

BLOW DART
The Abduction

A Novel
By
Patricia Gayle

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**In loving memory of my brother,
Bob Fortenberry**

**In keeping with my promise to you to finish my book...
This one's for you!**

and

**A very special dedication to my husband, Roger,
for his loving support and unwavering belief in me.
I couldn't have done this without him!**

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PROLOGUE

Kaitlin Tierney, a voluptuous young brunette, was just stepping out of her shower when she heard the doorbell ringing. *He's early*, she thought as she quickly wrapped a large bath towel around her well-tanned, curvaceous frame and hurried for the front door.

She peered through the peephole then opened the door. "James... you're early," she timidly scolded.

"Am I?" he questioned, glancing down at his wristwatch.

"You weren't supposed to pick me up until seven-thirty. I'm not ready."

"I can see that," he retorted as he leaned his tall, muscular body against the doorjamb. His dark eyes scanned her half-naked body from her head to her toes. Her smooth skin was still glistening with water droplets. He arched his brows and gave her a sidelong glance. "Looks to me like you're well worth waiting for, Kaitlin; and I *have* been waiting."

With one arm hugging the towel to her naked body, Kaitlin blushed and coyly smiled as she stepped aside, gesturing with her free arm for him to enter. "I know you've waited, sweetheart," she said as she closed and locked the door. "Believe me... it's hard for me, too. But this is important to me. You know that."

He offered no response.

"Look, just make yourself at home while I get dressed. I won't be long." She headed for her bedroom when he suddenly grabbed her by the arm and yanked her around, pulling her face to face against his body.

“What if I don’t want to wait any longer?” he pressed.

“James... you know how I feel about this,” she said. “I’m no prude, but I was raised believing in the sanctity of marriage. Besides, waiting for our wedding night is romantically old-fashioned... exciting, actually.” She smiled and gave him a short, sweet kiss. “Now please, just let me go so I can get dressed!”

“Oh, I don’t think so, Kaitlin.” He pulled her even closer against his body and tightened his grip. “I really do want you.”

His demanding tone took her by complete surprise. She glared up at him, her eyes questioning. She let out a choked laugh, “You’re kidding around, right?”

He just looked at her and flashed a smile that was totally uncharacteristic of him.

“You’re making me uncomfortable, James, and you’re hurting me. Please, just let me go,” she challenged.

Not only did his hold on her not waiver, he began kissing her on the neck and slid his free hand under her towel, trying to cop a feel. Kaitlin didn’t resign to his aggressive behavior. Instead, she vigorously rejected his advances.

“I don’t favor being manhandled, James, not even by you! Now, like I said, let me go!” she demanded fervently as she twisted herself free from his grasp. “This evening is over,” she quietly declared. “You know the way out. I suggest you use it.”

She quickly turned and rushed to her bedroom, slamming the door shut behind her. But before she could lock it, he slammed his body against the door, bursting through it and knocking her down. He pulled her up by her hair and ripped the towel from her body.

“You really are one gorgeous woman, Kaitlin Tierney. Your skin... it’s so soft, tanned and firm.” He ran his fingertips down her neck and across her left breast, then down the curve of her waist to her bare hip. “I said I wanted you, and I always get what I want. So why don’t you just relax and enjoy it.”

“What the hell has gotten into you?” she screamed as she slapped at him, scratching, drawing blood with her nails. “Have you lost your mind?”

His face stung and his temper quickly escalated. “No one says no to me!”

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He grabbed her by the shoulders and flung her down on the bed. Kaitlin scrambled to the other side, grabbing the phone only to have him snatch it from her grasp. He yanked the cord out of the wall and hurled the phone across the room.

His rage was now at its peak. He grabbed her wrists and forced her back onto the bed, but she didn't oblige. Her hands may have been useless, but not her knees, feet and teeth. She kicked and screamed and kicked some more, biting at his arms.

"You bitch, that hurt!" he shrieked, backhanding her across the face. The blow was delivered with such vehemence that it snapped her neck like a twig. She lay there, quiescent and soundless.

Her stillness was consequently sobering. "Kaitlin?" he softly called, shaking her, praying for any response. But there was nothing... only her eyes staring back at him, fixed and dilated. He felt for a pulse but there was none.

His sudden dilemma was unanticipated and daunting at best, thrusting him into full panic mode. *You've got to calm down and think*, he thought to himself.

