"And I want our boys at the force to interview this twat headmaster at the school, talk to some kids."

"I reached out. They said they don't usually investigate cases where—" Chaz stops himself. "The kids at that school have parents who aren't gonna just let them be interviewed. It's complicated."

"You tell Doyle it's gonna get a helluva lot more complicated if they don't do what I say."

"Yes, boss."

"I'm leaving the school now. The headmaster lied to me."

"Lied?"

"He said he talked to the kids about Anthony before what happened, but has no idea why Anthony was having trouble."

"Yeah?"

“Why in the hell would he be talking about my boy before if there wasn’t somethin’ up?”

Chaz is silent.

“Tell your guy that I wanna know what’s on that headmaster’s computer, and phone too.”

“Will do.”

O’Leary kills the line.

He reaches over and hugs Gina, kisses her on the forehead. “I’m gonna find out, my girl. You watch me.”

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:07 am

MONTEPULCIANO, ITALY

Ryan glowers at The Monster. His face is plain, much as Ryan described to the sketch artist. And the hands—eight fingers—reveal all. Ryan's heart is hammering, adrenaline pumping. He has the mad impulse to charge him. Beat the living shit out of him. But he's scared. And he needs answers. About that night. About what the fuck is going on.

The Monster nods to the two Italian men with wide necks and bulging pecs who march over to Ryan. He has a momentary fear they're going to throw him off the terrace. But one of them raises his arms like a T, signaling that Ryan should do the same. Ryan raises his arms and the big Italian frisks him.

He immediately finds the Taser and yanks it from Ryan's waistband. He holds the device, tiny in his large hand. He says something in Italian to the other guy, who laughs. The giant turns on the gun and it makes that buzzing sound. He zaps his comrade, who makes a yelp amid laughter from the first guy. The other guy snatches the gun away, then jolts his friend back. They both laugh, and if they weren't so scary it would be funny. Two buffoons zapping each other.

The Monster is shaking his head like they're idiots. He motions for them to give Ryan and him some space.

"Sorry about that. Hired hands. I thought you might want to hurt me." Whoever this guy is, he has an American accent.

Ryan feels his jaw pulse.

“Look, I don’t want to be here any more than you do. But we have”—he stops, searches for the words—“mutual interests.”

“I don’t know what you’re fucking talking about,” Ryan says.

“Well, if you’ll turn it down a notch, I’ll tell you. Can I trust you not to come at me if I tell them to fall back?” He eyes the two meatheads.

“You can trust me as much as I can trust you.”

The Monster makes a fair enough expression.

Ryan feels the pulse in his neck jump a beat. He watches as the hired muscle goes to the other side of the terrace.

“Why?” Ryan says, the single word loaded with so many questions.

The Monster runs a hand over his face. His hand is marred with scratches and the eight remaining fingers have dirt under the nails.

“Listen to me. This is important. You need to tell everyone you think MRK did it... that your memory of me came from the bump on the head.”

Ryan doesn’t understand, shakes his head.

“I think someone’s found me. They saw these,” The Monster says, holding up his hands with the missing pinkies.

“This sounds like a you problem,” Ryan says, unable to contain himself.

“You wouldn’t think that if you knew what I know.”

Ryan tilts his head: I'm listening.

"We need them to back off. You gotta put out a statement, say it was MRK, tell the world I never existed."

"Why would I do that?"

"Cause if you don't and I'm found, it's not only me they're gonna take out."

Ryan shakes his head again, genuinely baffled.

"Who would take you out? What are you talking about?"

"Listen, you little shit. I could've easily taken you out that night. And it's not too late. I've given up more than you can imagine. I can never go home. I can't—" He stops, collects himself. "I have a new life, a wife. I don't want to run anymore."

Ryan can't believe this guy's begging for sympathy, of all things. "Tell me what you're talking about or I'm leaving."

The Monster hisses a breath and waves his arm at the exit, frustrated. "Fine. Go. It's not just me they'll take out. It's her."

"Her?"

A nod. "You have no idea what you're dealing with."

"Then tell me. Are you saying Alison's alive?"

The man closes his eyes, gives no response.

“You were there, man. Who was in the car in the lake? And how the hell’d you find me? If you want my help, then stop lying and asking me to fucking trust you!”

The Monster sighs. “If you don’t believe me, talk to the sheriff.”

This pushes Ryan back on his heels. “The sheriff? What sheriff?”

“The one from that shit town of yours.”

The Monster’s phone pings, but he ignores it.

“I’ll help you,” Ryan says, “if you tell me everything.”

The Monster seems to be silently debating how much to say. His expression turns resigned, like he has no choice but to come clean. “I never meant all this to happen,” he says. He pauses as his phone pings, then pings again. When he looks at the screen, his face freezes in what seems to be concern. Then comes the ringtone of a call.

“Sorry, I need to get this.”

Are you fucking kidding me?

The man holds the phone up like it’s a video call, then his face drains of all color.

“Please don’t,” he says into the phone, staring intently at the screen like he’s watching something unsettling, something horrifying. The call ends, and he turns to Ryan with a devastated look. “It’s too late,” he says. “They found me.”

And with that, the man who abducted Alison sprints to the exit like his life depends on it.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:07 am

Ryan races after The Monster, but the two bodyguards block the wooden doors, the only way out.

Ryan tries to push past them, but they're too strong. In accented English, one of them says, "Calm down. You go once he's gone."

"What's his name? Why is he—?"

The other giant shakes his head. Ryan stops fighting and they step back. After a few minutes, the brutes move aside, opening a pathway to the stairs. Ryan thinks about questioning them, offering them money, but they're hired hands and probably don't know anything. And if he's fast, maybe he can catch up with The Monster. Or maybe, just maybe, Nora followed him.

He races down the stairs, so fast he nearly tumbles. Bursting out the front doors into the sun from the piazza, he sees Nora. She has a concerned look on her face.

"Did you see him? Did you see where he went?"

"Better," she says. "I spotted that Fiat and slipped one of my AirTags through the cracked window of his car."

Back in the van, Ryan races around a curve. The vehicle feels like it might tip over but returns to four wheels. The sky has turned black, a storm blowing into the region.

"Whoa," Nora says. "We won't catch him if we're dead or in a ditch."

Ryan slows the van. He positions the rearview mirror so he can see Nora, who sits in the row immediately behind the bus's single driver's seat. She's studying her phone, following the dot that tracks her AirTag.

"He's on the move again," she says, not looking up. They've tracked the blue dot to a place not too far from their B and B. The car stopped there for a few minutes, so they thought they had him. But he's back on the road.

"Which way?"

Nora taps on her phone, like she's trying to identify any landmarks in the direction The Monster is heading.

"Which way?" Ryan says again, more impatiently than he should.

"Stay on this road until we get to the roundabout. He's on the A1. We're a few miles away."

Ryan steps on the gas and the van wobbles as it accelerates.

A raindrop splats the windshield, then another. He fumbles with the gauges until he finds the switch for the wipers, his main focus on the chase.

"What happened up there?" Nora finally asks.

Ryan's mind is still racing, processing. Then he tells her: "He said she's alive."

"Wait, what?"

"And that she's in danger." Ryan fills her in on the rest. He keeps his eyes on the road but can feel the shock, or maybe skepticism, emanating off her.

Nora says, “And before he told you what’s going on, Pinky Man got a call and just took off?” She’s taken to calling him Pinky Man, which Ryan thinks fits. He wasn’t a monster. He’s just a man, a scared little man.

Ryan nods, as he takes the roundabout’s first exit onto Via Traversa Valdichiana.

It’s raining hard now, difficult to see. He’s always hated the rain since that night on Lovers’ Lane. He used to love the smell of an imminent rain, the clean feeling after heavy showers washed away the grime on the streets, the pollution in the air. He loved going for a run during a downpour. Ali called it *le péttrichor*, French for the pleasant smell after a rain. But now whenever it rains, he thinks of Ali’s matted hair, her makeup smeared, her milky white skin when she removed her shirt. Then her scream. And those monstrous hands with the missing pinky fingers yanking him out of the car.

Nora directs him to merge onto the A1, her eyes still on her phone tracking Pinky Man’s blue dot. “I think I know where he’s going.”

“Where?”

“The airport.”

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:07 am

LEAVENWORTH, KANSAS

By late afternoon, Poppy's standing at the door of a well-maintained home in Maywood, a nice neighborhood in Kansas City.

The door opens and a kid examines her for a moment. He's eleven or twelve with olive skin and dark hair that touches his shoulders. The message pinned this address for the podcaster's studio, but this is someone's house. Maybe the studio is in the basement.

"Hi, is your dad home?"

The kid scrunches his face. "I don't have a dad."

Poppy is taken aback. She glances at the numbers on the exterior of the house to make sure she's at the right place: This is it. Maybe it was a crank tip after all. "I'm sorry, I'm looking for Ziggy de la Cruz."

"That's me."

Oh. "You're the host of the Treehouse podcast?"

He nods.

"I'm with the sheriff's office. You sent a note to our tip line..."

The kid's eyes light up. He opens the door, motions for Poppy to come inside.

The place is nice. A great room has a massive stone fireplace, exposed wood beams on the ceiling.

A woman, about forty or so, appears. Ziggy's mom, presumably. Poppy feels the need to explain why she's there, visiting a little kid. Ziggy's mom shows no concern, like this is the most normal thing in the world. "Can I get you a water or something to drink?"

"I'm great, thanks. You've got quite the son," Poppy says.

Ziggy's mom issues a knowing nod.

"Come back to my studio," Ziggy says.

He leads her to a room that looks like a miniature radio studio. It has a rack of equipment with blinking lights, a table, headsets, and two microphones with those foam heads.

"Would you be willing to talk on the record?" Ziggy asks.

"I'm sorry, I'd have to get permission." Poppy smiles. "You wouldn't want to get me fired, would you?"

Ziggy shakes his head. He looks disappointed.

"You said you had some new evidence."

Ziggy stares at her a long beat. "Have you listened to my show before?"

"I'm afraid not," Poppy says. "I haven't really listened to any podcasts."

“Not really doing your research.” He isn’t trying to be insulting. Just observing the truth in the way only a kid can.

“I suppose you’re right,” she admits. “I started at the sheriff’s office this week. On my first day, they found Alison Lane’s car, so I haven’t had much time to—”

“Her father’s car,” he corrects.

“Right. They found her father’s car. And I’ve been struggling to keep up with everything.”

Ziggy sits, nods, like he hears her but doesn’t approve of her excuse.

She takes a seat herself. “How long have you had the podcast?”

“Four years.”

This surprises her even more. “So you started a true crime podcast when you were...”

“Eight,” he says. “But I don’t get the attention like the other young podcasters. I’m not doing ‘kid’ content.” He makes air quotes with his fingers. “The others do cutesy content and people eat it up. I’m trying to solve murders.” He seems incredulous.

“How’d you get interested in true crime?”

“My dad was murdered.”

Oof. Poppy doesn’t know how to respond. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. My mom won’t confirm this, but my research on his case led me to believe he wasn’t a nice man.”

Poppy doesn't respond. "So you've been doing true crime for four years?"

He nods. "Helped solve three cold cases."

"That's impressive."

Ziggy rolls his eyes like he doesn't like the flattery, though Poppy isn't trying to flatter.

He turns, taps on a computer keyboard. The printer in the corner of the room hums, like he's printing something for her.

"I contacted your office several times and told them that I didn't think MRK abducted Alison Lane."

The hairs on Poppy's neck rise, though she's not sure why. "Why do you say that?"

"It never added up. MRK's last victim before Alison Lane was one hundred miles away. He was making his way down Highway 100 along the river. Why would he backtrack to Leavenworth?"

"Maybe to throw the authorities off his trail?"

Ziggy shakes his head. "And Benedict Cromwell is from New York City. His dad was an investment banker. He never learned to drive. Didn't have a driver's license. He used car services. When he was on the run, he was always on foot. Hitchhiked. Took buses. He never took a victim's car before."

Poppy shrugs. She doesn't say so, but that's hardly exculpatory.

"And the DNA they found, that's what always bugged me, so I looked into it."

Now he's got her attention. "What do you mean?"

"So, Benedict Cromwell's arrested, his stuff taken in. They run everything through the wringer and don't find any DNA from unknown victims. Then, a month later, they mysteriously find Alison Lane's hair on his sleeping bag?"

"It happens."

Ziggy shakes his head. "Well, I did a state FOIA request to get the report. It took me nearly a year, but they finally sent me the file."

Poppy doesn't understand.

Ziggy explains, "Government records are available to the public unless there's a good reason to keep them confidential. Freedom of Information Act or sunshine laws. When the sheriff announced what they'd found on the sleeping bag, the reports became fair game, particularly after Cromwell was murdered and the investigation closed. But it still took forever."

Poppy regards him, waits for him to continue.

Ziggy leans back, reaches to the printer, retrieves the sheaf of papers. "They found a hair on Cromwell's sleeping bag. They needed something to compare it with. Your office got hold of one of Alison's hairbrushes from her family or a friend or something, they never said."

Poppy hasn't studied the DNA test in the file closely. But she recalls that both samples—the one they found and the one they used to compare—came from Alison's hair.

"So I got the tests from the hair they found and the brush they used to compare it.

And guess what?”

“What?”

Ziggy hands her the printouts. “Professor Palumbo at Wash U has helped me with forensics over the years. She used the latest DNA techniques and found something not in the report.”

Clearly, this kid is a better investigator than Poppy is. She reads the printout, a report on Washington University in St. Louis letterhead:

Our opinion, based on a reasonable degree of scientific certainty, is that the hair collected from Benedict Cromwell’s sleeping bag and the hair used to compare the sample came from the same hairbrush.

Poppy feels her heart drop. There’s a lot of technical jargon on how they were able to determine that the strand found on the sleeping bag, which supposedly came from Ali’s head years before, and the comparison strand came from the same brush.

“So you’re saying...”

“That the evidence on the sleeping bag was planted. It was taken there and put on the sleeping bag.”

“By who?”

Ziggy raises his brows. He has a baby face, but right now he looks like a seasoned college professor.

“Well, who had the hairbrush?”

Poppy's office. That's who. "Why would anyone...?"

Ziggy shrugs again. "Someone wanted the world to think MRK killed Alison for some reason."

"But why would someone want to blame MRK for Alison's murder?" Poppy asks.

"My guess: to protect whoever really took her."

"And who would that be?"

Ziggy looks at her, exasperated. "You need to listen to Episode Eighteen."

FLORENCE, ITALY

Nora was right. Pinky Man raced to the Florence airport. But the trail ran cold at the rental car drop-off. The AirTag stayed with the car, so Pinky Man is now somewhere in the crowded airport, if not already on a plane heading to who-knows-where.

Peretola Airport is a madhouse. There are no separate departure and arrival areas like in the U.S., and cars and cabs zig and zag, stopping abruptly to load and unload travelers.

Ryan looks around for a place to pull over, but the van is too big. He needs to get inside before his quarry gets away. “Can you take the wheel?” Ryan asks Nora. “If he gets to the gate we’ll never—”

Nora shakes her head. Of course. Ryan’s the only one who can drive stick.

“You need to go inside. See if you spot him.”

“Okay, but what if I see him? What then?”

“Tell security he has a gun.”

Nora appears skeptical. But when he judders to a stop, she gets out and hurry-walks into the terminal.

As Ryan circles the airport a second time, he receives a text:

Don't see him and can't go to gates without ticket

Ryan contemplates having her buy a ticket to anywhere. But it's pointless. The airport is large and Pinky Man could be boarded by the time she gets a ticket and makes her way through security. He texts back, asking her to check what flights are leaving within the next hour. That might at least narrow down where the man was rushing off to.

Ten minutes later, he retrieves Nora.

"He stopped somewhere before he went to the airport," Ryan says in a rush. "Does the AirTag show the address?"

"Yeah, I pinned it."

Nora taps her phone. Ryan hears a chime on his phone and sees the address arrive by text.

"What now?" Nora asks.

Ryan pauses. "This is pointless. Let's go meet the others."

She seems surprised he's giving up. Crestfallen. But she says nothing.

It takes an hour to return to the Arezzo train station. He stops at the street adjacent to the drab entrance.

"I'll meet you on the platform."

She shakes her head, confused.

“I need to get the van back to the rental company.”

She looks at her phone. “There’s a train to Rome in thirty minutes.”

“I should make it, but if not, I’ll catch the next one. You go on ahead.”

She doesn’t respond, just climbs out of the van. Turning, she says, “I’ll see you on the platform.” It isn’t a question, but it sounds like one.

And she’s right to think he won’t show. He can’t put her at any more risk.

Half an hour later, he pulls up to a small resort in Madonnino, the place Pinky Man stopped before heading to the airport. It’s another bed-and-breakfast. Pinky Man must have stayed here. Maybe he can find out the man’s name.

He pulls the van to an iron gate securing the resort. There’s an intercom. He leans out the window and finds the call button. There’s a structure at the top of a hill ahead. Another old farmhouse converted to lodging.

He presses the button. After a moment, a voice says something in Italian.

Ryan says, “Hi, do you speak English? I’m interested in seeing the lodge—I’m from an American university and we need longer-term housing for our abroad program.” He doesn’t like to lie. But maybe he can recommend the place for next year’s law journal trip.

The voice, this time in English, says, “Can you make an appointment? We have guests checking in soon and need to finish getting everything ready.”

“I leave today. If there’s any way you can show me, it can be quick. I’m sorry, I’ve been visiting a number of properties and someone I met said yours would be perfect.

It could be a lot of business for you if it works out.”

There’s another long pause. Then the iron gate comes to life, the doors swing open.

Ryan jams the stick shift into gear and putters up the hill.

He’s met by a short heavyset woman. She watches as he parks. An unleashed dog rushes up to him when he gets out.

“Don’t mind Bella. She loves to welcome guests.”

Ryan crouches down and lets the dog lick him on the face. Few things in this world can make you feel better than a dog.

Ryan comes over, shakes hands. Shows his Georgetown student ID and explains the school’s annual trip, exaggerates about the school needing additional accommodations for the abroad program.

The woman, Angie is her name, gives him a quick tour.

First the outdoors—the infinity pool overlooking more vineyards, the postcard-perfect cypress trees. The area is nicer than where he and his classmates stayed. He tells her as much.

“I know that place,” she says without elaboration, as if Ryan’s B and B is a rival.

She shows him the common area for guests. It has tile floors, a long wooden table. That’s when he sees the guest book. It’s large and is on a stand with the open book displaying signatures.

“You get many American guests?”

“Oh yes. And a lot of Germans. People from all over the world.”

“That’s great.”

“Yeah, except for the Swiss.”

Ryan doesn’t know what that’s about and doesn’t ask. “I love the guest book. Everyone signs in when they arrive?” He examines the book with admiration.

“Oh yes, I insist. We have their registration. But it’s nice to have an informal record that other guests can read.”

He tries to make out the names of the visitors. But she calls him over to the patio where they serve a multicourse breakfast every morning.

Angie eyes a woman sitting by the pool. “Six courses and she wants only toast. The Swiss...” She shakes her head. “And they always give less than five stars.”

Ryan needs to get back to that book. “Any American guests lately?”

“We had a man this week. He didn’t say where he was from, but I know a Philly accent when I hear one. He’s American, but lives in the UK now.”

Ryan doesn’t pry. He can’t seem too eager. “Speaking of accents. Do I detect Chicago?”

She laughs. “Good ear. But don’t make me say ‘da Bears.’”

“Well, your place is amazing. I’m going to recommend it to the school.”

“Okay, well, make sure to tell them to book early. It’s harder with larger groups.

Most rooms only have double beds, so it's not set up for the roommate thing. And remember, if you look at the reviews, anything less than five stars were the Swiss."

She escorts Ryan to the door. "Shoot," he says as they pass the guest book. "I seem to have set down my phone." He makes a show of checking his pockets. "The patio maybe."

"I can check."

When Angie leaves, Ryan pulls out his phone. He snaps photos of the open guest book pages. He flips the prior page and nervously takes another photo.

He then calls out, "Sorry, I found it."

Back in the van, he pulls up the photos.

The most recent page has only three names. The first is a woman from Switzerland. The toast lady. There's another woman's name. Then he sees it.

"Peter Jones, Lackford, England." A fake-sounding name if he's ever heard one. Says "Ryan Smith."

The woman said the American guest lives in the UK. Jones is the only guest from the UK. And Nora learned that of the two flights leaving soonest from the airport, one was to London's Heathrow.

He's got him.

PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA

Michael softly raps his knuckle on his daughter's bedroom door.

He waits for Taylor to respond before opening it a crack. She sits on top of the covers in an oversized sweatshirt. Her laptop is nearby, frozen on some video she's watching. He should monitor her screen time more, he knows. He should monitor everything a lot more.

He holds a black dress from a dry-cleaner hanger, the plastic sticking to the garment from the electricity. He remembers the last time she wore this dress—her mother's funeral—and hopes it still fits.

"I need you to try this on. We'll have to stop by Macy's in the morning to get you something if you've grown out of it."

"It'll fit."

Michael nods. "I know going to a funeral will be hard..."

"Then why are you making me go?"

Michael is surprised at the anger in her tone. "We've been through this. It's the right thing to do."

"And you're afraid."

“Yes, I’m afraid. I’m not sure you appreciate the situation. Anthony O’Leary’s father is a dangerous man. If he finds out about the—”

“He won’t find out.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Dylan made sure everybody scrubbed their phones. No one’s gonna talk.”

Spoken like an invincible teenager.

“And I think the real question is why do you work for such a dangerous man?”

“This isn’t about me, Taylor.”

His daughter makes a huffing sound and dramatically turns away from him.

“Try it on,” is all he says before leaving the room.

Later, in his study, he thinks about Taylor’s question: Why do you work for such a dangerous man? He could never tell her the truth. That he’s simply repaying a debt.

It’s funny, when someone dies, there’s this tendency to deify them. To make them perfect in every way. To completely ignore their shortcomings, their problems, their demons. But the truth of the matter was that Taylor’s mother had many shortcomings, many problems, many demons. It started with the Amazon packages, so many that every other day looked like Christmas. Then it was home shopping club. The mall. When he cut her off, she turned to a new addiction, sports betting apps. And when the credit cards got maxed out, she found her way to the casino. When he blocked her access to their accounts, she started playing through bookies on credit. Which led her to the world of Shane O’Leary.

Even after her cancer diagnosis, she continued. Michael found a GoFundMe campaign she'd sent to old high-school and college friends. It was supposed to go toward her medical expenses. But every dime went to that bookie.

And her debts didn't die with her. It was only two weeks after her funeral when a man in a leather jacket stopped by Michael's office. He explained how things worked. But they'd given Michael an out: Help Mr. O'Leary and the debt can go away.

So that's how I got to work for such a dangerous man, sweetheart. It was my inheritance from your mother.

He's startled by Taylor appearing in the doorway. She's wearing the black dress. She's been crying.

"I'm sorry, okay. I never thought he'd..."

Michael takes her in his arms. "It's not your fault." He holds her as she weeps. He brushes a tear from his own eye because he knows Shane O'Leary would never see it that way.

FLORENCE, ITALY

Ryan sits in the molded plastic seat at Peretola Airport, lost in his thoughts. The next flight to Heathrow is at eight. It cost 300 euros, so he used his credit card. He hates racking up debt. But he needs to do this. If she's alive—which he cannot fully accept but cannot fully let go—he needs to find Pinky Man and make him tell the truth. Make him explain why she's in danger, who are the dead men in the car, what really happened that night. He's googled the name Peter Jones, the name in the B-and-B guest book. There's a famous British entrepreneur with that name, but he looks nothing like Pinky Man. There's also a department store in London called Peter Jones Partners. It's obvious that Pinky Man is using a fake name, a ubiquitous one that isn't internet-search friendly.

Ryan also googled the town of Lackford. It's an English hamlet, population 270. A farming community outside larger Bury Saint Edmunds. The Wiki page shows an old church. The town has a website, but it hasn't been updated in two years based on the date of the last entry.

There's a pub on the outskirts called Black Ditches, so that seems like a good place to start. In a town of fewer than three hundred, someone's going to know a man missing both pinky fingers if he lives there. He could've used a false address in the B-and-B guest book. But why would he? He wouldn't think Ryan would track him there. Ryan supposes he'll find out soon enough.

The airport's overhead speaker blares. Like in U.S. terminals, it's distorted and unintelligible. More so because the voice is in Italian. But he spots travelers who look British—don't ask him why, he's not sure, they just do—head to the line to board, so

he follows.

The thoughts come again. What's he doing? This is nuts. He should call the police, go to Rome.

But who would believe him?

Nora.Nora does.

Maybe his parents would believe. Maybe his lawyer. But there's nothing they can do so far away. And the Kansas cops? Can they even be trusted? He remembers Pinky Man mentioning the sheriff in Leavenworth.

