

**THE
GIRL
IN
THE
WOODS**

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Nick Sumner killed people for a living, but he considered himself a salesman more than anything else. When he was a kid, everybody thought he'd follow his daddy's footsteps and become a Southern Baptist preacher. The ministry had held little appeal for him, but he liked standing in front of crowds and talking. He had a knack for it, too. Even at twelve years old, he'd been able to crack up entire rooms full of people. It gave him an edge in his current occupation.

He shifted on his black leather seat, pointed his ass toward the kid in the driver's seat, and farted. Logan darted his eyes in Nick's direction. The kid's skin was pale, and he gripped the steering wheel with a white-knuckled grip. A clammy sweat had formed on his brow. He looked sick, but he was fine. He simply didn't want to kill his girlfriend, their present job.

"Did you fart?" asked Logan.

"Nah," said Nick, hooking a thumb toward the window. "We passed a pack of wild elephants. They were trumpeting."

He thought he'd get a reaction, but Logan nodded

and looked forward again, continuing to drive. They were heading toward St. Louis in the kid's black BMW 3 Series. Nick didn't know Logan well, but they had been in the car together for almost half an hour. They'd never be friends, but a little conversation didn't seem out of order.

"Wild pack of elephants? You're not going to say anything?" asked Nick, smiling and dragging out the words for comedic effect. "Elephants don't form packs. They're not Cub Scouts. That's crazy talk. Elephants form parades."

"Sure," said Logan. His lips didn't crack a smile. To do this job right, the kid needed to relax, and Nick had something that could help. He slipped his hand inside the right breast pocket of his jacket and pulled out a Ziploc bag that held a joint made from a marijuana strain called Granddaddy Purple. He didn't smoke often, but he had purchased it and a lot of other stuff from a shop in Colorado three days ago.

He lit up, inhaled, and held his joint to the man beside him.

"You need this more than me, kid," he said. "Toke up. It'll make you happy."

"Are you serious?" he asked, looking at Nick again. "You want to smoke now? In my car?"

"Yeah," said Nick. "You look like a cancer patient. If we meet Laura with you looking like that, she'll recognize something's up. This will help you relax and make you feel better."

Logan hesitated but then took the joint and put it to

his lips. He inhaled for a second before trying to pass it back to Nick.

“Have a real hit, kid. I’m tired of asking.”

Logan looked to his right again before inhaling for a five count. The tip of the joint burned a pleasant orange, and when he exhaled, the car filled with the grape-smelling smoke. He handed the joint back to Nick, who took another hit. Relaxing waves of euphoria washed over him.

When they finished the joint, Nick felt himself almost melting into the BMW’s supple leather seats. He glanced at Logan. Nick didn’t like working with partners—especially amateurs—but his client had insisted for this job. That was life. He couldn’t fight it.

“So tell me about your girl. What’s she like?” he asked. Nick didn’t care what Logan said, but he needed to get the kid talking to calm him down. Logan’s eyes fluttered, and his Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed.

“Her name is Laura Rojas. She’s a lawyer. She’s really smart.”

“How old is she?”

“Twenty-six,” said Logan.

Nick nodded to himself as he got a fuller picture of what he was dealing with.

“So she’s a smart, young lawyer,” he said. “She pretty, too?”

“Yeah,” said Logan. “She’s beautiful.”

“You screwing her?”

“None of your business,” said Logan. “Why would

you ask me that?”

“It’s my job to ask questions like that,” said Nick. “We’re not driving to pay her a social call. Your girlfriend is a threat. My employers don’t respond well to threats. You’re lucky they sent me. Some guys I work with would have killed her and taken out her whole family the moment they got to town. Me, I don’t think we need to do that. Do I need to do that?”

“My stepfather tells you what to do,” said Logan. “You’re an employee. We’re in charge.”

Nick shook his head and reached into his jacket for his firearm. It was a nine-millimeter SIG Sauer P226 loaded with jacketed hollow point rounds. Upon impact with a target, the tip of the round would expand to inflict a maximum amount of trauma. They weren’t great against men in body armor, but they were lethal against soft targets. He pressed the weapon against the side of Logan’s head, any sign of conviviality gone for the moment.