After a few moments of sobering silence, his survival mode kicked in. *Fingerprints, I can't leave fingerprints*. He mentally struggled, trying to trace his steps all the way back to when he first rang her doorbell. He was almost certain that he hadn't touched anything since the doorbell except for the phone and her. Quickly retrieving a wash cloth from the bathroom, he proceeded to wipe down the doorbell and phone. He then wet the cloth and washed her limp, naked body.

As he looked at her one final time, the reality of all that had just happened quickly engulfed him, sucking the color from his face. He had never meant for this to happen. But it had, and now he had to protect himself—and his future—at any and all costs.

CHAPTER

1

Ten years later - Echo Lake, Colorado

The log cabin was nestled deep in the woods. It rested beside a babbling stream bordered by stones, continually painting its way through and around Mother Nature's canvas of lush, evergreen foliage and towering Colorado pines.

Tendrils of wispy, white smoke escaped atop the fireplace stack, wafting through the crisp, cold, night air; tantalizing the senses and imagination with the scent and promise of winter, a roaring fire, hot buttered rum and rustic hardwood floors covered with bearskin rugs and overstuffed pillows.

But don't be fooled by its outward appearance and charm, because what lurked inside those walls painted a much different picture and was nothing shy of pure evil.

"You bitch, you stupid, stupid, little bitch!" he growled as he reached in the fridge and yanked out a bottle of beer. He kicked the door shut, uncapped the bottle and took an extra-long swig.

“Shouldn’t have poked her nose in where it didn’t belong! Now she’s become a fringe liability... and I damn well don’t like liabilities!” he grimaced, taking another long swig. *In the joint, she’d be referred to as a “loose end.” And loose ends have to be dealt with, sometimes in not-so-pleasant ways.*

Pacing back and forth across the kitchen floor, trying to figure out how best to handle his newly acquired complication, he was startled by something he caught a glimpse of out of the corner of his eye. Instinctively, he spun toward it only to find it was his own reflection in the mirror hanging on the wall across the room.

As he slowly approached the image staring back at him, his face hardened like stone and his eyes turned icy cold. The brows above them furrowed in confusion as his trembling hand reached toward the mirror to see if it was real. It was as if he didn’t recognize his own image. Then he stopped, withdrew his hand and slowly ran his fingers through his hair as he watched the image mimic his every move.

His head slowly turned from side to side and then up and down as his fingers gently traced each of his features, like a blind person exploring a stranger’s face for the first time. His eyes neither blinked nor wavered from the image in the mirror.

The hair’s the same. His thoughts were questioning and confused. *Eyes are the same, too. Dark and soulless.*

“But *you’re* the ‘evil’ one,” he grimaced with clenched jaws. “It’s because of *you* that I have to do all these horrible things! Now you have to pay—and pay you will!” he screamed, hurling the half-full bottle of beer at his reflection.

The mirror shattered into a thousand tiny shards. “That’s what awaits *you*, you bastard!” he snarled. “And as for that nosy little bitch, well, let’s just say, what goes around comes around. Now that I think about it, maybe she’s not as much of a liability as I thought. Matter of fact, this is one loose end I’m going to enjoy dealing with!”

He turned and went into a small mudroom adjacent to the kitchen where there was a door giving access to a stairwell leading down into the basement tunnel.

“Time to get prepared. I can’t afford to forget *anything*. Chance does always favor a prepared mind. My plan depends on perfection...

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everything has to be right,” he mumbled as he disappeared through the door and down the stairs.

It wasn't long before he returned, bringing with him everything he needed to prepare for his next prey, his plan crystal clear in his mind. He walked over to the corner of the living room where there was an old, rectangular, wooden table and a couple of spindle-back chairs that he used for his workstation. Slowly and methodically he laid everything on the table in a very organized fashion, pulled out one of the chairs and comfortably seated himself. With a pad and pencil, he wrote out a checklist of things to do and in what order, laid them to one side and then donned, one hand at a time, a pair of latex gloves he retrieved from the box at the far, left edge of the table.

“Must be careful... must not leave prints,” he mumbled.

As each step in his preparation process was completed, he marked it off his checklist. “Blow gun—check. Darts—check. Tranquillizer gun—check. Must be thorough... must not make mistakes.”

Momentarily pausing from his work, he reflected on the image he had seen in the mirror. *Handsome gent*, he thought, *respectable looking, too. Not exactly what one would expect of someone capable of such torturous and unspeakable acts.* “Works for me,” he said, smiling smugly. Then he returned to the task at hand. “Have to be prepared... have to be prepared,” he kept repeating over and over again.

Finally finished, he leaned back in his chair with his fingers interlaced behind his head and exhaled a long sigh of relief. “This is what I've waited eleven long, agonizing years for... prepared for. Now it's your turn. The clock is steadily ticking and your time is running out! Tick-tock! Tick-tock! Tick-tock!”