On the plane, he closes his eyes and hopes for some sleep. But no such luck. It's too uncomfortable. There's not enough leg room for someone five feet tall, much less his height.

A kid plops next to him. He's about ten or eleven, Ryan guesses. His parents are wrangling three other younger kids. In an English accent, the kid's mother says, "I hope you don't mind?"

Ryan smiles.

The kid turns to him. "Are you American?"

Ryan gives him a look. "What gave it away?"

The kid shrugs. He guesses that's just the way it is sometimes.

"I like America," the boy says.

“Yeah? You’ve been?”

“California. We stayed in Hollywood.”

“Cool,” Ryan says. “Did you see any movie stars?”

“No. But we went to Hollywood Boulevard with all the stars on the sidewalk. And I got a picture with Spider-Man.”

The kid reaches for his small backpack. He retrieves a Polaroid that shows him standing next to one of those street performers who dress like superheroes and sell photos to tourists.

To be a kid, when life is so simple and your prized possession is a photo with a sweaty dude in a dirty Spider-Man costume.

The boy has large eyes and sucks on a piece of hard candy. He asks, “Why are you coming to England?”

To find the man who abducted my girlfriend. To find the man who ruined my life.

“Are you on holiday?” the boy adds.

“Something like that.”

“Where’s your family?” The kid looks around the cabin.

“My mom and dad are in the States. Have you heard of Kansas?”

He nods. “In the middle of the U.S.”

He's bright, this kid.

"Are you married?" the boy asks.

Ryan chuckles. "Not yet. I'm still in school."

The boy digests this.

"Girlfriend?"

"No, you?"

The kid blushes.

"I won't tell," Ryan says, smiling.

"A gentleman never does."

It goes on like this with the kid for the entire flight. Ryan doesn't mind. One of the other passengers huffs at the chatter and puts on large headphones of the noise-canceling variety. But Ryan realizes he needed this. Needed the purity of this boy. A reminder that there are bright spots in the world.

After Ryan has landed and gone through the usual airport nonsense, it's late, the rental car companies are either closed or booked solid. Ryan searches for the cheapest nearby hotel he can find, and forty minutes later he's in line with other weary-looking travelers at the Heathrow Holiday Inn Express.

Inside his room, he takes a shower—makes the water as hot as he can without scalding himself—and he cries. What's he doing? He should be in Rome with his friends—with Nora—having the time of his life. He should've moved on by now. But

he's simply unable to get over that night.

It's not just because he loved Alison. Though he did truly love her, they weren't perfect like everybody thought. There is no such thing as a perfect couple. During their senior year, Ali had feelings for another guy, kissed him. It was a mistake, she said. And Ryan would've never found out about it if she hadn't unburdened herself. When they got into arguments, as every couple does, he sometimes threw the indiscretion in her face. He's not proud of it. But he forgave her. Even refused to know who the guy was, lest rage take over. Honestly, he understood Ali's temptation. As the star of the basketball team, he'd had no shortage of opportunities. He sometimes wondered what it would be like to be with another girl. He and Ali were so young. And Ryan's parents, with their obnoxious meant-to-be story, were, frankly, an oddity. That last night at Lovers' Lane, Ryan wondered if it was a goodbye for a reason.

His phone pings with a text. He scans the device. Nora:

i take it you're not coming to Rome

Ryan should text her, tell her that he's tracked Pinky Man down, or at least that he's in England. But he doesn't want her doing something rash, flying here. And if he's honest with himself, this sudden rush of memories about Alison makes his feelings for Nora seem almost like a betrayal. So, he responds the way everyone from his generation responds to a question they don't want to answer: He ignores the text. Then he closes his eyes and hopes to fall asleep.

LEAVENWORTH, KANSAS

Episode Eighteen of the Treehouse podcast is troubling. Poppy listens on her phone's tinny speaker as she drives home from Ziggy's house. Tonight, the interstate is crowded with long-haul trucks. Unlike the police, Ziggy had identified a witness, a thirty-year-old woman who claims to have seen a suspicious man at Lovers' Lane the night Alison was taken. Ziggy's voice sounds higher in the interview than when Poppy met with him.

"What did you see?" Ziggy asks.

"My boyfriend at the time and I were parked at Lovers' Lane, the section that's farthest from the road. He got out of the car to take a pee and he said he saw somebody prowling around near the other car."

"What was the man doing?"

"My boyfriend watched the guy. He seemed to be spying on the couple in the other car."

"You believe the other car was Alison Lane's father's car?"

"I'm not totally sure of it. But there aren't too many BMWs at Lovers' Lane. My boyfriend had commented about the car. So we're watching and the guy is lurking and then we lost sight of him. But I was creeped out, so we got outta there."

"Why didn't you come forward sooner?" Ziggy questions like a skilled prosecutor,

yet he must have been only ten or so at the time of the interview.

“‘Cause I was married to someone else at the time. We’ve since gotten divorced.”

Poppy feels a hand squeezing her insides. How could the police—her office—miss this witness? Or were they not looking? Purposefully not looking.

Look in your own house.

Ziggy continues: “Could you identify the man if you saw him now?”

“No. He was tall, kinda lanky, but I didn’t get a look at his face.”

“Was there anything you saw that would help identify him? His age or race? The type of car he was in?”

“No,” the witness says. But then she says something that nearly causes Poppy to veer off the road:

“When we were leaving Lovers’ Lane, we saw this old-time motorcycle parked out of the way. No owner in sight.”

“What do you mean by ‘old-time motorcycle’?”

“It was like one of those ones with a sidecar, like old war movies where there’re two people who can ride at the same time.”

Poppy feels nauseous, she thinks she may throw up. But it’s coming together.

Dash.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:07 am

PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA

Shane O’Leary threads through the mourners like a zombie. The wake at their estate is packed with black suits and black dresses and black hearts on this black night. It’s not a traditional Catholic vigil. Anthony’s casket isn’t there. No priest blathering on. They’re lapsed Catholics, after all. A server offers him hors d’oeuvres from a silver tray and he declines.

He sees Gina in the far corner of the grand room near the Steinway. He flashes to an image of Gina and Anthony sitting on the piano bench, her showing him how to play something. It’s too much, he can’t do this.

Someone stops, says something, and he nods. It’s like he’s out of his body. He needs a drink. He slips into the hallway and past Brian, his hulk of a brother, who stands at the foot of the spiral staircase. Security at a wake—what a sacrilege. But it’s for the best. In his business, some are bound to view this as an opportunity. A chink in the armor. If he can’t protect his own son...

Upstairs, he heads into his private study. It’s the only room Anthony wasn’t allowed in. The only room O’Leary won’t be slammed in the heart by memories of his little boy.

He doesn’t turn on the light. He just heads over to the bar cart and pours himself a Macallan—expensive stuff that someone gave him as a gift. And he falls into the leather chair.

He eyes his big, expensive desk. Gina found it at some auction house. He couldn’t

believe how much she paid for it. And he's never told her about having a gun holster mounted under it.

He chokes back a sob, knowing that Anthony used one of O'Leary's own guns. He was usually so careful. This was normally the only place in the house he kept firearms. He left a Glock in the bedside table one time, after they'd fed that Sabatino soldier to the fish and feared retaliation, and Anthony must've found it. One goddamned time.

There's a tap on the door.

"Go away," O'Leary calls out.

"Boss, you have a moment?" Chaz's voice comes from behind the door.

The door opens a crack, Chaz pokes his head in. He has dark circles under his eyes that match the suit. "Sorry to bother you, boss. Gina asked if I'd check on you."

"What? She think I'm gonna off myself too?"

"No, I think she—"

"Come on in. Get a drink, take a seat, my friend."

Chaz pours himself a glass, takes one of the fine wicker chairs that are more decorative than functional, and pulls it close to O'Leary.

They sit quietly for a long while. O'Leary has always appreciated that Chaz is one of those guys who talks only when they have something to say. Unlike the rest of the nitwits in the crew.

“You hear from the computer guy?” O’Leary asks.

Chaz shifts in his chair. “I did, Shane.” He rarely calls O’Leary by his first name even though Chaz has known him since he was a boy, was his dad’s top man. Chaz could treat O’Leary like a kid, but he doesn’t. He shows respect.

“And...”

“How about we talk about it tomorrow, after the funeral?”

“I want to know now.”

Chaz retrieves a cell phone from his jacket’s inside pocket. “Anthony’s phone didn’t tell us much. He deleted a lot of what was on it. But our guy managed to find some texts. He was being bullied.”

O’Leary feels the temperature of his blood bubble, his breath shorten. He takes a drink, lets Chaz continue.

“It gets worse.” Chaz swallows. “Our guy got into the headmaster’s computer and phone. The school knew—and the headmaster and some parents covered it up.”

O’Leary listens in a haze. About weeks of relentless bullying. About a video of his son. About a report to the school about it. About the slap on the wrists to the kids who did it. About powerful people making sure it stayed quiet.

“You have the video?”

“Shane, you don’t want to—”

“Show me the goddamned video!”

Chaz looks down at his lap, then fiddles with his phone.

O'Leary feels the tears streaming down his face as he watches. He can't seem to swallow, to say anything. He feels a cocktail of unbridled sadness and rage.

Gina's standing in front of him talking now, a concerned look on her face. Chaz is saying something to her, but O'Leary can't make out the words. Then he sees her rip the phone away from Chaz and slide to the floor in devastation.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:07 am

Chaz leaves O'Leary and Gina in the study. They need to be alone in their despair. Those two have been joined at the hip since they were teenagers, and Chaz is glad they have each other. He doesn't think either would get through this alone.

O'Leary was brutally abused as a child, and Chaz has always regretted not doing anything about it. At the time, he told himself that it wasn't his role to interfere with how someone raises their kid. Not to mention that crossing Shane's father could result in spending eternity buried in a hole at the body farm. But on certain days, in a certain light, he doesn't see his boss, but instead, a sixteen-year-old with a black eye or a cast on his arm and Chaz regrets he was a coward. But who's he to judge? Chaz was a shit father himself to Patrick.

The caterers are cleaning up, gliding around trying to remain invisible as they gather glasses and plates and start breaking down the tall tables they'd covered with flowing covers.

Chaz finds Patrick and his crew in the living room, standing in front of a television. They're watching a recap of the Eagles game.

Chaz feels a wave of anger. He approaches the group, asks Patrick for a word. Patrick is about to protest, but he must see the red in his father's face.

"Have some respect, it's a wake."

"What? It's over. They went upstairs and aren't gonna—" Patrick stops midsentence and he looks a shade paler.

Chaz follows his glance and sees Gina in the living room. “Jesus,” Chaz says, shuttling over to the crew.

One of the boys wisely shuts off the television. He looks at Gina. “Mrs. O’Leary, I’m sorry, we thought you were turned in for the night, and—”

She cuts him off with a shake of the head.

Chaz is about to intervene but decides to let this play out. These boys need to learn some manners.

“You call yourself a crew?”

“Mrs. O’Leary—” another one of them starts to say, but stops talking.

“Watching the game when the people who caused this to happen are going about their lives like nothing’s changed.”

Patrick says, “I’m sorry, Mrs. O’Leary, we are actually—”

“After we bury Anthony tomorrow,” Gina cuts in, “I’m taking my husband on a trip, far away from here. And while we’re gone, any self-respecting crew would make sure this matter is taken care of.”

To Chaz’s surprise, Patrick answers: “It’s already in the works, Mrs. O’Leary.”

“Good, get it done.” Gina turns and storms away.

Chaz walks over to Patrick. In a quiet voice he says, “What did you do?”

“You’re always saying I need to take initiative.” He eyes his father. “So I did.”

LEAVENWORTH, KANSAS

Poppy pulls into the driveway of her house. She's called her brother repeatedly, but he's ignoring her. Dash knows something about Alison's abduction. Or worse. She can't let herself deny it anymore. It's been there the whole time. Buckman, so angry that his investigation was being stifled, believing he'd been wrongfully terminated: Look in your own house. Alison's friend Ruby Quinn: Ask your brother. Now the podcast's witness who saw a motorcycle and sidecar—like the ridiculous and rare one of Dash's—at Lovers' Lane that night.

But that's not what's making her skin crawl. It's the question she asked Ziggy: Why would someone want to blame MRK for Alison's murder? And Ziggy's response: To protect whoever really took her.

Who would want to protect Dash if he'd done something horrific? The answer strikes a lightning bolt to her core. Their father. Helped by his closest friend in the world, the man who helped him survive in Iraq, Sheriff Ken Walton.

Poppy marches to the front door. It's time to confront her father. She pushes through the front door, steeling herself. She hears the television still on.

Charging into the living room, she's stopped in her tracks.

In the blue light, she sees her father spread out on the floor. He's not moving.

“Dad!”

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:07 am

PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA

Michael wakes up abruptly to the pinging of his phone, jolting upright. The sharp morning sun cuts through the window. He's had a restless sleep, filled with dreams he can't remember. It's probably for the best because he's also filled with dread, so they can't have been good ones. The phone pings and pings again, which is always ominous this early in the morning.

Please don't be O'Leary, he prays.

He reaches for the device and sees three email notices from Taylor's school. The subject lines wake him up: Alert! Fire on Campus; Alert! Classes Canceled; Alert! Information for Students and Parents.

The headmaster's quarters—the grand residence on the hill of the Academy—caught fire well after midnight. But that's not what sends his heart into free fall. It's that Headmaster Pendleton is believed to have succumbed to the blaze.

It's a coincidence, an awful coincidence, Michael tells himself. This isn't an episode of Dateline, it's real life. And in real life, awful coincidences and tragedies happen. It has nothing to do with what happened to Anthony O'Leary. Nothing to do with what Michael and the other parents did to protect their children.

Michael swings his legs out of the bed, heads to check on Taylor. Her bedroom door is shut, but there's noise coming from inside. He puts his ear near to the door. He thinks he hears crying.

“Taylor,” he says to the closed door. “Everything okay?”

She says something he can’t make out, so he slowly turns the knob and eases the door open.

She’s in bed and is sobbing.

“Taylor, honey, what’s the matter?”

She sits up, pushes her back against the headboard. Tears stream down her face, her breath jittering.

“What is it, sweetie?” She’s probably heard about the fire, about Pendleton. Although that’s probably upsetting, he thinks it’s something more.

“It’s Dylan,” she says.

This takes him aback. Dylan, one of the kids from her friend group. The attorney general’s son. Then his heart smashes to the floor: one of the kids in the video.

“What about him?”

“He, like, overdosed.”

Michael’s head is spinning. Overdosed? He’s fourteen years old. Taylor and her friends aren’t into drugs.

“Overdosed?”

Taylor gasps for air as she tries to talk. “Lana’s parents are friends with Dylan’s parents. She said they found him unconscious last night. They say he overdosed on

something.”

“Is he going to be okay?” The sad truth is that Michael isn’t so much worried about Dylan but instead that his daughter’s close friend is taking drugs. That maybe all the kids are. That maybe Taylor has been too. That maybe Michael’s been an oblivious parent. But then a more terrifying thought slams into him: What if this wasn’t an accidental overdose?

“Lana doesn’t know.” Taylor starts crying again.

“I’m so sorry.” Michael sits on the bed and opens his arm for a hug.

“Do you think he’s going to be okay?” she asks, burying her head in his chest.

Michael doesn’t answer. All he can think about is the video. Dylan unzipping his pants and urinating on the immobilized Anthony O’Leary.

LACKFORD, ENGLAND

Ryan pulls the rental car off the A11. Driving in London was terrifying—even more so than a van in Tuscany—mostly because they drive on the opposite side of the road. Fitting in the Mini Cooper doesn't help. But it was the only car available at the discount rental car place near the airport.

It took nearly two hours, but he's finally here. The village of Lackford is as promised: a cluster of modest homes in an ordinary town—at least by European standards. England's equivalent to Leavenworth, Kansas.

He follows his phone's navigation to the pub called Black Ditches. What did people do before GPS?

He walks into the pub aware that a stranger—especially a six-four, American stranger—will not go unnoticed.

Inside is what you'd expect in the middle of the afternoon. A smattering of men hunched on stools. Eyes glued to the television behind the bar. Weathered faces. Calloused hands and work boots.

Surprisingly, they don't give Ryan a second look. It's one of those kinds of places. Mind your own business, like the joints near his dad's factory in Leavenworth.

Ryan takes a stool, and the barman hobbles over. He must be in his seventies. Ryan orders a pint. When in Rome. With that thought, his mind jumps to Nora. She's sent him several texts from Rome, each more agitated than the last, about him ditching

that leg of the trip. The professor who supervises the law journal is pissed that he skipped the meeting with the alumnus donor. He's sent her a quick text saying very little, but at least providing proof of life.

The old-timer says nothing as he pours the beer from the tap, sets the tall glass on the bar. Ryan takes a sip. It's lukewarm. He smiles, thinking of one of Eddie's rants: What's the aversion to ice-cold beer, ice-cold anything?

There's surprisingly little chatter in the place. No opening for him to ask a question.

He considers how to play this. Should he pretend Pinky Man is a relative? He's there to surprise him? Plausible. But these blokes aren't going to buy it. Maybe say he found Pinky Man's wallet? No, they might ask Ryan to leave it for him at the pub.

"Can I ask you a question?" Ryan says.

"You can ask," the barman says in a thick regional accent.

"I'm trying to find an old friend of my dad's. My father passed away and he wanted his war buddy from Iraq to have his medals." Ryan's dad was never in the military. But in the heat of coming up with a lie, he remembered Ali saying that her dad had served in Iraq.

The man wipes the bar with a rag. He's thinking.

"My dad said his old friend would be hard to miss since he's missing fingers on both hands." Ryan holds up both hands, folds in his pinky fingers. "It's peculiar, I know, but that's what my dad said. His friend's name is Peter Jones."

The barman looks up with his leather shoe of a face. "Sorry, mate."

Ryan's mind leaps to Pinky Man at the Palazzo. I think someone's found me. That morning Ryan searched the internet for reports of sightings of Pinky Man in the UK but found nothing. That could be because there is nothing or that Ryan simply missed it in the literally hundreds of podcasts, blogs, and websites relating to Alison's abduction.

Next Ryan tries something he learned from television. He puts a ten-euro note on the table. It's not much, but he's running low on money. It doesn't help that England uses British pounds, not euros, but he didn't have time to convert his cash.

The man eyes the bill. "What part of 'Sorry, mate' didn't ya understand?"

Ryan holds up his palms. He surveys the pub, but the patrons all examine their drinks. It's good news, actually. They know Pinky Man. Ryan's on the right track.

Ryan heads outside. Near the front of the pub, a group of teenagers eyeballs him. They're not the gentlemanly handsome Englishmen from the movies. Turns out that the UK and the rest of Europe are like the U.S.: Not everyone's wealthy, not everyone's good-looking. And not everyone's nice.

He decides to give it a chance. "I'm looking for someone who lives in town. Do you know where I can find Peter Jones's place? He's a friend of the family."

"He's a friend of the family," the leader of the group repeats in a mocking American accent. His buddies laugh. "Piss off," the kid says.

Ryan watches the kids jerking around as they disappear down the street. This place is definitely not getting five stars on TripAdvisor. And he's not even Swiss.

What now? He studies the row of houses and wonders if any have mailboxes. Perhaps with names on them. He sees none and isn't even sure if that's a thing in England.

The sky is a wall of gloom. But then something catches his eye. The steeple of a church, probably the one pictured on the Wiki page.

A pastor or priest isn't likely to lie to Ryan.

He heads down the sidewalk, a pitted lane of asphalt with grass sprouting from the cracks. The adjacent street is a treeless road with a single line of homes. As he walks, he wonders how Pinky Man might have ended up in this town. Does he have some connection to the village? An extended family member, maybe. But his accent and demeanor are decidedly American. The B-and-B lady thought he had a Philly accent, which seems right. This village is out of the way, no tourist sights, so it would be a good place to lie low. But why hide out? Most people thought either Ryan made up seeing Pinky Man to cover for his own involvement in the crime or it was the result of a concussion or quack hypnosis. At the Palazzo, Pinky Man seemed genuinely scared of someone other than the police, but who?

The sidewalk ends. Ryan makes his way along the trampled grass toward the old stone church. On either side of the path are vast open fields. It feels like he's walking back in time. He can almost imagine townspeople from the 1500s strolling this same route. To the town's credit, it has left things as they were.

The sky is dark gray now. At the end of the path is a wooden gate to the fence surrounding the church grounds. He walks through it, passes a small cottage that has a sign near the door that says: GROUNDSKEEPER. Moss-covered gravestones speckle the grounds in no discernable order. A cluster stands near an old tree, another on the outer boundary close to a stone wall. The entrance to the old church has a portico, under which stand two ancient-looking wooden doors. The wind whooshes through the space. Ryan pushes on one of the doors and it groans as it opens.

The church is dimly lit. It's a beautiful, if humble, place of worship. A lectern in the front. Worn pews on each side.

It's empty. He's wasting his time. This trip was for nothing. But he's come this far. Maybe whoever leads this congregation is around. That's someone who, unlike the townsfolk, won't lie to him—or at least won't tell him to piss off.

“Hello,” he calls out, his voice echoing.

Nothing.

He gazes around the empty church. It's quiet save the wind rattling the stained glass. Defeated, he heads to the door. He notices a corridor near the entrance away from the main area of worship. Might as well give it a look.

He walks down the hallway that leads to a small room that has folded chairs stacked against the wall. A bulletin board with signs pinned to it. One for a rummage sale. Another about youth activities. On the wall opposite, photos of church staff. There's one of a man in a green robe with the title of REAM RECTOR. Other photos of vicars and priests.

In the second row, there's a photo of a friendly-looking woman. Her title is READER.

But it's the photo in the bottom row that grabs Ryan's attention. It's of the church's groundskeeper. The man wears coveralls and gloves. But there's no mistaking it:

It's Pinky Man.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:07 am

PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA

Just when Michael thinks the day—the week—can't get any worse, he turns on the local news.

The anchor reads the copy in a somber tone. “The Academy community is mourning a series of tragedies today. Last night, the home of the school’s headmaster, Leslie Pendleton, caught fire, killing the fifty-eight-year-old head of the elite private school. Officials initially deemed the fire suspicious, but the fire inspector has since reevaluated the scene and designated it an electrical fire. The incident has sent shock waves through the school community. Now, we have reports of another tragedy: Two Academy students were found unconscious. Both were rushed to the emergency room, where they died of what sources say appears to be a fentanyl overdose.”

Taylor appears in the kitchen, and Michael scrambles to turn off the television. But she’s holding her phone—which undoubtedly has blown up with texts delivering the same news. Her knees give.

Michael races over to her on the kitchen floor.

“Dylan’s gone. So is Gabrielle.” She sobs uncontrollably. Gabrielle is Dylan’s girlfriend, another one of Taylor’s friend group. Another from the Anthony O’Leary video.

Michael helps Taylor off the floor and guides her to a chair. He tells her to take deep breaths. That everything is going to be all right. It’s a long time before she stops sobbing, appears to regain control. He has her drink some water, gives her some

Advil PM to help her sleep, then guides her back to bed. They were supposed to go to Anthony O’Leary’s funeral today, but he decided against it.

The chime of his phone nearly makes him jump. But it’s the name on the caller ID that causes a noticeable shake in his hands: Shane O’Leary.

He grips the phone as it chimes for the third time. Michael steadies himself and swipes the device. “Mr. O’Leary,” he says. He keeps his tone steady, tries to sound normal.

“Michael, how are you?”

“Fine, sir. I’m so sorry we missed the service. I don’t know if you saw, but there have been tragedies at the Academy, and my daughter’s been upset and—”

“I understand, Michael. I’m calling about something else.”

Michael feels the acid crawling up his throat. O’Leary didn’t ask the natural question What tragedies?

“So I need you to run some transactions,” O’Leary says. “You got a pen?”

“Yes, absolutely. What do you have in mind?”

O’Leary hesitates. “It seems my companies have been infiltrated by a corporate spy. I need to move some assets to make sure they’re secure.”

Translation: O’Leary thinks there’s a rat—someone talking to the Feds. He wants to hide his money somewhere else.

“I’m sorry to hear that. Especially with all you’re going through. What do you need?”

“Write down these account numbers.” O’Leary lists eighteen accounts. Michael recognizes them as Swiss bank configurations. O’Leary wants him to move all of his money to these new accounts.

“This is a lot of movement and high amounts,” Michael advises him. “It’s going to take a little time to do this so there are no inaccuracies.” In other words, so it won’t raise red flags with regulators.

“Whatever you gotta do. My wife and I are headed out of town for a few days. I’d really like it done before we return.”

“Will do.”

The line goes dead.

