

**CHASE THE SILVER  
GHOST**

**R O B E R T B O W M A N**

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**“MANY PEOPLE GO FISHING ALL THEIR  
LIVES NOT KNOWING IT IS NOT FISH  
THEY ARE AFTER.”**

**- HENRY DAVID THOREAU**



# CHAPTER 1

## AMY

Her name was Amy. She had black, straight hair and I thought she was pretty, even with her crooked smile and space between her front teeth. She was the only person I'd met that was my age at the condo on the beach, and if it hadn't been for her, the days would have been long and boring.

If it wasn't for her . . .

If it wasn't for her, my parents and my three-year-old sister would still be alive. That would've been my first choice. My second choice would have been to die with them. But that didn't happen so I was left with my third choice. Live without those who you care the most about — thanks to Amy.

That day on the beach was calm and warm — a rare treat on the coast of Oregon in June. Unlike more popular beaches of white sand and hot temperatures, the beaches of Oregon and Washington, where I'm from, are quite the contrary. They're usually rocky, have dark gray sand, and don't make the best sandcastles.

I know a little about sandcastles because every year for the past ten years, my family rented this condominium on this particular stretch of beach and though I would bring an occasional book to read, there really wasn't a lot to do. Mom and Dad refused to let me bring anything electronic — that even included my phone.

“It’s time to get away from all of that,” my father would say. “This vacation is about relaxing.”

For him, yes, I totally see that. He worked long hours for not-very-much pay and he got a whole two weeks off during the year. My mother worked part-time, but with Raquel, my little sister, she was just as busy as Dad. So I understood. Vacation was one of the few things they looked forward to.

Because of that understanding, I didn't complain. I used to, but once I got enough smarts to realize how much it meant to them, it was easier to just stay quiet and hope the week went by as fast as possible.

Then I met Amy. Actually, she met me as I attempted a castle. Making sandcastles at fifteen-years-old is a bit, well, childish I guess, but when you got nothin', you have to try and do somethin'. I'd gotten pretty good and I think that's why she stopped by that first day. I had a decent castle going.

“Nice,” she said and immediately plopped

herself down next to me.

I looked her over and then replied, “Thanks.”

And that simple exchange started our four-day friendship. Turns out she was staying at the same condo complex we were but she had already been here a week, with another week to go. I found out she was a year older than me and just as bored. I think that’s why we got along so well. We really didn’t have a choice besides being alone, and neither of us wanted that.

My parents, of course, were thrilled. I wouldn’t complain, had someone to hang with, and basically stayed out of their relax time. Meeting Amy also meant I didn’t have to entertain Raquel, who could be annoying, but I loved nonetheless.

Amy and I went horseback riding on the beach, took walks, went to the strip malls, and hung out eating ice cream. It wasn’t a bad vacation really — the first four days anyway.

On the fifth day, that all changed.

We were down at the beach talking, not really making much of a sandcastle. That’s when we both heard it. The explosion was so loud it overpowered even the ocean. I turned my head and my heart sank, a ripping sensation coming from my stomach.

The condominium complex was on fire, and I don’t mean just a little fire coming from a room. The entire complex was ablaze and parts of it were

completely blown away as if a missile from a fighter jet had hit it.

I froze. It was as if the entire world went into super-slow motion. What brought me out of it immediately was Amy's ear-piercing scream. Before I could move, she was sprinting up the small sandy knoll toward the complex.

I was right behind her, shouting, "Mom! Dad!"

The sand slowed us down. By the time we arrived, it was chaos. I looked up to the third floor corner room, our room, and to my horror, it was gone, completely blown away.

I left Amy, tears falling from my face, screaming for my parents, my sister. As I neared the burning building, the heat alone felt like a blast furnace on my body. I knew I wouldn't last if I attempted to enter, but I couldn't stand there. I couldn't just watch. There were people on fire, jumping from the fourth and fifth story windows. There were children wailing from their balconies, a mixture of fright and terrible pain from burns on their bodies.

Heat or no heat, I was going in. Maybe, somehow, my parents were still alive. Perhaps they weren't in the condo when this explosion happened. Rushing forward, I put my arm in front of my face and pushed my nose into my elbow to try and breathe. There was another explosion and

debris fell everywhere. There were more screams, more chaos. I pushed on but just as I was coming to what I hoped was the entry door, I was tackled from the side.

At first, I thought I'd been hit with falling debris. I slammed the ground hard, my back first, then my head. The pain was so intense, it felt like someone had punctured my skull with a pitchfork. I was groggy. Things were a blur. I saw a man standing over me, saying something to me, but I couldn't hear him. Then he was dragging me by the shoulders away from the fire.

I wanted to resist. What was he doing? I needed to save my parents and my sister. Why had he tackled me?

As much as I resisted, darkness fell and I went unconscious. Before I did, though, I hoped to never wake up.

# CHAPTER 2

## FBI

My wish didn't come true. I woke up in a hospital. Oxygen flowed through my nose and I felt weary. At first, I thought what had happened had been a dream, but then why was I in a hospital and why did I have a large bandage over my right forearm? Then the rush of images came — the people falling, the screaming, the burning, the condo complex utterly destroyed. Emotion gripped me and I slowly sat up, tears streaming down my face. My mouth was dry and crusty, and when I first shouted, hardly anything came out. I licked my lips and swallowed hard, and then tried again.

The first person to come into the room was a nurse, a squatty woman with a kind face. It was her look that gave it away. She didn't have to say anything. It would be a look I would see so many times in the coming days: the look of sorrow and pity.

I knew right then, even before asking, that my parents and my sister were dead. The tears

came harder and all I could say was, “no”.