CHAPTER

2

Vail, Colorado

It was shortly before 10 p.m. on a cold and rainy Friday night. The cold front and storm had arrived earlier than predicted, leaving a lot of people unprepared and without their winter coats that evening. The wind was howling and the rain was pouring down without mercy as Patricia Dawson—Trish, as she liked to be called—pulled into the parking lot of the market she often shopped at on her way home from work. The lot was unusually dark, compliments of vandalism by some overzealous teenagers.

“Where did this weather come from? It wasn’t supposed to hit for a couple of days and I don’t have my coat,” Trish grimaced as she pulled to a stop in one of the vacant spaces close to the front entrance. “And they still haven’t replaced those broken security lights. This is *not* going to be pleasant.”

Lightning temporarily lit the skies, revealing less than a dozen vehicles still dotting the parking lot. She shook her head and cracked a small grin. “Well... at least I’m not the only one who has to cope with it. Like they say... misery *does* love company.”

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No sooner had the words crossed her lips than she got more company when a black van eased into the space to her left. It parked so close it left her with almost no room to exit her own vehicle. She stared at it for a few moments while contemplating braving the weather. “Now why did they have to park here?” she lamented. “I mean... it’s not like there’s a shortage of parking spots to choose from. They could’ve at least left an open space between us.” Then all the warnings her husband had drilled into her head about never parking next to vans suddenly floated to the surface of her mind.

Probably nothing to worry about, she thought. But just to be on the safe side, I think I’ll move. Trish slowly backed her car out of the space. Not wanting to get too far from the front doors because of the weather, she re-parked only three spaces down, then banished all further thoughts of the van from her mind. It was the end of a long, tiring day with having art class after work, and she had more interesting things on her agenda to think about. This was their anniversary and Roger had promised he’d cook them a romantic late-night dinner if she’d stop and pick up the food.

As Trish reached down to unlatch the seatbelt, her friend, Shea Connors, popped into her thoughts. *She must still be really upset with me. I haven’t seen her or heard from her in over a week, now. She hasn’t been in art class and won’t return any of my calls.*

When a big clap of thunder jarred Trish’s thoughts back into the moment, she peered out her window at the rain still pouring down.

“I really do miss her,” she said softly, finally depressing the release button on her seatbelt. *I’ll try calling her again tomorrow and do a little apologetic begging.*

She cut the engine and removed the keys from the ignition. *Damn, no umbrella either,* she remembered as she grabbed up her purse and mindlessly tossed in her keys. She braced herself for the weather, exited her car, depressed the lock button on the door and shut it.

“Burr!!!” she grumbled out loud when the cold, blowing rain slapped her face and whipped through her hair. By the time she made her way from her car to the store entrance, her clothes were soaked and her hair was dripping wet.

Even wet, Trish Dawson was strikingly beautiful. Her five-foot-seven frame was slender and shapely with shoulder-length, reddish-blond hair, a peaches-and-cream complexion with fine features and electric blue eyes. She thought about heading straight for the restroom to dry off a little, half-heartedly wondering if standing under the electric hand dryer would do any good. But she quickly dismissed it because she was already running late and Roger was on his way home. *I'd like to at least have time to change into something dry before he arrives. Or... maybe I'll just have nothing on*, she thought.

"Now that's a thought worth hanging on to," Trish said through an impish smile and with a twinkle in her eye. With that thought still in her mind, she grabbed a shopping cart and scurried across the store to do her little bit of shopping.

Trish quickly finished up and took her place at the only open checkout lane. Fortunately, she was second in line. Unfortunately, she happened to be behind a person whom, from the looks of *her* cart, either did a whole lot of impulse buying or was shopping for a family of ten. Either way, she was screwed for time.

"I can't *believe* my luck tonight," Trish moaned in a low voice.

With her frustration level rising, she reached into her purse for her wallet to retrieve her bankcard and ID to help speed things up only to find her bankcard missing. Her cheeks took on a pink glow at the thought of the embarrassing situation she suddenly found herself in. She just rolled her eyes. *I hate being embarrassed*, she thought. *And yet, here I am with a cart half full of groceries, no bankcard and not enough cash on me. How much worse is this night going to get?*

Shoving her wallet back into her purse, Trish decided to pull out of line and put everything back. But as she picked up her purse from the shopping cart seat and hung it on her right shoulder, she remembered placing her card in the center console of her car after purchasing gas that morning. Blowing out a sigh of relief, she looked upward, closed her eyes and mouthed the words, "Thank You!"