Michael stands staring at nothing, thinking. The call was unnerving. One, if there’s someone talking to the Feds about O’Leary and his accounts, it could implicate Michael. Two, and more troubling, O’Leary wants his money transferred to accounts that Michael doesn’t control. That means he has someone else helping him manage his funds. Someone to maintain the accounts in the event something happens to Michael...

LEAVENWORTH, KANSAS

Poppy and her brother arrive at their childhood home, Poppy's current home, in the afternoon. It's been a long night at the hospital. Her father's alive, but it's touch and go. It wasn't the cancer this time, not directly, anyway. It's an infection from the chemo, which lowered Dad's white count, which resulted in neutropenia, which led to an infection that worsened to sepsis. The dominos fell quickly. Their father is in the ICU on a ventilator. The doctor—an alpha type with little bedside manner but probably strong medical skills—told them that they weren't doing any good taking up seats in the waiting room.

“He's gonna be all right,” Dash says at last. It's not for Poppy's sake. He's reassuring himself. He and Dad have a unique bond, one forged from basketball and guy stuff. She knows her father loves her. But she also knows Dash is who he was probably thinking about when he collapsed on the floor. And, while Poppy would be crushed if her father didn't come out of this, she would push through. She's not so sure about Dash.

She eyes her brother. She feels what can best be described as disgust. The evidence doesn't lie. The high-school friends telling her to ask Dash about Alison. Disgraced cop Buckman suggesting that she get her own house in order. And the podcast—the witness describing someone who could have been Dash at Lovers' Lane that night. Dash's weird behavior—crying in his room—the day they found the car in Suncatcher Lake.

She'd considered confronting her brother at the hospital. But between the hospital staff and people in the waiting room, there was no opportunity to get him alone. Also,

Sheriff Walton was there most of the night. He told stories of their dad surviving all kinds of peril in Iraq and assured them that cancer is going to wish it hadn't messed with Mac.

In the fleeting moments they were alone, Dash was too distraught, too distracted, for her to question him.

Now that they're home, she knows what she has to do.

"I'm gonna go take a shower," she says.

"You want a drink first?" he asks, reaching for the bottle of Jack perched on top of the refrigerator.

"I'm good," she says. But maybe she should have a drink. Her nerves are on fire, anxiety prickling her skin.

She heads down the hallway. She opens her bedroom door, then closes it loudly without going inside. She peers back to make sure Dash isn't coming. She can hear him in the kitchen, a cupboard opening, glass placed on the counter. She steps quietly and turns the handle of his bedroom door.

It opens with a quiet click. She looks back again, then goes inside. She's walking on her toes, trying not to make a sound. She moves around the bed and to the desk. She inspects the clutter until she sees it. The red shoebox.

Sitting softly on the bed, she bends over and retrieves the Jordans box, placing it on her lap. She turns to the door again, listens. Then she opens the box's lid.

Inside is a T-shirt that's been rolled up and several folded sheets of paper. Like notes you'd pass in elementary school before they all had phones. Poppy unfolds one of the

notes and apprehension spreads through every part of her:

4-4-9; 44-7-2; 73-8-12.

Her mind flits to Chantelle from KBI, who brought her the note they found in Alison's handbag. We think it's a book cipher.

Poppy feels a tear run down her cheek at the realization that her brother and Alison were communicating in the same code.

But what causes bile to run up her throat is the shirt. She doesn't want to look, but she has to. She slowly unrolls the black fabric.

It says: BON JOVI on the front. The shirt Alison was wearing the night she was abducted.

Poppy's heart nearly explodes at the sound of Dash's voice.

"It's not what you think."

LACKFORD, ENGLAND

Ryan studies the photo of the groundskeeper hanging on the wall in the side room of the church. He fishes his phone from his pocket and pulls up the sketch artist rendition of The Monster—Pinky Man, he reminds himself, adopting Nora’s rebranding of the man. The same man everyone thought was a figment of Ryan’s imagination. He holds a photo of the artist’s sketch on his phone next to the photo on the wall. If they don’t believe him now, it’s because they don’t want to. He takes a photo of the man.

He remembers that the church grounds have a small cottage with a sign for the groundskeeper. Could it be this easy? Will he find Pinky Man there?

Outside, the sky is darker now, threatening rain. He walks past an old crypt surrounded by a wrought-iron fence. The place is starting to creep him out. Should he call the police? Is he in danger? Perhaps. But Pinky Man could’ve had his goons give Ryan a beatdown or toss him over the ledge of the Palazzo Comunale. And before he rushed out, Pinky Man seemed genuinely terrified. What was that about?

Ryan reaches the small bungalow. The front light is off. He walks to the door, knocks. And it’s then he notices the door is ajar. It pushes open with the rap of his knuckle.

In the entryway is a small table with mail. Ryan eyes one of the envelopes and it’s addressed to Peter Jones.

“Hello,” he calls out.

There's nothing. It's a small place. Right off the entryway is a television in front of a worn sofa covered by a colorful yarn blanket.

"Hello?" he says again. But there's only the sound of the wind from outside. He looks back out the door. Then to the kitchen in the rear of the place. There are shoes on the kitchen floor.

Terror spouts up from his gut. He walks slowly to the kitchen and slaps on the light.

He nearly vomits when he sees them.

A woman is on the floor surrounded by a pool of blood. Her throat's been slit. The man—The Monster—is slumped on a chair. He's covered in blood. And not only his pinky fingers are missing. So are the rest of his fingers.

Fear seizes Ryan at the sound of a man's voice from behind him.

"Oi, don't you bloody move."

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:07 am

PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA

Someone has rung the doorbell. It's late and Michael is already on edge. He peers outside and sees a woman. She must see the peephole darken because she holds up an ID. He can see "FBI" prominently displayed on it.

Michael opens the door cautiously. The FBI agent introduces herself, but he doesn't take in what she's saying. His heart is pounding in his ears. O'Leary's words hang in the back of his mind: It seems my companies have been infiltrated by a corporate spy.

"Mind if I come in?" the agent says, looking over Michael's shoulder. The agent is tall with short hair, elegant in a way you wouldn't expect.

He hesitates, but his head is clearing, survival mechanisms kicking in. He's feared this day since he created the first shell company for Shane O'Leary. And he's done far worse since then.

He nods for her to come inside. Takes her to the kitchen, explains that his daughter isn't feeling well, offers the agent something to drink.

"I could use a whiskey, but I'm on duty," she says with a smile.

Michael could use a shot himself, but doesn't say so. "What can I do for you?"

The agent's smile bleeds away. She says, "You ever heard of John Favara?"

Michael is confused. It's an odd way to start a conversation. And the name is

unfamiliar.

“I can’t say that I have.”

“On a spring day in 1980, Mr. Favara was driving home from work to his house in the Howard Beach section of Queens.”

“I’m not sure what this has to do with—”

“On his way home,” the agent interrupts, “from out of nowhere, a twelve-year-old boy darts into the street on a minibike, right in front of Mr. Favara’s car. The kid is rushed to the hospital but doesn’t make it.”

“That’s horrible, but again I’m not sure what it has to do with me. I don’t know Mr. Favara. I’ve never been to Queens. I’m not clear why you’re telling me this.”

The agent stares at Michael for what seems like a long time. “I’m telling you because the kid on the minibike was the son of a man named John Gotti. Have you heard of him?”

“You mean the mobster? Yeah, I’ve heard of him. But what’s—”

“So, the police rule it a tragic accident. The kid darted into the street in a blind spot. Clear-cut accident, so Mr. Favara faced no charges.”

“Okay...”

“But then something strange happened. John Gotti went on a vacation, and you know what happened to Mr. Favara?”

Michael feels his stomach clench. A bolt of ice jammed into his chest.

“Neither does anybody else. The last time Mr. Favara was seen he was being shoved into a van by a group of men.”

Michael feels the pulse in his temple throbbing. He tries to slow his breathing, show no reaction. “Why are you telling me this?”

“Why do you think?”

“I have no idea.” Michael holds the agent’s gaze. “And I don’t have time for riddles, so unless you want to tell me what this is all about, I’m going to have to ask you to leave.”

The agent doesn’t get up. “I think you know what I’m getting at here.”

“I’m afraid I don’t.” Michael stands, signaling that it’s time for the agent to go.

“Sit down, Mr. Harper.”

“I’d like you to leave.”

“If you want to save your daughter’s life, sit.”

LEAVENWORTH, KANSAS

“I loved her.”

Poppy stares at her brother in the dim light of his childhood bedroom, amid the trophies and posters of his youth. She recognizes that she’s tired and stressed and not thinking clearly.

“What are you talking about? Why do you have her shirt?”

“Senior year, we were close... but she chose Ryan.”

“That doesn’t explain why the hell you have the shirt she was wearing the night she disappeared.”

“Because I was there that night.”

Poppy stands, shakes her head, starts pacing.

“I went to Ali’s house that night. To try to, I don’t know, give it one last shot. I got there right when she was leaving. And I don’t know why, but I followed her car.”

Poppy is having trouble processing this. So far it sounds like Dash was a creepy stalker.

Her brother’s Adam’s apple bobs up and down. “It was stupid. I followed her to Lovers’ Lane and I saw him.”

“Saw who?”

“The guy who took her.”

Poppy guffaws. “Really. And you’re only mentioning this now?”

“It happened so fast. Ali and Ryan went into the field to mess around. I realized that it was pointless me being there. She’d made her choice, and it was Ryan, not me. I was about to take off. But then it started raining and I saw them rush back to the car, and the guy was on them so damn quick.” He shakes his head as if the memory still pains him. “It was dark, but I saw him get inside the car and take off. So I followed.”

Poppy examines Dash. His eyes are glassy, his face flushed.

“You didn’t go help Ryan?” Poppy asks.

“I didn’t see him get yanked from the car. I thought the guy was taking them both. So I followed, thinking I could help.”

“Why didn’t you call for help?”

Then Dash says it, words that hit Poppy like a two-by-four: “I did. I called Dad.”

LACKFORD, ENGLAND

Ryan raises his hands, turns around slowly. He expects to see several police officers, guns drawn, but there's only a single cop with a nightstick. He has red hair and a ruddy face and can't be much older than Ryan. The officer turns even paler when he gets a look at the scene. He makes a panicked reach for his radio.

"I just found them," Ryan says. "I didn't have anything to do with this."

The young officer holds the nightstick pointed at him, keeping him at a distance.

Ryan considers lowering his hands, offering them to be cuffed, but he doesn't want to spook the cop. The U.S. has taught him a lot about the need to tread lightly with cops.

As the standoff stretches, the sound of cars, loud engines, cut the quiet. Feet stomp on damp grass. Ryan keeps his hands up high. A woman comes inside first, followed by two older guys. They don't wear uniforms, so they either are detectives or came from home.

The woman—she has unruly brown hair that's being overtaken by strands of gray, and a no-nonsense demeanor—takes in the scene. She remains calm, but Ryan catches her heavy swallow.

An hour later, Ryan sits in a windowless room at the station house.

Since the meeting at the Palazzo he's been engulfed in anguish. The thought that maybe, somehow, Ali is still alive is buzzing through his entire body. It's crazy, it's

magical thinking. But what if? If there's even a trifling chance, he has to save her. He can't let her down again. His mouth is dry and he's having a hard time swallowing.

The woman detective from earlier comes into the room. She introduces herself as Tracy Suhr. She looks tired. They took his phone, so he doesn't know what time it is. He guesses eight or nine o'clock. His stomach growls, but he has no appetite.

Suhr takes a seat across from him.

He thinks back to when Ali disappeared. The folksy, older Leavenworth sheriff sitting across from him, just like this. Asking questions carefully, in a nonthreatening manner. Then the interrogators from other agencies got more aggressive with their questions until Ryan's lawyer shut it down.

"I'd like to make a call. I have a right to—"

The detective shakes her head. "We're not in America, mate. It doesn't work like that here."

He feels a chill run through him.

She exhales, examines him. "How did you know Peter and Val Jones?"

The best course is to wait for a lawyer. Wait for a lawyer. His criminal law professor at Georgetown told him prisons would be half-empty if defendants simply kept their mouths shut. But he decides that the situation warrants the truth. As crazy as the truth may sound to this detective.

"I didn't know them."

"You were asking about Peter at the pub," she says back.

Ryan realizes that he didn't go unnoticed at the pub. Maybe the old barman told the young cop to go check on the suspicious-looking American who was asking about Jones.

"He tracked me down in Italy. I was on a trip for my school."

Suhr's expression turns curious.

Ryan takes a deep breath. And he tells her. Everything.

The detective stays quiet, but he senses extreme skepticism.

"Look at the sketch artist rendition. It's Jones. Call my lawyer in the U.S. Hell, google it."

The detective is all poker face, so it's unclear whether she believes him.

"Look, I know it sounds crazy. But was Peter Jones American? Did he have missing pinkies? Did he move here five years ago?"

Suhr finally responds. "If you believed he took your girlfriend, that's a motive...."

"Look at me." He holds up his hands, gestures to his clothes. "If I did that to them, there'd be blood evidence."

Her eyes move to the table, as if conjuring the bloody scene at the groundskeeper's home. "Whoever did this cut off his remaining fingers. Why would they do that?"

Ryan doesn't want to think about that. But the answer comes to him readily: They were torturing him for likely one of two reasons.

To take revenge. Or to get information.

LEAVENWORTH, KANSAS

Poppy sits on the bed, trying to recover from what Dash is saying. The night Alison Lane was taken, he witnessed the abduction, called their father. And then...

“Was it the Missouri River Killer who took her?” she asks.

Dash shakes his head.

“Then who?”

“Let’s get that drink.” He stands, leaves his bedroom. She follows. In the kitchen Dash pours himself another glass of Jack. Takes another glass from the cupboard and pours her one.

She downs the drink in one gulp, then takes the bottle, refills the glass, and follows Dash into the living room.

Poppy sits in Dad’s lounge chair while Dash stares absently at the photos on the fireplace mantel. There’s one of Poppy after basic training, her effort at a tough expression, the American flag behind her. Then one of their mother. One of Poppy as a little girl, smiling wide, before she grew self-conscious about the gap in her front teeth. Dash picks up another frame. It’s of Dad and Sheriff Walton and another man in desert camouflage standing on a sand dune. Despite his haunting memories from that time in his life, her dad is smiling in the picture. The same gap-toothed grin as Poppy’s.

“I followed the car. The man who took Ali drove from Lovers’ Lane to Suncatcher Lake. He was parked there like he was waiting for someone. After I called Dad, I hid and watched. Then Dad and the sheriff got there.” Dash stares at the framed photo in his hand now. “They told me to leave.”

“But you didn’t.” She can see it in his eyes.

“I loved her... I hid in the trees.”

“What happened, Dash?”

Dash swallows.

“Tell me what happened.” This time, her tone matches her new police role.

“Alison’s father showed up.”

“What?”

Dash turns to her. “Dad must’ve called him.”

Poppy shakes her head. “Why would he—”

Dash puts his index finger on the photo.

Poppy doesn’t understand. She snatches the frame from her brother and examines the photograph of her father in Iraq.

Then it hits her.

“Alison’s father was in Dad’s bomb squad?” she says in disbelief. Her father, the

sheriff, and Alison's dad served together?

Dash nods. He continues recounting what happened: "So Alison's dad shows up. Not discreet like Dad and the sheriff. It spooked the guy who took her, and the guy ran."

Poppy nods for him to continue.

"Alison's father was freaking out and he talked to Dad and the sheriff." Dash is fidgeting now. "Dad and the sheriff went after the guy who took her while Alison's father got her out of the car. She was tied up. That's when I first realized that Ryan wasn't in the car. I thought maybe the guy killed him, dumped his body. I didn't know he was knocked out, still back at Lovers' Lane."

"What happened to the man who took her?"

Dash shakes his head like he doesn't know. But his face is drained of color. "Another car pulls up. Alison's father sees it, gets Ali hidden in the woods, hides himself, and then he..."

Poppy feels a shiver travel through her. "And then he what?"

"The two guys who showed up, they walked over to Ali's car, looked inside. And her father sneaks up behind them and shoots both of them in the head." Dash's breaths are uneven now. "Dad and the sheriff came back. They caught the guy who took Ali from Lovers' Lane. I thought they were going to kill him too, but they let him go. Then they helped Alison's father put the dead guys in the BMW and roll the car into the lake."

Poppy can't believe what she's hearing.

"I came out after the car went in the lake. I was in shock. Dad told me to get home,

not tell anyone what I saw. I saw Alison's shirt in the grass, took it with me."

"So what you're saying is that..."

"Alison's alive."

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PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA

Taylor hasn't stopped crying since he told her.

The car accident resolved any doubts. Taylor's best friend, Isabella—the fourth kid in the Anthony O'Leary video—inexplicably running off the road and over the embankment. The fire, the overdoses, the car accident, none of them were accidental. The FBI agent said Michael could save his family if he turned on O'Leary. He could provide financial information that could build an airtight RICO case. The agent said it would be “easy-peasy.”

Easy-peasy. Changing their identities. Taylor leaving behind everything she's ever known. Never being able to visit her mother's grave again.

But what other choice does he have? Michael knows that the moment he transfers O'Leary's funds to those new accounts, he and Taylor will suffer their own accidents.

Michael did some quick research on WITSEC. The program is run by the U.S. Marshals, not FBI. They'll be given new identities, a home, Michael a new job. None of the eighty-five hundred witnesses and ninety-nine hundred family members in the WITSEC program has been harmed. Taylor and he will be asked their dream place to live, which is a trick, since that will ensure they don't get stationed there, as the program will assume that they've told other people the same thing.

Now he and Taylor sit in their car in the old warehouse at midnight as instructed by the FBI agent. He doesn't understand why the U.S. Marshal he's supposed to meet—their WITSEC handler—didn't come to the house and gather them. But maybe

that's how it goes. Cloak-and-dagger.

He's taken Taylor's phone and she continues to cry, slumped low in the passenger seat.

"I'm sorry," is all he can manage.

She shudders and snuffles and says nothing, which is breaking his heart.

She's not only leaving everything behind, her closest friends are gone. Dead. He worries if she'll ever recover.

"Where will we live?" she says.

"I don't know."

"We have to change our names? And everything?"

"Yes."

She sobs more. Then, to his surprise, she springs out of the car and runs out into the gloom of the warehouse.

Michael jumps out and chases after her.

The warehouse smells of oil and garbage. She's disappeared in the shadows.

"Taylor," he says in a whisper-yell.

Then a black SUV pulls inside the cavernous structure. The windows are tinted and Michael can't see inside. The driver must see Michael because the headlights flash

the brights on and off. The engine dies and a figure emerges from the driver's side. He wears a three-piece suit, has slicked-back hair. He's somehow familiar.

"Mr. Harper," the man says. "I'm with the U.S. Marshals."

Michael walks up to the man. "My daughter... She got upset and..." He gestures around futilely.

"We'll find her. This isn't unusual. She's a teenager. This can be a lot."

Michael nods. "She'll come back. She just needs a minute."

"Why don't you get inside the SUV. Don't worry, I've found many a wandering teen." He flashes a smile. He's a good-looking guy, this marshal.

He holds out his arm, inviting Michael to go to the vehicle.

"Let's find her first," Michael says.

"Really, I got this." The agent gestures to the vehicle again. Whoever is in the back opens the door.

Michael isn't going anywhere until he finds Taylor. Then he sees a familiar face inside the SUV. It takes him a second to register, but he thinks he's seen the man at O'Leary's Tavern. One of O'Leary's—

"Get in the car," the man in the suit says, the barrel of a pistol shoved into Michael's back.

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Panic washes over Michael. He plants his feet. “Move,” the man says, ramming the gun barrel harder into Michael’s back. Michael knows one thing: If he gets inside, he’s going to die. And his daughter will be as good as dead too.

He raises his hands, walks toward the vehicle. The thing with accountants is that everyone thinks you’re too bookish to be tough. That you can’t take care of yourself. But most accountants didn’t do a tour in Iraq.

Hands still raised, Michael glances around the warehouse. He sees no sign of Taylor. The SUV has O’Leary’s other goon in the back seat. In the front passenger seat is someone he can’t quite make out.

“Get in,” growls the man who is most certainly not a U.S. Marshal.

This is his only chance. Michael places a foot on the SUV’s footrail and raises himself up, as if he’s going to climb inside. Then he kicks back quickly, planting his heel in the fake marshal’s chest. The gun goes off, but the shot goes high as the well-dressed man hits the ground.

Michael spins and dives on top of him. Grabs his wrist, bangs his hand on the concrete until the gun skitters away.

Footfalls. Michael grabs both sides of the fake marshal’s head and slams it into the floor before jumping to his feet.

Shots ring out.

Michael feels no bullet impacts as he sprints toward an old oil barrel and ducks behind it.

He has no weapon, nowhere to run. And Taylor is out there somewhere. Through a rust hole in the barrel, he sees a figure with a handgun approaching.

It's over for him, and probably for Taylor.

From nowhere comes the roar of an engine, and Michael's sedan jets past him and plows into the approaching gunman, tumbling him like a bowling pin. The car screeches to a stop and Michael sees Taylor behind the wheel, ghost white and terrified.

There's still another gunman. Michael crouch-runs to the car, opens the back door, and dives inside. Taylor is already flooring it in reverse, making their way out of the warehouse.

She screams when the sound of more gunshots rings out and the windshield spiderwebs. But she keeps driving, ducking low, panting, navigating via the rearview camera on the dash.

More shots. The sound of tires squealing. But she's on the street now.

The car juts forward and they peel away. Michael peers out the back window and sees a figure of someone getting smaller as his daughter and he disappear into the night.

They drive seventeen hours—through Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, then Missouri—stopping only for gas and fast food, and once at a Starbucks for Wi-Fi so Michael can transfer O'Leary's money to Michael's own Swiss accounts. It's early evening and they now sit in a diner in Leavenworth, Kansas.

“We’ll be safe here. My military buddies live here. One of them’s the sheriff. He’s already got new papers for us.”

Taylor is silent. She’s not crying anymore. She’s shell-shocked.

“Your name is Alison Lane now...” He pauses. “I’m so sorry.”

Michael couldn’t know then that she would thrive for four years in Leavenworth, graduate from high school—fall in love. Or that their troubled past would rise again when O’Leary and his men found them.

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“I’m not sure Mac’s gonna make it,” Sheriff Walton says down the phone. “I’m sorry to call you, Michael, but I thought you’d want to know.”

Michael gets a lump in his throat, holds back tears. It’s hard to believe that after clearing IEDs and VS-500 mines and pressure plates, investigating car bombings, and kicking down doors to find bomb makers, it was cancer that might take out Mac.

Ken sounds tired on the other end of the line.

“I’m glad you called,” Michael says, looking out his window of his modest home. A bicyclist pedals down the street, a little girl bouncing in the plastic child’s seat mounted to the back. The girl is clutching a brown bag with a baguette sticking out of it. “You’re using the burner?”

They’ve kept communications to a minimum over the past five years. To protect them both.

Ken confirms he’s using the disposable phone. He’s in his car, about to leave the hospital shortly after midnight in Kansas.

“I wish I could be there,” Michael says. He means it. Life was good in Leavenworth until someone on O’Leary’s payroll saw the viral video of his daughter taking down those high-school bullies and things spiraled.

“How’s Nan?” Michael asks. He always liked Ken’s wife.

“She’s doing as well as can be expected. The nurses and doctors at the new facility

are first-rate. She even recognized me on my last visit.”

Nan’s dementia has gotten much worse since Michael left. He sometimes wonders if the three men are being punished for their roles in a pointless war: his own wife’s cancer, Mac’s wife’s stroke, and Nan’s dementia. He shakes it off.

“I’m glad the new facility is working out for her.”

“I wanted to thank you again for covering it. Our insurance company had her with a low-cost provider and it was terrible and—”

“You never have to thank me for anything, Ken. Ever.” He doesn’t need to say more. Beyond that godforsaken desert, Ken Walton saved Michael and his daughter two times: first helping them escape Philadelphia and start anew in Kansas, then four years later when O’Leary’s goons found them. No amount of money in the world could repay that.

“It’s so much money, I—”

“You’re forgetting, it’s not my money,” Michael says, if only to quell whatever guilt or pride is causing his old friend to raise the topic. In the years since he stole O’Leary’s \$10 million, Michael made shrewd investments, doubling the amount. He’s thought of transferring the money back to O’Leary, buying his way out of this mess. But this is about more than money to Shane O’Leary.

Ken clears his throat. “Speaking of our friends from Philadelphia, I think it’s only a matter of time until they find you again. That guy who got away that night, the one with the missing fingers, called to warn me that someone’s found him.”

