

disOWNED

Devin Monroe had been a good father, of that he was certain. Well, if not good, at least wise. Two things he'd always done well; he'd always been there for his daughter, and he'd always given her wise advice. Whether she'd taken it or not had been another matter.

He leaned toward the dresser mirror and rubbed a hand across his salt and pepper stubble. It seemed like grey hairs had popped up overnight. He looked down and sighed at the old photo of his ten year old girl, Angela. He held it in his hands. It had been ten years since that picture had been taken. Ten years since a lot of things had been taken. He ran a finger across the face in the photo. *Angela, my girl...* He sighed again, then laid it face-down on the dresser. He grabbed a tie and wound it around his neck with one hand, grabbed his briefcase with the other, and left for work.

"Come on, B!" A young man named Elvis motioned to his friend, who remained behind the fence, reluctant to follow. "It's initiation time." Elvis flashed a bright white smile and flipped up the collar on his black leather jacket.

Two boys hopped up over the back alley fence, very glad not to discover a toothy Pitbull on the other side. Elvis sauntered up the back sidewalk like he owned the place, while his nervous partner Bender, darted his head from side to side like a chicken. "Everyone can see us, dude. This is stupid. We should do this at night like normal people."

Elvis looked back at Bender and smiled. "Exactly. That would be normal and boring and not challenging at all. Now quit looking so scared. If you look like you belong here, people will assume you do. Confidence sells anything." He reached the door and began inspecting the electronic keypad. "Okay, you're up. Let's see what you've got."

A look of confidence overtook Bender as he reached into his pocket and pulled out a small device. He leaned against the house, tapped on the screen a bit, and then looked up at Elvis. "There."

"There what?"

The keypad on the door beeped and the lock disengaged. Bender smirked and nodded toward the door. "There."

Elvis grinned. "That was too easy. Let's go."

The boys headed through the open door and into the kitchen.

"I hear you," Devin said, reaching across his desk to hand the man a tissue. Devin had worked at the Family Crisis Center for the last five years, helping families work their way through poverty and avoid homelessness. The most important work to him was keeping families together; in particular, he had a soft spot for fathers and daughters remaining together. He'd lost his innocent little girl ten years ago, and that pain sliced him fresh every day. "Loss is difficult," he said to the man, "Very painful." A knot formed in his throat as he thought of his own loss, but he ignored it. "Here's what we're going to do. We're going to make a plan, okay?"

The man across the desk from Devin blew his nose with the tissue. "I'm sorry. I never cry. Ugh! I just... I haven't eaten in two days, and haven't slept since day before yesterday. I can't be homeless! I can't lose my little girl!"

The state would remove the man's daughter if they became homeless. That couldn't happen. Devin set a hand on the table and leaned forward, looking the man in the eye. With great conviction and almost sounding gravelly, he said, "We won't let that happen. You won't lose your daughter, okay? Not if I have anything to say about it. You're a good dad. We'll help you fix this."

The man nodded while keeping his gaze on the floor. Devin picked up the phone. "I'll set you up with Theresa in housing. She'll make sure you and your daughter have a place to stay."

Just then a notification on his phone blinked. His heart seized, and he excused himself in a hurry.

Except for the slice of light that shone through the bottom of the closed washroom door, Vicky's room in the basement was dark. But, after the years she'd spend holed up here, she'd become used to it and could see well enough.

She froze, listening for some sign of the man upstairs. Sometimes he left for hours, other times he was home, but very quiet. She could never tell. Still, she listened. Hearing nothing, she withdrew a slip of paper from inside the waistband of her jeans where it had escaped the last random spot check. Her captor had been much more careful at first, blindfolding her, observing her use of the bathroom, and watching her every move. After many years – she'd lost count how many already – he seemed to trust her more. Not enough to let her leave that cursed room, but enough that he'd stopped blindfolding her. She'd been able to use the washroom without his precise allotment of toilet paper squares or even supervision. That's how she'd gotten the paper. She'd managed to sneak the waxy paper strip from a maxi pad without his noticing. Her wiry fingers tore slowly at the waxy paper strip, creating a straight, long ribbon from it, and tucked the rest back into her waistband. She rolled the end of one long ribbon, licking its edge first, then rolled it tightly into a white bead with pink stripes. It took forever, but all she had down there was time.

There in the dark, she had finally created a message – a desperate clue to help someone discover her. Vicky rolled the little bead between her thumb and forefinger, wondering how to best use it.

She was ten years old when she was taken into this room. It was her fault, he said. She'd been a bad little girl. A girl who had been deceived and needed correcting. And until she saw the light, she would sit in darkness. It was for her own good, he always said. Vicky ran a finger across the scar on her cheek, the one he gave her so she would never forget that he was the King of the Castle, and she was the loyal subject.

"This will help you remember," he'd said, standing over her crumpled body adjusting the bloody ring on his middle finger. She had looked up at him, squinting past the pain and was confused by the look of tenderness on his face. His eyes had even moistened as though telling a sweet daughter he would protect her with his life. "I would walk through fire for you, you know." His voice became choked with emotion, "I wish you'd understand that." Then he'd knelt, zip tied her hands and feet to a support pole, and flipped off the light as he left. That had been Day One.

A hundred escape scenarios had run through her mind over the years. Some had been tried. One nearly killed her. None had succeeded. The only thing that had improved her predicament at all was her demonstration of submissive obedience and loyalty. Becoming the little girl he seemed to want. Sometimes she was tested almost to breaking, but she'd passed all of his tests. Even so, after Day One, he'd never been willing to trust her enough to let her out of the basement.

She rolled the bead in her hand, wondering how on earth it could ever possibly help her.

A man with steely grey eyes had been watching. From his vantage point, he'd seen the two boys go in. The moment he was sure they were inside, he'd withdrawn his gun and held it at his side as he approached the house. The boys had to be stopped.