The BMW swerved to the left. Logan corrected and gasped.

“I pull this trigger, I’ll blow a hole out the side of your head the size of a golf ball. I don’t want to hurt you, but neither you nor your daddy calls the shots on this job. Understand?”

“You shoot me in the car, you’ll die, too,” said Logan, darting his eyes to the right. “I’ll drive into the ditch or the other lane.”

“True,” said Nick, “but at least I’ll die with a smile on

my face.”

Logan said nothing for a few seconds. Then he nodded.

“I was trying to sleep with her. I never got the chance.”

Nick nodded. It was a good answer. Already, he was thinking of her in the past tense. Nick took the firearm from the kid’s head and put it back in his holster. They drove for another fifteen minutes.

“So what kind of food do people in St. Louis eat?”

Logan looked at him and shrugged. “Whatever they want?”

“Yeah, I get that, but what’s the city known for? Chicago’s got deep-dish pizza, Philly’s got the cheesesteak sandwich, Memphis has barbecue. What’s St. Louis got?”

Logan shrugged again. “Gooley butter cake, maybe? Why are you asking me?”

“I’m asking because you’re the only person in the car and you grew up here,” said Nick, looking out the window. The landscape around the interstate had rolling, wooded hills with occasional jagged outcroppings of limestone. It was pretty, but Nick preferred the ocean and white sand beaches of Miami, his hometown. “Where do you get gooley butter cake?”

He shrugged. Nick smacked the back of his head.

“Don’t shrug,” he said. “Answer the question. Where do we buy gooley butter cake?”

He straightened and gripped the steering wheel. “My favorite place is Park Avenue Coffee.”

The Girl in the Motel

“All right,” said Nick, nodding. “We’ll take care of Ms. Rojas, put her in the trunk, and then get cake at Park Avenue Coffee. I like to try a place’s specialty when I’m in town. Goopy butter cake sounds good.”

Logan looked at him, his mouth open. “I don’t want to have cake while she’s in the trunk. What the hell is wrong with you?”

“You refuse cake, and you think there’s something wrong with me?” asked Nick, shaking his head. “No, my friend, there’s nothing wrong with me. Two things I’ve learned in this life: One, you never turn down a beautiful woman when she offers you sex, and two, you can never eat enough cake.”

“You’re crazy,” said Logan.

“Some days, I think I’m the only sane man in the world.”

Laura Rojas lived in a little house in Mehlville, a suburb south of downtown St. Louis. Nick had scoped it out on the internet, but he hadn’t driven by yet. After another few minutes of driving, Logan put on his turn signal and exited the interstate.

“Have you been to Laura’s house before?” asked Nick.

“Why does that matter?”

Nick sighed, allowing his frustration to come out into his voice. “This will go a lot easier if you trust me and answer my questions. If you’ve been to the house before, it won’t look as weird if we show up to it now. If you’ve never been to the house before, you’ll look like a

stalker.”

“Then, yeah,” said Logan. “I’ve been there.”

“Good. Have you got a picture of her?”

Logan reached into his pocket for his phone and thumbed through his photographs before coming to one he wanted. He handed it to Nick. Laura was more than attractive; she was gorgeous. In the picture, she wore shorts and a St. Louis Cardinals T-shirt. Logan had his arm around her shoulder, but she looked stiff, like she was hugging her brother.

Nick handed the phone back, and they drove for another few minutes before Logan turned into a residential neighborhood. The homes were brick ranches with covered front porches and single-car garage stalls. The neighborhood looked old but well maintained. It was probably a good place to raise a family.

“Laura is beautiful,” said Nick. “Did you ever wonder why a gorgeous twenty-six-year-old lawyer from the suburbs of St. Louis was visiting a college kid from St. Augustine?”

Logan said nothing, not that Nick cared. Logan screwed up; the trick was not screwing up again.