I tried to force out another word, a sentence, a question, but nothing came. The nurse came over to me and gripped my hand. I stared into her eyes that were now full with tears. Sympathy tears.

My heart raced and the pain returned to my head like before, not as intense, but it was enough to force me into unconsciousness again.

This time when I awoke, a doctor was standing over me — a bearded man, close to fifty-years-old with a pair of too-small glasses stretched over his hazel eyes.

“Take it easy,” he said, putting his hand on my shoulder.

“Who?” I managed.

“I’m Doctor Perkins.”

I closed my eyes. The pain was still fresh in my temple.

“We’ve given you something for that,” he said, seeing my wince. “You’ve got a concussion. You’re lucky to be alive.”

I nodded, my eyes still closed.

Lucky. What a joke. How was I lucky, exactly?

“Just rest. That’s what your body needs.”

I opened my eyes and gripped his wrist firmly.

He stared at me with sympathetic eyes, just like the nurse, just like so many to come. It was a look I learned to hate.

“How many . . . how many survived?”

He stared at me for a long time, and then looked to the door, as if asking permission from some invisible person. He took a long breath and said, “Four.”

“Four?” I repeated incredulously.

“Two children and a woman. And you.”

“What?” I tried to comprehend. “I’m not a survivor. I wasn’t in there.”

The doctor frowned. “You didn’t jump?”

“No,” I whispered, letting go of his wrist and putting my hand to my head. “I was at the beach and then I heard the explosion. My parents . . .”

My parents.

My parents were dead.

“I was told you jumped out of a second story balcony. That’s how you came to get the concussion.”

“I didn’t jump,” I said. “I was trying to get in. I was trying to save them.”

The doctor looked perplexed. He glanced at the door again, then back to me.

“How did you end up with that concussion? Did something fall on you?”

“No. A man tackled me. I was going in and he grabbed me and drug me from the fire.”

“Did the man tell you his name?”

“No,” I said. “Maybe. I don’t know; I blacked out.”

Just then, the door of the room opened, and in walked a bulky man wearing jeans, a polo shirt and a blue windbreaker with the yellow letters *FBI* emblazoned where a pocket could have been.

“He’s awake?” the bulky man asked in a deep tone.

“He just woke,” the doctor said quietly. “But he’s in no condition . . .”

“He’s awake, Doctor. That’s enough for me. You’ll need to leave now.”

The doctor moved to the foot of my bed. “I don’t think . . .”

“I appreciate your concern, Doctor. I won’t be long but I need to talk to Gary alone.”

“I should stay,” the doctor said, looking back at me.

“No, you shouldn’t,” came the FBI agent’s reply. “I promise to be brief.”

The doctor looked at the agent, then walked toward the door. Before leaving, he turned to me and said, “If you need anything, press the red button on your bed panel there.”

I looked at the panel to my left and saw the red button he was referring to. I nodded and reluctantly the doctor left, leaving me alone with the agent.

“My name is Diego Valencia,” he said, pulling up a chair and sitting close to me. He was a Hispanic man with dark features and high cheekbones — a

faint scar above his left eye.

“How are you feeling?” he asked flatly. I got the impression he didn’t care how I was feeling but didn’t know how else to start the conversation.

I was numb. I wasn’t feeling anything. That would come later. “Okay,” I replied.

He stared at me for a long moment then said, “I’m here investigating what happened at the condominium complex.”

I said nothing.

“What do you know about it?”

“About the fire?” I asked.

The numbness dissipated and the anger surfaced. “What I KNOW is that the building exploded, it burned. What I KNOW is that my parents and my sister are dead!” my shout turned to tears and my hand shook as I pointed at him. “What happened? Why did it blow up?”

“I’m not good at this kind of thing,” he admitted, his tone now somber. “Look, kid, I can’t tell you anything right now. But, yeah, the place exploded. Over a hundred fifty people died.”

I didn’t know much about the FBI but I found it strange that this agent would be here at the hospital for just a fire. Weren’t the FBI used on special cases? Special problems? Was the condo explosion a special problem? I didn’t care. Whatever happened, whatever the cause, it destroyed my life, my parents, my sister.

“Tell me what happened. Were you in the complex when it went up?”

I shook my head, which still pounded hard. “No. I was at the beach and I heard the explosion.”

“Then what?”

I wiped away a loose tear that had traced down my cheek. I didn’t feel like answering questions. I wanted to be left alone.

“Gary, I’m sorry I have to ask you questions like this so soon, but you might have a valuable piece of information that we can use.”

“Use for what?” I asked in a frown.

He sighed. “Just tell me what happened.”

So I told him everything I remembered, but when I got to the part about the man tackling me and dragging me away, the agent was suddenly very interested. He wanted to know what the man looked like. Did he speak with an accent, was he of dark complexion, or was he fair-skinned? All of which I had no idea because I was about to fall into unconsciousness at the time. The agent kept asking the same questions and I responded the same every time, though it was obvious he didn’t like the answers and hoped I would give him some details that he could use. But I told him everything I remembered, which obviously wasn’t good enough.

“What happened to Amy? Where is she?” I asked.

He frowned as he answered. “We don’t have anybody by that name, either at the explosion or at any of the surrounding places.”

“What do you mean,” I said, attempting to sit up.

“So far, we’ve got nobody by the name Amy. What’s her last name?” Agent Valencia asked.

“I don’t know,” I replied. And I didn’t know.

“Did you meet her parents?”

“No,” I responded.

“Did she speak with an accent of any kind?”

“What? No,” I said irritably. “Why? What’s that got to do with anything?”