Elvis and B worked quickly, each darting to different ends of the house. B snuck from room to room in search of electronics, and Elvis hunted in drawers and behind wall hangings for safes, gold, and anything he could pawn.

While Elvis rummaged through drawers in the bedroom, B opened the door to an office. The first thing that caught his eye was how oddly stark it was. The room was empty except for a desk, a chair, and an empty built-in bookcase. He walked around the desk and pulled open the drawers. Each was empty except for one, which held a single pen and a blank notepad. He closed the drawer and stood in the room looking it over with some confusion. In this moment of calm, his sensitive ears caught the slight, barely audible hum of electronics.

He turned slowly to the closet door in the corner of the room, the only place the humming could have come from. Carefully, he pulled the closet door open. Empty. Strangely empty. Not so much as a layer of dust on the baseboard. The humming did seem a bit louder here, though. He pressed an ear against the

back wall of the closet. The sound was definitely coming from behind there. He spread his fingers on the wall, swallowed the knot of fear that had risen in his throat, and pushed.

The closet wall moved forward and made a clicking sound. B released the wall and it sprung back slightly. He pulled the panel forward to reveal a small room behind the closet.

"What the-- ?" A bank of monitors hung on a wall above a narrow desktop. Each monitor displayed a different camera angle from inside and outside of this very house. One screen was black. One monitor showed a live video feed of Elvis rummaging through drawers in the bedroom. "Elvis!! Get over here!" The monitor showed Elvis grab something from a drawer and leave the room.

"Where are you?" Elvis called out.

"In here!"

Elvis entered the empty office, and B peeked around the closet door. "You've got to see this."

The boys stood at the desk, looking over each of the screens. "Did it get us?" Elvis asked.

"Yeah. I could see you in the bedroom." B thought he'd seen some movement and leaned toward the black screen.

"Dude. Creepy. Who has a video feed in their bedroom?"

"Yeah..." Yes, there had definitely been movement on the black screen. He leaned close, "What is that?"

Elvis leaned in, too. "What is what? It's a blank screen, duh. Probably turned off or broken or something. Let's find the recording."

B continued watching, his eyes scanning. Waiting. "Naw, I saw something, man. I think it's a live feed of... something..." Then he saw it. A movement in the dark. An arm, barely visible in a faint shaft of light. "There! See it?"

"Whoa..." Elvis said, leaning in, "I think you're right! What is that??"

"Or who..."

The boys looked at each other, their stomachs sinking to their feet. They'd made a terrible mistake. Now they'd accidentally uncovered... what? A kidnapping? A torture room? A slave syndicate? Bad news, anyway. They looked back at the black screen in time to see the shaft of light faintly outline long blonde hair. It was a girl. The bottom right screen showed a car pulling into the driveway.

"Let's get out of here!" Elvis hissed. His mouth had strained into a line, and his confidence that could sell anything was washed over with a look of fear.

The boys' feet pounded hard and their hearts pounded harder as they scrambled out of the room, racing away from the monitors, the house with bad news in it, and the man in the driveway who controlled it all.

Vicky rolled the bead between her finger and thumb for what seemed like forever. The gnawing in her stomach didn't bother her anymore. It was the gnawing of her soul she couldn't stand. She couldn't stand being held like this; being owned. She couldn't do one more year down here. There had to be a way out.

She rolled the bead like she had when she was ten. Before this had all happened. Dad had bought her a set of beads so she could make bracelets and necklaces. Then she had run out and began making beads out of paper like she'd seen online. "Look, Daddy!"

Her dad had taken the paper beads into his hand and admired each one. "My crafty little girl," he'd said, smiling and admiring each design. "Nicely done! Keep it up!"

His approval had filled her heart with such warmth she thought she might explode with pride. There were few things that made him proud of her. Having finally discovered one, what could she do but continue in the thing he'd found to love about her?

She did not ask for a new bead kit to replace the used up one; instead, she gathered paper. Shiny paper, textured paper, newspaper; anything she could get her hands on, and would craft beads out of it. She crafted and crafted like her father's love depended on it. Maybe it had. It didn't matter. He loved the beads, which meant he loved her.

Vicky's fingers froze around the bead at the sound of muffled footfalls. They sounded quiet and far away, but she knew it meant something very important: something different was happening. And anything different was bad. Anything different was also an opportunity to toss in a change of her own. What was going on, and how could she use it to her advantage?

Her heart hammered in her chest and terror shot through her arms like electricity as she realized this meant someone else was probably in the house. And, if she could hear their steps through the soundproofing, it meant they were running. Hard. Scared. *He* was home. Maybe he would capture whoever it was and put them in here. Or kill them like that other time. Either way, their presence in the house would be her fault and she would pay.

She desperately wanted to cry out for help, but there was no point. Even if they could hear her, they were running from him. If he knew she was calling out for help, wanting to get away instead of staying here with him, any trust she'd earned would be lost.

Then it hit her. It might not get her out of here, but she knew how the bead could at least help her survive the price of the footfalls upstairs.

Devin Monroe made his way through the office, past desks and cubicles, trying to contain his panic.

Ever since the day of Angela's disappearance, he'd been watching and hoping for her return. She was alive, and somehow, she would come back to him. He had been willing to consider no other option. The

month it happened, police had told him how unlikely it was. Friends and family had long given up. But he still held out hope that his little girl would return.

The fact that he was the only one who clung to this belief only deepened his resolve. She would return to him if he had to turn his world inside out to make it happen. The house had become an instant shrine, her room remaining untouched since that day except for the days he would sit on her bed and imagine things were just as they had been. Perhaps on some level he'd hoped that if everything remained as it was, it could become that way again.