Michael’s mind loops back to that summer night. Him killing O’Leary’s two men. Ken and Mac running into the woods after the man who’d abducted Michael’s

daughter, returning with him subdued. Michael shoving the man to his knees, putting the gun to his forehead. Mac and Ken intervening. Saying enough is enough. Michael remembers Ken crouching down to eye level to the man.

The guy was crying. “They made me,” the abductor said. “I owed O’Leary money. They’d already...” He’d held up his hands showing where they’d amputated his fingers. “They said they weren’t going to hurt her. They were just going to use her as leverage.” Leverage to get back the money Michael had stolen.

Ken had exhaled. “This is one of those moments in life, a crossroads of sorts, son.” He looked deep into the man’s eyes. “The question you have to ask is whether you’ll ever gamble again.”

The abductor mouthed the words, Never again, as he sobbed.

“And the next question is whether, if you had some money”—Ken had looked over at Michael, who’d reluctantly nodded—“you’d have somewhere you could start over as someone new? Because as far as O’Leary knows, you helped kill his men. You double-crossed him.”

Ken’s voice breaks through the memory. “You have to be ready in case they find you.”

“I’m so sorry I got you into this,” Michael says.

“Just like I never have to say thank you, you never have to say sorry. I wouldn’t have made it back home without you and Mac. And I’d do this all over again to protect you and your daughter.”

Michael feels that lump in his throat again. “You tell Mac that I’m ordering him to pull through this.”

Ken chuckles. “He’ll probably snap out of it just to remind you that you don’t outrank him and can’t order him to do squat.”

“I’m counting on it, my friend.”

LEAVENWORTH, KANSAS

Poppy sits on her bed, seven scraps of paper with deep fold creases spread out before her. The coded notes that Alison Lane sent Poppy's brother back in high school. Dash also gave her the key: a book called *The Little Prince*. The handwritten notes are short—a series of numbers—so it shouldn't take her long to decode them. Dash said they were locations where they would meet in secret. He said it had been innocent—they would talk about life, her loneliness, his fears about the future. They kissed once, he said, but that's as far as it went.

Poppy eyes the first note. It has 30–15–7 written on it. Chantelle had told Poppy that the codes usually make the first number the page of the book, the second the line, the third the word. She flips to page 30, counts to line 15, then traces her finger to the seventh word. She writes the word in the Notes app on her phone and realizes that this could take a while. She should get some sleep. But she's still wired from the hospital, from her brother's confession. Was that what it was? A confession? More like an unburdening. Dash has carried this with him since he was seventeen. Poppy's father has always kept secrets—things he didn't talk about from his time in the war—but Dash's secrets have pushed Poppy's world off-kilter.

She continues decoding. The first note says: The park, 10. The park at ten o'clock. Poppy reaches for the next note, and continues. Her legs are cramping from sitting on the bed, so she lies down, the book in front of her. She examines the cover. A simple watercolor of a boy standing on a barren asteroid gliding through space. On her phone, she types in the title. There are several entries for *The Little Prince*: literary analyses, a *New Yorker* story, SparkNotes. Poppy remembers it being assigned reading at their high school, the only reason Dash owned the book, but she doesn't

remember much more about it.

She clicks on Wikipedia. She reads that it's a novella written by a French author. The story is about a pilot who crashes in the desert who meets a young boy who tells the pilot his life story. The boy is a traveler who lived on an asteroid and has gone planet to planet where he meets their lone inhabitants: a king who demands obedience but has no subjects, a drunk who drinks out of the shame of drinking, a geographer who has never been anywhere, and so on.

Poppy thinks she'll read the book again. She wonders why Alison Lane loved it so much. It seems like a kid's book. But maybe she felt like the alien boy, alone, trying to find meaning in her travels. Poppy looks up at her Beyoncé poster and decides, yeah, she needs to get some sleep—she's waxing a little too poetic. But she needs to try to decode the note found in Alison's car. She pulls up the photo of the note on her phone. It has several lines of numbers, each with a three-digit sequence. She spends the next fifteen minutes trying to decode the note, flipping through the pages of *The Little Prince*.

The message is gibberish.

It's not the right book.

Defeated, Poppy says a prayer for her father, her mother, and Dash. And she closes her eyes and falls into a restless sleep.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:07 am

BURY SAINT EDMONDS, ENGLAND

After being kept all night, Ryan is finally allowed to make a call. It's not from a dirty payphone in a jailhouse corridor like in the movies. He's taken to a tidy conference room. The detectives leave him alone, but they're probably recording the call or listening.

"We've been worried about you," his dad says, sounding breathless. It's late morning in the UK, after five in the morning in Kansas. "You haven't responded to texts and—"

"I found him," Ryan says.

His father is quiet for a long moment. "Found who?"

"The man who took Ali," Ryan's voice shakes. "I'm not crazy, he's real."

A tear escapes his eye and he wipes it away with a hand. For so long, he's felt the guilt from that night, and rage at himself for not remembering. Conjuring a monster rather than accepting that he'd been a coward. But he hadn't imagined the man, he wasn't a coward.

Now the questions: Who is he? Why did he take Ali? Who are the men found dead in Ali's car? Who killed them?

"I don't understand, Son." His dad sounds exhausted. "Start from the beginning."

Ryan tells him about The Monster, Peter Jones, tracking Ryan to Italy. Jones meeting him at the Palazzo Comunale and saying Ryan had to cover for Jones or else Jones and she would be in danger. Jones's suggestion that the Leavenworth sheriff knew something. Jones rushing home to England after he got the video call.

It's then that Ryan understands: Whoever called Jones was waiting at his house on the church grounds, probably holding a knife to his wife's throat.

And another realization: Jones might have been referring to his wife when he said she would be killed too? Maybe he wasn't referring to Ali. Maybe Ryan's gotten ahead of himself.

"Ryan? You there?"

"I tracked him to England," Ryan says.

"You what? You're in England?"

"I've been arrested."

"Ryan, what the hell is going on?" In a matter of seconds his father's tone has gone from exhausted, to disbelief, to panic.

Ryan tells him about finding Jones and his wife dead. He leaves out the ghastly details. His parents are under enough stress.

His father listens, the silence heavy and heartbreaking. He says something to Ryan's mother, whom Ryan pictures sitting up in the bed with a worried look on her face. It takes a moment, but Dad regains his composure.

"I'll call Marty, he'll be able to help us get you a UK lawyer."

“You don’t have to do that. I can handle this myself. I don’t want you to spend more money on—”

“Son, don’t you understand?” his father interrupts. “We’d spend every last penny we have to help you.”

More tears well as Ryan collects himself. “Okay. Well, please tell Mom I’m okay,” he says. “She shouldn’t worry.”

There’s another long silence. “After I call Marty, Mom and I will get on the next flight out. Where are they holding you?”

Before Ryan answers, the lead detective comes into the conference room. Her look is more sympathetic than stern now. “When you’re done with your call, you’re free to go.”

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Ryan eyes Detective Suhr suspiciously. She's said it twice now, but he's still dubious. "So you're just letting me go?"

He rushed his father off the phone. Told him not to book any flights or do anything until he called back. Didn't mention the detective saying he's released, though. Not yet, in case it's a trick.

"You're free to go, mate." The detective gestures to the conference room door. Something about her demeanor has changed. It's less stiff, less all-business.

"You've talked to my lawyer in Kansas? You believe me?"

"I've reached out to the police in your town, but we haven't had a chance to connect yet. It's still early there."

Ryan doesn't understand. It's unlikely they would let him go without talking to someone in Kansas.

Suhr guides him out of the room and down a corridor. She says he'll get back his phone and passport when they process him out. Ryan's thoughts are swirling: What's her play here?

"Can I ask you something?" Ryan asks as they walk down the narrow hallway that has walls covered with too many coats of paint.

She turns to him, gives a one-shouldered shrug.

“Why are you just letting me go?”

The detective tilts her head to the side, as if debating whether to share information with him. Then: “I’d like to show you something, if you have time.”

He obviously has time. They must have found something that made them understand Ryan didn’t kill Peter Jones and his wife.

Ryan nods, and follows the detective. The hallway opens up to a large space crowded with cubicles. The cube farm is filled with chatter and the clack of computer keys. She takes him down another hallway and stops in front of a closed door.

Before they go inside, Ryan says, “When I go in there, is someone going to put a black sack over my head and strap me to a chair for more questioning?”

She gives a small laugh. “You watch too much television.”

The room is set up with several computer monitors. There’s a single officer at the workstation, like the commander of the Starship Enterprise. The detective instructs the officer to pull up some footage.

On a large screen on the wall pops up a scene of a rural road. The area has the purple hue like it’s early in the morning. That’s confirmed by the time and date stamp in the right corner of the screen: 6:07 a.m., two days ago—the day Ryan met with Pinky Man at the Palazzo. It feels like a lifetime ago. Ryan recognizes the area: It’s near the church in Lackford. The spot where the road ends and the only access to church grounds is the footpath.

A figure enters the frame, walking down the trail toward the old church. The footage is grainy, so you can’t make out much except that the person wears a baseball hat, a covid mask, and glasses. It could be anyone—a local on a morning constitutional, a

parishioner heading to an early mass—except for one thing. The figure carries an axe.

“Is this who you think killed them?”

The detective doesn’t answer. “If this was London, we’d have footage at every imaginable angle from hundreds of CCTV cameras. But we don’t get much crime out here.”

The man at the workstation taps on the keyboard and more footage appears. It’s now daytime. The date stamp says 4:32 p.m. the same day. A car races to the same spot, a man jumps out and sprints down the path.

Ryan understands now. The man sprinting is Peter Jones—aka The Monster aka Pinky Man—and he’s running because someone, the figure with the axe, has his wife.

Ryan’s mind jumps to the Palazzo, the pure terror on Pinky Man’s face when he received that video call.

“Peter Jones?” Ryan asks, though he knows the answer.

The detective nods. The video isn’t clear, but she seems certain about it.

The final piece of footage shows the figure with the axe heading back down the path. Head down, baseball cap pulled low.

The figure—is it a man or woman?—fumbles with some keys and the lights on Peter Jones’s car flash on and off. The figure opens the back door and throws the axe inside.

Ryan shudders thinking of the couple’s last moments. You still can’t see who it is, but you can tell that the killer is wearing surgical gloves, plus blue booties over his

shoes. The car soon drives out of the frame.

This is one of the “they” whom Peter Jones warned him about.

“Were you able to identify who it is?” Ryan asks.

“Not yet. We’re still analyzing the footage, seeing if other cameras in the area caught anything. I know it’s hard to make much out, but do you recognize anything about this person? We can play it back, if that helps.”

The officer at the controls plays the video back again. It’s even more unsettling the second time.

“I’m sorry,” Ryan says. “Nothing stands out to me.”

“He’s not from Lackford, we know that much. Paddy at the tavern knows everyone in town.”

“Did you find Jones’s car yet?”

“No, but we will.”

“This must be the guy who called Jones when I met with him in Italy. The reason he left in a panic.”

The detective nods somberly.

“Maybe if you find out who Peter really is—I mean, was—it will help ID who killed them. You should talk to the Leavenworth sheriff. Jones implied he knew something about Alison’s abduction.”

“Step ahead of you, mate.”

LEAVENWORTH, KANSAS

Poppy pulls into the garage of the station house at just after six in the morning. Sheriff Walton is an early bird. She plans to have a frank discussion with her boss about what happened to Alison Lane before everyone else arrives.

It doesn't make sense—why would someone take Alison, presumably to deliver her to the two men who found themselves on the wrong side of a desperate father? A father with old friends who could both help rescue her and cover up what happened. And only two men were found at the bottom of the lake. Where's the third man Dash saw that night? Or is her brother lying?

No, she thinks Dash is telling the truth. He's not creative enough to come up with that nutty story. So: Why the cover-up? If this was only a kidnapping gone awry, why would Alison and her father go into hiding? So many damn questions. And now she has the unenviable task of getting answers from her boss.

She takes the elevator from the garage to the lobby. She'll get this over with, see what he has to say, then figure out what to do. If Dash isn't lying, this isn't just about Alison and her father—it's about Poppy's own dad. Did he and the sheriff take out the third man? At minimum, they helped cover up the murder of two men after the fact. And Poppy's brother kept quiet about it all.

She wants to storm into the hospital—confront her dad. But it's hard to confront someone who's on a ventilator. Walking briskly down the hallway, she musters the courage to face Sheriff Walton. She needs to be brave, have confidence. She reaches the sheriff's office, glances through the glass walls. The lights are out.

Margaret's computer is on, but she isn't at her desk.

"Good morning," Margaret says, rounding the corner from the break room holding a cup of coffee.

Poppy doesn't reply. She's too preoccupied thinking about the speech she prepared in her head. "Where is he?" It comes out harsh.

Margaret gives a concerned look. "Everything okay? The sheriff said your father..."

"Yes. Sorry. I just have something I need to talk to him about. Something urgent."

"He's usually in by now, but I'm sure he'll get here soon. How's your father, dear?"

Poppy doesn't answer. The sheriff left the hospital late last night. They walked to the parking lot together, after the a-hole doctor told them they should go. "I really need to talk to him."

Margaret picks up the phone. Dials. Listens. "He's not picking up his cell. Maybe he slept in. Or maybe he's back at the hospital."

Poppy considers this.

The phone on Margaret's desk rings. She looks at the caller ID, hopeful that it's the sheriff, then sighs.

"Could you take a call about the Alison Lane case?" she asks.

Poppy gives her a puzzled look.

"A detective from England has called three times wanting to talk to the sheriff.

Apparently, they've arrested Ryan Richardson and they really want to speak with someone."

Poppy feels a jolt of excitement. No wonder she couldn't find that kid. He's in England? And arrested?

"Please patch them through to my office."

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:07 am

PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA

“Granddad, can I ask you something?”

They sit eating ice cream at Baskin-Robbins, chocolate dripping down Davie’s hand. Davie licks the messy combination of cone and hand without concern for germs or social etiquette, the way only a twelve-year-old can.

“Sure, buddy. Somethin’ wrong?” Chaz has sensed a melancholy all morning. Usually Davie’s upbeat, delightfully squirrely.

Davie looks down at the drops of melted ice cream on the table.

“What is it? You can tell me anything.”

It’s true, this boy could confide his worst inner thoughts—not that he has any—and Chaz wouldn’t judge. He experiences a brief melancholy of his own, wishing he’d been this way with Patrick. It’s hard to believe it’s been five years. Chaz dreads the day when they identify Patrick as one of the bodies in the car in that lake.

Davie looks up, tears building in his eyes.

“What is it, buddy?”

“There’s this kid, Stanton Funkney.”

He waits, but he knows what’s coming. Davie is a gentle boy, the kind who makes an

easy target. While the other kids attend sports or outdoor camps for the summer, Davie is at acting camp. He takes after his mother, which is a good thing. His father wasn't the kindest man. Davie's mom, Sylvia, hasn't remarried. Chaz thinks she's dating again but afraid to tell Chaz. Good for her. She should have a life. For herself, for Davie. He's just thankful she's kept him in Davie's life.

"Funkney?" Chaz makes a face at the name. "This kid picking on you?"

Davie nods, looks at the table again, ashamed.

"Look at me."

Davie's eyes move up to his grandfather.

"I was bullied," Chaz lies. Back in the day, no one would dare take on Chaz Donnelly.

"You?" The boy says this as if his grandfather is the toughest man in the world, which leaves Chaz's heart melting like the ice cream. Davie bites into the cone.

"Oh yeah, this kid they called George the Giant would torment me."

Davie's eyes light up, and he smiles at the made-up name. "What did you do?"

"I got a lot of advice. 'Don't take any crap,' 'hit him back harder than he hits you,' that kind of stuff. But he was a lot bigger than me, and I didn't think that would stop him."

"What did you do?" Davie repeats the question, eager for advice.

"You're not gonna like this."

Davie listens.

“I talked to my mom. She knew what to do. And it stopped. Just like that.” Chaz snaps his fingers.

Davie looks deflated.

“Have you told your mom about this?”

Davie shakes his head.

“Would you like me to talk to her or this kid’s parents?”

“Is it okay if I think about it, Granddad?”

“Of course, buddy.”

Davie’s eyes are to the table again.

“But trust me, pal, this is going to stop. I promise.”

Davie’s eyes bounce up. He believes Chaz. He knows his grandfather will never let him down.

A text pings. Chaz takes out his reading glasses, scans the phone. “You mind coming on an errand with me?” he asks Davie.

Davie is wiping the table with the miniature ice-cream-store napkins, smearing chocolate over the tabletop. “Sure.”

“The stuff I ordered from the gardening center is ready for pickup.”

At City Planter on North Fourth, Chaz finds some sharp shears, a pair of gardening gloves, a bucket.

“Ooh, I’ve been wanting one of these,” he says, scooping up a plastic rain poncho. “It’s supposed to rain tonight.” At the register, there’s a refrigerator filled with soft drinks and bottled water.

“Want a soda, buddy?”

Davie shakes his head. “Mom doesn’t like me to drink soda.”

“Smart. Especially after ice cream. Can you grab me two of those waters? The big ones.”

Afterward, he pulls up to the curb of Davie’s house. Sylvia waves to them from the front door.

Davie says, “Thanks for the ice cream. See you next week?”

“I wouldn’t miss it.”

Davie opens the car door.

“Hey, buddy,” Chaz says.

Davie turns.

“Don’t you worry about this Funkney kid, okay? It’s gonna work out, I promise.”

Davie offers a fleeting smile and heads to the door.

After two quick beeps of the horn, Chaz heads out.

He checks his phone for the address again. Twenty minutes later, he pulls in front of the place. It's a boarded-up row house in Tioga-Nicetown.

He gets out of the car, taking his garden-center purchases with him.

At the front door, he knocks, and a small-framed man answers. Inside, Chaz opens the bag for the rain poncho and puts it over his suit. "Is he talking yet?"

The other man—his name is O (yes, the guy's full name is the letter O)—shakes his head. O is what, back in Chaz's day, they'd call a mute. Chaz suspects there are more politically correct terms now.

Before Chaz retired, O'Leary had him train the guy. Every organization has a succession plan. O'Leary always had a thing for picking up neighborhood strays. Rumor was that O got his name from the tag on his crib at the Russian orphanage—the American adoption agency labeled the cribs from A to Z.

Shane O'Leary called Chaz out of retirement for this job. Chaz doesn't mind, it's not merely business. As they say in movie trailers, this time it's personal.

O looks at Chaz with his scary ice-blue eyes through large protective glasses that are speckled with red. He leads Chaz to the man who is tied to a chair that sits on top of a sheet of plastic. Chaz removes the pruning shears from the bag. He peers at O.

"I see you already got to work." The man tied to the chair has bloody stumps for hands. He'd taught O well.

But this is one tough dude. Before O grabbed the guy last night, Chaz researched the sheriff of Leavenworth and learned that he'd been in the military. Two tours in Iraq.

Probably had torture training. Name, rank, serial number, and all that.

O is good, but he looks tired. Understandably: The guy gets off an international flight from the UK, grabs up this guy in Kansas, and drives all night to bring him to Philly.

Chaz says, “Get me a cloth and fill up that bucket.” He points to the bottles of water he bought at the gardening store.

The sheriff starts screaming through the rags jammed in his mouth. He knows. Nobody can sustain waterboarding. Nobody.

And for the next half hour, the sheriff writhes in pain. Chaz had studied the best technique for waterboarding—a forty-second pour, lift the rag from the face, then a twenty-second pour, lift, then a ten-second pour, lift, repeat. But this sheriff somehow holds strong.

When it’s clear further efforts will be futile, O walks up behind the sheriff, takes the ends of the garrote in each hand, then pulls it tight around the sheriff’s neck. Sheriff Walton bucks and kicks, but O’s grip is tight.

Once the man stops moving, Chaz says, “Maybe that was premature. We got nothing.”

O shakes his head, holds up the sheriff’s cell phone. It’s a cheap burner. Beyond his interrogation skills, O is something of a tech whiz. If the sheriff has communicated with the accountant, Michael Harper—whom the citizens of Kansas knew as Michael Lane—O will find him.

Before the cleanup crew arrives, Chaz says, “I wondered if you can do me a favor?”

O is washing his tattooed hands in the bucket, the water a sickly pink. He looks at

Chaz, waits. Chaz has never asked him for anything personal, so O seems curious.

“There’s a kid who’s been bullying my grandson...”

M11 MOTORWAY, ENGLAND

Ryan is speeding down the M11 to the airport. The motorway has two lanes running north, two running south. Trees and fields run along each side. Ryan's head is spinning. The man who took Ali—The Monster—was real. And now he's dead. Gruesomely murdered. He visualizes the man who murdered him, the stranger with the axe. It's like some B horror movie.

He called his parents and told them not to come to England, that the police let him go. The relief in his mother's voice almost made him cry. They don't deserve this. He used to be the pride of his basketball-loving father's life. His parents went to every game, reveled in Ryan "Dodge" Richardson's glory. Bragged that their son was headed to Division I. But Ryan's been nothing but trouble for them since that awful night. His parents had to put a second mortgage on the house to pay for his lawyer. Helped him with expenses when he transferred colleges, application fees to law school. He tried to give them his money from bartending, but his parents refused. Told Ryan to go, have fun, live his life.

Ryan's phone buzzes. It's a FaceTime call. An unfamiliar number. But it's a 913 area code—Kansas—so he decides to answer it.

He swipes the device, which is on a cradle mounted to the rental car's windshield. He's met with the face of a pretty woman with freckles.

"Mr. Richardson?"

She's about Ryan's age, so the "Mr." is a bit much. But that's not what catches his

attention: The woman knows his real name.

“Yeah,” he says, darting his eyes from the phone to the road and back.

“My name is Poppy McGee. I’m with the Leavenworth sheriff’s office.”

He waits, contemplates pulling over since his heart is thumping now.

“I understand from the UK police that you’ve had quite a night.”

“You’re not supposed to be talking to me,” Ryan says. “My lawyer told your office years ago that all communications go through him. Anything I say to you would be inadmissible.” First-year law-school nonsense coming in handy: the fruit-of-the-poisonous-tree doctrine.

“Mr. Richardson—Ryan—I don’t care about being able to use anything against you. Are you driving?” She can obviously tell that he is. “Can you pull over?”

Ryan spots an exit, veers off without saying anything.

“I don’t know if you heard about Alison’s car?” Before he answers, she adds, “We found something we hoped you could help us with.”

It’s an effective tactic. Baiting his curiosity.

“Why should I?” he asks, if only to elicit more information.

“Because I don’t believe you killed Alison Lane.”

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:07 am

Ryan paces outside the petrol station off the M11. He stretches his legs, which have been cramping from being folded into the Mini Cooper. It's already late afternoon. It took forever to get processed out of the station house. He's about twenty miles from Heathrow. This place looks like any rural American freeway exit. There's a BP station, a Starbucks.

"Do you know if Alison had a favorite book?" the deputy sheriff asks. She has an unusual name—Poppy McGee, like a character from a children's story.

"A favorite book?"

"Yeah, like a favorite novel or book?" the cop asks from the cracked screen of his iPhone. McGee is a study in contradictions: She's unusually young to be a deputy, but she has one of those gaps between her front teeth that somehow make her seem worldly. Yet her accent still screams Kansas.

"Why?" Ryan's tries to catalogue the books on the shelf in Ali's room. He knew her favorite of all time was a book her father gave her, *The Little Prince*. French, of course. She was such a Francophile.

The deputy sheriff hesitates. But he can see the decision to disclose on her face. "We found a note in Alison's car."

"A note?"

The cop is looking down, like she's retrieving something. "Yes."

“How? I thought the car was in the water for years.”

“We got lucky,” she says without elaboration. “Written on the envelope was: ‘If something happens to me.’”

The words grab Ryan by the shirt collar.

“We think the note was for you.”

“Well, what’s it say?” he asks impatiently. What’s with keeping him in fucking suspense?

“That’s just it. We don’t know what it says. It’s written in code.”

Ryan is confused. But then his mind leaps to the prom. The silly prom proposal. The code Ali used.

His memory is confirmed when the cop says, “It’s called a book cipher. We need to know the book she was using to decode the message. We know she made similar messages using a book called *The Little Prince*, but that wasn’t the book she used for this note. Can you think of a book she might’ve used?”

Ryan’s pulse is ripping. “It’s not a book you’re after.”

“What do you mean?”

“Send me the note and I’ll tell you everything.”

“I’m afraid I can’t—”

“Send me the note or we’re done talking.”