“It doesn’t matter,” he said, trying to blow it off. “Is there anything else you can tell me about it? Anything? Even the smallest detail.”

Anger welled up in me again. I was tired of talking. I was tired of the questions. “I have told you everything,” I declared almost in a shout.

“How long did you know her, the girl?” Valencia probed, as if not hearing me.

“Four days,” I said with exasperation. “I met her my first day here.”

“Did you talk about personal things?”

What kind of question was that? “Well, yeah,” I said, still irritated.

“Like what kind of personal things?” Valencia pressed.

“I . . . I don’t remember. We talked about a

lot of stuff. School, where we were from . . .”

“She told you where she was from?”

I had to think about it for a moment, but in fact, she didn’t tell me where she was from. The more I thought about our conversations, it was I who said most of the personal things, not her. Agent Valencia picked up on this and leaned closer.

“What is it?” he asked. “She didn’t say much about herself, did she?”

I stared at him, my irritation being replaced by curiosity, or was it concern?

“No, she didn’t,” I replied slowly. “What’s going on?”

The agent looked at me seriously, then took out his cell phone. “We’ll talk later. Try to get some sleep” he said, and then left the room.

Sleep did not come. The mystery revolving around Amy commanded my thoughts. How could they not find her? She was with me up until I made the break for the condo. She was just as upset as I was when the explosion occurred. It was her reaction that jerked me back into reality.

Now she was missing? And why had Valencia asked those questions? So what if I did a lot of the talking. Amy seemed like the listening type anyway.

But the thoughts of her went away and then faded, being replaced with the terrible emptiness that accompanies loss. The sinking, almost deadly

feeling that I no longer had my family gripped me. I turned on my side, pulled the covers over my aching head, and let the angry tears fall.

# C H A P T E R    3

## V I S I T

Agent Valencia only visited me one more time in the hospital, and he didn't ask me any more questions about Amy. He seemed preoccupied with other things and only came in to leave his card and tell me that if I were to ever remember anything about her, I should call him. The whole thing was weird.

I was in the hospital for five days. On that second day, after Agent Valencia had left, Uncle Joe arrived. He was my father's only brother and the only family I had left. And . . . he hated me. He'd hated me since I'd been a little boy. Why, I didn't know, but it was abundantly clear when he arrived and saw me in the hospital bed.

There were no comforting words, no hugs, no encouragement. There was only a look of disgust. It was obvious he didn't want to take me. Once I was out of the hospital, I really tried to avoid everyone. All the funeral arrangements and other things surrounding my family I left to him, but

the closer we got to the funeral, the more angry he seemed to get. I was set up in their downstairs bedroom and had the whole floor to myself, which was nice because I didn't get along with his two twin, seventeen-year-old daughters. Most of the entire summer I stayed downstairs and watched television, keeping to myself.

And it was in this lonely downstairs that I began my metamorphosis into anger. The funeral fueled my change — the looks of sympathy, the pats on the shoulder, the constant, "I'm sorry for your loss" crap. By the time we left the cemetery, I was done with being Gary Hope. I was going to be someone else. Though I would carry the same name, I would be someone entirely different.

That Gary, the angry Gary, didn't start the next school year out well. Upon living with Uncle Joe, I had to move school districts and schools. I didn't have many friends, but the ones I did have, I left in Yakima for the city life of north Seattle. I wasn't at my new high school for a week before I was into a fight with a boy named Kareem in the commons area.

After the fight, (Kareem was taken to the hospital), the principal asked what had started the whole thing, and I replied, "He looked at me wrong." Kareem had a broken arm from the whole deal, and when I finally returned after ten days of suspension, it was obvious Kareem and his buddies

were looking for a time to get me. I didn't give them the chance. I wasn't back three days and the fight ensued in the cafeteria.

There were three of them against me, and I got it the worst, though they didn't walk away without some blood either. As I was fighting, part of me wanted them to kill me, to end the torture of the almost nightly nightmares of screaming and burning people, the guilt of not being there when it happened, the deep pain of not having anyone in the world that truly cared. Surely Uncle Joe didn't.

When you have this mentality and you fight, you don't care. I was mad at everyone. Everyone that had a family, that got to go home to someone that cared about them and asked about their day. There were times when my fist pounded into one of the boys that I imagined I was hitting Uncle Joe, and that thought helped ease the pain when I got hit back.

I was expelled after that, which was the last straw for my uncle. I had lived with him for nearly two months, and it was two months of hell for both of us. When he came and got me that afternoon from school, he was livid and told me that I would be going to a boarding school over on the east coast, that he was done with me and my attitude. Like I cared what he thought. What would be the difference between boarding school and public school? There would still be kids, and

my anger wasn't going away. There would be more fights and secretly, I looked forward to them. The school would inevitably call Uncle Joe and kick me out. I figured it would take less than a month. The thought of driving Uncle Joe crazy with it was the only thing I looked forward to.

That weekend, as I was coming up the stairs to get some water, I heard a heated argument between my aunt and uncle. Midway up, I paused on the stairs and listened intently. It was obvious who they were talking about.

"You think that going to live with him would be a better solution?" Uncle Joe asked angrily.

"He's the one Gary's parents deemed . . ." my aunt said, but was cut off.

"Except for care. He's in charge of everything but care. How typical of my brother to write his will like that. Now we're the ones stuck with the boy."

"But why now? Why does he want to take Gary now?" asked my aunt.

"I don't know. He's a flippin' hermit. Half-crazed. How am I supposed to know what he's thinking? He didn't attend the funeral, Susan. Didn't even show up — left me to do all the arrangements. Ungrateful mooch and now, he wants this?" Uncle Joe grunted. "Boarding school is what that little twit needs, and as far as I'm concerned, that's what he gets. Get that kid as far

away from here as possible.”