He unlocked the car door, climbed in, and slammed it shut. The day was unreasonably sunny for such a moment. He hadn't only been watching for her return. He'd been watching parked vans and slow-moving unmarked cars, too. He'd watched the neighbors. Kept his distance from people in general. If they could succeed in taking his innocent daughter, there was little else they couldn't take. His guard had been up ever since. He checked the phone again and read the notification. *Activity detected*. He had known for ten years this day would eventually come. Could it really be happening now? He turned the key and pulled out of the parking lot.

The boys had dared to do this in broad daylight. Mistake number one. The steely-eyed man checked the door knob. The boys had left it open. Mistake number two. He slid into the house, gun at his side, and listened. In the next room, he heard their voices.

"Whoa... what is that?"

"Creepy"

"Let's get out of here!"

The man's muscles tensed as he heard their feet pounding toward him. He raised his gun, and waited. He had them.

Elvis made it to the end of the hall first, coming face to face with the steely-eyed man and his gun.

"Hold it!" the man yelled.

Elvis stumbled to a stop and put his hands in the air. Bender, still running, and unable to see the man in the kitchen, slammed full force into Elvis' back, sending him jolting forward.

"I said HOLD IT!" the man yelled.

Elvis felt the push of B's body against his, and lurched forward. As his body sailed forward, he knew one thing; he was dead. Every cell strained with anticipation of the sound of a gunshot and the piercing hot pain of a bullet.

In the space of a second, as he flew forward, Elvis realized three things. First, the man with the gun was not firing. Second, Elvis was headed straight toward a counter on which there sat a bowl of fruit and a blender, all of which was an arm's length from the man with the gun. Third, Bender was right behind

him, offering the perfect distraction. Elvis' hands landed on the counter's edge, and he grabbed the blender, base and all, yanking the cord from the outlet as he did. He turned and swung it, hitting the gunman on the side of his head.

The thick glass made a terrible thudding sound against the man's skull. The steely grey eyes rolled back in his head and the man crumpled to the floor.

Stunned, Elvis stood over him, panting. Bender stood at the end of the hall, mouth open and eyes as wide as deck doors. Elvis dropped the blender, which clattered to the floor, breaking the handle off. "Go, go, go!"

The boys ran past the man on the floor and through the back door just as he moaned, starting to come to.

PART TWO

Jack laid with his eyes closed, and groaned. The stinking kid hit him with a blender – a blender! He was lucky the other kid in the hallway had divided Jack's attention, or he never would have had the chance. He rubbed his head which was now throbbing, and blinked and squinted, forcing his eyes open. He sat up. His gun was still firmly in his grip, unfired. The back door was open. The boys had gone.

He stood, rubbing his head where a lump was quickly forming, and scanned the room. He pulled a radio from his belt clip to call in the break and enter, but... what was the address? He grabbed a piece of mail from on the counter. 28 Westbrook Drive. *Why did that sound familiar?* He would take a look around and report back. No need for backup.

"Ten-Four," the voice on the other end crackled.

Officer Jack returned the radio to its clip and scanned the room. Aside from having entered and exited here, and of course, knocking him out, the boys didn't appear to have disturbed too much. He moved through each room, checking for damage or evidence of theft. A painting in the living room was off of its hooks and on the floor. The bedroom drawers looked like they'd become sick and vomited socks and pant legs. He scanned the office and noticed the closet door hanging open. Jack cautiously peeked around the door and discovered the bank of monitors. Instinctively, he put a hand on his gun, but did not withdraw it.

He leaned in, examining each screen's display. On the black screen, long blonde hair glinted in a shaft of light. He gasped and pulled out his gun. All the monitors were of this house. The rooms inside. The walkway outside. A car parked in the driveway. It was reasonable to believe that whoever was being held and watched in the dark was on site too. *But where?*

A few blocks from home, Devin flipped the signal and changed lanes. His mind raced with anticipation and dread. The day had come, hadn't it? This would either be the day he got his little Angela back, or the day he would have to finally admit she was gone forever.

"Here, Daddy," her soft little voice echoed in his mind, "I made this for you."

As soon as the memory filled his heart with warmth, the distance of it turned cold like death. A new memory took its place, piercing his heart like an icicle.

She had just turned ten, and the birthday party had been a tastefully small affair. Minimalistic, really. No balloons. *They're not good for the environment, honey.* No cake. *We don't put junk in our bodies, dear.* And the present that year had been simple, too; tickets to the local movie theatre. She hadn't known they'd been a gift from his work. No one had known that. Not that it mattered. Minimalism, environmentalism, and good old fashioned simplicity were too scarce in the world. It was good for them to embrace such things.

Devin arrived and pulled into the driveway. He shut off the vehicle, his hands tightly gripping the steering wheel. Life had been tough as a single dad, but he'd never let on to Angela that it was difficult or even that they didn't have much. Devin's whole purpose and identity was wrapped up in his innocent little girl's happiness. Even if it killed him, she would have everything she needed. That's what good dads did.

That month though, shortly after her tenth birthday, little Angela rang a bell she couldn't un-ring.
"Daddy, are we poor?"

The question gutted him. Instantly. Irreparably. Unforgivably. She may as well have asked, "Daddy, are you a failure?" A knot lodged in his throat even now as he thought of it.

But it wasn't her fault. She'd been talking to *him* again; that hateful man who thought he was better than everyone else and who would fill her mind with ideas. Lies. Lies about her own father! He'd always discouraged their talking, but the man was so persistent, catching her at school, sending her coded messages through Christmas cards, and she was so... innocent. She didn't understand that behind the man's pretty words and pleasant smile was a hateful, lie-spreading demon.

Were they poor. Ha. What a question. *That's just the sort of thing he would say about me to tear us apart.* Where else could she get such an idea? It wasn't her own, obviously. He'd given her everything she'd ever needed. He'd been a good father. No, the idea came from the only person who was stupid enough and hateful enough to turn a man's daughter against him.