About two blocks into the neighborhood, Logan slowed and gestured toward a single-story brick home with a bright yellow door. Unlike the surrounding homes, Laura Rojas’s house had no landscaping, and her yard looked more like a field that a farmer had left fallow for the season than a manicured suburban lawn. No cars were parked in the driveway, and none of the lights inside were

on.

“Pull to the end of the street. We’ll wait for her. When she arrives, I’ll do the talking. You back me up.”

“Why don’t we wait in her driveway? She knows me.”

Nick sighed and rubbed his eyes. “This girl was milking you for information about your father’s company. She doesn’t care about you. She used you, and now she’s done with you. How do you think she’ll react if she sees you in the driveway?”

“I don’t know.”

“Since I’m old and wise, I’ll tell you. If she sees you, she’ll drive by her house and call the police because she doesn’t want to deal with you anymore. We don’t want that, so we’ll stay here and surprise her. When she pulls into her driveway, you will park behind her car so she can’t leave. Then, we’ll get out, and I’ll do the talking.”

Logan glowered, nodded, and drove to the street Nick had pointed to without saying another word. There, he parked behind a big evergreen tree to conceal their vehicle. As they waited, Logan drummed his fingers on the steering wheel.

“We won’t hurt her, will we? I mean, she may have been using me, but she was still a nice person.”

“I will talk to her and learn everything I can from her. Afterwards, I will shoot her in the heart. Is that a problem?”

“Please don’t hurt her,” said Logan. He swallowed and looked to his right at Nick. “I mean, don’t hurt her more than you have to. Make it quick.”

“I won’t make her suffer.”

They waited in silence after that. After half an hour, Laura Rojas’s red Honda pulled into her driveway. As she waited for her garage door to open, Nick tapped his young companion on the shoulder.

“Magic time. Drive.”

Logan turned on the car and pressed on the accelerator. Laura’s house wasn’t far, but by the time they arrived, her garage door was up and she was driving inside.

“Park right behind her on the driveway,” said Nick. “Stay calm.”

Logan did as Nick asked, and Laura popped out of her car. She looked concerned at first, but then she saw Logan step out. She forced a smile to her lips, but she did a good enough job to fool most people—especially a college kid in love with a woman way out of his league.

“Hi, Logan,” she said. “I didn’t know you were coming by. I’ve got work tonight. How about you call me later, and we’ll get together?”

“Sorry for dropping in like this, but I’m Nick Sumner. I’m Logan’s uncle,” said Nick, stepping forward and holding out his hand for her to shake. “The kid’s been telling me all about this young woman he’s met, and I told him I had to meet her. I didn’t believe him, but you are everything he said you were.”

She stepped forward and shook Nick’s hand. Her skin felt soft, but her grip was firm.

“It’s nice to meet you,” she said. “I’m sorry, but I’ve

got to work tonight. Rain check?”

“Don’t worry about it. We were in the neighborhood and thought we’d stop by,” said Nick, nodding. “I’ll tell you what. Logan and I plan to get dinner in St. Louis. You want us to bring you back some gooey butter cake?”

She hesitated but then shook her head. “I’ve never been a fan of gooey butter cake. It’s too sweet.”

Nick looked to Logan and smiled.

“I thought everybody liked it around here. You’re telling me that this young woman, a St. Louis native, doesn’t like gooey butter cake? That’s absurd. That’s unbelievable. That’s un-American. I need you to get in Logan’s BMW right now—backseat, please—and we will get some gooey butter cake.”

“Sorry, but I’ve got work to do,” she said. She turned to Logan. “I’ll call you later, okay, hon?”

“Please get in the car, Laura,” said Nick.

“I’m sorry, but like I said, I’m busy.”

Nick pulled his jacket back, exposing his sidearm. “How’s that niece of yours, Ms. Rojas? Emma is such a pretty little girl. I’d hate for something to happen to her.”

Laura’s smile disappeared. Her skin lightened a shade.

“Logan, what’s going on?”

“Get in the car, Laura,” said Nick, his voice soft. “If you listen and do as I say, your sweet little niece and your beautiful sister will live long, happy lives. If you don’t, they’ll die screaming. It’s time for us to talk. If you answer my questions, I’ll tell my employers you cooperated. I’ll

recommend that they let you go. If you refuse to talk, you'll have a long, hard day."