I stood there and made up my mind that I was leaving that night. I didn't know where I was going, or what I was going to do, but I knew I was leaving. That evening I packed my backpack and went upstairs about ten o'clock. Everyone was in bed and sure enough, just like always, Uncle Joe put his wallet next to his keys on the counter by the phone. I raided his cash, took his credit card, and made my way out the front door as quietly as possible.

I figured I would catch a bus and go north, maybe up toward Bellingham. I didn't know where exactly, I just needed to get away. The residential streets were empty and quiet. I'd gone maybe five blocks when the headlights of a car hit my back. I kept my pace and figured the driver wouldn't give me a second look, but as the car got closer, it was noticeably slowing down.

Great. Uncle Joe heard me sneaking out. I turned to face the vehicle, which had completely stopped but idled. However, Uncle Joe didn't have a large, luxury SUV like the one in front of me. Getting out of the passenger side was a woman. The lights from the truck made it difficult to tell who she was, but she was definitely walking toward me. I put my hand in front of my face to block the beams and get a better look.

As she neared me, she spoke. “Gary, you

have to go back to your Uncle's house."

Her voice was familiar, but where had I heard it? She stepped closer and came into view, and I froze. What was Amy doing here? I dropped my backpack and stared, suddenly angry.

"What are you here for?" I shouted. "Where'd you go? Who are you?"

She stepped closer, her face compassionate. "Gary, you have to listen to me. You've got to go back to your uncle's house. It's not safe for you out here."

"What are you talking about?" I demanded.

"You're running away," she said flatly, staring at my backpack, then at me.

"Yeah, so?" I said.

"You can't. You need to go live with your other uncle," she said.

"What are you talking about?" I asked, staring past her and into the driver's seat, though I couldn't make out a face.

"Your Uncle Joe is going to give you to your other uncle — a man named Bryant. You have to go with him."

I picked up my backpack in disgust. "You have no idea what you're talking about. I don't have an Uncle Bryant!"

I turned and started to walk away.

"Say it," she said, almost shouting.

I continued forward.

“Say it,” she said again.

I turned, anger boiling. “Say what?”

“You know what,” she shouted, walking toward me. “Go on. You’ve been wanting to say it, for how long now?”

The words left my lips like a bullet. “It’s your fault. It’s your fault I’m still alive. If I hadn’t met you, I would’ve been up there, I would’ve died with them!”

“You fool,” she said, now inches from me. “I saved you.”

“Saved me?” I screamed. “Saved me to this? What do I have left, Amy? Nothing. No one. I’m alone!”

“No, you’re not,” she said.

“Who the hell are you? What’s going on? Why was there an FBI agent talking to me at the hospital after the accident, asking questions about you?”

“Gary, I can’t explain right now,” she said, turning back and looking at the driver, holding up a finger as if to signal to wait. Then she faced me again. “You’ve got to trust me. Running away is not the answer. Go back to your uncle’s house.”

She turned and walked to the SUV.

“What are you talking about? What’s going on? You owe me answers!” I shouted.

“Believe me, Gary, it’s better if you don’t know. It’s your decision, but if I were you, I would

go back to your Uncle Joe's. It's what your parents would want."

"Don't you talk about my parents, don't you even . . ."

She got into the SUV and shut the door and before I could say anything more, sped off. I chased after, running as fast as I could, but the SUV picked up speed and soon was out of sight, leaving me out of breath and with a decision to make.

# CHAPTER 4

## BRYANT

How long I stayed out on the sidewalk, I didn't know — a half hour, maybe even an hour. However long, when I finally stood up and picked up my backpack, I had made my decision.

Sneaking back into my uncle's house was easy. I was thankful I'd left the front door unlocked. I put his wallet back (with all the cash and the credit card) and went to my downstairs bedroom. Once I was there, my mind could only think of Amy and what was happening.

What did I know about her? She definitely wasn't some normal kid my age. That was for certain. To say she was mysterious was an understatement. How did she know so much about me, how I was feeling, what I was thinking about doing? And who was the person in the SUV with her?

These were questions I realized I wouldn't know the answers to, at least not anytime soon. But the biggest question I had was how she knew

about an uncle that I didn't know I had.

That morning, as I came up to breakfast, Uncle Joe was at the table reading the newspaper. I got a bowl for cereal and grabbed the milk. Before I started to pour, he put the paper down and looked at me with disdain. "You know, I've been looking into a boarding school for you."

I didn't look at him. I poured the milk over the cereal and put the box away as he continued. "But now I think it's going to be better for you to live with Bryant."

The other uncle I didn't know I had. I still didn't look at him as I picked out a spoon from the drawer and came to the table.

"You're going to get your things together by this afternoon because you're going to live with him from now on."

I know he was waiting for a response, but I said nothing, just ate my cereal, keeping my eyes focused on the table.

"You're gonna hate it."

He was trying to push my buttons. For some reason, I didn't want to give him the satisfaction by replying.

There was silence as I ate and he stared.

After I'd finished about half the cereal, he said, "Get your stuff together by one o'clock this afternoon. We're heading to Sequim. That's where you're going to meet him."

Where was Sequim? Was it even in Washington state? I didn't ask him. I finished my cereal in silence and left the empty bowl on the table, walking toward the hallway that led to the downstairs. I could feel his stare at the back of my head.

"Come get your bowl and put it in the sink," he ordered.

I stopped, my back to him, paused, and then made my way to the staircase. I was three steps down before he yelled, "I said, come in here and get your bowl."