LEAVENWORTH, KANSAS

Poppy shouldn't tell Ryan Richardson anything about the evidence. He's long been a suspect. And Poppy's been on the job for less than a week and the sheriff already admonished her for breaking protocol. But Ryan knows something. Even through the small screen on the iPhone, she can see it on his face. And the UK detective told Poppy that Ryan—who goes by “Ryan Smith” now—had an unbelievable tale. About the man he claimed abducted Alison Lane, complete with missing pinky fingers, tracking him to Italy. About the man then ending up dead at his home in England. But the impossible part: The story is checking out. The man with the missing pinky fingers is a ringer for the man Ryan described to a sketch artist five years ago, complete with the missing fingers. And the detective said it turns out he was an undocumented noncitizen, an American who told locals his name was Peter Jones. They're sending Poppy his DNA in the hopes that a U.S. database will get a hit.

“You want to know the key to the code, send me the note,” Ryan repeats.

“I'm not authorized to—”

“Come on, Deputy.”

“If I send you the note, how do I know you'll give me the key?”

“I guess you don't know that,” Ryan says. “But I promise you, I will.”

Poppy's eyes don't leave the screen. Ryan jostles like he's typing on his phone now. His face comes back into view. He's outside on a gloomy day. By a gas station, from

the looks of it.

“I just pulled it up on my phone. It’s the key. It has to be,” he says.

“How do you know?”

“Because I know Ali,” he says. “She made me one of these codes for her promposal.”

Poppy hated that phase in high school—everyone trying to one-up classmates on creative ways to ask dates to prom. That didn’t seem like Ali Lane’s style. Though Ali asking Ryan to prom rather than the other way around seems on brand.

“What’s the key, Ryan?”

“Send me the note...”

The standoff continues.

Ultimately, Poppy relents. She hopes she won’t regret this. She swipes her phone, finds the photo of the printout of the note found in Ali’s car on her reel. Her thumb hovers above the send triangle. She hesitates, then decides she’s already in this deep. She’ll have to trust him.

She hears a ping on his phone, then one on hers. Ryan has sent her the crypto key. It’s a photo of a plaque on a wall somewhere. The plaque’s inscription is in a foreign language.

The screen is dark now, but Ryan’s still on the line. Poppy thinks he’s trying to crack the code.

“Ryan,” Poppy says.

“It’s a plaque at the Louvre Museum. Ali’s great-great-great-grandfather helped save the Louvre from being burned down during the French Revolution. There’s a plaque at the museum paying tribute to him. She used it as the key for the prom proposal.”

Poppy shakes her head. This is some weird Da Vinci Code shit.

“How’s it work? I thought you needed the pages of a book for the code numbers.”

“No. The first number is the line, the second the word, the third the letter. Ali said her dad taught her the code. He was in the military.”

Poppy examines the plaque:

EN MAI 1871

HENRIBARBETDEJOUY

CONSERVATEUR AU MUSÉE DU LOUVRE

ANTOINE HÉRON DE VILLEFOSSE

ATTACHÉ AU DÉPARTEMENT DES ANTIQUES

LEON MORAND

CHEF DU BUREAU ADMINISTRATIF DES MUSÉES

PAR LEUR COURAGE ET LEUR DÉCISION

ONT ASSURE LA DEFENSE INTERIEURE

DULOUVRE

ET CONSERVE A LA FRANCE

SES COLLECTIONS NATIONALES

The first number is 11, so she goes to the eleventh line on the plaque. The second number is 5, so the word is “France.” The third number is 1. The first letter of the fifth word is F.

The second sequence of numbers is 4–4–2. Fourth line, fourth word, second letter: I.

So far: F-I.

She continues and decodes the first word of the note: find.

There’s what appears to be only four more words, but it still will take a little time. She moves on to the next word when she hears Ryan’s voice from the phone:

“Oh my god.”

“What is it, Ryan? What—”

Before the line drops, she hears him say, “Ali’s alive.”

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:07 am

Poppy finishes decoding the note and she's even more confused. The message has only five words: "Find me in the clouds."

What in the hell kind of nonsense? But the note means something to Ryan. Poppy didn't tell Ryan what she knows about that night—what Dash told her—that Ali is alive, but he knows somehow anyway from the coded message. For Poppy, the puzzle pieces don't fit yet, but she's thinking the story goes something like this: Ali moved to Leavenworth when she was starting high school. She knew someone might come after her. She wrote a coded note that only Ryan could read if anyone ever found it. But why'd she'd go to such trouble is unclear. Was she concerned that someone would take her and find the note?

Poppy reflects on how Ali didn't use social media. Her three high-school friends saying that she was almost phobic about not having her picture taken. Maybe she was in hiding. But from who?

Poppy suddenly thinks about the FBI agent, Fincher, who knows more than she's willing to share. Maybe Ali and her father were in witness protection. That would explain why no one knows much about their background before Kansas. And who better to help you hide in a new town than the head of law enforcement there, Alison's father's old war buddy Sheriff Walton? Poppy thinks back to the press conference. The sheriff told the reporters that he'd spoken to Alison's father, stalled giving Poppy the father's address or number. She pulls on the thread...

So she's in hiding. Keeping a low profile. Then suddenly writes a coded note that says: "If something happens to me" for her boyfriend. Why?

Then it hits Poppy: the viral video.

It went viral two weeks before Ali was taken. Maybe Ali feared whoever she was hiding from would see the video and come to Leavenworth. But she didn't know that would happen, hoped it would blow over as viral videos do and they wouldn't see it.

But they did.

Who are they?

Poppy's biggest clues are the men from the bottom of the lake. She picks up her phone, finds the name in her contacts, and calls. "Chantelle, hey, it's Poppy." She flushes a moment but doesn't know why. "You have a minute to help me run down something?"

She smiles when she hears the reply: "Hell, yes."

PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA

Chaz stands in the greenest grass he's ever seen. Shane O'Leary's lawn is expansive—with complex irrigation systems and a gardening team that must spend hours a day making sure every blade is in place, every line from the mower perfectly symmetrical. The golden sunlight makes it look like one of those infomercials for retirement communities.

O'Leary makes the long walk from the house to the middle of the lawn. "How'd you find them?" O'Leary asks.

"I don't think you want to know," Chaz says. O'Leary, like his father before him, preferred to be insulated from the dirty work whenever possible.

O'Leary looks around as if assessing whether anyone could pick up the conversation. Chaz knows that O'Leary has the property swept twice a day, so there's no way anyone's getting within the three-hundred-yard range of those handheld listening contraptions. Still, freedom favors the cautious.

"I wanna know everything about this one, my friend."

Chaz tells them about O abducting the sheriff from Kansas. Dragging him all the way to Philly in the trunk of his car. Then the interrogation.

"Why bring him to our backyard?"

Chaz shrugs. "Easier to get rid of him. A missing lawman is better than a dead body.

The cops protect their own.”

“Don’t we all,” O’Leary says, with a weariness in his voice. “You broke him?”

Chaz shakes his head. “Tough old bastard.”

“I can understand O not breaking him, he’s still learning the ropes. But you couldn’t get him to talk?” O’Leary chuckles. “‘Tough old bastard’ is right. A damn shame. They don’t make ’em like that anymore.”

“That’s the truth.” Sheriff Walton was a tough nut. Most people break easily. It took O less than twenty minutes to get that eight-fingered mutt in England to break. Granted, he was quick to talk because he was trying to save his wife. But Peter Jones, or Glen Sweeny as he was known in Philly, should’ve known that he and his wife weren’t getting out alive.

Chaz shakes his head. He always said getting a gambler involved was a bad idea, but no one asked him at the time. It had been his son Patrick’s operation. After the accountant’s daughter was seen on some viral video, Patrick offered Sweeny a way to pay off his huge gambling debt to the O’Learys: Go to Kansas, confirm it was really the accountant’s daughter, then await instructions. It was better than losing more fingers, so Sweeny took the deal. After Sweeny confirmed it was really her, Patrick and Sean Duffy went to Kansas. The plan was to have Sweeny grab the girl and deliver her to Patrick and Duff. That way, if there were any witnesses to the abduction, only Sweeny would be on the hook. O’Leary’s crew would then use her as leverage to draw out the accountant, secure the return of O’Leary’s stolen money. But when Patrick and Duff never returned to Philly, everyone assumed Sweeny had cut a deal with the accountant and double-crossed the O’Learys. You can never trust a gambler.

But during O’s interrogation of Sweeny, he denied a double cross, said that the job

had gone sideways. That the accountant killed Patrick and Duff. And that the sheriff helped the accountant and his daughter escape. Sweeny wisely realized that Shane O'Leary wasn't the forgiving type, so he had to disappear too.

"If the sheriff didn't break, how'd you find the accountant?" O'Leary asks.

"The sheriff had a burner phone. Don't ask me how, but O tracked it to a town in France. It's gotta be the accountant."

"So what's the play?" O'Leary says, putting his hand over his eyes like a visor from the sun, staring out at his horse stables.

"O is headed to France."

"You're not going?"

"He can handle it. And I'm getting long in the tooth for international flights and jet lag and all that."

"Won't he need backup?"

"Brian went with him." O'Leary's older brother, the one their father passed over when he made Shane heir to the throne. A wise decision by the dad since Brian liked the perks of being an O'Leary but was lazy, didn't have Shane's gift for management.

O'Leary says, "Should've figured he'd volunteer if there's a free trip to France. I'll bet you anything he flew first class on my dime."

Chaz doesn't say anything. A good rule to live by: Never criticize someone's family.

O'Leary says, "I'm surprised you're not going."

Chaz gives him a quizzical look.

“I just thought since the accountant...” O’Leary pauses. “You know, Patrick...”

Chaz doesn’t say so, but he doesn’t have vengeance in him anymore. He loved Patrick, but his son was a ruthless killer. A cruel husband. And a callous father. Chaz blames himself. His son was trying to live up to his dad’s reputation. Patrick’s murder is the only thing that saved Davie. Chaz’s grandson isn’t equipped for the family business and would’ve probably ended up like Anthony O’Leary, under the pressure of being raised by Patrick. Davie is the only thing Chaz is leaving good and pure in this world.

Chaz says, “O will make the father pay. And he has the tech skills to make sure he transfers the funds back to our accounts.”

“No,” O’Leary says.

Chaz furrows his brow, confused. He can’t possibly be granting the accountant mercy?

“They need to bring the accountant to Philly so I can take care of him myself.”

“I don’t think you want to be near this and—”

“Nonnegotiable. Gina needs to see justice. With her own eyes.”

Chaz understands now. Gina never recovered from what happened to their son. The last time Chaz saw her, it was obvious that she’d gotten lost in the bottle and probably pills. O’Leary thinks that if Gina sees O’Leary take care of the father who helped cover up why their son killed himself, it will help her heal. We all delude ourselves for the ones we love the most.

O'Leary continues: "Have O grab the accountant's daughter. Tell the accountant that she'll be free if he comes home to Philly to face me. If not, O will take his time with her."

Chaz gives him a skeptical look. He wants to say, Isn't this the same screwed-up plan that failed last time? But he doesn't.

Reading Chaz's thought, O'Leary says, "It'll work this time. He'll come. He'll do anything for his daughter."

"You'll let the girl go after we take care of him?" Chaz strangely hopes he will. She was just a teenager when Anthony was bullied. And that viral video that led them to her proved she turned herself around.

"Tell O not to kill her," O'Leary says.

Chaz nods.

"Reach out to our Russian friends. Have them get O and Brian guns. Tell them we'll trade the pieces for the girl."

Chaz feels a chill sliver up his spine.

"By the time the Russians get through with her, she'll wish she were dead."

LEAVENWORTH, KANSAS

Poppy sits across from Chantelle Luna at the Chipotle on Fourth Street. The young KBI forensic analyst wrinkles her nose at the fist-sized burrito in front of her.

“You’re serious, this is the first time you’ve been to Chipotle?” Poppy asks. To be fair, Leavenworth didn’t get a Chipotle until last year. But Chantelle’s from out of town. How could she possibly not have... Whatever.

Poppy takes her own burrito in her two small hands, like she’s demonstrating, then takes a big bite. “Trust me,” Poppy says with too big a mouthful.

Chantelle cocks her head to the side, assessing the bundle of meat and beans and cheese. She picks up the plastic knife and fork, contemplating where to begin, but Poppy shakes her head, signals that she needs to use her hands.

Chantelle releases a sigh and takes a bite. Poppy watches, expecting her face to light up, but Chantelle is more reserved. She chews slowly, like she’s swirling wine in her mouth.

She nods approvingly, and Poppy says, “See!”

Poppy likes this woman. She’s—what’s the word?—effervescent. And she provides Poppy a brief reprieve from worrying about her father. When Poppy stopped at the hospital, the asshole doctor said her father was stable but still in the ICU on a ventilator, and shooed her away again.

Poppy slurps her fountain drink through the straw and says, “You said you found something with the guy’s suit.”

Following up on the FBI agent’s lead, Poppy asked Chantelle to focus on tracking the dead guy’s suit.

Chantelle’s already put down the burrito, which has started to fall apart.

“First off,” Chantelle says, “how’d you crack that book cipher? I’ve got every expert in the state working on it and Poppy McGee cracks that shit?” She smiles, seems to get a kick out of saying Poppy’s full name.

Poppy looks around, makes sure no one is in earshot. She tells Chantelle about the call from the UK police; about the dead man who fits the description of the man Ryan Richardson identified all those years ago as Alison’s abductor; about her call with Ryan and his crazy tale of the man tracking him down, then ending up brutally murdered by a guy with an axe.

Chantelle is speechless, her mouth agape.

Poppy doesn’t tell her the rest of the story. That Alison Lane’s dad killed the two men in the car; that Poppy’s own father is involved; that her brother witnessed it all.

“What’s ‘find me in the clouds’ mean?” Chantelle asks.

Poppy shakes her head. “I don’t know, but Ryan does.” Poppy thinks of the young man on the FaceTime call. You could almost see the lightbulb turn on over his head before he killed the line.

“Where did he go?”

“I don’t know. I’m trying to get a trace on his cell, but it’s complicated since he’s in the UK.”

Chantelle nods.

Poppy decides to share more. “But after he read the note, he had a revelation. He said, ‘Ali’s alive.’” Poppy doesn’t mention that Dash had said the same thing.

Chantelle’s eyes sparkle again, like this is the most exciting thing that’s ever happened to her. “You think that’s possible?”

“I do.”

“Poppy McGee in the house.” Chantelle raises her soft drink as if for a toast.

“What’d you find on the dead guy’s clothes?” Poppy asks.

Chantelle retrieves her phone from her oversized handbag. Unlike Poppy in her brown uniform that’s too big, Chantelle is dressed fashionably. Her handbag has logos that look expensive, but Poppy has no clue.

“Your FBI friend was right. The suit is unusual. It’s custom.”

“She’s not my friend. I’m not supposed to be talking to her.” Poppy tells her about the agent and her weird talk of Holy Fools and Warren Harding.

“That’s some Malcolm Gladwell shit,” Chantelle says, as she pulls up something on her phone.

Poppy doesn’t understand the Gladwell reference but doesn’t say so. She’ll look it up later.

Chantelle continues: “The suit is expensive, bespoke tailoring.”

Poppy shakes her head, lost again.

“Custom-made, basically.” On her phone, Chantelle displays a blown-up image of a small label. It has a MARINANI BESPOKE, PHILADELPHIA, and a seven-digit number.

Poppy has a burst of adrenaline, seeing where this is going. “The tailor keeps track of their custom designs. They’ll be able to track who bought it?”

“One way to find out,” Chantelle says, holding up the phone.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:08 am

“We should get a warrant,” Poppy says, as Chantelle looks up the number for the tailor shop in Philadelphia. “I’ve kinda stepped in it without clearing things with the sheriff once already, and I don’t want to—”

“Kenny? He’s a teddy bear. He’ll be fine.”

“I’m not sure we should—”

Poppy is cut off when Chantelle raises a finger in the air, phone pressed to her ear as someone answers on the other line.

In a girly voice two octaves higher than her already high-pitched voice, Chantelle says, “Hi, I’m, um, trying to buy my dad a surprise present. He has all his suits made by your shop and I wondered if you, like, could make a recommendation for a tie.”

Poppy watches as Chantelle listens to the tailor shop employee on the other end of the phone.

“His name?” Chantelle says. Her eyes widen, like she hadn’t anticipated the question. She then makes a static sound from her throat, simulating her phone cutting out. “Sure... I... His name is... I want to get him something that matches...”

Poppy’s stomach turns. They can’t possibly be buying this, can they?

“Wait, what? Can you hear me now?” Chantelle says. “I have the number on the label of his suit if that helps.” Then she does a cute fist pump, and reads the number into the phone.

Chantelle puts the phone on speaker as the employee goes to check their records. After a small eternity, the voice comes back through the speakerphone: “Your father is Patrick Donnelly?”

“That’s right.” Poppy and Chantelle look at each other, excitement emanating off them both.

From the speaker: “It’s been a while since he’s been in. I have the perfect tie for his style.”

“A-maz-ing,” Chantelle says. “I can come by tomorrow to pick it up.”

“I’ll set it aside,” the employee says. “But can you do me a favor?”

“Sure.”

“When you give him the gift, tell your father we’d love to fit him for a new suit. Our records say it’s been five years.”

Chantelle gives Poppy a quiet air high-five as she listens to the description of the tie.

They’ve found him.

A20 MOTORWAY, FRANCE

In law school they teach you that there are several definitions of legal insanity or “non compos mentis,” the Latin phrase Ryan’s criminal law professor favored. There’s the M’Naghten rule, the Irresistible Impulse test, the Durham rule, and the Model Penal Code test. But the true definition of insanity is driving more than twelve hours from London to the south of France when you’re six-four in a Mini Cooper. Ryan looks out at the dark road ahead. He’s through the most brutal part of the drive, the traffic and check-in at the Eurotunnel terminal—driving under the English Channel—and past the stop-and-go traffic near Paris. His phone tells him he’ll arrive at his destination in six more hours.

Ryan understood the moment he decoded the note: Find me in the clouds. Ali’s family descends from a small town in the south of France that, when she was little, she called the Place in the Clouds. Its real name is Cordes-sur-Ciel—which means “Cordes in the sky”—named because on a misty day the hilltop town looks like it’s floating under a pillow of clouds. Ali spent spring breaks there when she was a girl. She told Ryan about those magical trips and how her family owned an apartment in Paris’s 7th arrondissement. Her grandfather would take her to the city for the weekend. She loved France and everything French because of it. She would describe with vivid detail the smell of sugar and flour on Pastry Street. Sitting in wicker chairs at cafés, people-watching. Eating baguettes, cheese, and grapes, picnicking on the grass at the Champ de Mars in the shadow of the Eiffel Tower. Browsing her favorite bookstore on the Left Bank.

The sketch Ryan keeps in his wallet is of her grandparents’ home in Cordes-sur-Ciel. She planned to be married in their garden someday.

The note instructed him to find her in the clouds. Maybe, just maybe, that means she's alive. That she was taken but somehow escaped. That she knew someone might come for her. There would be no other reason to write that note.

Was her father, the mysterious man who scared the crap out of Ryan back then, involved in something that made them targets? They were affluent, Ryan knew. Ali didn't act like she was from money and downplayed it. But it was clear from their home, their cars, everything, that they were wealthy. He'd once asked her what her father did for a living and she said he was retired after spending time in the military, then as an accountant. He seemed young for retirement, so Ryan always assumed that maybe there had been life insurance or an inheritance after Ali's mother's death. He occasionally fished for clues, but she always shut it down. And honestly, it never mattered. He loved her. Even if there were things she didn't want to share with him.

Is he crazy? Thinking she's alive? He's had little sleep and it seems semi-insane. But he'll never forget the look on Peter Jones's face when Ryan asked if Ali was alive. Jones didn't need to answer the question. Ryan has considered calling his parents again, maybe his lawyer, talking it through. But each time he imagines the call, how he'll sound, and he decides against it.

He pulls into a petrol station off the A20. There's nothing more mysterious than how to pump gas in a foreign country. Just when he figured out Italy and its weird diesel pumps, France poses another enigma. After he muddles through and fills the tank, he stretches his back before climbing into the torture device called a Mini Cooper. He checks his phone's battery. He's about 50 percent.

It's after midnight. Nora and the gang will probably still be out and about in Rome. If she didn't think he'd lost his mind before... He opens FaceTime on his phone, calls.

Nora's face appears on the screen. "For fuck's sake, where are you? Are you okay?" There's flashing lights and pulsing music in the background. They're probably at a

club—the 3Ds love clubbing. Ryan needs to stop thinking of Dena, Diana, and Divya as if they're a unit. They're not.

"I'm fine. I'm in France."

"You're in where?" she says. "Hold on. Do not hang up."

The screen goes dark, but he hears the sound of Nora pushing through the club, stopping, saying something to someone. Then the music fades and there's the sound of street noise.

Nora's face appears on the screen. Behind her are Dena, Divya, and Diana, whose faces loom in and out of the frame.

"Where are you exactly?" Nora says.

"We're coming," one of them says. Aiden and Jake now appear partially on the screen and it's apparent what's happened: Nora's told them who he really is.

"You told them," he says to Nora. It comes out more tired than angry.

"You weren't answering your texts. I was worried."

This time Eddie appears in the frame. "I've known since first semester... about you, about Alison."

This surprises Ryan. Eddie's never let on.

"I saw a package from your mom. Your parents have a different last name, you're so guarded. It only took me a half hour on Google."

Ryan feels something rush through him like a chemical. Relief.

Before he gets one word out, Jake says, “Bro, we don’t think you did it—” He stops himself. “We want to help. We got you.”

“Where are you?” Nora repeats.

Ryan tries to gather his thoughts. He’s tired, emotionally hungover from the last few days, and now his chest fills with—what is it?—then he gets it: gratitude.

“You don’t need to come,” he says.

There’s some grumbling until he adds, “But there is something you can do to help.”

With his friends on the sidewalk outside a club in Rome and Ryan on the side of a dark road in rural France, he tells them everything. He starts at the beginning in case Nora has held back. He describes the night at Lovers’ Lane, explains his new identity. He watches their faces turn from sympathy to shock when he tells them about finding The Monster and his wife dead in England. But it’s the note Ali left for him—“Find me in the clouds”—that makes them understand. He thinks she may be alive, in hiding from something, from someone, for the past five years.

It’s hard to see everyone in the small FaceTime screen, but he can’t escape Nora’s expression. Concern, but sadness at the same time. Like she knows that anything that could’ve been between them may never be.

But because she’s the woman she is, she says, “So what can we do to help?”

Ryan snaps a photo of Ali’s sketch of her grandparents’ home he’s kept in his wallet all these years. As he gives them time to study the sketch, Ryan wonders if they would have gotten married at her family home in the south of France. Or would they

have moved on, realized it for what it was: Young love?

“I need help finding this house.”

It takes only a few minutes for his friends to develop a plan. Eddie will use his video game developing skills, years spent world building, to create a digital image of the house. Aiden and Dena will use their coding skills, a variant of a facial recognition model, to make a structure-recognition program.

Nora is fluent in French and she'll help Jake scour any public land records. Ryan doesn't remember Ali's family name, but the name on the plaque at the Louvre—her great-great-great-grandfather who helped save the museum—his last name was Morand.

“You said she's an artist,” Divya says.

“That's right,” Ryan says, remembering Divya was an art history major in college.

“Well, maybe that's her job now,” Divya says. “I can search the local galleries online for her or her work. Even if she's using a different name, I think I can identify her style from the sketch.”

Maybe they'll find the house or her name or her artwork.

It might be that he's so tired, but Ryan is genuinely moved that they didn't hesitate to help him, even if it means staying up all night. They didn't hesitate to jump in knowing who he really is.

“I'll text you when I'm close to the town. It'll be a few more hours. And I'll understand if you get tired and you—”

More grumbling cuts him off.

Before tears spill from his eyes, he says, “I’m lucky to have you as my friends.” He kills the line.

CORDES-SUR-CIEL, FRANCE

“I can’t do this, not again,” Alison tells her father.

“I spoke to Ken and he’s concerned they’re onto us.”

“How many times do we have to...”

She places her breakfast plate in the sink harder than she should. It’s not her father’s fault, she knows, it’s her own fault. She got them into this mess. Whoever says the things you do when you’re only fourteen can’t haunt you forever is dead wrong. Ask Taylor Harper. Ask Alison Lane. Now ask her third identity in nine years: Sophia Rousseau. Strangely, she always thinks of herself as Alison, maybe because that was the happiest time of her life.

“I don’t think you should go to the gallery today.”

Alison shakes her head. “I’m not going to live in fear. I have a life. And I have a new client coming in today. He might take the entire collection of one of my artists. The sale could change her life.”

Her father’s face is etched with worry. He just wants the best for her, she knows. But she can’t—she won’t—start over again. How many times can one person, in one life...?

She smooths her skirt. Sighs. “If I see anything suspicious, I’ll go to our place.” They have a preplanned meeting spot, the dilapidated farmhouse outside the fortified gates

of the town. Her father is a planner, a moneyman, and has new papers and an escape bag with cash, passports, and everything one needs to start a new life. He's had enough practice, for goodness' sake.