He jolted back to reality, yanked the key from the ignition, and exited the car. The moment of truth had arrived.

Jack's investigative mind kicked into high gear. The blonde captive was here somewhere. Outdoor shed? No, there had been no outbuildings. Basement? No, in his scan of the house, he'd come across no basement stairs. It was a one-level bungalow that—

Wait a minute. His mind flashed back to his approach through the backyard. The house was sitting on a raised foundation. There were no windows, but the three feet of concrete under the house implied a basement.

Officer Jack's eyes darted, scanning each room for potential hidden doorways. His heart pounded harder as he ran to the empty bookcases in the office, running his fingers along its edges, pushing on its backs for false panels. Nothing. He checked the room with the bank of monitors, pressing on the walls, searching for some clue. Nothing. He glanced again at the monitor. A sliver of light caught the edge of the long blonde mane.

He walked briskly down the hallway, feeling the walls with his spread fingers all the way. He checked the bedroom closet, the kitchen pantry, nothing. He felt along the dark wall of the broom closet and flipped on the light switch. A mop, broom, and feather duster hung from the back wall. He flipped off the light and swung the door closed, then froze. He opened the door again and flipped on the light. Something had niggled at him. What was it? He scanned each edge, floor, wall, and ceiling. The corner had a single, straight crack in the drywall. He followed the crack up to the ceiling where it ended behind the feather duster. He moved the feather duster aside to reveal a slide lock.

His heart hammered harder as he reached up to slide it open. He unlocked it and pulled the back wall open to reveal stairs into a basement. He slipped the radio from his clip and called for back-up, then flipped on a flashlight and trained his gun on the darkness below.

In the office closet where only cameras were watching, the bottom right monitor showed a parked car in the driveway. The door opened, and a man climbed out. The man who controlled it all headed for the front door. *He* was home.

The pounding footsteps had vanished. Shortly afterward, Vicky heard the door creek open. It was *him*. This was it. He'd found whoever was upstairs and they were about to join her in the basement.

She slipped the bead into her waistband and sat up straight just like he liked, and adjusted her zip-tied hands in her lap. Today, if it was the last thing she did, she would please him. Or at least, not make him angry. Today, she would survive.

A shaft of white light moved across the floor at the base of the stairs.

"Hello?" a man's voice called.

Her breath quickened and her heart turned to stone and dropped into her stomach.

It wasn't him – it was someone else! In all the years, no one had ever even known about this room. Not unless they were also to become a prisoner, or worse. She opened her mouth to call back to the voice, but fear kept her silent. What if it was a test? She could not fail by crying out; by showing her disloyalty.

Then again... was it possible that after all this time someone had finally found her?

"Hello?" he called down into the basement, his voice following the beam from his flashlight.

He listened. Nothing. The old wooden steps creaked beneath his shoes as he stepped down into the dark basement.

Somewhere, he heard the sound of frightened breathing. He moved the flashlight across the room. Concrete walls. A room at the far end with the light on and door mostly closed. An empty chair. A freestanding bathtub. A foot. ...A foot? His light stopped on the foot and moved up the leg, up to the torso, and landed on the face of a young blonde haired woman whose blue eyes, wide and terrified, were fixed on his light.

"It's okay. I'm here." Jack said. He found a light switch and flipped it on.

The girl's eyes squinted and blinked, adjusting to the light, then landed on his face. She startled, her eyes widening with recognition. "Mr. Jack?!"

"Angela??"

The moment she saw his face, she recognized him. Even after all these years, she'd know his face anywhere. "Mr. Jack?!"

In the slice of a second she saw his face, her mind and heart flooded with so much emotion it frightened her. Just the sight of him here in this dungeon filled her with the kind of hope and happiness she hadn't felt in a lifetime. In her short ten years in the outside world – her ten years before this place – there had been only one person who had ever felt like home. How any person could feel like home she didn't know, but in his eyes, in his voice, she'd always felt seen. And known. And loved just as she was.

Daddy had loved her too, in his own way, but it had always felt like the way a person loves a pair of shoes; sincere, perhaps, comfortable even, but always conditional on the state and performance of the shoes. Love for shoes was hard-earned and easily lost. As a child she'd felt it, but the understanding of it had only come as she'd grown.

Mr. Jack on the other hand, who was not her daddy, had the eyes of a good father. His steely grey eyes would stare into her soul and turn soft as they held her gaze. He would listen. And see her. And smile at her. And it would wreck her every time, making her stammer and bubble over with sloppy tears, which was super embarrassing. Even at eight, nine, ten years old, she wasn't used to being seen. Or loved. Or known. Even as she would stammer and snivel though, his soft eyes would smile into her soul.

Now, seeing him down here with her, her heart swelled so instantly with a joy so unreasonable it terrified her. She wanted to jump up from the chair and run to him, and would have, if not for the zip

ties around her ankles. Instead, she croaked his name, her voice having been unused for so long. "Mr. Jack?"

"Angela?" he said.

Angela? She hadn't heard that name in years. Her captor had named her Vicky, which served as a reminder of the rotten person she was until she proved otherwise, which she had so far failed to do.

But Mr. Jack had called her Angela. He knew her true name and called her by it. She'd known it of course, but after so many years of being called Vicky, Angela had become a distant memory. Yet somehow, by the simple hearing of her true name, a daring bit of hope sparked in her. *She was Angela!*

The moment he saw her, a surge of panic shot through Jack's legs. *Angela was alive? After all this time?* He pushed the confused thoughts aside and bolted across the room to her.