Her eyes locked on Nick's, but she didn't move. She had more backbone than he had expected. Good for her.

"Who's your employer?" she asked.

"Not Logan and not his stepfather," said Nick, nodding toward his younger partner. "And nobody you want to meet. Now get in the car, or an associate of mine will pluck out Emma's eyeballs with an ice pick."

Laura straightened and stared into Nick's eyes. Then the first tear fell down her cheek, followed by another. She wiped them away and took a step back.

"You would hurt her, wouldn't you?"

"With the greatest reluctance," he said, nodding, "but yes, if that's what the job required."

She swallowed hard enough that her throat bobbed. "Can I get my purse?"

Nick shook his head. "No. But you can get in Logan's car."

"Don't hurt Emma or Alma."

"You have my solemn vow. If you do as I ask, no one will touch your niece or sister," said Nick, walking toward the BMW and opening one of the rear doors. Laura walked beside him and sat down. He shut her door and looked at Logan, who was wiping tears off his cheeks. "Get in the car, kid. We've got a long night ahead of us."

I stopped and felt my feet sink into the muck as my radio spat static. My mouth was so dry I couldn't spit, and my head felt light. Given the heat and humidity, sweat should have poured down my back and chest, but I had stopped sweating an hour ago. I was dehydrated and tired, but I had a job to do.

I leaned against a tree to steady myself. The air smelled like mud, stagnant water, and animal shit. I was so deep in the woods I no longer knew where the highway was. Dark clouds covered the sun and sky, so little light penetrated the canopy of leaves and branches above me. We were under a tornado watch, but so far no storms had come our way. Even without severe weather, though, the area's gloomy feel depressed my mood.

"Dispatch, repeat," I said into my radio. "I'm only getting static."

I waited for Trisha to repeat her message. Around me, an early summer breeze rustled the fallen leaves and weeds at my feet. I should have brought a machete to hack through the brush. It would have made the morning a lot easier.

I drank the final gulp of water from my canteen and wiped grit from my forehead with my shirt sleeve before asking my dispatcher again to repeat her instructions. When that didn't work, I took out my cell phone. My connection was weak but stable. Trisha answered on the second ring.

"Hey," I said. "It's Joe. I'm somewhere in grid seven in a hollow in the woods. I didn't hear your message."

"Hey, Joe. Sorry about that. The terrain makes it hard to communicate."

"Yeah," I said, looking around to make sure no one could see me before adjusting the sports bra beneath my shirt. The salt-encrusted fabric chafed my back and sides, but it was the best outfit I owned for a long walk in the woods. "What's going on?"

"A volunteer found a body in grid thirteen."

Even though I had expected this call all morning, I still grimaced.

"Paige or Jude? And please don't tell me one killed the other."

"Neither," said Trisha. "It's a Jane Doe. She's at a little campsite."

I blinked, hoping I had misunderstood.

"You're telling me our search for Paige and Jude turned up a different murder?"

"We still don't know whether someone murdered Paige and Jude, but this girl's dead. Dave Skelton is on the scene now."

Complaining about a body on the ground wouldn't

get me anywhere, but I swore under my breath anyway. Our search had started that morning when a hunter found a car belonging to Paige Maxwell deep in the woods. She and her boyfriend, Jude Lewis, had gone missing four weeks ago. They were both in high school, and they were in love. When my station received reports that they were missing, I presumed the two of them had run off together to hook up without their parents stopping them, but after this much time without contact, I feared the worst.

“Tell Dave I’m on my way,” I said. “And remind me where grid thirteen is again.”

Trisha gave me directions and warned me that the National Weather Service said we had nasty weather coming in. I groaned and cleared my throat.

“If you haven’t already, call the boss and let him know about the weather. We’ve got almost fifty volunteer searchers out here. If we get a severe storm with this many civilians out here, we’ll be in real trouble.”

“Will do,” said Trisha. “Good luck, Joe.”