She kisses him on the cheek, grabs her satchel, and heads to the door.

"You're riding your bike?" he asks.

"I was planning to."

"Good. Don't drive the Volkswagen. It's been acting up. I think the engine is going out, so take the other car if you need to drive anywhere. Seriously, it could be dangerous to drive, so..."

"Got it," she says, then heads out. He was in the garage tinkering with the VW all night. He should get a mechanic, but that's not his way.

She rides along the bumpy cobblestones, lost in her head. She's been trying not to think about it, trying not to let anxiety creep in, but she couldn't resist googling. They found the car. She wonders if they found the note too. The stories say they found her "personal effects," but that could be her handbag, the rucksack. There's no way anything survived submerged for so long. And if they find it, only one person would understand the note. It was foolish writing that note. A schoolgirl's fantasy of reuniting romantically in Cordes-sur-Ciel if the O'Learys showed up in Leavenworth as her father feared when that video went viral. She didn't understand the danger until she saw what her father did to those men who'd come to take her. Until he told her what they would do to her—to Ryan—if they found them again. So she had to let Ryan go.

She thinks about Ryan. Regret and guilt flow into her bloodstream as if by IV. He didn't deserve any of this. He not only lost her, he lost his life. To suspicion. She

begged her father to do something about that. That's when Uncle Ken planted the evidence about the Missouri River Killer. But even that is falling apart. She's monitored true crime blogs and podcasts, which are buzzing about the discovery of two dead men in the car at the bottom of Suncatcher Lake, questioning whether MRK was really involved.

How is Ryan? Where has life taken him? She's internet-snooped from time to time, but after he quit playing ball he fell off the grid. Maybe someday she'll be able to tell him she's sorry. But what would she say?

She approaches her favorite hill. The one that overlooks the beautiful town. When she races down this slope all of her problems, her regrets, her fears, drift away, if only for a few seconds each day.

She careens around the few cars on the roadway and races in the wind. Her thoughts venture to the rainy night with Ryan, the wind and rain and electricity in the air. She wonders what he'd think of her now. Would he forgive her? Would he be proud of her? Would he still love her?

Her thoughts are interrupted by the feeling of being watched.

Of being followed.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:08 am

In the early morning light, Ryan drives along curvy roads that make Montepulciano's roadways seem easy to navigate. He's tired, punchy from the vending-machine coffee and gas-station junk food. But he's arrived at the picturesque hilltop town. His thoughts race faster than the tiny car: Is it possible? Alison alive? He shouldn't get his hopes up. It's really more wishful thinking, a break from reality. But that's what everyone said about his memories of Pinky Man.

He considers parking, exploring by foot. The roads are narrow and hills steep. But he needs to cover a lot of ground. He slows, unfolds the sketch Ali gave him all those years ago. The graphite from the pencil has smeared, the creases from the fold dark. He examines the drawing: Ali's grandparents' home. It's where I want to get married, she told him in a statement loaded with promise.

He looks for any landmarks. The street is like the ones before him now: clusters of sand-colored structures covered with ivy and piled on top of one another. The house has a sky-blue door, but other than that there's nothing that serves as a marker. Ryan imagines there are hundreds of homes like this one in the town. One clue is that it appears to be at the top of a hill. But the town is on a mountain, so there will be no shortage of castles on the hill. He'll have to do a grid search, drive every street.

That's already proving challenging, since the place is a bit of a maze. He puts the Mini Cooper in gear and pushes along. He'll start on the main street, head uphill, look for a blue door. It's early, the town is awakening. The street is lined with shops, most of which are still closed. A shopkeeper for a fruit market is hosing down the sidewalk out front.

Ryan makes it to the crest of the hill, then descends. The shops give way to homes,

which in D.C., they'd call row houses. He glances at the sketch again, then at the line of dwellings.

The sun has disappeared. Clouds have blown in, turning the morning gray. It might even rain. God, he fucking hates rain. He rolls down another street, then another.

He considers stopping at a bar or shop, flashing a photo of Ali—he has only two on his phone, both he'd taken when she wasn't looking—asking locals if they know her.

And then a small miracle happens. A series of texts that deliver pin drops for locations.

His friends have narrowed down the search to three places.

He clicks on the first link and begins following the directions, making his way to the first address. He parks in front of the house and compares it to the one in Ali's sketch. He's deflated when it's not even close. One down, two to go.

He follows the phone's directions to the second place, turning onto a side street. It's another steep hill. The car's small engine rattles as he makes his way up. When he reaches the top, he peers down the road. More ubiquitous dwellings. What'd he expect? TripAdvisor said the town was built in 1222.

A young woman pedals by on a bicycle, flying down the hill. She's very French, riding in a skirt and high heels. He watches as her hair dances in the wind behind her. It's only when she turns the corner that he gets a momentary glance at her profile.

His heart palpitates.

No, he's imagining it. He used to do that all the time—see someone from behind and for a moment believe it was Ali. Is that what's happening?

He doesn't take time to ponder, and instead follows after the woman.

When he turns the corner, he resists flooring the gas. He can see the bicyclist ahead, weaving around cars and other vehicles.

He follows her onto a busier street. There are only two lanes and more foot traffic. Residents heading to jobs, tourists getting breakfast, taking photos.

He's at a standstill. Cars waiting as pedestrians pour across the street. He sees the woman on the bike intermittently through the gaps. But she's getting smaller and smaller. He could lose her.

Once he starts moving again, he has indeed lost sight of her. No, wait, there's a whoosh of hair turning in to a side street.

When he arrives, she's gone.

He looks up and down the street, but there's only a handful of people and she's not one of them.

His imagination is working overtime. He pulls to an open parking space on the street, looks at Ali's sketch that sits on the passenger seat. He peers around the area again. Maybe the woman went into one of the shops. It's then he notices his phone. It says the second address his friends identified is only one hundred feet away.

Then he sees it. A bicycle leaning against a lamppost. It's in front of a business. That's when adrenaline—God knows how he has any left after this week—rushes through him.

The storefront is an art gallery.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:08 am

Ryan climbs out of the car, eyes locked on the gallery. A man ahead fast-walks to the door and goes inside. An early customer or employee of the gallery, presumably.

Ryan walks to the front window, which displays several pieces. An oil painting of a green river viewed through green leaves of a forest. A sculpture of a primitive woman. A ceramic bowl. But it's the sketch—in pencil and in a familiar style—that lodges a lump in his throat. It's of a couple, young lovers, running to a parked car on a secluded knoll, laughing to escape a heavy rain.

He braces himself to go in. But then thinks maybe he should wait until the customer leaves. Ryan's arrival might cause a scene.

He lingers outside, debating what to do. Then something unsettling happens. A hand, one covered with tattoos, appears through the blinds covering the small window on the gallery's door. It turns a sign from open to closed. He stares at the sign: FERME.

Ryan thinks about the man he saw enter the gallery. He walked in with purpose. There was something familiar about the gait. Ryan's mind flashes to the image of the man on the English CCTV. The one carrying an axe.

Without hesitation, he charges inside. The door isn't locked. It's one of those locks that requires a key even from the inside.

A bell jangles when it opens. A small hallway leads to the main area of the gallery.

There, his heart free-falls. It isn't a grisly scene with the man with the axe. She's standing behind a counter. Looking radiant.

She's frozen staring back at him.

The silence holds for what feels like a lifetime.

"Dodge?" Her tone is threaded with hope and disbelief. And something else, he realizes: fear.

That's confirmed when a tear rolls down her cheek and she mouths a single word to him.

Run.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:08 am

A knock at the front door rattles Michael's nerves. He's not expecting anyone.

He moves stealthily to the entryway. There's no peephole in the old wooden door, but maybe he can see who it is through the side window.

Before he can look, the door bursts open, the frame splintering. The man standing there is large, beefy, like a boxer past his prime. He holds a handgun at his side. Michael has a vague recollection of the man sitting in the back of O'Leary's Tavern.

Michael turns, dashes to his bedroom to retrieve his own handgun. He hears the man say, "Jesus Christ," as he follows after him. There's no urgency to it. He doesn't take a shot.

In the bedroom, they each aim a gun at the other. The guy shakes his head, exasperated.

The man then does something unexpected: He lowers his gun, places it on the dresser. He reaches to his front pocket until Michael says, "Don't do it."

The man shakes his head again. "It's my phone. I need to show you something."

"Who are you?" Michael keeps his weapon trained at center mass.

"My name's Brian O'Leary," he says calmly. "May I?" He gestures to his pocket.

Michael thinks about this. Brian O'Leary. Deadly Shane O'Leary's brother. The man's gun is on the dresser. He didn't need to surrender it. Michael nods for Brian to

pull out his phone.

“Slow.”

Brian takes his time, makes a show of removing the phone from his pocket. He seeks approval with his eyes to pull up something on the device and Michael nods again. Then Brian flips around the screen to show him.

Michael nearly vomits from the shock. The photo is of his daughter. She’s wearing the clothes she had on this morning. There’s an arm wrapped around her neck, a gun with a long barrel pressed to her temple.

“Put the gun down,” Brian O’Leary says.

“Your brother sent you?”

“Ya think?”

“Do what you need to do with me, but leave her out of this. She has nothing to do with any of this.”

“Shane sees it differently.”

“What do you want?”

“For starters, our money.”

Acid crawls up Michael’s throat. For starters.

“I’ll give you whatever you want. Just don’t hurt her.”

“I don’t want to hurt a kid in her twenties,” Brian O’Leary says. “I’ve got one of my own.”

“So don’t.”

“Here’s the thing. My brother is a prideful man. This isn’t only about the money for him. He needs to talk to you in person. To come home to Philly.”

“I’ll do whatever you want. I’ll come without a problem. But please leave her out of this.”

“I don’t have any say in whether he’ll leave her out of it. I’m just supposed to bring you home.”

Michael slowly places his own gun on the dresser. “She was a middle-school kid. She didn’t know Shane’s son would—”

“I get it. I do. But you don’t know my brother. Or his wife.” Brian shakes his head.

Michael is sweating but he feels cold.

“But maybe there’s a deal to be made here,” Brian says. “Maybe your daughter escapes.”

Michael examines the man. He has full cheeks and a gut that hangs over his belt. He’s not fit and menacing like his brother. Though they have the same dead eyes.

“How much of the money is left?” Brian O’Leary asks.

“Double.”

“Twenty mil?” He nods, like he’s impressed.

Michael nods back. “It’s all yours if you let her go.”

The man bunches his lips, thinking. “Here’s what we’re gonna do. You’re gonna transfer fifteen of the twenty into my brother’s accounts. The other five to a different account.”

It takes a moment, but Michael understands. Shane O’Leary’s brother is redirecting a portion of the funds to himself. It’s smart. Shane doesn’t know how much Michael’s investments made on the principal. With five mil in profit, Shane’s unlikely to suspect his brother is skimming.

There is indeed no honor among thieves. Even if they’re family, apparently.

“If I do that, you’ll let us go?” Michael says.

“Let’s not get carried away. I said maybe your daughter escapes...”

Michael’s mouth is bone-dry, it hurts to swallow. But he has no choice.

“How do I know you’ll let her go?”

“I give you my word. Transfer the money and my guy can give her an opening to escape. Shane’s gonna be pissed, but he’s been pissed at me before.”

Michael resists the urge to roll his eyes. The word of a guy who betrays his own brother isn’t exactly an ironclad oath.

“I need proof my daughter is still alive.”

Brian shakes his head. “She’s alive unless I don’t report that I have the money by the time my brother wakes up back in Philly.” He looks at his watch. “And Shane’s an extremely early riser, so get your laptop and let’s get this done.”

Michael’s heartbeat is thumping in his ears. He’s not transferring anything until he knows his daughter is okay.

“The accounts don’t allow electronic transfer. It has to be in-person at the bank.”

“Don’t fuck around. Just get your—”

“I’m not fucking around. You think I didn’t plan for this day? I made sure there’s no way to move the money unless I appear in person with identification and three passwords.”

It wouldn’t take more than a few internet searches to know that Michael’s bluffing. But this guy’s no graduate of Harvard Business School.

“So, let’s get going.”

“To the bank?”

“No, to the goddamn strip club. Yeah, to the bank.”

Michael offers a resigned nod. “I’ll drive.”

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:08 am

At the same moment Ali tells Ryan to run, a figure pops up from behind the counter and there's the sound of wind cutting the air next to Ryan's ear. He sees the gun in the man's hand, Ali tugging on his arm, causing him to miss his mark. The gunman backhands Ali and she falls to the floor.

Ryan doesn't think. He's running on pure instinct now. He zigzags in a sprint at the man, much as he did on the basketball court all those years ago. More whooshing sounds as the small, menacing-looking figure gets off another two silenced shots. Ryan ducks and continues his charge. Near the counter stands a sculpture of a rhinoceros's head on a pedestal. The long barrel of the pistol follows Ryan as he grabs the statue in both hands and thrusts it two-handed like he's making a desperate pass in the last seconds of a game. The heavy sculpture hits the assailant square in the face, momentarily disorienting him. Enough time for Ryan to complete his charge. He leaps, Michael Jordan-style, crashes atop the man, coming down on his head with a sharp elbow.

They're both on the floor now. The man is a coil of muscle. Ryan gets on top of him, straddles him, as the man struggles to get the muzzle of the gun straight for the shot. The man's eyes are clear blue and determined. He manages to free his arm, pulling back the gun and hitting Ryan on the head with the butt.

It's a blow that carries more weight than mere gunmetal. It carries the memory of a night on a knoll in the rain.

Ryan's thoughts are hazy, he feels throbbing pain, blood dripping into his eyes. But he won't let her down again. He brings a fist down on the man's face. The man takes the blow, trying to angle the gun again to take Ryan out. But Ryan keeps hitting him

in the face, again and again, pressing away the gun hand with his other arm. He feels bones shatter, but he keeps hitting him, even when the man stops moving. The cartilage in the man's nose is flattened. Ryan's fists are raw and bloody, knuckles broken or bruised to the bone. With each hit, something releases in Ryan. The fury. The years of guilt and shame. The crushing loss.

As if from far away, he hears Alison's voice:

"Ryan." It's a gentle tone. Strangely not frenzied, given what's happening. "Dodge," she says quietly. "Please... please, stop."

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:08 am

They park the Volkswagen in a lot about a block from the bank on the D922. Michael insisted they take his car because the bank manager knows him. It's a small town. If he arrives with a strange man in an unfamiliar vehicle to transfer millions, well... The lot is empty and has a line of sight to the entrance.

"Okay, Michael, let's not play any games," Brian O'Leary says. "By the way, why'd you keep your real first name for your alias? Not the smartest thing in the world."

"My international banking contacts all know me by only my first name. It would be hard to move the money without the passwords and an identification that has my first name on it."

Brian shrugs. He looks out at the front of the bank. It resembles most of the other buildings in the medieval town, except it has a protective concrete barrier lining the front of it. "The bank looks closed."

Michael shakes his head, disagreeing. "I need to see my daughter before I transfer the money," he says.

Brian shows him those dead eyes. "I understand, I do. I'm a parent. And my kid sure as hell ain't running a gallery in the south of France. But I've been straight with you. I gave you my word."

Michael has been playing different scenarios in his head since the man told him the grim realities of the situation. Brian might stay true to his word: deliver Michael to Shane O'Leary but release his daughter. Or Brian could get the money and let his partner take his time killing Michael and his daughter. Michael would gladly sacrifice

himself if he could trust this man. But Brian O'Leary's word means nothing.

"Contact your partner," Michael says. "Tell him to let me talk to my daughter."

Brian hesitates, looks at his watch again. He fishes out his phone.

He keeps his expression blank when no one answers. But Michael sees it. In the forced nonchalance. In the slight clench of the jaw.

"What's wrong? Why isn't he answering?"

"Nothing's wrong." Brian's face turns hard. "Now I'm gonna say this once: Get in there and transfer that money. If you don't do it by the top of the hour, your daughter's gonna be missing a finger for every minute it's late."

Terror rips through Michael again.

"Think I'm kidding? My partner, he's an odd bird. He won't do it because my brother ordered it, he'll do it 'cause he likes it. I'd tell you to ask your friend, that small-town sheriff, if I'm exaggerating, but he's no longer in a position to say."

Michael's heart is thumping. His core fills with dread, sadness, that they must've taken out Ken Walton. But he needs to push through. His daughter is alone with a sadistic killer. Why isn't the partner answering his phone?

It's then he decides. He has to execute the plan. He gets out of the car, heads toward the front of the bank.

Brian rolls down the passenger window. "Don't fuck around. Get this done. The clock's ticking." He taps his watch with two fingers.

Michael holds up the sheet of paper with the new account numbers written on it, then looks around the street to confirm no pedestrians are nearby.

He's on the sidewalk in front of the bank, past the concrete barriers lining the front. He turns around, surveys the area to confirm no one is in range. Then he makes eye contact with O'Leary, who doesn't know that Cordes-sur-Ciel financial institutions don't open until the afternoon.

O'Leary looks puzzled when Michael ducks low behind the barrier.

Protected, Michael pulls the remote detonator from his pocket, flips the protective cap, and presses the button.

LEAVENWORTH, KANSAS

Poppy and Chantelle sit under the fluorescent lighting of a conference room in KBI's offices in Kansas City. Other than a custodian, whom Chantelle greeted by name when he came in to clean the trash cans, they're the only people still at the office this late.

They've spent the better part of the evening running down the lead from the tailor shop, researching the suit's owner, a man named Patrick Donnelly, known in some quarters as "Dapper Donnelly." They've only been able to discern this much so far from Google and the KBI's databases: Patrick Donnelly was a soldier in the O'Leary crime family out of Philly. He'd been under investigation for RICO violations, but so was everyone else in the organization. He was never reported missing, but he seems to have fallen off the face of the earth five years ago. They reached out to the cell phone and credit card companies. If the guy hasn't used a cell or card in the past five years, there's no question he's one of the bodies from the car. He's not in the CODIS DNA database, surprisingly. But his father, Chaz Donnelly, the longtime consigliere to the O'Leary family, did time and his DNA is on file. It won't be hard to connect the dots if the body in the car is related to the father. Chantelle has reached out to a contact at the FBI to try to gain access to the bureau's more extensive files and databases.

Chantelle stands, stretches her back. "What do you do for fun?" she asks Poppy.

"Fun? What's that?"

Chantelle smiles, returns to her chair.

“How about you?” Poppy asks.

Chantelle thinks about this. “I like to go to the Blue Room.”

“What’s that?”

“I thought you grew up here?” Chantelle says, seeming surprised Poppy has never heard of the place.

“I grew up in Leavenworth,” Poppy says, “but we didn’t get up to KC much. Mostly trips to Worlds of Fun.”

This time it’s Chantelle who says, “What’s that?”

“Think Six Flags without the sophistication.”

“Well, that settles it, I’ll have to take you to the Blue Room, and you’ll have to take me to Worlds of Fun.”

Chantelle’s phone chimes and she studies the device.

“Your FBI contact?” Poppy asks.

“Yeah, he says he’ll look into it and get back to me. He has friends in the organized-crime division and they’ll likely have a file on Donnelly.”

Poppy nods.

“What about WITSEC? Do you think they’ll tell us anything?” Poppy asks.

Their working theory is straightforward: Alison and her father were in hiding from

the O'Learys. They don't know why, but for the government to intervene it probably means that Alison's father was going to testify against the O'Leary organization for something, and that doesn't often lead to a long life span.

Chantelle says, "If they were in WITSEC, the marshals won't tell us jack."

"Will they clue in the FBI?" Poppy can understand WITSEC not sharing information with state and local law enforcement, but wouldn't they brief one of their own?

"I'd be surprised. They've never lost a witness for a reason: They trust no one."

Poppy feels a stab of worry when her phone vibrates in her pocket since it could be a call about her father. Poppy flicks the device.

"Hello."

"Hi, Poppy, I'm sorry to bother you." It's Margaret from the office. Something must be wrong for her to call so late.

"No worries. Is everything okay?"

"I never heard from the sheriff today. It's not like him. I contacted the assisted living facility where his wife lives, and he hasn't been there all day. I wondered if you've heard from him?"

"I've been at KBI working the Alison Lane case, and haven't heard. But I usually don't... Did you check with Kyle?"

"No one's seen him. I'm not sure what to do."

"Has anyone gone to his house, done a wellness check?"

“I drove by, but no one answered the door.”

Poppy feels unsettled, a tingle of apprehension at the base of her neck. “I’m sure everything’s fine. We’re about done here, so I’ll stop by the hospital to see if he’s there with my dad, and if not, I’ll stop by his house.”

Margaret lets out a loud sigh of relief. “If it wouldn’t be too much trouble.”

“No trouble at all.”

Ten minutes later, Chantelle walks to the parking lot with Poppy. The outdoor lot is nearly empty with only scattered light from a few lampposts. “Sure you don’t want me to come with you?”

“Nah, it’s late. I’ve got it. The sheriff is probably at the hospital. He was buds with my father.”

When they reach Poppy’s car, they linger there a long moment.

“I really don’t mind coming,” Chantelle says.

“I’ve got it,” Poppy says. “I’ll call you tomorrow...” She hesitates. “About the case stuff.”

Chantelle nods, then waits as Poppy gets into the Ford Escort. Poppy watches as Chantelle walks across the shadowy lot to the employee section and gets inside her car. Before heading back to Leavenworth, Poppy checks her phone to see if there are any updates on her father or the sheriff.

The lot is quiet, the only sound from the wind.

Until she hears the voice coming from the back seat.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:08 am

CORDES-SUR-CIEL, FRANCE

Ryan retrieves the gun with the oversized barrel from the floor next to the bloody mess that remains of the attacker. He unscrews the barrel, a silencer he presumes, jams it in his pocket, and tucks the gun at the small of his back.

Ali seems to be in shock. She's said nothing more since the man stopped moving. Ryan studies his body. The man's chest is rising and falling, he's alive.

A wail of sirens comes from the street. Ryan looks at her. "Wait here."

He darts down the hallway to the gallery's front door. Peering through the shades on the door's window, he sees people on the street staring toward the main road. The distinctive sound of European emergency sirens fills the air. Ryan opens the door, looks toward the intersection. Cars are veering to the side of the main road to give way to the procession of police cars and ambulances. In the distance, Ryan sees smoke billowing in the sky. Like there's been some kind of explosion or fire.

He goes back inside, stands in the entryway, trying to gather his thoughts. They should call the police, right? Their attacker is in bad shape, but it was self-defense. But who is he? And why is he after Ali?

Ryan's aching hands are shaking now. When he returns to the main space of the gallery, his blood turns cold.

The man, his face ghoulish, swollen, and covered in blood, stands behind Ali. He has what looks like a phone or computer cord pulled around her neck. He's unsteady, but

the cord is tight.

Ryan raises his hands, palms out.

The man starts pushing toward the door using Ali as a shield and maybe to support him since he's badly injured. But not so badly that he can't kill her.

Ryan should take the gun from his waistband, shoot him. But he's no sharpshooter. And the killer could finish Ali before Ryan even has time to reach the weapon.

It all occurs so fast, Ryan's mind can't comprehend what's happening: Someone moves swiftly and silently from the back of the gallery, approaching the attacker and Ali from behind.

Hands seize the bloody man's head and twist it abruptly to the left, then right, and the attacker's limp body falls to the floor.

Ali yanks the cords from her neck, turns, and throws her arms around the other man.

"Daddy," she sobs.

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LEAVENWORTH, KANSAS

Poppy lets out a scream that ricochets in the cabin of the Ford Escort. Panicked, she reaches for her sidearm before whoever's in her back seat has a chance to harm her. But fright turns to what borders on fury when she realizes who it is.

FBI Special Agent Fincher.

“What in the holy fuck?” Poppy yells.

“Sorry to frighten you.”

“No, fuck that. Get out of my car. This is—”

“I understand your friend reached out to the FBI about Patrick Donnelly,” Fincher says, her voice calm, matter-of-fact.

Poppy's heart is still beatboxing. She shakes her head, wondering momentarily how the tall woman managed to stay hidden back there. And why would she be skulking around, tracking Poppy?

“I've got nothing to say to you.”

The woman shakes her head, disappointed. “Don't you think it's time we shared information?”

“Sharing is a two-way street.”

The corners of the woman's mouth curl as if she's amused.

"This isn't funny. Breaking into someone's car is a crime, in case you didn't—"

"You want to know how Dapper Donnelly fits into all this?"

Poppy quells the anger in her chest, tries to focus on this chance to gain information. Poppy says, "He was coming for Alison Lane. She and her father were on the run from the O'Learys. They were in WITSEC." It's a bluff, but it's a good working theory. Let Fincher dispute it.