The girl's ankles were zip tied to the legs of a chair, and her hands zip tied at the wrists. He looked into her eyes. "We'll get you out of here, okay?" She nodded wordlessly. Shock. EMS would help her with that when they arrived. *Where were they, anyway?*

Jack knelt beside her and inspected the ties. "It's okay now, Angela. I'm here." He grabbed the knife from its pouch on his belt, flipped it open, and cut through the ties on her ankles.

The door at the top of the stairs creaked open, startling Jack. He turned to see a man whose eyes were fire beneath angry eyebrows and growled, "You!"

The man at the top of the steps halted in shock at the scene below. Not only had his secret lair been invaded by an outsider, but that outsider was crouched at the girl's feet, caught right in the middle of an attempt to take away what was his.

The door creaked behind him and the outsider turned to face him. A wave of heat washed over him at the sight. The face in front of him was none other than the very man who had always conspired to take from him.

"You!" He barked it like a rabid dog. "Get away from her!"

The officer kept his eyes on him, holding one hand up and sliding the other down to his belt. The man on the stairs wasted no time withdrawing his own gun. "Don't even." The officer froze. The man descended the stairs, keeping the gun aimed and his eyes fiery. "Pull it out – two fingers only! – and lay it on the floor. Taser and radio too." The officer's eyes looked sideways to the girl, which made the man's stomach twist with rage. *She's mine! Stop looking at her!* "Kick them to me." The officer complied, just as the man knew he would.

The man picked up the tools, careful not to remove his eyes or gun from the officer. He set the radio, Taser, knife, and gun on an empty shelf near the stairs. "Now then," the man walked toward the officer, then stopped. After a quick calculation, he stuffed his gun in the back of his pants and grabbed the Taser, training it on the officer instead. "You've been a bad boy, officer Jack." He stepped closer, "You've

been deceiving people. Telling lies.” Moving closer, the man was careful not to get too close, but oh, how he ached to break each bone in this man’s body. His mind filled with ideas of how to inflict physical pain. Psychological pain. The man’s mouth salivated at the thought, and his mouth twitched as he suppressed a grin. He stopped. “But not anymore.”

The man pulled the trigger, and two electrodes launched into the officer’s neck. The officer’s body lurched and jolted in a full-body seizure. The girl’s eyes widened with horror, but she said nothing. *Good girl*, he thought. The officer collapsed to the ground in a gyrating heap near the girl’s feet, which soothed his soul like a steaming hot cocoa on a stormy winter night. He had to work to keep his eyes from going dreamy at the sight. He looked over at the girl, hopeful that they shared the same satisfying sense of good riddance. As the girl watched the officer lurch and jolt, he noticed a tear slid down her cheek.

A tear? She was sympathetic toward him? So it was true! His heart twisted, partly with the glee of discovering he was right all along, and partly with the dread of this realization. After all this time, after all his years of patient correction and generous effort, she was still deceived. *And she always will be*, he thought. The man sighed and released the trigger, allowing the officer’s body to go limp. He jerked the electrodes out of the man’s neck and put the spent gun on the shelf by the stairs. A silent determination overtook him as he realized everything had changed. He knew what he had to do now. There was no going back. It had to end. All of it.

Vicky, who was also Angela, had watched the whole thing unfold with a surreal terror most people only experienced through movies. Mr. Jack had found her in this dark place, and had instantly set to work on releasing her. He’d gotten through the ties on her ankles and was about to start on her wrist restraints when the door creaked. Her heart turned to ice in her chest. She knew what that meant. *He was home.*

Her eyes met the officer’s and then slowly rose to meet the man on the stairs. Despite herself, and despite her hatred of the years of training in this place, one thought instantly crossed her mind; the thought she had been trained to think of the man on the stairs. *Daddy...*

What happened next went so fast, it was a blur. She couldn’t think. Daddy had disarmed Mr. Jack, who went along with it. Next thing she knew, he was twitching helplessly on the floor in front of her. There was her hope, slain on the floor, or about to be, and there was nothing she could do about it.

Her chest swelled to exploding. Jack had loved her. For real, he had loved her. He hadn’t known it, but he was the reason she was here. All those years ago, Angela had asked her daddy if they were poor. They’d studied poverty in school that week, and she’d recognized some of the markers in her own life. It was the last question Angela had ever asked of her dad. Well, if she didn’t count things like “What happened to the basement?” and “Why, Daddy, Why?”

He’d always blamed Mr. Jack for her questions, but it had never made sense to her. She and Mr. Jack didn’t even ever discuss her dad. He was just a nice man and she liked him. But it didn’t matter. Daddy believed what he believed, and no amount of talking would change that. Mr. Jack was a filthy liar and she was Vicky – an argumentative little vixen who chose to believe liars instead of her own loving father.

Daddy secured Mr. Jack's hands and feet and walked to the back room. Her breath quickened with fear about what was next. "Mr. Jack!" she whispered when Daddy left the room, "Hey! Psst! Mr. Jack! Please wake up! Please!!" She kicked his feet. No response.

Daddy came back into the room carrying a red gas can. Her heart sank. This was it.

Devin Devereaux walked over to a toolbox in the corner and withdrew a handful of zip ties. He knelt beside the officer and wound ties around his ankles and wrists, then rose and stood over the body. It was important not just to get this done, but to be thoughtful about how it was done. Shooting him would be quick and convenient, but admittedly anticlimactic. Maybe he should carve the man's heart out, just as he'd done to him for years. No, too gory. But what about fire? He had been burning with pain and bitterness for years because of this man, this deceitful wimp on the floor. Yes, a fiery death would be a just and poetic end, he decided. Devin turned and walked to the back room, returning shortly with a red gas can.