Trish located the name, Jeri, on the store tag pinned to the cashier's blouse. "Excuse me. Excuse me, please." When Trish finally got her attention, she spoke in almost a whisper. She didn't want to draw any undesired attention to her embarrassing plight. "Jeri, I'm sorry to interrupt, but it seems I have a bit of a problem here."

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“What’s the problem, ma’am?” Jeri blurted out without the level of quiet discretion that Trish had hoped for.

Trish lightly touched her lips with her index finger to indicate that a little diplomacy would be appreciated. In a soft whisper, Trish pled her case. “I know this will probably sound a bit lame, but it would appear I’ve left my bankcard in my car. It’ll take only a minute or so to get it. May I please leave my cart in line so I don’t have to start all over again? I’m really pressed for time and I promise I’ll be back well before you finish with this lady... I swear! I’m parked just outside the front doors and about three spaces to the right.”

What a mouthful that was, Jeri thought, flashing Trish a look that said, *Yeah... right. I’ll just bet you will.*

Trish caught the look. Finally giving up on the idea of keeping the conversation low key, she smiled. “Look, if I’m not back in five minutes,” she said as she spread her fingers, “you can send the Grocery Police after me. Deal?”

Jeri managed a weak smile of her own and granted her request with a nod.

“Great! Thank you, thank you so much.” Trish excused herself as she squeezed by the lady in front of her and made a mad dash for the front doors. As she darted out of the store, the rush of the damp cold took her breath.

She padded across the wet pavement to her car, thankful for the temporary reprieve from the blowing rain. *Wish it had done that before I went in,* she thought.

As Trish reached her car, she was already hastily fumbling in the dark to retrieve her keys from her purse when something jabbed her in the neck.

“Ah, perfect hit,” he jeered as a sinister smile washed across his face. *Lucky for me the wind hit a lull. It can storm all it wants to now. As a matter of fact... the stormier, the better. Now all that’s left to do is watch and wait.* “Just a little longer, my nosy little bitch, and you’ll be all mine.”

“Ouch!” Trish yelled, quickly snatching her hand from her purse. She reached up to rub her neck and felt what appeared to be a short, tiny, metal cylinder stuck into her flesh.

“What in the world?” she mumbled.

As he watched his plan start to unfold, the image of what was to come massaged his senses, arousing him. He could feel the bulge in his pants swelling.

Trish flinched as she extracted the tiny cylinder. When she looked at it, she saw a needle attached to the end of it, her blood clinging to the tip.

“This looks like some sort of... dart,” she guessed as she twirled it between her fingers, examining it. “I can’t believe someone actually shot me with a dart! This is insane... has to be some kind of sick joke!”

She instinctively looked around, hoping to see where it came from; the black van successfully eluded her search under the cover of night and the darkened parking lot. Suddenly, it dawned on her to question what was housed in the tiny metal cylinder. That’s when the fear struck and struck hard. “Oh my God!” *I’ve got to get in the car... lock the doors.*

Still holding the dart in her right hand, she awkwardly reached across her body with her left and plunged it into her purse. She was grappling for her keys when the wind began to pick up and the rain started pouring down again. Her wet hair was being whipped into her eyes, stinging them and making it difficult to see. Finally, the tips of her fingers brushed against the metal dragonfly on her keychain. “C’mon, c’mon, c’mon! Whew!” she hissed, finally locking her fingertips around the keychain. She yanked it out as fast as she could, breathing out a sigh of relief.

Only two parking spaces to her left, he watched from his van, waiting as patiently as a cat stalking its prey. “Just a few more seconds ought to do it. Thaaat’s it,” he whispered. “Come on, my nosy little mouse. Don’t fight it, just let it happen,” he coaxed with a gleam in his eyes. *You know, he thought remorsefully, though only briefly, it really is going to be a shame to destroy such beauty. But it’s not my fault... it’s hers. She should’ve stayed out of it.*

As Trish battled the elements, a relentless sense of urgency ripped through her mind when she felt her knees rapidly growing weak. Panic surged through her body like an electrical current. The pouring rain and strong winds, combined with the darkness and the sudden effect of the drugged dart, made it an arduous task for her to

find the “unlock” button on her keypad. Her thought process had already become obscured and erratic. “Can’t... focus,” she muttered. “Sweet Jesus, what’s... what’s happening...? I feel so... weak and ...” she trailed off in a murmur.