I thanked her before hanging up. Already, mud and sweat caked my shirt and jeans, making them stiff and uncomfortable, while rainwater from crevices and nooks along the forest floor had long since soaked through my cheap hiking boots. Every muscle in my body ached, and every inch of my skin itched from mosquito bites. This wasn’t how I had envisioned spending my Sunday afternoon.

I hurried to the staging area where I had parked and

then drove to grid thirteen. As I neared the crime scene, I found a marked police SUV on the side of the tiny gravel road. Officer Dave Skelton and a civilian in jeans and a T-shirt leaned against the vehicle. I parked behind them and stepped out. Dark clouds loomed on the horizon to the west. Without shelter nearby, a severe storm would hurt.

A mosquito buzzed past my ear, and I slapped it as it landed on my neck. The bug spray I had put on that morning should have lasted eight hours, but it had stopped working an hour ago. Thankfully, mud caked my arms. That would keep the insects from my skin.

Skelton and the civilian nodded as I walked close. Skelton was in his late thirties and had black hair that had turned gray. He was a local product, and he knew St. Augustine County well because he had smoked weed in every hollow, hill, and valley when he was in high school.

The guy with him was about fifty, and he wore an orange high-visibility vest. I shook his hand and looked to Skelton.

“Got a moment?”

Skelton nodded, and we walked to the back of my truck to talk in private. Officer Skelton wore a St. Augustine County Sheriff’s Department T-shirt and an orange high-visibility vest.

“What do we have?” I asked.

He took a notepad from the pocket of his jeans and flipped through a few pages before speaking.

“Mr. Williams is the volunteer searcher assigned to this quadrant. He claims he followed the road and came

to a campsite where he found the body. He shouted until another volunteer came with a radio. Nobody touched anything, and nobody walked around the scene until I got here.”

“Good,” I said, nodding. “What have you done?”

“I checked the victim to make sure she was dead. Then I backed off. I thought you’d want to have the first crack at her. Victim is twenty-five to thirty years old. She’s Hispanic, five-two to five-three, and maybe a hundred and twenty pounds. No ID or clothes on her. She has a single gunshot wound to the chest, but there’s little blood on the ground.”

A hundred-and-twenty-pound human being carried a little over a gallon of blood in her body. If someone had shot her at the campsite, her blood would have pooled around her. This wasn’t the murder scene; it was a dumping site.

“Any sign of sexual assault?” I asked.

“I didn’t look that close, but considering she’s in the middle of nowhere and nude, I’d say it’s a strong possibility,” he said. He paused and lowered his voice. “If you’re not comfortable working the case, I can bring in Harry. He wouldn’t mind, considering everything you’ve gone through.”

I didn’t roll my eyes, but I wanted to. Officer Skelton meant well, but the comment still pissed me off. I had grown up in the foster care system. Some houses were safe and stable, but some weren’t. When I was sixteen, my foster father—a man named Christopher Hughes—

drugged and raped me. It was the most awful experience of my life, one I had wanted to keep private for the rest of my life.

Unfortunately, a reporter from St. Louis told the world my story while I worked a high-profile murder case four weeks ago. Since then, people held doors for me and looked at me as if I were an invalid everywhere I went.

I lowered my voice.

“Thank you for your concern, but I don’t need the boss’s help to work a murder,” I said. “Okay?”

Skelton straightened. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Good,” I said, looking around. “You know St. Augustine. Where are we?”

Skelton blinked and looked around. “You go north about half a mile, you’ll run into the chicken processing plant. East of here, you’ve got the interstate and the Mississippi River. West of here, you’ve got farms to the county line.”

“You know who owns this property?”

“I’d guess Ross Kelly Farms, but I wouldn’t put my paycheck on that.”

I groaned. St. Augustine had few major employers, but the few it had enjoyed considerable influence with the local powers that be. If we arrested somebody at Ross Kelly Farms, we’d have a county councilor or two knocking on our doors with complaints soon. I could deal with that, but it would waste time I’d rather not waste.

I walked toward the campsite. Rustic benches surrounded a rock-enclosed fire pit, while cigarette butts

littered the ground. There were beer bottles everywhere I turned and tire tracks in the mud near the road. As Dave had said, the victim was nude, and she had a gunshot wound to her chest.