The girl was watching him. She was also saying something to him, but his mind was a freight train headed full steam in one direction. This man had taken his daughter's innocence with his lies. Even thinking his name pierced him with such rage he thought he might start shaking. And now he'd breached the inner sanctum - the retraining ground where he'd hoped to regain some semblance of the peace they'd had before this man's meddling. The man had to die. The girl's voice was a distant mumble. Something about Daddy, can I. Daddy I want. Daddy, I need. It was something about her, the same way she always needed to say something, or had an opinion or was "just asking". Sure. Just asking. For no reason at all. Did she really think he was that stupid? If Devin knew anything about anything, it was that people always had reasons for what they did. There was always some reason to ask questions. Gathering intel to give to his enemies or to be used against him in some other way, for example. Sometimes questions were asked to teach him something, as though she had anything to teach him. They came off innocently, of course. "Did you know...?" Or "Had you heard...?", but it was just another way of criticizing him. Saying he was wrong. Or stupid.

He suppressed the terrible thoughts rising up in him. He loved his daughter. It wasn't her fault. She didn't mean to collect intel or tell him he was a failure. It wasn't her. It was *him*. He scowled at the man on the floor.

He carried the gas can to the tub, put the drain plug in place, and began pouring fuel into the tub. Normally it served as the girl's wash basin, but today it would serve as a fire pit. He'd read about a serial killer who'd burned his wife's body to ashes in their fire pit in a matter of days. He had monitored that fire for three days, even stirring the ashes while chatting with the neighbors, and no one ever knew anything. Even years later when it had finally been suspected, and FBI agents sifted through the ashes for evidence, there had been nothing conclusive. He'd gotten away with it. Devin shook his head. It never stopped surprising him how stupid people could be. He was no serial killer obviously, but even an average citizen could glean helpful information from such people.

He poured a generous amount of gas into the tub, then set the can on the floor a bit too hard. It splashed a bit onto his sleeve. He wiped at it and shoved the can aside. He rubbed his hands together and couldn't hide the grin that stretched across his face as he approached the officer who lay still on the floor. Finally, he'd get his revenge on the man who had stolen his daughter from him. Devin bent to grab the officer's shoes, and began dragging him across the floor to the tub.

Angela watched her father pulled Mr. Jack's limp body across the floor to the tub. Was he really going to burn his body here? Alive? On the outside, she appeared still though every muscle was taut like piano wire. On the inside, she was shaking and screaming 'No, no, no!'

She knew there was no way to convince him of anything. He knew what he knew. He would consider nothing else. Despite herself, she let a plea escape her lips. "Daddy?"

His eyes were dark and empty, his mind clearly somewhere far away. He didn't seem to even realize she was there. Which was weird. He'd always been very focused on everything about her. Her words. The way she sat. How she addressed him. Even now, as an adult, she must always call him Daddy. Yet now he was distant? Blocking her out maybe? Then a terrible realization struck her. She would be at fault for the footfalls upstairs. She would be to blame for Mr. Jack coming into the basement. And she would most certainly have to pay for talking to him again. After all this time, after all he'd done for her, that she would even lay eyes on this man was an act of highest treason, the penalty for which she was sure involved a tub and a gas can.

Angela swallowed hard and reassessed the situation. The stairs were unlocked. The radio, gun, knife, and spent Taser were on a shelf by the stairs. He had a gun. Her legs were free. She could make a break for it, but her legs were weak from years of eating little and being confined to that chair. She'd never be able to race him to the top. She'd never race a bullet to the top. Even if, by some miracle, she managed to escape, she couldn't leave officer Jack down there to die. Besides, in his eyes she saw her future. Daddy had disowned her long ago and kept her captive until somehow she could deserve his love again, but Mr. Jack's presence here had thrown everything off of its precarious balance. He broke all the eggshells she had learned to walk on. Now, Daddy had lost hope of her ever being worthy; he had disowned her in his heart. If she didn't escape today, she knew she never would. She watched him drop Mr. Jack's feet to the floor and walk around to the man's head, turning his back to her. He bent, readying to lift the man into the tub. She had to think of something. Fast. Or they were both dead.

The bead. Maybe if she could stall him, or convince him of her loyalty, she could think of some way to get them both out of there. Angela fished out the bead from her waistband. "Daddy?" Without moving his body, he whipped his head to the side, then slowly stood and turned to face her. His face and eyes were dark and angry like he'd been jolted out of some intense thought. His murderous eyes fixed on her and fear pierced her like a hot knife. A flame of heat washed over her, and she held her feet perfectly still, hoping he would not notice they were free.

Devin's breathing became heavier, not just from dragging the man across the floor, but from the rising delight and anticipation welling up in him. All the years of seething hatred mingled with the joy of the justice he was about to exact. He salivated and grinned, or at least he felt like he was grinning, as he walked around to the officer's head. As he stood over the man's still body, a wicked glee surged through his veins like a drug, swallowing the years of hatred and anger in a single, pulsing wave of happiness. He wiped his mouth with his sleeve, ignoring the passing thought that he probably looked like a tooth-bearing hyena standing over its wounded prey.

"Daddy?"

The word jolted him from his surging high, and he instantly resented the intrusion into such an intimate and important moment. He snapped his head to the side and slowly stood to face her. The girl had called him Daddy, as she should. As she'd been trained. Still... had she no sense? Could she not understand the monumental importance of this moment? No. Of course not. It was always about her. *Kids. The most selfish creatures alive.* But it wasn't her fault, he reminded himself. She didn't know better.

"Daddy, can I show you something?"

Normally he would soften at such a request. He'd wished for so long for her genuine affection and ask-no-questions loyalty that the slightest hint of it turned him to mush. He was an old softie like that. Which was probably why others always tried to take advantage of him. Like nosy officers and selfish children. But that turn-to-mush business was over. He'd seen the tear she'd shed for the twitching officer on the floor.

"What is it?" he said, trying to soften his sharp tone like a good dad should.

"Look Daddy! I—I made you a present." The girl sat perfectly straight, just as he'd taught her, and lifted her open hands to him. Her smile looked forced. In one of her palms was a small white ball.