“What the hell’s taking it so long?” he bellowed, slamming his fist against the dash. “She should’ve been out by now. I must’ve mixed the ketamine cocktail too damn weak!” He sat for only another moment before deciding it was time whether she was ready or not. He couldn’t risk some Good Samaritan happening by.

He pulled the stocking down over his face, not quite ready to reveal his identity. Then he slid the gearshift into “D,” and as calm as the eye of a hurricane, circled her car like a buzzard hovering over dead prey.

Trish’s entire body grew weaker, allowing her purse to slip from her shoulder. As she slumped forward against the side of her car to keep herself from falling, the dart in her right hand dislodged and hit the ground.

The front of her body was hugging the cold wet metal of the car as her arms and hands grappled at the roof trying desperately to hold on. That’s when she noticed the van pulling into the space beside her once again. *It’s back. Why is... it... back? So... close. Too close.* She was far beyond frightened at this point. She tried screaming but was too weak to be heard above the howling wind.

Trish was now panicked, pushing at the wet, slippery buttons on the keypad, but too disoriented to do any good. She was barely even able to formulate her thoughts now. When she heard the door sliding open, she managed to cut her eyes toward the sound and saw the blurred outline of a man stepping down from the side of the van. *So close... too close,* she was thinking as she continued her struggle to hold on to the side of the car.

He stood like an oak, staring at her for a moment. “You weren’t supposed to last this long,” he scolded. “Quite the little fighter, aren’t you?”

The sense of urgency and panic raging through Trish’s body erupted like a volcano. Fear and terror were like lightning bolts shooting from her eyes. But when she tried to move, her knees gave way.

He quickly leaned into her, pressing his excited body firmly against hers. She knew she'd been drugged and this man, whoever he was, had done it. She just didn't know why. Trish could feel his hot breath, enhanced by the cold wind and rain, penetrate her ear as he whispered, "I've got *big* plans for you, my nosy little mouse. Can you feel it? Now, let's go."

She made one last, desperate attempt to depress the alarm button on her keypad as he peeled her body from the car. Her thumb finally connected. The noise sliced through the night like a double-edged sword, bringing with it the fear of detection.

Startled and shocked by the unexpected sound, he violently jerked her up in his arms, causing her keys to sling from her hand.

"You BITCH!" he screamed as he pitched her through the doorway and onto the floor of the van. He jumped in and slammed the door behind him with such force that it shook the entire vehicle.

"This is the second time you've screwed with my plan. I should just kill you right here and now and be done with you," he screamed as he squealed his tires, fishtailed the van across the parking lot and headed for the nearest exit.

The only thing Trish could hold on to as she was being bounced and tossed all over the back of the van was the fading vision of her husband's face. Then her whole world went black.

CHAPTER

3

Back inside the grocery, Jeri had finished checking out the woman who had been in line in front of Trish. She was placing the last item from Trish's cart on the black conveyer belt when she heard a car alarm blaring, drawing her attention to the front of the store. She glanced over at the store clock hanging on the wall in the customer service area and noted that it was around 10:15 p.m. and the line was at least five or six customers deep. It was getting close to closing time and what few people were still in the store were all trying to finish up their shopping and get out of there.

Long five minutes, she thought to herself. Wish there was such a thing as the Grocery Police. I'd sic 'em on that broad right now.

She started scanning the groceries that she had removed from the temporarily abandoned cart, figuring Trish would return by the time she finished. She knew she was probably making a mistake, but she *had* agreed. The closer she got to that last item, the more irritated she became. *This is so not cool... my first week on the job, I'm already way behind and I'm checking out a person who isn't even here.* Under her breath she began muttering to herself between clenched teeth, "I *knew* it... I just *knew* it! She's not coming back. She probably lied about the bankcard in her car."

Great, just great! I should've just pushed her cart to the side and made her go through the line again.

As Jeri hit the total button, she looked around for Trish one more time. Still nothing. She immediately apologized to the line of customers for the delay and sent out a page for assistance. "Manager needed at register twelve, please. Manager to register twelve."

She could tell the natives were getting restless. Some were shifting from one foot to the other and others had a hand on one hip and cocked to one side, posture and demeanor speaking volumes. Then there were the men with their legs firmly planted about two feet apart and their arms crossed over their puffed-up chests, resting on their fat little Buddha bellies, looking like Grumpy. Last, but not least, there were the wind blowers as she called them. Every couple of minutes or so they switched positions, giving a roll of the head while inhaling. Then they flashed that ever-familiar exasperated look, exhaled the wind between their slightly parted lips, causing their cheeks to puff out, looking like a bunch of Louis Armstrong wannabees.