By now, he'd gotten up from his chair in the kitchen and was at the top of the stairs. I paused again, deliberately, because I knew this kind of defiance irritated him, and then said quietly, "No."

"You won't disrespect me in my own house!" he shouted. "Come get your bowl."

I turned and faced him, my blood boiling. "No, Uncle Joe. I don't want to."

He stepped onto the first stair and pointed, clearly enraged. "Boy, if you don't go get that bowl . . ."

"Yeah, what? How do you plan on making me get that bowl?" I said, matching the tone of my voice to his. "Huh? You think you can force me to do it?"

Joe's face was ashen, his breathing hard and fast. He took another step down and faced me. I

didn't care what he was going to do to me. I had no fear. I stared back like a stone.

"Both of you, knock it off," came my Aunt Susan's voice as she came into the hallway. "That's enough. Joe, back away!"

Joe stared, baring his teeth.

"Joe, back away!" she yelled again.

He took a step back. "Lucky this is your last day, kid."

"Or what?" I asked sarcastically.

"Gary Richard, go to your room!" my aunt ordered.

Gary Richard. Only my mother called me that, and usually only when she was mad. It shocked me, and a sudden gush of emotion flooded through me. I missed her. I looked at my aunt and then made my way to my room, where I stayed until it was time to go to Sequim.

I did a Web search and found that it was a city on the Strait of Juan de Fuca in Washington. I was glad that it wasn't far away which would have forced me to ride in the car longer than I wanted to with Uncle Joe.

I had two duffle bags packed with all the stuff I could carry and put them in the trunk of his Corolla. The whole way there we said nothing to each other. He pulled into a Safeway parking lot and stopped the car, popping the trunk from the dashboard.

“Get your bags,” he said.

I got out of the car and lifted the bags out of the trunk, slamming the lid as hard as I could. Without another word, without a wave, he drove off. I don’t know why, but I wanted to call out to him. Why was he leaving me? Where was he going? Then anger gripped me and I swore at him, followed by a hand gesture that definitely wasn’t cool with the grandmother who was wheeling a full grocery cart to her car.

I stayed there for an hour, waiting, looking for someone, anyone that might look as though they were searching for a person as well. Just about the time I was ready to give up searching, an old truck drove up and stopped next to me. Its paint job was rusting, and the truck looked as though it barely ran. It was loud and when it came to a stop and died, it did so with a loud pop.

The man that got out was tall. He wore weathered jeans and a checkered, flannel shirt. His fedora was brown and rain beaten, and his boots had caked mud on the sides. His beard was thick and peppered with gray and black, and his deep dark eyes looked menacing. He looked me over before speaking.

“You look like your dad,” he said in a rich voice.

This was the uncle I supposedly had that I’d never met before? I didn’t know what to think yet

at the same time, I really didn't care. "You must be Bryant," I offered.

The man looked around the parking lot. "That's right," he said, his eyes returning to mine. "I see my brother didn't stay to greet me."

"No," I answered.

This seemed to sadden the man momentarily. His eyes were suddenly distant, like he was remembering something.

"Ah, hello?" I said with a bit of sarcasm.

His fierce eyes returned to mine. "Throw your bags in the back."

I did as he asked and put my two duffle bags in the open bed of the truck. I figured they were too heavy to blow away. I got in, and it took Bryant a few times before the truck started.

He reminded me of some sort of survival man, like I'd seen on TV over the summer. There was a wilderness show I ended up watching a lot, and I couldn't help but think that Bryant looked like the man that hosted the show.

He drove me along Highway 101, west. I'd never been through this part of Washington before. Once you pass Port Angeles and begin to enter the Olympic National Forest, the scenery changes and it's as if you're transported into another time, where large trees and lush vegetation reign. Everything is so green.

We'd gone for maybe an hour when Bryant

veered off on a pullout adjacent to Lake Crescent, its colors a mix of turquoise and green. I'd never seen water that hue before. I walked a ways from the truck, my attention focused on the water, when I heard the first splash. I looked behind me and saw one of my duffle bags floating in the lake, briefly, before beginning to submerge. I then looked to the truck to see him pulling my other duffle bag, prepping to hurl it into the lake, like a discus thrower.

"Hey, what do you think you're doing!" I shouted, running towards him.

I knew I couldn't get there in time and, sure enough, it hit the water and began to sink. Part of me wanted to jump in and get the bags, the other part wanted to hurt Bryant. My mind chose the latter. My blood boiling, I ran to him and pushed him in the chest as hard as I could.

"Who do you think you are, that's my stuff!" I pushed him again. Even in my anger, I noticed how strong his upper body was because I didn't push him very far.

He said nothing, only stared at me, which fueled my rage even more. I took a step forward and swung my fist at his face. But it never made it to his cheek. Instead, he blocked it, and then I was doubled over in pain because of a hard elbow into my stomach, followed by a sharp pain above my shoulder blade. The blow sent me to the cement,

face down. He picked me up by the back of my shirt and stuffed me into the truck. The pain was fresh and I held my stomach, coughing.

Bryant started the truck and we were going west, again. It took a few minutes for the pain to subside, and when it did, my mind raced. We were going fifty miles an hour. If I jumped out of the truck at this speed, I'd probably end up dead. If I grabbed the wheel and crashed the truck, there was a chance I'd make it out alive. I reached for the seatbelt and fastened it, prepping myself. I wasn't planning on staying with this psycho for much longer, even if it did cost me my life.

I looked to the wheel and then to the road. I would grab the wheel and crash the truck into the railing, but before I could act, he slowed the truck and made a hard left turn onto a primitive gravel road. Perfect! The road was covered on both sides with thick forest, and we were only going about twenty miles an hour. I could jump out at this speed.