With two fingers, he picked it up and held it up to eye level. "What is it?"

"It's a bead, Daddy," she said.

He examined the bead. It was white with pink stripes and looked like it had been made by insects and stored in an old beehive. "A bead?" he said, rolling it in his fingers, inspecting it from every angle "It doesn't have any hole to thread a string through." He stared at her, waiting for an explanation, then raised an eyebrow and continued, "And where did you get paper from, anyway? I didn't give you any paper...?"

The girl's smile faltered into a frown, and her eyes darted from the floor to the man at his feet. Then her demeanor changed. She stilled, and raised her head slowly, meeting his eyes with hers.

"No, Daddy. You didn't. I snuck it. For you. I hope you'll forgive me just this once." Her eyes were dry and stared steadily with a strange confidence that bothered him. "Daddy, I think that burning Mr. Jack in a tub of gasoline is the right thing to do. May I help you lift him into the tub?"

Since when did she think killing this man was right? What was she trying to pull? He shook his head and plopped the bead back in her waiting hand. "We'll deal with this later. Right now I have more important things to worry about."

Devin turned back to the officer's body, pulling and pushing the dead weight to a sitting position, and reached his hands under the officer's arms.

Officer Jack awoke to the sharp smell of gasoline, the feeling of his feet in midair, and the sensation of concrete scraping across his back. He felt his feet drop heavily to the floor. The throbbing pain in his head prevented him from opening his eyes for a second, which was just enough time to realize opening his eyes could get him killed.

Devin and Angela were talking. He noted that even at her age, which had to be around twenty, she called him 'Daddy'. It indicated a particular kind of codependency or, more likely in this situation, a particular kind of control issue. Judging by the sound, both of them were at his head, Angela facing him, and Devin facing away from him. It was a perfect chance to take a peek without being noticed. At least, he hoped so.

Forcing his eyes open despite the pulsing pain, Devin blinked the view to clarity. Straight above his head, Devin towered above him, facing away. He blinked and looked in the direction the man faced. Angela still sat in her chair, holding her free legs very still, and raising her open hands to the man, who was saying something about a bead. Whatever he said must have been bad, because the girl hung her head and ran her gaze along the floor.

That's when she caught him with his eyes open. She froze, her mouth parted slightly, looking intensely into his eyes as though communicating a secret. She raised her head up to her father and said the most unthinkable thing.

"Daddy, I think that burning Mr. Jack in a tub of gasoline is the right thing to do." A surge of fear jolted through his veins. The guy was going to burn him alive? Right here, right now? And she thought it was 'the right thing to do??' How could she possibly? He'd come to save her! He'd cut her loose and—Wait. She was helping him. He shut his eyes.

"May I help you lift him into the tub?" They were still talking. *Good. Keep him talking.*

Officer Jack quickly assessed the situation. Help was on the way, but they might arrive only in time to investigate a crime scene, not save him. Or them. She might be in trouble too. Witnesses to a crime had a way of being in danger.

Think, Jack, think. Gasoline. Bathtub. He'd have to lift him in. Jack had felt the zip-ties at the ankles and wrists. Devin thought he was out cold. That was an advantage... but – then an idea struck.

He heard the man speak. "We'll deal with this later. Right now I have more important things to worry about."

Jack heard the shuffle of shoes at his head, and felt a pair of strong hands wrestle him into a sitting position. It was surprisingly difficult to let his body hang limply, but he managed it.

Once in a sitting position, he knew Devin would likely lug him into the tub by one of two methods; either by dragging him over by the armpits, or by slinging him over his shoulder. Judging from his position behind him, Jack guessed it would be the armpit method and calculated accordingly.

Once he felt the hands slide under his arms, it was all he could do to keep from shuddering or jumping up. Working to stay limp, he waited for the moment. The hands slid through and two arms were now under his arms. The strong arms hoisted him up and he felt his bottom leave the floor. He felt Devin's hot breath on his hair as the arms carried him in a U-turn and dragged him to the tub. This was it.

Jack's limp, zip-tied arms jerked to life and he raised them high above his head. He looped them around Devin's head and yanked. As he pulled hard on Devin's head, he twisted himself to the side for more leverage, causing the man to lose his balance and tumble forward. Devin fell forward, sort of summersaulting to the floor and releasing the arms from around his neck.

Jack hopped into action before Devin could compute what had happened, and knelt over the man, holding his zip-tied double fist in the air, positioned to punch him in the head. "Don't."

Devin locked his eyes on Jack while he moved his hands parallel to the floor, raising one above his head, the other hovered at his waist. He edged it closer to his back, where the gun was tucked. His hand quickly moved behind his back to retrieve the gun. Jack responded quickly with a hard punch to the head. Devin grunted, his eyes rolled back and then closed. He was out.

Panting now, Jack checked the man's vitals, confirming he was still alive, then looked up at Angela. "Thanks for the heads-up! You saved us!"

She tried to smile, but it looked like a frown. He wondered if she knew how to smile anymore. "Let's get you out of here," he said.

She nodded, then looked down at his ankles. "Maybe we should get you out of those ties first."

He stood, smiling, and hopped and teetered, trying not to lose his balance. "Yes, that would be good."

Angela walked over to the stairs, grabbed the knife from the shelf, and handed it to the officer. He cut his ankle ties first, then worked on his wrist ties. Angela kept peeking around him to look at her dad who was apparently still out.

He sliced through the ties on his ankles easily, but the knife angle was awkward to work on his own wrist ties. Jack tried using the knife this way, then that way, first trying to push down on the plastic zip tie, then trying to saw through it, finally it snapped open. His hands were free.

"Okay, your turn," he said.

Just then they heard a groan. "Daddy's waking up! We have to go!"

"Run!" Jack whispered.