It was only a half-minute or so before the manager showed up and voided the transaction on her register.

"Jeri... right?" asked the manager in a surprisingly pleasant tone.

"That's right."

"Looks like you got slammed. I'll see about getting another register open."

"Super," Jeri responded, rolling her eyes upward and exhaling a huge sigh of relief. "That would really be great! Oh, ah... one more thing. Some of the customers are complaining about the car alarm going off outside... grating on their nerves, that sort of thing. Do you think we could have someone check it out?"

"I've already called security and they're on their way."

Jeri whimsically smiled as the Grocery Police crossed her mind. She loaded the bagged groceries into the abandoned cart and pushed it over to the adjacent lane, looking around one more time. *I wonder?*

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Detective Roger Dawson was finally headed home after spending the last few hours at the local pub around the corner from headquarters watching his buddies chug down a few brews and suffering through a bunch of really bad jokes. Since Trish had art class after work, he had decided to join the “good ole boys” for a few rounds to pass the time. He watched... they drank. He was saving *his* drinking for the chilled champagne that awaited him at home. She had called him around 9:30 p.m. to let him know she was on her way home but had to make a quick stop at the grocery first.

“Whew! Thank God she called when she did,” he said to himself, shaking his head. It had been his ticket out of there. “I’d had about all *that* happiness I could stand for one night.”

Fifth anniversary. It’s hard to believe it’s been that long. Then, “Unchained Melody” by the Righteous Brothers started playing. First time they ever danced was to that song. Smiling, his thoughts drifted back to the very first time they made love.

All of a sudden he couldn’t wait to see her, touch her and ravage her beautiful body. His pulse quickened and his eagerness was beginning to show telltale signs. *I can’t believe this. I’m feeling like a teenager about to score for the first time.*

Roger was even more in love with Trish than the day they married... absolutely adored her. She was smart, beautiful, witty, and full of spunk... and when she made up her mind about something, she was a force of nature. He had really lucked up when he met her and he knew it.

Think I’ll stop by the store. If she’s still there, I can help her with the groceries. It should be just up here on the left, I think. “Yep, there it is.”

Humming along with the moldy oldies, he flipped on his left blinker, pulled into the turning lane and came to a complete stop.

“Man, oh man! It’s *really* pouring down out there.” His head slightly bobbed and his fingers tapped the steering wheel to the beat of the music as he waited for an opening to dart through. Finally catching a break in the traffic, he started his turn into the parking lot entrance when a black van came barreling out of the parking lot and onto the street.

“Oh, shit!” Roger yelled, jamming his foot down hard on the brake. He barely managed to bring his car to a screeching halt just in time to keep the fool from broadsiding him. More traffic was approaching so he backed up to get out of their way.

“You stupid SOB!” Roger blurted out. Cop instinct told him to take pursuit. But by the time he had regrouped from his delayed reaction to the near accident, the van had already sped out of sight. “That fool keeps driving like that in *this* weather, he’s going to kill somebody!” *Jerk!*

After dismissing the idea of playing *Smokey and the Bandit*, he had to wait once again for a break in the traffic and then turned into the sparsely occupied parking lot. That’s when he heard a car alarm. *Surely that’s not Trish’s car?* he thought. “She couldn’t *possibly* lose it with so few vehicles in the lot,” he said laughingly.

Roger followed the sound while his eyes searched out his wife’s car. “Bingo, there it is. She *is* still here.” The closer he got to her car, the louder the sound, and he realized it was indeed hers. He pulled into the space adjacent to the passenger side of her car and cut the engine. After grabbing the extra set of keys to Trish’s car from his console, he exited his vehicle into the blowing rain and punched a button and the alarm fell silent.

“They say silence is golden,” came a voice out of the dark.

Roger turned toward the voice and saw a tall, slender security guard sporting a clear, vinyl rain suit. *Lucky dog*, he thought. *Wish I hadn’t forgotten mine.*

“Your car?” the guard asked.

“Actually, no... It’s my wife’s,” he explained as he fished his badge out of his pocket. “I’m Detective Roger Dawson,” he stated, flashing his badge with his left hand and extending his right. “Is there a problem?” he asked, in a slightly edgy tone.

“I’m Officer Anthony Dodd,” he responded, shaking Dawson’s hand.

Roger looked at him inquisitively.

“Second job, Detective... you know how it is. As far as the alarm goes... it’s probably nothing. It happens a lot around here... these alarms. I thought I’d check it out, anyway.”