I unhooked my seatbelt and turned for the door handle and that's all I remember before everything went black.

# C H A P T E R 5

## W O O D

When I awoke, the first thing I noticed was the pain. My head and neck felt as though I'd been hit with a baseball bat. It took a few moments before I was able to figure out I was in a small cabin, laying on a beat-up sofa. In the left corner was a small kitchen. Directly in the middle of the room was a circular table with two rocking chairs to the right, one of which Bryant was sitting in, sipping something hot from a mug.

“Try not to move too fast,” he said. “Things will spin if you do.”

I sat up slowly, rubbing the side of my neck, where there was a lump the size of a golf ball. I was groggy but it didn't take long for my mind to deduce what had happened. Bryant had hit me again in the truck and knocked me out.

“Where am I?” I asked, staring at him with venom.

“Your new home,” he said, taking a sip of what smelled like coffee.

“You wanna bet?” I said with defiance. “I’m so out of here.”

I got up slowly and made my way to the door. He didn’t move, only watched as I went into the next room, a narrow space with three beds lined up next to each other. I opened the next door to the outside and stopped. It was dark, and I mean pitch-black. The rain pelted the ground, coming down so hard, it actually bounced off the cement.

Where was I? I had no clue. Judging by the intense darkness, I wasn’t around civilization. Then I remembered the conversation I’d overheard with my aunt and uncle and how Uncle Joe had said that Bryant was a hermit — a description he fit for sure! I didn’t have a coat. I didn’t have anything that would repel the rain. I was stuck at the cabin, at least until morning, when I’d have some light. Hopefully, by then, the rain would have stopped too.

I walked back into the main room, where Bryant still sat. He stared at me with indifference as I sat back down on the sofa. I glanced away, down at my feet, my anger washing over me again. I wanted to jump up and attack him, but part of me feared what would happen. It was obvious Bryant knew how to take care of himself. As though sensing my thoughts, he said, “I’m sorry about hitting you.”

Sorry. Yeah, right. He wasn’t sorry. It was a lame attempt at an apology.

“But you didn’t give me a lot of choice, especially when you got the idea to jump out of the truck. I couldn’t let you do that.”

I sucked in a breath. How could he have known I was going to jump out? I hadn’t said anything. Was I that obvious?

“Why not?” I shot back, now looking at him.

“Because you could’ve hurt yourself.”

I laughed mockingly. “Yeah, wouldn’t want that, since you did such a good job.”

“Feel lucky it’s not worse,” he said lowly, and a tinge of fear spread through me as he squinted and looked at me with a menacing stare — a stare that I would later call *the look*.

“You think you’re strong because you can hurt me?”

“Like I said, I’m sorry that happened. Hopefully, it won’t again, assuming you can make wise choices.”

“Who are you!” I shouted.

“That’s a good question.” He put his mug down on the small coffee table and leaned forward in the rocking chair. His menacing look changed to a look of seriousness. “I have a lot to tell you, Gary, but you’re not in any condition to hear what I have to say yet. I know you don’t want to be here. I know you’re angry and that anger builds inside you. But you don’t have a choice where you live.”

“Oh, yes I do,” I said, standing up. “I can live

wherever I want.”

“Highly unlikely,” he said, leaning back in the chair. “But go ahead. If you think you can survive out there, on your own, with no money, with no one looking out for you, go on. Be my guest. Go out and try it.”

He stood up and walked toward me. “But if you want to live a life with purpose and meaning, and find yourself, then you’ll want to stay here, Gary.”

“I could go back to Uncle Joe’s,” I attempted.

“My brother cares about one thing and one thing only — himself. He doesn’t like you, and that’s not your fault.

“Take the last bed in the sleeping porch. That can be yours. I’ll see you in the morning.”

Then Bryant turned and went to a door that led to a small den off the south wall. Was that where he slept? “Hope I see you in the morning,” he said, and shut the door, leaving me alone.

I had nothing. My belongings, all the stuff I cared about was at the bottom of a lake. All I had were the clothes on my back and a crazy man that was supposedly my uncle. I went to the front door again and opened it, hoping that the rain had stopped. It hadn’t. I slammed the door shut and went to the last bed, stripping down to my underwear and getting in. I pulled the covers over me and cried angry tears until I fell asleep.

When I awoke the next morning, there was an axe at the foot of my bed. I stared at it and then looked at the other two beds. One of them had been slept in. I guessed Bryant didn't sleep in the small room after all. I hadn't heard him come in and he wasn't in his bed now. I got up, put my clothes on and walked into the kitchen, where Bryant was just putting out a bowl of oatmeal.

"Good morning," he said. "You'll need to eat breakfast. We've got a lot of chopping. I'm assuming you saw your axe."

I stared at him with disdain, then said, "I'm not chopping anything."

He stepped forward and once again, I saw *the look*. "Finish your breakfast," he said slowly, "then come to the woodpile."

He walked out of the room and left me with my oatmeal. I didn't want to take anything he had to offer, but I was starving, so I ate. It was too plain and I scoured the kitchen for sugar, which I couldn't find. Most of the cupboards were plain and bare. The fridge had a few things in it, but nothing like I was used to. I forced myself to eat the oatmeal, knowing that I was going to need all the strength I could if I was going to escape.

I went to the den door and tried to open it, but surprisingly, it was locked. Why? What was in there that was so important Bryant had to keep it locked? I moved to the sleeping porch and decided

the axe might make a good tool. I grabbed it and went outside.