“You see any clothes around here?”

Skelton shook his head. “Nope.”

I nodded as I walked closer to the victim. The gunshot wound was clean without powder marks or fouling, which meant the shooter had stood at least a few feet from her when he squeezed the trigger. Her brown eyes were open, and they stared at the canopy of leaves above us. In life, she would have been beautiful. In death, she was a statue.

I hated this part of the job. This was someone’s daughter. She might have been someone’s mom. No matter what she did or who she was, she didn’t deserve to die like this. She deserved even less what would happen to her now.

The moment a bullet pierced her chest and killed her, she had ceased to be a human being. She had become evidence, grist for the great machinery of the criminal justice system. The coroner would photograph her, cut her open, and remove her internal organs. He’d tease out every secret her corpse possessed and present his findings to a jury. Twelve strangers would study every inch of her body more intimately than any lover ever could, and only then, when the system had taken every shred of dignity she had, would the courts release her to her family for burial.

To the system, she was an object to study. To me, she was more than that. She was something sacred, something worthy of protection. She was a person. From now until the day we put her killer in prison, I would become her voice. That was my calling; it was why I had become a police officer: I protected those who couldn't protect themselves. For those whom I couldn't protect, those like the young woman in front of me, I sought vengeance. I couldn't bring her back from death, but I could even the scales.

I walked closer to see her. A red hair tie held the victim's brown hair behind her head. The ground surrounding her looked dry, but there were no signs of drag marks, which meant the shooter must have carried her. Neither the victim's wrists nor legs had ligature marks, nor did her hands or forearms have defensive wounds.

I took out my cell phone and took almost four dozen pictures of the body and surrounding area before walking back to Skelton's SUV. Walter Williams—the man who had found the body—was inside, taking a nap. I doubted he had shot her, but we'd hold him until we eliminated him as a suspect. Skelton stood straighter as I approached.

“What do you think?” he said.

“She's dead,” I said. “Other than that, we've got work ahead of us. We need additional manpower here right away to search the woods, so call Trisha and ask her for everybody we've got available. I also need someone to

verify that Ross Kelly Farms owns the property. If they do, I need somebody to contact them. We'll need their representative out here.

"Second, Dr. Sheridan needs to pick up the body. I want him to ID the victim by the end of the day if possible.

"Third, find out who camps out here. Are they hunters, are they college kids who come here to get drunk and have sex, or are they something else?

"Fourth, we need at least two officers with forensic training to work the crime scene. We've got a lot of evidence to collect, and we need it done right.

"Fifth, call Harry. The sheriff should be here."

Skelton scribbled on his notepad, so I let him catch up.

"Anything else?"

"Do you have any plaster of paris in your car?"

He looked up and squinted. "No. Why?"

"Trisha says we've got storms inbound, and I want to get these tire tracks and footprints cast before it rains."

Skelton looked toward the campsite and nodded.

"Okay," he said. "I'll get on the radio and call this in."

"Thank you," I said, walking toward my old Dodge Ram pickup. The door opened with a creak, and I softened my expression. "And thank you for your work before I got here. You preserved the evidence and kept things clean. I appreciate it."

His expression softened, and he nodded.

"Thanks, Joe."

I smiled before sighing. “Okay. I’m off to the hardware store for supplies. I’ll get bottles of water, but do we need anything else?”

He squinted. “Bug spray?”

It was a fair idea, so I nodded. As I did that, thunder rumbled in the distance.

“I’ll be back soon.”

Skelton looked at the sky and nodded. “I’ll tell Harry to bring in the party tent.”

I closed my door. A drop of rain hit the front windshield as I rolled my window down.

“Please do,” I said. I paused and waited as thunder once more rumbled to the west. “And tell him to hurry or we won’t have a crime scene left.”

Even as they traveled over the keyboard, Aldon McKenzie's fingers trembled. It was Sunday, and the building was empty save for the security guards and cleaning teams. Aldon's colleagues were at home, playing with their kids or gardening or doing whatever the hell else they did on their days off. If he had been at home, he would've been reading a book with his autistic daughter.