“I appreciate that, Officer Dodd. As a matter of fact, I was just about to do the same. Sometimes my wife sets off the alarm to help her find her car when she forgets where she parked it,” said Dawson, hissing out a breath and smiling.

Dodd looked around at the sparsely occupied lot, then back at Roger with a raised brow and nodded toward the car. “Glad you had an extra key so you could shut that thing off.”

“Quiet’s good,” Roger said. “How about we get this checked out so we can get out of this rain?”

“Dry’s good,” Dodd countered and smiled.

“I can’t believe how dark it is out here,” Roger commented. “Wouldn’t happen to have a flashlight on you, would you?”

“Sure thing.” Dodd whipped out his Maglite and switched it on. “Sorry about the lights. The repairs got held up. The company contracted to fix them had a couple of guys just up and quit. Threw them behind.”

As the two of them started walking around the rear of Trish’s car, a beam of light from the Mag reflected off something shiny on the ground, catching Dawson’s eye.

“Hold up a sec, Dodd. Can you shine your light over here? I thought I saw something.”

Dodd turned the beam on Dawson and then pointed it to the ground at the rear of the car. When Dodd scanned the area, the light picked it up again, a shiny metal cylinder... very small. Dawson bent over and picked it up. The moment he saw it, he froze.

“What is it?”

It took Dawson a moment, but he finally responded, “Looks like a dart. It’s probably nothing. It’s just that it reminded me of an old case of mine, that’s all. May I borrow your light?”

Dodd handed over the flashlight and waited while Dawson continued on around to the driver’s side.

He illuminated the windows, peering inside. Seeing no signs of breakage or tampering, he announced with a sigh of relief, “Well, everything *looks* to be okay over here. I just can’t understand why the dart...” he broke off as his foot stepped on something. His eyes followed the light as it descended to his feet. Roger sucked in a big hit of the cold, damp, night air when he spotted his wife’s purse. He

called out to Dodd, "Call 9-1-1! Something has happened to my wife."

"How can you be sure?" Dodd questioned as he punched in 9-1-1 on his cell.

"I just found her purse on the ground."

Dodd walked up just as Dawson instinctively bent over to pick it up.

"Don't touch it!" Dodd blurted out. "Evidence." He took off his rain-slicker, for the lack of anything else, and placed it over Trish's purse in hopes of preserving any possible latents that may have survived the weather thus far.

He's right, Dawson thought. Can't touch anything. Wish I hadn't touched this damn dart either.

"You're right. I guess I just forgot myself for a minute, there." He placed the dart under the slicker along with the purse. "Maybe forensics will be able to lift some prints from it, besides my own, that is." Dawson frantically started scanning the light over the rest of the area. That's when he spotted her keys next to the front tire just under the edge of the car. Fear reared its ugly head and Dawson's stomach rolled up into his throat. It felt like he had just been gut-punched... hard.

"The van, it was the black van," Roger said as the dots started connecting.

"What van? Detective, what are you talking about?"

Dawson stilled. "There was a black van that sped out of the parking lot just a few minutes ago. Nearly ran me over as I was pulling in. I'm *saying* that whoever was in that van probably took my wife!"

Silence fell.

"Maybe someone inside saw something! Guard the store doors, Dodd, and don't let anybody in or out! Wait for the units. I'll be right back."

Before Dodd had a chance to respond, Dawson was running toward the store entrance, water nibbling at his trouser legs each time his feet slapped the wet pavement. He entered the store in a frenzied run. His wide, terror-stricken eyes peered through wet strands of hair, and his clothes were soaked. His mind was like an engine on misfire,

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and his normally calm demeanor was riddled with holes, panic seeping in through each and every one of them. *Got to calm down... get control.* He dragged his hands through his hair, getting it out of his eyes, and then took a couple of deep breaths as he shook the excess water from his hands. Taking a quick glance around the store, he noticed there was only one lane with an illuminated light. *Must be the only open lane,* he thought. *Wonder for how long?* As Dawson neared the cashier, his mind was on that dart. The more he thought about it, the more nauseated he became.

Outside, Dodd manned the doors while he waited for patrol units to arrive. Then he decided it was taking too long. *They're less than twenty minutes away. They should've been here by now,* he thought to himself. So he called it in again, this time giving them the detective's name and that it was *his* wife that had apparently been abducted.

"That should get 'em moving," Dodd said with a slight nod.

Inside, Jeri was busy scanning... scanning... scanning away, when Detective Dawson approached her.

"Pardon me, Miss," he said, flashing his badge. "I need to ask you a couple of questions. I need to know how long this has been the only checkout lane open."