To the right of the cabin was a massive woodpile where Bryant was busy splitting. It was a cloudy day but it wasn't raining. The smells were amazing. I'd never smelled the forest so fresh, so inviting.

"You ever split before?" he asked, wiping the sweat from his forehead.

I looked at the axe and then the wood. "No," I said. Who splits wood nowadays?

"Well, it's not rocket science. Put up a log and start in. The wood's dry. It'll be easy to split. Just make sure you hit the wood or the block. Miss those, and you stick your leg."

I watched him chop half a dozen pieces, which he made look easy. I figured I'd do this, and when he went back inside, make my escape. I started in on the logs. I found that chopping wood wasn't as hard as I thought it would be, and there was something about splitting the wood that felt good to me. Maybe it was the sound, maybe it was the force. Whatever it was, it felt good, and for the next hour that's all I did.

Bryant didn't say anything and I was fine with that. I stopped for a moment to catch my breath and he said, "I'm going in to get some water. You want some?"

I nodded. As he entered the cabin, I had the

thought that I could bolt; I could run away and never look back, but reality crept in. Where would I go? I didn't really even know where I was.

We drank the water in silence and just as I finished, Bryant said, "You should explore around. There's a lot to see." And he went back to splitting wood.

My hands were chapped from the axe handle and I figured I needed a break, so I walked, and did just as he said. The whole place was surrounded by lush forest and foliage. It was obvious it rained a lot. Judging by the ferns and wet ground, there was a pond nearby and a small creek further out. I sat down, watching the clear water pass over the pebbles, and wondered what I was going to do next. I felt pinned down by life. What real options did I have at fifteen?

That evening, as we were sitting down to eat a chunky soup that I admit smelled delicious, my temper flared and halfway through the silence, I threw my bowl against the wall and stood up. I was so mad, yet I couldn't explain it. I couldn't say why and so I just stood there, breathing heavy, and looking at Bryant.

He glanced at the broken bowl on the floor and then looked at me. "You're going to have to work through this. No one can help you with it . . . only time."

As I felt angry tears surfacing, it was the

first time I saw Bryant's face show compassion. "I should've gone," he whispered, looking back at his soup.

"What?" I steamed, still standing.

"I should have gone to the funeral," he said again, shaking his head.

I stared at him, wanting more of a response, but he finished his soup quietly and went to the sink to rinse out his bowl. Then he grabbed some paper towels and cleaned up the spilt soup and broken bowl I'd thrown.

I left the room and was going to go outside, but decided I'd lie down on the bed and gather my thoughts. My head had been pounding since the early afternoon, like someone was using a hammer on my temple. I closed my eyes and drifted to sleep. When I awoke, it was morning and I was covered with a thick blanket Bryant must have put over me.

My head hurt twice as bad as the day before, to the point it was making me nauseous. I couldn't move and I pulled the blanket over my head to block out the light. I heard the front door open and footsteps approach the bed.

"Get up. We've got wood to split."

I gritted my teeth. Not only did I not want to do that, I couldn't physically do it.

"Gary, get up," Bryant said, more forcefully.

"I can't," I said back angrily. "My head."

“What about it?”

“It’s killing me,” I said in a tortured voice.

There was a pause, then he asked, “Do you get headaches often?”

“No, never,” I replied. “But I did have a concussion from the explosion.”

“Hmm. I suspect it’s your diet.”

“What?” I asked, moving the blanket below my neck.

My face must have showed pain because I saw another brief look of compassion from him. “You drink a lot of pop?”

“No — mainly energy drinks,” I said.

“That would do it. Sugar and caffeine.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t have sugar here. I certainly don’t have energy drinks, and there isn’t much caffeine unless you count the coffee, which probably means your body is going through withdrawals.”

“Withdrawals from sugar?”

“Those energy drinks are loaded with it, and caffeine. It’s probably a combination of both. Stay in bed. Sleep. You’ll be better in a couple of days, once it gets out of your system.”

He was right. It took the better part of two days before I was feeling good enough to at least split wood. That morning, as I came out to the main room, there was a blazing fire in the fireplace and hot oatmeal waiting for me. It wasn’t

Lucky Charms, but the oatmeal tasted good. The headache I'd been dealing with had subsided, and only once in a while would I get a shot of pain.

As we sat together eating, he looked at me and said seriously, "Have you ever chased the Silver Ghost?"

"What?" I asked.

"Have you ever chased one?"

"What are you talking about?" I wondered. I'd never heard of a Silver Ghost before.

"You're not ready yet," he whispered, almost for himself. "But we're going to make you ready."

# CHAPTER 6

## THE ROOM

The following day I awoke to large plastic bags on the bed beside me and a note: New clothes. Use the dresser in the corner.

There were at least a dozen bags and all of them contained clothes, from underwear to socks to pants along with three pairs of boots. They had to have cost hundreds of dollars because these weren't your ordinary clothes you buy cheap. These were brand-name, high-quality clothes. I realized when I took out the full Gortex raingear — an outfit that probably cost close to three hundred bucks alone.

Not only were there clothes, but all the bathroom essentials as well, from deodorant to toothpaste, which I took to the bathroom, deciding it was time to take a shower. I'd been in the same clothes for days and the hot water and soap felt good.

I put on a pair of fresh jeans and a long-sleeve shirt. Both fit perfectly. Bryant had obviously known my size, down to my size twelve boots. I

walked outside and could tell it had been raining. Everything was wet, but the sun was peaking out from in between the clouds and the smells of the forest filled the area with the freshest aromas.