They bolted for the stairs. As they reached the bottom step, Devin yelled. "Get back here!!"

On the stairs, in front of Jack, Angela's body jolted against his hand. She wanted to stop. Even after everything, even with her hands still tied in front of her, she wanted to obey him. To go to him. "Go!"

Keep going!" he pushed against her back; she submitted and continued running forward and up the stairs.

"Stop!!" Jack heard the man yelling from behind them, but he didn't turn and didn't stop. If they stopped now, they'd never leave. This was it. Run or die.

Their exit happened all in a moment and all in slow motion, just like one of those dreams, where no matter how fast you need to run, every muscle moves like toffee in winter. Slow. Impossibly slow. All in the same moment, Jack heard Devin yelling. He watched Angela run up the stairs ahead of him. He heard the click of a gun safety switch releasing. He felt the pounding of his slow feet on the stairs and smelled the gasoline. Two-thirds of the way up the stairs, Jack felt a spear of searing heat stab his calf muscle. He'd been shot, and fell forward, scrambling up the stairs.

In that same second, Angela was on the main floor, running toward the front door. She turned back in time to see him tumbling up out of the basement. Their eyes met as they heard a tremendous sound that would forever be seared into their memories; the terrible, throaty sound of a flame igniting. WOOF.

"Go!" Jack yelled to Angela.

The girl opened the door, but stood waiting and watching wide-eyed as the basement door filled from edge to edge with flames that licked and reached for Jack as he tumbled out of the basement. He jumped into the kitchen and kept moving toward the door, sometimes hobbling on two feet like a man, sometimes clambering on all fours like a scared, wounded animal.

The two exited the house and ran across the street. There, they stopped, panting, and turned to watch the smoke billowing from the front door.

Angela stood panting next to Mr. Jack. They had run across the street and stopped on the sidewalk to watch. Thick grey smoke curled out from the front door they'd just run through. Her stomach twisted in a tight knot and she was thankful she hadn't eaten that day.

Her body riddled with sensations she didn't understand. Her heart pounded, her legs shook, and she felt suddenly cold and shivered. Her mind was a mess of thoughts, too. Honestly, she didn't know what she felt or thought. There was too much of it, and every thought and feeling had an opposite. She was relieved by her long awaited freedom, yet sad to lose her familiar home. It made her happy to never have to face her overbearing captor again, yet she was devastated to lose her daddy. A fleeting, horrible thought crossed her mind that he was getting what he deserved, but it was quickly overcome by a feeling of remorse. How could she even think such a thing of anyone? Of her own daddy? No matter what he'd done, no one deserved that. Shame on her.

A string of thoughts chased each other through her mind, none of them settling. She was free. She didn't have a dad. Angela wasn't Vicky the Vixen anymore. Was that ever the truth about her? Who was she? How did Mr. Jack find her? Would anyone ever love her like a dad again? Did Daddy ever love her at all? Where did people belong who didn't have a daddy?

Angela forced her eyes away from the house and smoke, and for the first time in ten years, took in the sight of the blue expanse above. The trees. Oh, she'd forgotten how their leaves dangled like earrings and shimmered like ten thousand butterflies. The sidewalk looked just as grey and cracked as it did when she used to walk to school with her friends. Some things had stayed the same, as though they hadn't even noticed she was gone. Or maybe they'd been waiting for her to return.

This was the world without her father in it. The world she could now be a part of. The world she never thought she'd see again. Why couldn't they have shared it?

Neighbors were starting to appear at their windows and doors, watching the rolling tower of smoke. Mr. Jack stepped in front of her and flipped his knife open. She startled at the appearance of a weapon in front of her, but saw his genuine smile and remembered he was safe.

"Here let me get that for you."

She raised her tied wrists to him, and he sliced them free. He looked into her eyes with his steely grey gaze and she swallowed hard, wondering how his eyes could feel so much like home. Did he know that about himself? She didn't think so.

Mr. Jack smiled and returned to his place beside her. Then he removed his jacket and slung it over her shoulders. "Here," he said.

The jacket weighed on her, all heavy and warm like the most wonderful, longest, tightest hug she had ever felt. A sharp knot formed in her throat and she thought she might cry right then. He put an arm around her shoulder and she worked to swallow the knot. Tears stung her eyes – and his, too she noticed - as they stood together in silence watching the house burn.

Mr. Jack had always been kind to her. He'd given her his jacket. Rescued her. Didn't say any words right now. He was kind even now, just like he had been when she was a child. He was the same. She may have been twenty-some years old and almost as tall as he was, but she felt like a little child beside him.

A few blocks away, sirens sounded as emergency vehicles approached. She remembered Mr. Jack had called in a Break and Enter when he'd first come into the basement. It was hard to believe that was only a short while ago. It felt like an eternity ago.

Angela's stomach twisted with joy and dread as she realized the emergency workers might be able to save Daddy. Joy because Daddy might be okay. She loved him. Dread because she might have to return to the basement. And the chair. And his murderous, fiery eyes.

Emergency vehicles pulled up and Mr. Jack patted her on the shoulder. "I'm going to let them know what's going on, okay?"

Angela stood frozen to the ground, mesmerized by the curls of smoke. "Uh-huh. Okay." She nodded and forced a smile. He smiled back sadly and then ran to meet the EMS workers.

As Jack left, the windows on the house across the street shattered from the heat of the fire, seeming to announce that terrifying truth; that everything was broken and gone. A new life had begun.

As relief, anger, and sadness swirled like a tornado in her mind, each making themselves known in rotation, she realized today was only the first step on a much longer journey to freedom. Sure, she was

free from the chair in the basement, and even from Daddy's control, but the tornado was swirling inside, getting bigger and darker. A storm had kicked up, and it would swallow her unless she could figure out how to escape it.

Freedom had come.

And freedom had yet to come.