She responded without looking up, "Since eight o'clock."

"I'm looking for a..."

Jeri interrupted him in a rather curt tone and said, "I'm sorry, sir, but you'll have to take your place at the end of the line just like everybody else." She wasn't about to piss off these customers again.

His hazel eyes flashed fire at her flippant demeanor and smart-mouthed attitude. This time he stuck his badge in front of her face, demanding her immediate and undivided attention.

"As I was saying, I'm looking for a young woman with shoulder-length, reddish-blond hair, about five feet, seven inches tall, blue eyes. Do you recall seeing anyone resembling that description in say, oh... the last ten minutes or so? She would have been wearing a two-piece, black, pinstripe pantsuit with a white silk neck-scarf?"

She glanced up momentarily from her scanner. "Oh, *her!*" she said, her tone on the sarcastic edge. "Yeah, she *was* in here. She left to get her bankcard from her car and didn't come back. Guess she

thought that excuse would make me feel better about her skipping out and leaving all those groceries. There's her cart." She pointed to the next aisle over and went back to scanning.

Dawson's patience went south. He had no time to lose and that snippy little shit had just pissed him off. He ushered the customer being checked out to one side and leaned across the counter, got in the cashier's face, and spoke to her like he was interrogating a suspect.

"My wife may have just been kidnapped from this store's parking lot, so I'm in no mood for your bullshit sarcastic little attitude! Now, you can either cooperate with me nicely or we can continue this conversation downtown! Your choice! You follow me?"

That got Jeri's attention. She stopped scanning completely and looked up at him with a wide-eyed, "oops, I just screwed up" look on her face. "Sorry, Sir... yes, I follow you."

"Now we're getting somewhere. I need to know what time you last saw her and exactly what she said to you."

"Ahm... let's see. She was waiting in line behind this other woman and, out of the blue, she says she's left her bankcard out in the car and needed to go get it. She joked about sending the Grocery Police after her if she wasn't back in five minutes. She thanked me and left. That's it. When she didn't come back, I just assumed she'd lied about the card... that it was just an excuse she came up with to avoid embarrassment. I really am sorry."

Roger's predisposed cool, calm and collected nature had already eroded. Red flags in his mind were like jack-in-the-boxes, popping up everywhere, delivering a startling jolt every time one jumped out at him.

"How long ago *was* this?"

"Around 10:15. I remember because that's when a car alarm went off outside."

"Did you notice if she might have been with someone? Maybe notice anyone hanging around here that looked suspicious or that didn't belong?"

"No, Sir. She was alone... just freaking out over not having her card."

"Okay. Thanks for your help. Just make sure you don't leave here until an officer has taken your statement. They're on their way."

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She watched the detective turn and head toward the exit doors, looking like a man who had just lost all hope.

As he exited the store, he saw Dodd still standing vigil over the doors. The wind was still orchestrating the rain, alternating it between sheets and swirls. “Damn it. This rain needs to let up!” he snapped.

“I’m with you on that,” Dodd replied. “I called this in again. Units should be arriving on the scene any minute now. Were you able to get any information from inside?”

“Yeah, the cashier saw her, talked to her. Said Trish came out to the car to get her bankcard. She also heard the car alarm when it went off at about 10:15.” Dawson went silent, then he agonized, “That’s just before the van sped out of the parking lot. It all adds up, Dodd. Whoever was in that van has my wife.”

“Tony, my friends call me Tony,” was all he responded.

Roger managed a very brief smile and returned the gesture. “Not much on formality right now, so... thanks, Tony... if you’ll call me Roger?”

“You got it,” Dodd agreed as they shook hands again.

Then they heard the sirens and watched the caravan of flashing lights speeding up the street. It wasn’t until they paraded through the parking lot that the gravity of the situation penetrated Dawson’s protective armor of shock. Roger’s mind went blank. Everything became surreal. It was like he was riding a carousel... up and down... round and round... but in slow motion while a slideshow of his life passed before his eyes.

“For the first time in my career, Tony, I truly understand what families of victims of violent crime go through. All the sympathetic words and gestures of comfort mean nothing to them. It’s all just bullshit... empty, meaningless bullshit. The only words those poor people want to hear are ‘we’ve found your child alive’ or ‘we’ve found your husband and he’s okay.’ Nothing else matters to them. And now I know why.”

Tony placed his hand on Roger’s shoulder and said, “Come on, let’s go,” nodding toward Trish’s car. As they walked, Roger was thinking, *All the training and experience on the force, you fool, and now all you do is panic! C’mon, man, think... think, damn it, think!*