The agent nods. "Close."

"Care to fill in the fucking gaps?"

Agent Fincher says, "They weren't in WITSEC."

"But they were hiding from O'Leary?"

She nods.

"Why? Was Michael Lane going to testify against the O'Learys for something?"

Fincher tilts her head side to side, like kinda-sorta. "You ever hear of the 'coupling theory'?"

Not this shit again. Before Poppy can stop her, the agent continues.

"Coupling's the idea that behaviors are linked, coupled, with a particular set of circumstances. There's been research on coupling with regard to suicide."

Poppy clenches her jaw.

Fincher continues, undeterred: “In the 1960s in England, nearly half of all suicides were by carbon monoxide poisoning: people literally sticking their heads in the oven. But then the country phased out the type of gas that had high levels of carbon monoxide. And guess what?”

“I’m tired of this bull—”

“The suicide rates plummeted. If you stuck your head in the oven you wouldn’t die. But the unusual thing was that it wasn’t only suicides by gas that fell. All suicides dropped.” Fincher raises a finger. “Conclusion? Behaviors are linked to a person’s circumstances.”

“Fuck your weird-ass riddles,” Poppy says.

Now Fincher smiles broadly.

“Talk straight or get the fuck out of my car,” Poppy says.

“For a thirteen-year-old boy named Anthony O’Leary, his circumstances were coupled: relentless bullying by affluent private-school classmates coupled with his gangster father’s culture of violence and keeping firearms in the home.”

“You’re saying the head of the O’Leary organization’s son killed himself?”

She nods.

“And that it has something to do with—” Poppy stops herself, has a revelation. “Was Alison Lane a classmate of O’Leary’s son?”

“Her name was Taylor Harper back then, but yes. Then another coupling event: devastated parents with an endless supply of brutal henchmen set on vengeance.”

“So you’re saying Alison was one of the kids who bullied O’Leary’s kid. And she and her father had to go into hiding because of it? O’Leary’s people wouldn’t possibly go after a schoolkid.”

“You wouldn’t think so, right?” The agent taps on her phone, pulls up a news story from the Philadelphia Inquirer. The story is nine years old, the headline says: Tragic Week at Elite Private School: Headmaster and Three Students Dead in Separate Accidents.

Poppy feels a rush of blood in her brain. She’s getting closer. “But why run? Why not join WITSEC?”

“They tried.”

“What do you mean?”

“I went to Michael Lane—Michael Harper—convinced him to turn on O’Leary. He was O’Leary’s captive accountant. Helped them cook the books. But his downfall was helping O’Leary get his son into that private school with Alison.”

“So why didn’t—”

“Someone at WITSEC—and my office—was dirty. In O’Leary’s pocket.”

Agent Fincher explains that she arranged for Ali and her father to meet with the liaison for WITSEC. Explains how it turned into a setup: When Ali and her father arrived at the meet, O’Leary’s men were there. Ali’s father is a former soldier, he got the better of them.

“And they disappeared to a small town in Kansas,” Poppy says.

“Not before Michael stole millions of O’Leary’s money.”

A double reason to hunt down Alison and her father: the bullying of O’Leary’s son and stealing his money.

“The viral video,” Poppy says, thinking aloud. “Someone from O’Leary’s crew saw it five years ago and came to get them?”

The agent nods. “They sent someone outside the O’Learys to grab her. It would give them some distance if anyone put the pieces together when the Lanes disappeared. A patsy.”

“The man with the missing pinkies Ryan Richardson described?”

She nods. “He was supposed to do a handoff. To Patrick Donnelly and another O’Leary soldier. But obviously that didn’t go well for either of them.”

Poppy doesn’t say so, but this corroborates everything her brother told her. The sheriff and Poppy’s father going after the missing-pinky guy who’d driven Alison to Suncatcher Lake that night presumably to deliver her to O’Leary’s goons; Ali’s father killing Patrick Donnelly and the other bad guy. But something gnaws at Poppy. “How do you know all this?”

Poppy examines the agent in the weak light. Far from gloating, Fincher appears despondent.

“Patrick Donnelly was my CI.”

“Your informant?”

She nods.

“Why hasn’t the FBI done anything? Why haven’t you—”

“You weren’t listening.”

Poppy waits.

“Someone in my office, and at WITSEC, is dirty.”

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“Your turn to share,” Agent Fincher tells Poppy. She’s moved to the front seat of Poppy’s car. They sit in the empty parking lot at KBI.

“Ryan Richardson was arrested in England,” Poppy says.

“England?”

“He’s a law student. On some trip for school. He was in Italy when the man with the missing pinkies tracked him down.”

The agent thinks about this. “He told Ryan Richardson what happened to Alison?” the agent asks. “The truth about O’Leary and—”

“I think he was planning to. But then he got a call and rushed back to a small English town where he’d been hiding. Ryan tracked the guy there.”

The agent is listening intently.

“When Ryan got to the guy’s house, someone had tortured and killed the man and his wife.”

Agent Fincher says, “This explains a lot.”

Poppy waits for her to continue.

“One of O’Leary’s men, one he uses for wet work, left for Heathrow a few days ago.”

“Well, that’s it—you’ve got him.”

Agent Fincher exhales like it’s not that simple.

Poppy decides to tell Fincher about the note found in Alison’s car. The cryptic message about finding her in the clouds.

“Did you crack the code?” Fincher probes. “Do you know what it means?”

“No, but I think Ryan does. I think he may be going to this place in the clouds.”

Fincher contemplates this, but says nothing.

“Why would they torture the pinky guy and his wife?” Poppy asks.

“For the same reason you’re trying to figure out Alison’s note: to find Alison and her father.”

“How would they know where they are? The missing-pinky guy was only there to do the handoff, you said.”

The agent shrugs. “Maybe they just wanted to silence them.”

“But why go to the trouble to torture them?” Poppy replies. “The UK detective said it was a horror show.”

“Like I said, maybe he knew something that would help track down Alison and her father.”

Poppy thinks of Dash saying how the sheriff and Poppy’s father arrived at Suncatcher Lake that night. Chased after the man with the missing pinkies. What if the man, like

Dash, had watched what unfolded that night? What if he identified the sheriff at the lake that night and told O'Leary's man? Poppy has a sinking feeling.

"I think the sheriff was helping Alison's father. They have a history." Poppy tells her about their military service, leaving out that her father was also on the bomb squad with the sheriff and Alison's father. Then she lets Fincher know that Sheriff Walton is AWOL.

"If they knew about the sheriff and told O'Leary's man..."

"They'll try to get the sheriff to tell them where to find Michael and Alison Lane," Poppy finishes the thought.

"You say the sheriff hasn't checked in?"

"That's right. I was planning to go do a wellness check right now."

Agent Fincher blows out a breath.

"What?"

"Go to his house, but..."

"But what?"

"But don't expect to ever see the sheriff again."

CORDES-SUR-CIEL, FRANCE

Michael looks at his daughter and Ryan Richardson, who sit at the small kitchen table. The wooden top is marred with scratches and imperfections, charming in the way only a French table can be. Ryan keeps calling his daughter Alison, but Michael can only see her as Sophia now. A survival mechanism: Never look back. Sophia is somewhere between shock and anger. She's refusing to leave their home, their life. But Michael knows there's no choice.

Sophia delivers another outburst at Michael in French: "He should go. He's not part of this. This is on us," she says about the boy—he's a man now—and Michael understands the despair. In some ways, she's right. Ryan didn't know Anthony O'Leary, he didn't take Shane O'Leary's money. But there's no question, he's part of this.

Michael considers their options. How can he get his daughter her life—her third life in less than a decade—back? He could contact Shane O'Leary, try to buy his way out. Twenty million is a lot of money, even for O'Leary. But Shane's brother was right: this is about much more than money. And even if there had been a chance to buy their way out before, that ended when Michael blew O'Leary's brother into a million pieces.

Michael dials Ken's burner phone again, but there's still no answer. It confirms what Brian O'Leary told him. Ken's gone.

He continues to kick around his options. If O'Leary won't make a deal, there's a more direct and violent option. He'd sworn after Iraq that he'd never take another

life, but that bridge has been crossed and burned. He could travel to Philadelphia and blow O'Leary's Tavern and his home to pieces. Vaporize the man and his entire crew. The authorities would blame rival gangs. And maybe the blood debt would end there. But there is no guarantee that it would keep his daughter safe. Not to mention, it's an extreme course, one that would likely make national news in the U.S. and prompt widescale investigations.

Michael paces. "I need to get back to the gallery."

"Why?" his daughter says.

"To clean it up." He doesn't need to specify that he must dispose of the man's body.

His daughter stares at the wooden table again. The red ligature marks around her neck wreck Michael every time he looks at her.

"Afterward, we have to leave Cordes-sur-Ciel," he tells her. "It's not safe."

"I'm not going anywhere," she says.

Michael looks at Ryan, hoping his daughter's long-ago boyfriend can convince her that there's no staying in Cordes. At least for now. Once O'Leary's men don't check in, more will be on the way.

Ryan's studying Alison as if trying to decide what to say. "What if there's another way?" he says at last.

She looks at him, waiting.

"Look, I don't know why those men were after you, but I know you've been running from something for a long time. If it's mobsters or whatever, then let's get you into

witness protection. Broker a deal that you'll testify, get every one of them locked up, and maybe there'll be a way to go back to your life here."

Michael frowns. "We tried that before." He tells Ryan about the ambush when they showed up at the meeting to begin the process of joining WITSEC all those years ago in Philly. How someone in one or both federal agencies set them up.

"Then don't go through usual channels," Ryan says. "I have a lawyer I trust in Kansas. And there's a cop there who I think can be trusted too."

"What cop?" Michael says.

"This deputy sheriff, she's young, but she's smart. She figured out that you're alive." He looks at Sophia. "You might remember her from high school. She's Dash McGee's little sister. You know, Dash from my team."

Michael almost chuckles. Mac's daughter.

He thinks about their options. None is palatable. But Poppy McGee can be trusted. He knows that much.

Michael looks at his daughter again. "I think we should try," he says.

She raises her eyes to his, resignation in her face. She offers a barely discernable nod.

"Make the call," he says to Ryan.

LEAVENWORTH, KANSAS

Poppy arrives at the sheriff's house. How did it get this late? It's past three in the morning. The porch light is out on the modest ranch-style home in a subdivision called Crown Gardens. The sheriff's pickup truck is in the driveway. The neighborhood is quiet save for the chirp of crickets, the buzz of mosquitos. The humidity is thick and oppressive.

Poppy gets out of the car, pulls her gun from the holster. She doesn't want to be dramatic, but the FBI agent's words haunt her: Don't expect to ever see the sheriff again. Her heart thrums, worrying she might find a gory scene similar to the one Ryan found in the UK. Her boss—her father's best friend—a bloody corpse.

She approaches the front door. Nothing seems out of place. The house is dark, which isn't unusual. It's late. She rings the doorbell. If she busts inside and the sheriff is home, he may think she's an intruder and give her a face full of buckshot. She waits.

Nothing.

She rings the bell again, knocks loudly.

When no one stirs she tries the door handle. It's unlocked. Not uncommon for Leavenworth, but maybe unusual for an area lawman. She opens the door slowly, listens.

"Sheriff Walton," she calls out. "Ken."

When there's no answer, she hits the light switch and proceeds from the entryway to the living room. With her gun outstretched in one hand, she slaps on the lights with the other as she walks.

The living room has no television. It's homey, if dated. In a cabinet in the corner, there's one of those triangular wooden boxes with a folded American flag. On the next shelf a familiar photograph. The one of the sheriff, Poppy's dad, and a third man she now knows is Alison Lane's father. In pride of place above the fireplace is a framed photograph of the sheriff's wife. She's standing in front of a body of water, and she shares a sly smile, like she's holding a secret. Like the smile is for only her husband.

"Sher-iff?" Poppy calls out again.

She ventures to his bedroom. The bed is made. Dread envelops her. The last time she saw the sheriff was late that night at the hospital. No one's seen him since then. If he was grabbed that night, he wouldn't have slept in his bed.

She roams from room to room. The place is tidy. No sign of anything out of place, no sign of foul play.

He's vanished.

This is above her pay grade. She'll need to get others involved. Who? FBI? No, Fincher said that someone at the FBI is dirty. But there's no way not to involve the Feds, now. They're not all dirty. What would she tell them? She's already told Fincher enough to create a trail of bread crumbs to Poppy's father and maybe her brother. She'll call Chantelle in the morning. KBI may be the best bet.

The sound of her phone ringing nearly causes her to discharge her gun in a fright. She pulls the device from her pocket, worried it's the hospital. But it's not.

“Deputy Sheriff McGee?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s Ryan Smith, I mean, Richardson.”

“Hi, Ryan. Is everything okay?”

“No, not really. We need your help.”

PARIS, FRANCE

They arrive in Paris in the evening. Ryan is exhausted, every part of him aches. Ali and her father had crammed into the Mini Cooper, allowing only two small bags. It was better than using one of their vehicles, Michael said.

The next flight to the U.S. is in the morning. Ali's father booked them three tickets out of Charles de Gaulle. They should be safe until then. O'Leary is probably getting wise that something's up with his men, but there hasn't been time to send reinforcements yet. It's possible O'Leary might have someone in law enforcement who can track the airline ticket purchase or Michael's credit card usage, but again, probably not this quickly.

They stay at an apartment in the 7th arrondissement on Rue St. Dominique. The place has been in Ali's family for generations. The furniture is covered with white sheets and the place smells musty. But it has a stunning view of the Eiffel Tower.

"We should stay in," Ali's father tells them. Her father walks to the large windows facing the Eiffel and pushes a button. Metal roller shades come down covering all the windows.

Ali says nothing and retreats to a bedroom.

"There's another room in the back," Michael says to Ryan. "You should get some sleep."

Ryan knows sleep is unlikely, but he heads to the room and sits on the bed. The space

is compact. It has two twin beds pushed next to each other and a wardrobe with a long mirror affixed to the door. He looks like hell in it: scruffy hair, dark circles under the eyes, scrapes on his face. Hands raw and swollen.

Sitting on the bed, he tries to make sense of the past couple days.

She's alive.

It's still a glorious fact and he feels something like euphoria as he processes it, but this achievement has come at great cost. Ryan tries not to think of the couple in England, the man at the gallery whom Ali's father killed with an experienced twist of the neck. And then there was whoever was in that car he blew up. Her father is obviously not merely an accountant.

There's a tap on his door. A quiet, timid, knock.

Ryan opens it and Ali ducks inside.

She makes a shhhh sound, pulls on his arm to follow.

An hour later, they're at the Louvre. The museum closes soon. They barely said a word on the thirty-minute walk on Paris's beautiful streets.

She guides him through the white marble halls of the museum. She doesn't want to see the Mona Lisa or the Venus de Milo or the Great Sphinx. She takes him to the ground floor, past the statues of Roman emperors, and to the junction between Vestibule Denon and Galerie Daru. He loves the look on her face as she admires the memorial plaque honoring the Louvre's defenders, which included her great-great-great-grandfather.

Afterward, they stroll past the giant glass pyramid outside the museum, threading

through the crowds of tourists and street merchants. Couples stand on elevated stumps built into the ground to take selfies. Others hold out their arms, point a finger so the photo will look like they are touching the tip of the pyramid.

Ali leads him past a pond where she used to play with remote-control boats, and to the street where they walk along the Seine, the water choppy as boats filled with vacationers float by. They turn in to a small park, trees canopied over them, and stroll back into the 7th. It's strange how little they've spoken, comfortable in each other's presence, perhaps neither sure whether this is real. But it's more than that, he knows.

She leads him to the grounds surrounding the Eiffel Tower where young and old sprawl out on blankets in the grass. She gazes at the tower and its intermittent twinkling lights. They pass more street vendors with their own blankets on the pavement displaying tower-shaped trinkets.

On the walk down Rue St. Dominique, she stops in front of Au Canon des Invalides. Ali says something to the man working the front of the place in French, he smiles, and takes them to a table outside that faces the street, a prime spot that has a straight line of sight to the Eiffel.

A couple in wedding attire shuffle into the intersection when there's a lull in traffic. A photographer hastily is taking shots. Ali glances at them, and the melancholy returns to her face.

She orders a gin and tonic, and it dawns on him how little he knows about this young woman. When they were kids, it was cheap beer from the 7-Eleven. Tonight, he has a 1664.

The only way to truly experience a city, or a country, for that matter, is to experience it with a local. Though Alison Lane isn't a local, Sophia Rosseau is.

Ryan's thoughts oddly jump to Nora. He remembers Nora's dad taking Ryan and their classmates to dinner in Georgetown before the trip to Italy. She said her dad loved a good steak, so Ryan said, "So we're going to Clyde's?" Nora scoffed. "Clyde's is for tourists. He'll take us to Martin's Tavern."

Funny how we all hate tourists even though we'll all be tourists at some point...

"You know what my father said about you?" Nora said to Ryan later that night.

Nora's father is head of litigation at Arnold Porter's D.C. office, a legit big shot.

"What? That I ordered too much food. I'm six-four and I—"

"He said you'll make a great lawyer someday."

"Why do I sense a but coming?"

"He said you'll be a great lawyer if you can get out of your own way."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Nora never answered.

Ryan looks at Ali's profile—Sophia's profile—in the glow of the streetlamps.

He decides to say it: "Why didn't you ever tell me?"

It hangs in the humid air.

"Tell you what?" she replies. She doesn't look at him. But she knows what he means. They dated for four years, nearly all of high school, yet she'd never trusted him

enough to tell him about her past. Tell him her real name. That they were in hiding.

That's confirmed when she says, "I liked Alison better."

It's unusual to hear her talk about herself in the third person.

"What do you mean?"

"Taylor..." She pauses. "Taylor wasn't a good person."

"You were only in ninth grade when I met you. You were a good person."

"You don't understand." And that's when she tells him. About a boy named Anthony O'Leary. A boy whom her friends ruthlessly bullied. A boy who couldn't take it anymore. A boy who killed himself after a cruel prank. A boy whose father is a mobster who had her friends killed one by one.

"When I became Alison, I swore I'd be the best me." A single tear runs down her face. He wants to brush it away, but he doesn't. "I wanted to be assertive, take-charge, confident."

"Mission accomplished," he says with a smile. But his attempt at levity fails.

"I didn't want you to know the ugly me, so I buried Taylor Harper."

Ryan thinks about this. "You went through something traumatic. And you're being too hard on yourself. You were a kid."

More tears. "I lured Anthony O'Leary to the party. I'm the one who told him my friend liked him. I'm the one who led him to that room where they were waiting for him."

Ryan reaches across the table for her hand, but she pulls it away.

“You didn’t know they were going to do that to him,” Ryan says, “didn’t know they—”

“But I did. Taylor did.”

For some reason, Ryan’s mind flashes to the viral video of Ali, taking down those bullies who were tormenting the kid at their school. The fierceness, the bravery. It all makes sense.

He reaches for her hand again, grabs it before she pulls away.

“Look at me,” he says. She averts her eyes, but his remain fixed on her until she reluctantly returns his gaze.

“It’s time to forgive yourself.”

“What if I can’t?”

He thinks of the anchor around his neck at the guilt over not saving Ali from The Monster. Then he recalls the touch of Nora’s lips on his, even after he’d exposed his ugliest self to her.

“You were the love of my life,” he says. “The center of my world. And I couldn’t forgive myself for so long.”

She stares at him with those eyes.

“But you’ll never be truly you—not Taylor, not Alison, not Sophia—until you forgive yourself. You’ll never be able to give yourself to someone until you do.”

This time, it's Ali who reaches for him, cradles his chin in her hand. "I'm so happy for you, Ryan."

"What do you mean?"

"That you found someone to give yourself to."

He's about to protest, about to say that he hasn't given himself to anyone but her, but she puts a finger on his lips.

KANSAS CITY, MISSOURI

Poppy pulls the Ford Explorer curbside at the Kansas City airport. Dash gave her a loaner from his dealership and she hates driving the thing since she has to sit forward to reach the pedals. But her Dad's old Escort wouldn't fit everyone.

She watches as weary travelers emerge from the terminal. Some are sweet scenes, family members reunited, a couple does one of those swirling hugs. But most are businesspeople looking at their phones, parents looking ragged wrangling their kids and strollers and all the crap they have to bring with them on a trip.

Poppy didn't sleep well again last night. She's not sure she should be going rogue on this one. But with the sheriff gone, her father still bedridden and unable to give her advice, what's she to do?

It's nearly four o'clock. They're going to be tired after the long international flight and layover in Detroit.

At last, she sees them coming out of the terminal. Ryan Richardson is hard to miss towering over the crowd. Poppy has to prevent her jaw from hanging open at the sight of Alison Lane. It's like seeing a ghost. Poppy's memories of the confident girl from high school, the sliver of her on the viral video, are replaced with a sophisticated woman with stylish clothes straight out of French Vogue, even after the long flight. Damn. Alison's father is no slouch himself.

Poppy opens the SUV's door, tiptoes on the foot railing, waving her arms until they see her. They shuttle over and all shake hands like this is some routine business

meeting. Poppy opens the back and they put their luggage—they don't have much—in the cargo hold. All three climb in the back seat, like Poppy's an Uber, but she gets it.

She pulls from the curb and heads to I-29. No one speaks for what seems like a long time.

Poppy decides to start. "How were your flights?" The worst kind of small talk, but what can you do?

They all mumble, say the flights were uneventful, which is the best you can hope for these days given the state of modern air travel. With pleasantries out of the way, Poppy gets to it: "So, my FBI contact has arranged a meet with a U.S. Marshal. My contact trusts them, knows O'Leary has someone from WITSEC or the FBI on the payroll, so it's all need-to-know, all trusted agents."

Michael Lane—the man in the photograph with her father and Ken Walton on her fireplace mantel—leans forward in his seat so Poppy can see him in her mirror. "Thank you for doing this."

"I got you."

"Before we go anywhere else," Michael says, "I want to see your father."

Poppy is taken aback for a moment. She swallows. "He's in the hospital. He's not doing great and they're limiting visitors and—"

"I understand. But I'm not going anywhere until I get to see Mac."

LEAVENWORTH, KANSAS

The Dwight D. Eisenhower VA Medical Center smells of bleach and sickness. Michael looks around the dreary waiting room. Poppy McGee asked them to wait here while she checks on her father so she can assess if she'll allow visitors. Michael has a memory of Poppy as a little girl with her red pigtails, a feisty kid even then. Her father had kept his distance from Michael in Leavenworth, for the safety of his family. Michael understood.

Ryan and Sophia sit on the uncomfortable chairs, staring ahead at nothing.

Poppy finally appears. "He's still on the vent. The nurse said he might be able to hear you, but don't count on it."

The hospital room is a tangle of tubes and equipment with indicator lights flashing in the dim light. Mac lies there like he's sleeping. He's aged. A lot. Michael supposes they all have.

He takes his old friend's hand, careful not to pull out the tubes.

"You're really embracing the suck on this one," he says.

Mac's favorite expression during their tours was "embrace the suck" for the countless hours they spent doing shitty tasks in that desert.

Mac shows no reaction.

“You’ve got quite the daughter there,” Michael says.

Again, no reaction. “I need your advice, soldier,” he says, trying to hold back his emotion. “I need to protect my daughter. But I want to make these bastards pay: They took out Ken.”

The machines in the room beep a little faster. Maybe his old friend can hear him. “I’ve got a few options, as I see it.”

Michael continues, sharing his decision points with his old friend.

It’s when he tells Mac the last item—the one Michael knows is the only hope of giving Sophia her life back—that he feels it.

The squeeze of his hand.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:08 am

“We’ve got to get going. The meet is set for five thirty,” Poppy says to Michael when he returns to the hospital waiting room.

He has a faraway look in his eyes. Poppy doesn’t have any recollection of this man who meant so much to her father. She doesn’t remember Dad and Michael Lane hanging out. But Poppy’s father was most definitely there when Michael needed him: the night Alison was abducted and two men were killed and ended up at the bottom of Suncatcher Lake.

“Where’s the meet?” Michael asks.

“An Econo Lodge about five minutes from here.”

Michael shakes his head. “No way.”

“They don’t want you to come to a field office.” She doesn’t say why, but it’s obvious: O’Leary has someone on the inside.

Ryan and Alison are on their feet now, listening.

“I want somewhere public,” Michael says. “And I’m going on my own. I need to make sure all this is square before I put her on the line again.” He looks at his daughter, and nods like she’ll understand what he means.

“That’s not what I discussed with my contact and I—”

“I’m sorry. But tell them that’s the deal. We meet somewhere public or we disappear

again. And tell them I'm not bluffing. We've disappeared before and can do it again."

Poppy frowns. "I need to make a call." Poppy pulls out her phone, hesitates. "Where do you want to do it?"