Daria loved fish. At times, she couldn't focus on anything else. Many kids with autism developed nearly obsessive interests like that. Sometimes that led to trouble, but for Daria, it became her release. She couldn't talk about herself or her day, but once she started talking about clownfish, she wouldn't stop.

Aldon loved hearing her little voice. She had spoken her first word at two years old. *Table*. It was an odd first word, but Aldon fell in love with her voice the instant he heard it. His entire world shifted when she spoke for the first time. At the time, he and his wife pretended Daria was a late bloomer. Now that she spoke, they had told themselves, she'd interact with her parents more. Maybe she'd smile like other kids her age.

That didn't happen.

They took her to doctors and therapists. The professionals were kind and understanding, but Daria would need help the rest of her life. She'd never go to a typical school, and when she got old enough, she might have to move to a special facility with appropriate staff to care for her. Even the word *facility* broke Aldon's heart. To him, Daria was perfect. She would always be his baby, and he'd never give up on her and dump her into a facility, where they'd warehouse her until her death.

And then, he and Jennifer took her to the zoo in St. Louis. Daria had been four, but she still liked riding in the stroller. They spent hours at the zoo, but she had hardly looked at the animals. Then they walked into an artificial cave near the end of the elephant exhibit.

Both Alden and Jennifer had been ready to go home. Giggling, happy children had surrounded them all day, but Daria hadn't even cracked a smile. It broke his heart all over again. Aldon wished his daughter could experience that same uncomplicated childish joy. She deserved it. He would have given anything to make her smile.

And then she did.

The cave at the end of the River's Edge exhibit wasn't large, but it had faux stalactites and stalagmites on the ceiling and floor, and there were signs pointing out the different features common to the limestone caves that dotted the Missouri countryside. The cave also held a thirty-three-thousand-gallon fish tank with gar, bluegill,

and whiskered catfish. When Daria saw that water, she squealed and clawed at the restraints that held her upright in the stroller.

Aldon and Jennifer thought something had scared her, so they ran her through the exhibit and out the other side. Even when they got back into the late afternoon sunlight, though, she didn't stop fighting. Thinking she'd hurt herself, Aldon unhooked the stroller's straps, and Daria vaulted out and ran back into the exhibit.

When Aldon and Jennifer got to her, Daria had pressed her face to the glass and grinned.

"Fish," she said, looking to her mother and father and then back to the tank. She pointed at an ugly gar near the glass. "Fish."

It was the second word she had ever spoken. It was also the happiest she had ever been. Jennifer cried. Aldon knelt beside his little girl and hugged her tight.

They spent two hours staring at that fish tank. Other families passed through the exhibit, but nobody remarked on the cute, smiling little girl at the fish tank. It became the happiest day of Aldon's life.

Now, Daria spoke every day. Her vocabulary and memory astounded everyone around her. She knew the scientific names for hundreds of fish, and she remembered the exact outfit she wore when seeing an alligator gar for the first time at the zoo.

Unfortunately, despite her progress, God hadn't made Daria for this world. As long as Aldon and Jennifer lived, Daria would have everything she needed, but the

two of them wouldn't live forever. Aldon was thirty-eight; his wife was thirty-nine. With luck, they'd live another forty years, but they couldn't provide Daria the help she needed forever.

Between Aldon's job as an accountant and Jennifer's job as a second-grade teacher, the family enjoyed a comfortable middle-class lifestyle. They saved every spare penny they earned for their daughter and put it into a tax-deferred trust. In thirty years, Daria would have several million dollars to live on. That money would buy all the help she needed. She'd be happy and safe.

Now, Mason Stewart had put that dream in jeopardy.

Aldon's throat felt tight as he typed in commands. Six weeks ago, he had found some disturbing discrepancies in his employer's accounting books. Everybody made mistakes, and Aldon thought little of them. Then he looked closer and learned the discrepancies weren't mistakes at all. Something bad was happening at Reid Chemical.