It hit me then that I didn't really have anything to do. All of my electronic gear, my phone, my handheld games, were at the bottom of Lake Crescent. The vision of Bryant throwing my stuff into the water enraged me, like someone flipped my angry switch. So I had some new clothes. He had no right to throw all my personal stuff away.

How was I going to fill my time? That morning I explored the forest more and found a few animal trails, but that only lasted a couple of hours. When I returned, Bryant was getting out of the truck, a bag of groceries in his hand.

"I see you found your clothes. Looks like they fit," he said, going into the cabin.

"Yeah," I said, still disgusted that all my own stuff was gone.

I followed him in and sat down on the older of the two rocking chairs.

As I looked on, he took out some vegetables and put them in the refrigerator. After a few moments, he sensed my stare and looked up. "Something on your mind?"

"Yeah," I said in a harsh tone. "I had clothes, you know. You didn't have to throw all my stuff away."

“Ah,” he said, shutting the fridge and crossing his arms. “I wondered when we were going to have this conversation. So let’s have it. You’re angry that I threw your stuff in the lake, is that right?”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

“You know what that stuff represents, Gary?”

“That stuff was MY stuff.”

“It represents the past. Everything you might have had represented your past life. You have enough personal baggage to last a lifetime, and you didn’t need that stuff.”

“But I had my iPhone, my . . . “

“All of which I’ll be happy to buy for you again.”

I paused. Did I hear him correctly? Did he just say that he would buy that for me?

“But before I do that, you’re going to give me a few months of not using any of it. You can write down all the stuff you feel you need down and give it to me, but know that I won’t get it for a while.”

“What? Why not?”

“Because you have learning to do, and the kind of learning that has to happen can’t be tied to the past.”

“What’s wrong with the past?” I asked, my anger curbing a bit.

“Too many people live in it. This is the

present. You live in this moment right now.”

He went to the bag, grabbed some more things, and opened the refrigerator again. I sat there, wondering what to think of this man. He was mean, no doubt, yet there was also a caring side to him that I couldn't figure out.

“Last night, you asked me about the Silver Ghost,” I said.

“That right,” he answered, putting the last of the bag's contents in the fridge.

“What is it? The Silver Ghost?”

“Your dad never showed you? Never told you?” he asked, moving to the kitchen table and sitting down.

“No,” I said.

“That's too bad,” Bryant sighed. “Your grandfather, who died before you were born, was the best one I'd ever seen when it came to chasing them. No one could compare, and he showed us, the three of us — your Uncle Joe, me, and your dad how to chase. That's what I do, Gary. I chase the Silver Ghost.”

My curiosity piqued. “What is the Silver Ghost?”

He leaned forward. “I could tell you right now, but like I said last night, you're not ready yet.”

“What are you talking about? Just tell me,” I demanded.

He shook his head. “Not yet. Tomorrow, in the morning, we’re going to be picked up by a friend of mine, Steve. He’s going to be taking us up to a mountain lake to do some scouting for the forest service.”

“You work for the forest service?” I asked. I was surprised he had a job because nothing in the house looked as though he had any type of career. There were no pictures, no indication that he worked for a living.

“Sometimes, like tomorrow.”

“What are we going to be doing?” I asked.

He grinned. “Working and learning.”

“And that means?”

“Just what I said. Working and learning.”

He stood up from the table and walked to the door. “Come on. Another delivery of wood came in this morning. We’ve got more to split.”

“I don’t want to split anymore. I’m sore, and I’ve got a headache that won’t quit,” I said.

“Your headache is because you haven’t had caffeine, and your body is going through withdrawal. Go the cupboard over there and take two Tylenol. They’ll help. Drink a couple glasses of water and meet me out at the woodpile in a few minutes.”

He left and I took the Tylenol, though I didn’t drink very much water. I looked in the fridge hoping to find something with a little flavor or

sugar, but all there was were vegetables and fruit, some meat and milk. No candy bars, no yogurt, nothing that looked appealing.

I was almost out of the room when I glanced to the left — to the den. I was curious to what was in it. I moved to the door and tried to turn the knob but it was locked.

That was strange, I thought. Why would he lock the den, unless there's something inside he didn't want me to see or have? I grabbed the handle harder and tried to force turn it, but the knob wasn't budging.

I turned and froze, feeling the color drain from my face, as standing next to me was Bryant, holding his axe. He'd obviously seen me trying to get in, but how'd he come in so silently?

"Usually when something's locked, it's for a reason," he said quietly.

"What's in there?" I asked defiantly.

"That's not your concern. What is, is that you leave my things be, and in this case, that means the doorknob. Stay out of that room, Gary. Am I clear?"

I frowned. "Sure. Whatever."

He took a step forward. "That's not the answer I'm looking for," he said, this time with *the look*.

As much as I wanted to be defiant, *the look* scared me, and holding an axe, *the look* really scared

me. “Yeah, you’re clear,” I said with a gulp.

“Good,” he said. “Come on. We’ve got wood to split.”

# CHAPTER 7

## OFF WE GO

“Stay here,” Bryant said, as he went through the side door into the garage. The massive garage, that had to be twice if not three times the size of the cabin, was an impressive structure. Much newer looking than the cabin, I wondered what could be in there, and even more curious, why I couldn’t go in either.

When Bryant came back out, he was carrying two massive backpacks, like hiker backpacks. One was green, which he gave to me, and the other was blue, which he heaved over his shoulder.

“What’s this?” I asked, holding the pack at my feet.

“Your work,” he said. “Our ride should be here any minute.”

That ride wasn’t a truck or a car. It was a helicopter, landing in the open field adjacent to the cabin. The wind from the blades made the trees and plants sway, and it felt like I was going to go airborne from the pressure. I