"Somewhere public. Crowded with people."

Poppy frowns again. Leavenworth isn't exactly a bustling metropolis. "Give me a minute."

Poppy heads outside, calls Agent Fincher.

"Hey," the agent says. "You have the packages?"

The packages? Poppy doesn't like stupid Federal agent-speak. "Yeah, but there's a change of plan."

"What do you mean?"

"He'll only meet somewhere public."

"That wasn't the deal."

"Well, he says he's not coming unless it's somewhere public. I believe him."

There's an audible sigh. "Where?" she asks, finally.

Poppy considers this. Where is somewhere public, somewhere crowded that he'll feel safe?

"The carousel museum," she blurts, remembering the place was always crowded

when her parents would take her there as a kid.

“The what?”

“The carousel museum,” she repeats. It’s the best Poppy can come up with on the fly. And it’s just up the road from the Econo Lodge. “Google it. It’s not like there’s more than one carousel museum in Leavenworth.”

“Or anywhere, for that matter,” the agent says with the condescension of a big-city person.

“One more thing,” Poppy says.

“Seriously?”

“He’s coming alone.”

“No. We need them both,” Fincher says. “You need to convince him to bring Sophia.”

Poppy sighs. “Not gonna happen.” She wonders how the agent knows Alison is going by the name Sophia, but Fincher has always had a leg up on intel.

“For fuck’s sake, what the—”

“Look, he’s got a right to be paranoid. Let’s just get him comfortable, then we can get this squared. You want O’Leary, don’t you?”

Fincher doesn’t answer.

“Where are you taking the daughter?” Fincher says eventually.

Poppy hasn't a clue. "I'm not sure. I'll figure out somewhere safe. I'll keep them close until you all finish, then we can all meet at the motel once he's comfortable."

Poppy waits for confirmation, but the agent has hung up on her.

Nice.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:08 am

Alison feels a strange combination of fear and hope. She sits in the back seat of Poppy McGee's SUV next to Ryan, who is lost in thought, perhaps fear and hope of his own. Her father is about to meet with the Feds. One of two things will happen: It will be the real deal or a trap. In either case, they'll be in hiding again.

"Everything okay?" Ryan says.

"Dandy."

He smiles at that.

Dodge has such a wonderful smile. She's experienced a roller coaster of emotions seeing him again. The nostalgia of their youth. The man he's become. Her betrayals. Not only keeping her real identity from him for all those years. There's more. She'd had periods of doubt about their relationship, including what could best be described as a dalliance with Poppy's older brother. And in the years since, she's become a different person. If Alison was the good version of Taylor, Sophia is the melancholy version of both. She has a deep sadness—loneliness—baked into her bones now.

She thinks a lot about that night at Lovers' Lane. Not the abduction, which she's tried to bury. But of Dodge shivering in that car, the anticipation that they would finally... She fights the memory. You can't go home again isn't just a literary cliché.

The car pulls into a lot in front of a structure the size of an airplane hangar. A sign over the entrance reads C. W. PARKER CAROUSEL MUSEUM.

Her father, in the front passenger seat, looks at Poppy. She returns the look with a

shrug that says, Best I could do on short notice.

He climbs out of the vehicle, opens Alison's door. She steps out and they stand in the parking lot, facing each other. He's giving her that look he does sometimes, that weird admiring fatherly gaze.

Right as she says, "Please be careful," Michael says, "I'll be careful," their words overlapping.

His response nearly levels her: "Copycat rat."

He then hugs her tight. When he releases his hold, she notices Ryan has gotten out of the SUV as well.

"I'll call when I'm sure it's safe," her father says to them both.

She holds back the tears. She needs her father to be sharp in case there's trouble, not distracted worrying about her.

Ryan looks at her father, sticks out his hand for a shake. "In case WITSEC whisks you both off and I don't see you again," Ryan says, "I wish you good luck."

Alison—she's still Alison when Ryan is near—feels more sorrow in her chest. Ryan won't be joining them if they go into WITSEC. It's a risk. But he's never been the target of the O'Learys. Just collateral damage.

Her father shakes Ryan's hand firmly, then pulls him into a hug. With that, her dad turns and heads inside the structure.

Back in the vehicle, Poppy McGee says, "We can wait at my house."

“No, we should wait here. He may need us,” Alison says.

“Trust me, I agree with you. But your dad made me promise I’d get you away from here, take you somewhere safe.”

“Well, break your promise,” Alison says.

Poppy says, “We need to trust him.”

Her father and this deputy have already agreed on the plan, the die is cast.

“You hungry?” the deputy asks. “I can get us some takeout.”

Alison hasn’t thought about food, isn’t sure she can eat. Ryan shrugs. He’s a giant and probably needs fuel to keep going.

“You guys like burritos?”

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:08 am

The museum is teeming with families and young children racing around the old carousels in the massive facility. Old-time music—the kind that reminds you of being a kid at the county fair—floats in the air.

Michael glances around for anyone who looks like a Fed—dark suits, sunglasses, erect posture, that kind of stuff.

The main attraction is a one-hundred-year-old carousel, the only one operable in the museum. A ride was included in the price of admission. He wanders over and watches as moms and dads hoist kids up on the painted wooden horses.

The carousel moves faster than he would've expected. No safety rules back in the day. A few teenagers stand on it clinging to tarnished brass bars, staring at their phones, looking bored, as the ride whirls around.

It's then that he sees her.

The tall woman without any children with her standing on the carousel. As it rotates past, she makes eye contact with Michael. He's met this agent before. She was the weird one who talked in riddles and told him about the disappearance of the guy who had the misfortune of running over mobster John Gotti's son. Michael has a gnawing sense of dread.

The carousel makes it around again, but the agent is gone.

It's then Michael feels the barrel of a gun jammed into his back. A voice says, "Let's go outside. And let's not risk hurting the kiddos."

The voice isn't that of the tall FBI agent.

It's Shane O'Leary.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:08 am

Alison watches as the compact woman consumes the giant Chipotle burrito at the kitchen table in her modest house. Poppy McGee has explained that she just moved back to town, which is why she's living with her father in her childhood home. The officer keeps checking her phone, waiting to get the all clear from Alison's father.

No word yet, not even an update.

Ryan has eaten not one, but two burritos.

Alison and Poppy retreat to the living room while Ryan stays in the kitchen to call his parents. The room has a worn lounge chair, a stand for old-time TV trays. Alison is too wired to sit still, so she paces. A framed photo catches her eye: Poppy's father next to his best friends from the war. Alison's father looks so young.

But it's another photo that takes her breath away. Two couples wearing flower leis, sitting at a table with giant cocktails in front of them. It's Poppy's and Alison's parents apparently on a vacation together. Her mom is laughing, a big openmouthed smile. It's odd seeing photos you never knew existed of your parents.

"My dad really admires yours," Poppy says, drawing up beside her. "Said he was the bravest man he ever met."

Alison says, "It looks like our moms were friends too." She picks up the vacation photo.

Poppy's phone rings and she quickly examines the screen. Alison watches to see if it's her father. Poppy shakes her head that it's not him, then heads down the hallway

to take the call in private.

At the same time, Ryan enters the living room.

“You get hold of your parents?” she asks.

He nods. “Not sure I’ve calmed them down, but yeah. I’ll go see them tonight.”
Alison knows he’s keeping his distance until he knows it’s safe for them.

Poppy comes rushing back into the living room. “I need to go,” she says.

“What’s going on? Is my dad okay?”

The young sheriff’s deputy has a dire look on her face. “I just got a call from my friend at KBI...” She pauses, explains, “It’s Kansas’s version of the FBI. She heard from her contact at the Bureau who had information on Patrick Donnelly.”

“The guy they found in my dad’s car in the lake?” Alison says.

Poppy nods. “He was an FBI confidential informant, I knew that.” Poppy stops to catch her breath. “But his FBI handler... she apparently was turned. She and Donnelly had a relationship. The FBI fired her when the Bureau uncovered it after Patrick Donnelly disappeared.”

“I don’t understand,” Ryan says.

“The agent’s name is Jane Fincher.”

Alison is about to ask when Poppy says, “She’s my contact. The one who set up the meet for your dad.”

Terror engulfs Alison at the realization: Fincher is the dirty agent who set them up in Philly. Who was supposed to set them up in WITSEC but sent them to a grimy warehouse to be killed by O’Leary’s henchmen. Who was dating Patrick Donnelly, the man Alison’s father killed at Suncatcher Lake...

“I need to go,” Poppy says, her tone desperate.

“We’ll come with you,” Ryan says.

“No, you shouldn’t, it could be—”

“We’re coming,” Alison says.

The three race to the door. Poppy thrusts it open and is stopped in her tracks by a man standing in the entryway. He’s older, has a kind face.

But he’s holding a gun.

“Hi there. My name is Chaz. Do what I say and no one has to get hurt.”

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:08 am

Michael drives as Shane O'Leary keeps the muzzle of the handgun shoved hard into his side.

In the back seat, a woman, O'Leary's wife, maybe, has said nothing since Michael was forced into the car. Michael has no idea where they're headed, but he suspects it's somewhere secluded, somewhere where no one can hear you scream.

He's tried talking to O'Leary, to reason with him, but each time he's been barked down.

O'Leary directs Michael to turn right onto Fourth Street. The mobster seems agitated, like he too has had enough of all this.

"I have your money," Michael says. "I made some good investments and a significant return."

O'Leary clenches his jaw, shakes his head.

"Twenty million. I'll transfer it all, just leave my daughter out of this."

Michael hears a sob from the back seat. O'Leary reaches back, like he's squeezing her hand, comforting her.

"It's okay, Gina, baby," O'Leary says. Then he glares at Michael. "Your family has taken something from me that can't be replaced with money."

Michael feels a wave of nausea.

“My daughter was just a kid. She never thought...” He doesn’t finish the thought.
“This has to end.”

“It will. Today.”

Michael looks in the rearview, tries to catch Gina O’Leary’s gaze. “It’s not going to make the pain go away, taking my daughter. Is this what Anthony would want?”

Michael feels a blow to his face. The vehicle swerves until he regains control.

“Don’t you ever say his name,” O’Leary growls.

O’Leary’s wife is sobbing again.

Michael thinks about Mac in his hospital bed. Ken dead, by this man’s hand. Ryan’s lost years of his life. And, of course, his daughter.

He tastes blood in his mouth. There is no convincing O’Leary.

O’Leary points the gun to the sign indicating the Centennial Bridge, which crosses the Missouri River and connects Kansas and Missouri.

On the bridge, Michael’s thoughts return to his daughter. To her wandering Paris holding her grandfather’s hand. To teaching her to drive. To them both having no one but each other all these years. All the identities... all the starting over. And her coming out on the other side a talented artist and curator. He thinks of Mac squeezing his hand from that hospital bed.

Gripping the wheel, he steps on the gas pedal.

O’Leary puts the gun to his head. “Slow down.”

Michael accelerates, screeching around cars on the bridge, gaining speed.

O'Leary says something he can't make out.

Their vehicle is a blur on the busy road until Michael cuts the wheel sharply toward the protective barrier.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:08 am

Chaz is really tiring of this shit show. He's supposed to be retired.

The mess between these two families has gone on long enough. This obsession of Shane O'Leary—no, of Gina O'Leary—has killed Chaz's son, both of the dipshits who helped Patrick try to abduct the girl, Leavenworth's sheriff, and now O and Shane's own brother, in the south of France, no less.

Enough is enough.

But here Chaz is in a small Kansas town babysitting the accountant's daughter and her high-school boyfriend. Icing on the cake: A young sheriff's deputy is with them.

He wants to go fishing on his boat, get ice cream with Davie, live his life without having to carry around a piece. Maybe make up for everything he's done, though he knows that's not possible.

He looks at his captives. They're tied to chairs he brought in the living room from the kitchen table. The kid, Ryan, is a big guy. If he gets loose, Chaz will be no match for him. The accountant's daughter is a stately young woman. And this redhead... Chaz thinks he'd like her if they met under different circumstances. The three sit quietly—he warned them that chatter would result in uncomfortable gags.

Killing them would be such a waste. But Chaz is a soldier. And orders are orders.

A call comes in. The original plan was to take the accountant and his daughter to the woods on the other side of the river, a spot Chaz scouted ahead of time. O'Leary remained adamant that Gina needed to be there. But the accountant wisely smelled a

rat, changed the plan.

Another tragedy of all this is Shane and Gina. He remembers them as teenagers. They had this deep connection no one really understood. Probably because both had abusive parents. For all of his brutality, Shane is so gentle with his wife. But she's not the same Gina anymore. And that's what's eating at Shane. Nothing he's done, nothing he can do, will bring her back. He keeps trying and trying, but look how that's turned out.

Chaz presses the phone to his ear, listens.

It's the kooky FBI lady who was fucking Chaz's son. Patrick sure could pick 'em. She sounds distraught.

"I'm on the bridge," she says, her voice panicked. "I was following them to the spot. He... They went over..."

"Slow down."

"The car, it plunged into the river."

When she collects herself, she tells him. Shane and Gina. The accountant. There's no way they survived. The bridge is shut down by the police. She'll get there when she can. Right now, he needs to clean up the loose ends.

Chaz kills the line, looks at his three prisoners.

He pulls the handgun from his shoulder holster. So much for making up for everything he's done.

His phone chimes. His regular phone, not the burner. Davie's picture appears on the

screen.

“Hey, kiddo. How’s it going?”

“Granddad, guess what?”

“What?” He smiles. Davie’s tone is pure joy.

“I got the lead in the play. At my summer camp.”

“Oh my gosh, kiddo. That’s amazing.”

“I’m Peter in Peter Pan.”

Chaz feels a wave of pride.

“Will you come?”

“Are you kidding me? I’ll be there, front row.”

“Okay. I wanted you to be the first to know.”

“I’m proud of you, kid.”

The line disconnects.

Chaz stands there, thinking. He pulls out the knife sheathed on his ankle and walks toward his roped captives.

He looks at the accountant’s daughter. She’s a beauty, this one. And he admires that she stares right into his eyes, not letting him off the hook by looking away.

Chaz slides the blade under the zip tie securing her wrist, cuts it free. He hands her the knife. Directs her with his chin to free the others.

After they're untied, the three stand there, looking at him. Waiting for instructions. He still has the gun, after all.

"This is over," Chaz says. "Go live your lives. You have my word, it's over."

"What about my father?" the accountant's daughter asks, her tone desperate.

He doesn't answer. He eyes the deputy sheriff. "Your old man is deep in this too. So, I trust you'll let it go."

She doesn't say anything, but he can see it on her face.

Last, the boyfriend—Ryan is his name. "I understand you're gonna be a lawyer?"

Ryan nods.

"Do some good in this world, kid. You'll thank me one day if you do."

Chaz turns and walks out. He looks forward to not being in Kansas anymore.

Before he starts the engine of the shitty rental car, there's a loud tap on the window. It's the redheaded cop. He prays she doesn't try to be a hero here.

He rolls down the window.

"Fincher. Where is she?"

Chaz thinks on this. No harm, he supposes. "I suspect she's on her way here."

He pulls out of the driveway and heads for the airport. He chuckles for a moment. He wouldn't want to be Fincher when that redhead gets to her.

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After the police cleared the Centennial Bridge, the odd woman who claimed to be an FBI agent rushes into the McGee home, probably expecting to find the organization's second-in-command with three dead bodies.

Instead, she takes a punch square in the face.

This one doesn't feel as good to Poppy as the time she punched her lech of a CO when he grabbed her ass, but it's close.

"All this for your dead mobster boyfriend?" Poppy asks.

Dazed, Fincher reaches for her firearm, but Poppy gives her another Mike Tyson-worthy jab to the nose and she's down on the floor. Poppy kicks Fincher's gun away and examines the woman, who holds her hands to her bloody face.

"Or was it for the money O'Leary paid you?"

Fincher doesn't reply.

Poppy continues: "And I looked up all that nonsense about studies about tall people, suicides, and 'coupling' and the rest of it. It's all ripped off from Malcolm Gladwell books. You need a new schtick. Anyway, I guess I'm a Holy Fool after all."

A group of agents bursts into the living room, led by KBI agent Chantelle Luna.

Poppy smiles and says, "Arrest this bitch."

PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA

Chaz Donnelly sits in a lawn chair in the amphitheater amid the other parents—and grandparents—for the middle school’s production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Shakespeare in the park. This is Davie’s third play in the past year. Who would’ve thought? Davie the lead in all of ’em.

Chaz scans the field, the families sitting on blankets, sipping smuggled-in wine. He spots Davie’s mom with a cluster of other parents closer to the stage. She invited him to join them, which was sweet. But he needs to keep his distance. He spies the four lugs there to protect Chaz if there are any threats. O’Leary always called them the “half-wit secret service.”

His thoughts trip to Shane. His death sent the organization into a tailspin. With Shane’s brother dead, there was no obvious heir apparent. Brian O’Leary’s son, Brendan, was next in line, but he’s nothing more than cokehead muscle for the organization. He was originally part of Patrick’s crew, and no one would follow him into battle. So here Chaz is, pulled out of retirement, involuntarily appointed. Heavy is the head that wears the crown, indeed.

He misses O’Leary. Shane, like his father, had a wry wit and a knack for management. But he was kinder than his old man, which wasn’t a heavy lift. He liked helping the folks in the neighborhood. And for all his faults, he only wanted to take care of his family, spend time with the love of his life, Gina. But there was no coming back from what happened to their son. Whoever said if you’re seeking revenge, dig two graves—one for your enemy and one for yourself—had it almost right. For Shane and Gina, it involved many, many more.

The stage goes black. The show's about to begin. Soon, Davie appears in the spotlight and Chaz feels his chest welling.

His grandson delivers his line with gusto: "You have her father's love, Demetrius. Let me have Hermia's."

Chaz isn't clear about the plot of this play, but he's moved just the same. There's a breeze tonight. He watches the performance with intensity, feels tears coming that he's gotta fight back. They do that to us, the ones who take our hearts.

He thinks of Michael Harper, the accountant, who sacrificed himself for his daughter. The bravery it took to fly off that bridge. Chaz gets periodic reports on the accountant's daughter. Her French gallery held an exhibit in Philly, and damn if she didn't take the risk to come. Even ventured into the old neighborhood to visit her mother's grave site.

Chaz told the young woman with three names that her debt was paid, she was free, but not everyone sees it that way. It's one of the reasons Chaz didn't fight too hard about upper management forcing Shane's job on him.

For the two hours, Chaz is mesmerized by the performance. Davie is talented. Maybe this will be his destiny, performing onstage. At the final bow, Chaz stays on his feet cheering louder than any other member of the audience.

Afterward, it's ice-cream time, and Davie is beaming.

"Thank you, Granddad," he says.

"For what, buddy?"

"For, well, everything."

Chaz feels a lump in his throat. He wipes a tear quickly from his cheek, looks back to see if the half-wit secret service crew are watching him from the parking lot. As usual, they're nowhere to be seen, probably on their goddamn phones inside the SUV.

"Are you kidding me? I gotta be nice to a future superstar."

Sylvia returns from the restroom. "All right, I've gotta get this kiddo home."

Chaz walks them to their car, which is parked close to the ice-cream shop. Davie throws his arms around Chaz before they leave.

Chaz saunters over to the Suburban. The dipshits aren't even gonna get out of the vehicle to open his door. This generation.

He opens the back passenger door. And his blood runs cold. Next to the lifeless bodies of his crew sits a man who stares at Chaz with a glint in his eyes: Leo Sabatino.

"You didn't need to throw my brother off that boat," Sabatino says, pointing the gun at Chaz's center mass.

"But I did, Leo, it was my job," Chaz replies.

Sabatino gives Chaz a look of what can only be described as admiration, a nod like he regrets what he has to do.

And then Chaz Donnelly's world goes dark.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:08 am

LEAVENWORTH, KANSAS

Poppy McGee lets out a scream.

It's of the roller-coaster variety as she holds on for dear life in the sidecar of Dash's stupid motorcycle. She knows he took that curve too fast on purpose.

He skids to a stop in front of her apartment building. She yanks off the helmet, glowers at her brother's broad grin.

"Damn," he says, laughing. "I'm glad your squad wasn't around to hear that embarrassing scream."

Poppy shakes her head but doesn't disagree. The Leavenworth law enforcement community is still getting used to the idea of a sheriff in her twenties. After she helped break the Alison Lane case—which led to the arrest of a corrupt former FBI agent—the mayor appointed her sheriff. She misses the real sheriff, Ken Walton. She knew him only a short time, but long enough to know he was a good man.

"I knew I shouldn't have let you talk me into riding in that contraption."

Dash holds the smile. A smile that has sold many a Ford automobile.

"See ya tonight. Don't be late. Dad's making steaks," she tells him.

Dash salutes.

Before he takes off, Poppy says, “Hey, Dash.”

His usual goofy expression turns serious, perhaps at the tone in her voice.

“I’m sorry I ever doubted you and—”

“Don’t get all stupid, Serpico.”

She smiles. “One more thing...” She pauses. “Do you think Dad will mind if I bring someone tonight?”

“What, like a date?”

Poppy hesitates.

Dash’s smile returns. “Nah. I think he’ll say, ‘It’s about damned time.’”

Poppy smiles. “All right, get outta here, you goon.”

“Hey,” he says, his tone softer than usual.

She looks at him.

“You know this isn’t the military anymore, right?”

Poppy cocks her head, not understanding.

“You bring your friend from KBI, or whoever you want. All we care about is that she’s good to you.”

Dash fires up the bike and takes off with a clatter.

Poppy waves goodbye. And damned if she doesn't have tears in her eyes.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:08 am

GEORGETOWN, WASHINGTON, D.C.

Eddie stands up at the long table in the middle of Thunder Burger Bar in Georgetown.
“I want to make a toast.”

Ryan considers intervening. The last time Eddie made a toast it nearly got him canceled.

Eddie continues: “To the new editor in chief of the law journal.”

They all raise their glasses and roar a round of cheers. Nora Watanabe blushes, modest as always. They’ve just finished finals and the election results came in today. Ryan was a distant second and will serve as Nora’s managing editor.

Eddie continues: “And here’s wishing our newbies on the staff, whoever they may be, an amazing trip to Italy. I, for one, will not be going back.”

This is met with groans.

There will be no summer abroad for any of them this year. Most of the gang are heading to Big Law. Many swore off ever “selling out” when they began law school, but six-figure student loans have a way of changing your priorities. But as much as he could use the money, Ryan chose to intern at the public defender’s office. Advice from an old mobster who told Ryan to do good in the world.

Nora, unsurprisingly, has short- and long-term plans that include a stint at Covington Burling, multiple judicial clerkships, and a run at the SG’s office. She’s too modest to

say so, but Ryan knows that her dreams include being a Supreme Court justice so she can change things from the inside.

“Is there anything you like about Europe, Eddie?” Divya asks.

Eddie thinks about this. “One thing is better there: They don’t tip.”

“When have you ever tipped?” Aiden fires back, eliciting a high five from Jake.

After dinner, the group huddles on Wisconsin Avenue, saying their goodbyes. Ryan and Nora decide to go back to his place near campus.

Nora says, “Let’s walk.”

Ryan gives her a you sure? look since, contrary to its name, Georgetown Law isn’t in Georgetown. It’s three miles away, near the Capitol.

“Looks like it may rain,” Ryan adds. The sky is purple and ominous.

Nora laces her hand in his and leads him down the brick streets where she’s grown up, one of the only Washington natives Ryan has met in D.C.

They stroll down a path along Rose Park and past an outdoor basketball court. The court is half lit, but shirtless men run and grunt and pass the ball. One of them calls out, “Ryan, we could use your help out here.”

“Next time,” he shouts back.

Nora looks at him. “They know you?”

“That night after dinner with your parents, I stopped for a game.” He won’t forget that game anytime soon. It was the first time he could remember since middle school

that he'd played hoops merely for his love of the game. Before the pressure of being good interfered. Before Ali was taken. Before the rival team shouted, Kil-ler... Kil-ler... Kil-ler, from the stands.

They walk to the Lincoln Memorial, a temple lit up against the dark sky. Tourists are doing their thing with photos and selfies, and a street performer plays guitar. As they continue on the gravel path that lines the reflecting pool, the area reminds Ryan of Paris, that walk a year ago from the 7th arrondissement to the Louvre.

He imagines Sophia in the gallery she opened in Montmartre. When they last spoke, she was still searching for the Alison Lane inside herself. He hopes she'll find her.

There's a rumble in the sky.

"You were right about the rain. We can get an Uber," Nora says, gesturing to the street.

A raindrop hits Ryan on the cheek. Then another.

Nora grabs his hand, starts to tug him away. But he pulls her to him, kisses her.

"Let's walk," he says. "Let's walk in the rain."