His fingers trembled as he progressed through the guide his attorney had given him. The first step was to create a virtual private network. That would allow him to upload company files to an off-site cloud server without fear of the IT department being able to track him. He had done this weeks ago, and nobody had found out, but the process still made him nervous.

Reid Chemical advertised itself as a boutique manufacturer of chemical compounds for the pharmaceutical industry. In actuality, the company made cough drops and children's ibuprofen. In the past year,

though, the company had branched out.

Aldon was on step five of his attorney's eight-step guide when he heard the elevator ding. Like many modern office buildings, Aldon's floor held cubicles but few private offices. He rose out of his chair to peer over the cubicle walls. Three men walked toward him. Two of them carried firearms and wore the black outfits of security officers, but the third came from IT.

"Shit."

Aldon didn't know how the Reid family organized their business, and on a day-to-day basis, he didn't care. He was just a CPA. He kept his head down, did his job, and drove home at the end of the day. It used to be a great job, but then Mason Stewart, the CEO, brought in new partners.

Supposedly, Stewart's new business partners operated an off-shore holdings company, but none of Aldon's colleagues knew who they were. These new partners, though, brought a lot of cash with them. More than that, they brought guns and their own security personnel. Now, men with assault rifles prowled the halls like it was a military base.

Aldon's heart raced. He had a story prepared if they caught him, but now it sounded flimsy in his head. The progress meter on his computer said he was halfway through the upload. He needed to stall, but first, he needed to calm down. He closed his eyes and pictured Daria. This was for her.

Once his breath came easily, he stood and forced a

smile to his face.

“Anthony, right?” he asked, stepping out of his cubicle and looking at the guy from IT. The security guards stopped near the elevator, but Anthony kept walking. Aldon swallowed hard and pointed to his cubicle with his thumb. “I’m trying to get a head start on a big project, and I’m short for time. You guys need something?”

“Oh, don’t let us bother you,” said Anthony. “We’ll come back later.”

“You’re not here for me?” asked Aldon. “I mean, you’re not here to fix my computer or anything?”

Anthony furrowed his brow. “Something wrong with your system?”

“No, it’s fine, but what’s with the security guards?”

Anthony looked over his shoulder before darting his eyes to Aldon.

“Mr. Stewart ordered it. My team is installing biometric fingerprint readers on each computer. It makes things more secure. I’m sure you’ll get an email about it.”

Aldon’s shoulders and chest loosened. “That will be a big change. It’s past time.”

“Way past time,” said Anthony, nodding and raising his eyebrows. “The world’s changing. Information security has to change with it. Since you’re up here, though, I’ll tell my team to work elsewhere so we won’t bother you. Good luck with your project.”

“Thank you,” said Aldon, nodding and breathing easier. “You, too.”

He watched Anthony go back to the elevator. Once the IT manager left, Aldon's legs gave out, and he fell to his chair, panting. The upload finished a few minutes later without a hitch, allowing him to finish the remaining steps in Laura's checklist. Then, he jogged to the stairwell and pulled out his cell phone to call his wife.

"Hey, honey," she said. "I'm making lunch for Daria. Will you be home soon?"

"I'm leaving the office now," he said.

She paused before speaking. "Are you all right? You sound out of breath."

He thought about lying to her and pretending that everything would be okay. It wouldn't be, though. Aldon had opened a Pandora's box. Unlike his colleagues, Aldon knew Mason Stewart's new partners. He also understood what they planned for Reid Chemical. If they found out what Aldon had discovered, they'd kill him and his entire family without hesitation.

Thank God he had found a lawyer with guts. Once he and Laura Rojas, his attorney, had the information they needed, she would contact the US Attorney's Office in St. Louis. She'd keep them safe. Considering the people they were up against, the government would probably put his family in witness protection. Witness protection would hurt Daria, but it beat the alternative of being dumped in a shallow grave in the middle of nowhere.

He cleared his throat.

"Nothing's right," he said. "I'll pick up moving boxes on the way home."

“Why do you need boxes?”

“I’ll tell you later,” said Aldon. “Think about what you’d want to take with you if we had to disappear for a while. I’ll be home as soon as I can. We have a lot to talk about.”