

Chapter 1

AMAYA

It had been two-and-a-half weeks since Wendy killed anyone, and she was getting antsy. The smell of popcorn wafting from the concession stand made her stomach churn; she didn't appreciate the reminder of her lost childhood. Amaya and Tommy argued about some stupid TikTok video while Meg attempted to intervene. Wendy's worn sneakers scraped the dry earth as she shuffled behind, allowing the meager crowd filling the football stadium to thin out. She spotted a handsome man in his early thirties fade into darkness under the athletic field. A warm rush of anticipation flooded Wendy's cheeks, and a sudden spike in adrenaline made her heart flutter.

"Go on ahead," Wendy said. "I'm just going to hit the girls' room. Meet you in the stands." Amaya waved her off, engrossed in her squabble.

She was lying, of course. She had no intention of using the restroom. Whether she would meet them in the stands later was still undecided. Wendy studied her friends as they blended into the crowd, memorizing each movement, in case this was the last time

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she saw them. She tucked her hair behind her ear, savoring the animated pitch of Amaya's fading quarrel as she and Tommy turned the corner and vanished from Wendy's sight. Her bones ached at the thought of leaving Amaya, but Wendy had one purpose for being on school grounds at such an ungodly hour on a Saturday morning, and she had just lost visual on him.

As she slinked beneath the stadium, the cement walls shaded the late-September sun and the temperature dropped ten degrees. Wendy wrapped her sweatshirt tighter around her torso, combating the goosebumps that crawled down her arms. She scurried toward the restrooms, her shoulders dropping in disappointment as the men's room door swung shut. She missed her chance. She furrowed her brow as she contemplated an alternative plan.

Reaching into her purse, she pushed aside her high school ID—the one that featured her overly energetic, toothy grin—the photo that captured everything she pretended to be, at least for now.

She dug through her bag. It was a cheap knock-off, but she didn't care. She pushed past a lipstick tube (Red Sunrise, Tommy's favorite), past a few broken pencils, their tips in a messy collection at the bottom of the bag, and past a barely wrapped tampon.

Wendy grabbed her wallet, unzipped the change pouch, and gripped a handful of pennies, nickels, dimes, and quarters. As the sound of running water echoed from the men's room, Wendy intentionally released the coins, watching them bounce on the solid concrete floor, their metallic *ting* reverberating off the walls.

"Oh, I'm such a klutz," Wendy said as Mr. Godwin exited the bathroom to find his third-period English student huddled over a mass of scattered money. "Who even carries change anymore, right? Ugh, I'm such a disaster."

"Let me give you a hand," Mr. Godwin said as he crouched down next to Wendy, prying up a dime with his perfectly

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manicured thumb nail. His eyes sparkled despite the sparsely lit basement. Wendy grinned, acutely aware of the intense jealousy her fellow students would feel being mere inches from Mr. Godwin's perfectly chiseled jawline. Wendy knew better, though. She was well-aware of the repulsive soul lurking beneath his flawless quaff of thick, wavy hair.

Wendy stood, reached back into her purse, and slipped something that resembled a joy buzzer onto her finger. From the outside, the contraption looked like a simple gold ring; however, inside her palm hid a small square sponge embossed in a plastic casing. Her thumb traced the groove that separated the lid as she flicked it off and reached for Mr. Godwin's hand.

"Thank you so much for your help," she said as she held Mr. Godwin's palm in hers, smearing a clear liquid that soaked the spongy patch of her "joy buzzer." She allowed his hand to linger in hers long enough for the poison to soak through his skin and long enough to bat her eyes as he smiled. Mr. Godwin almost expected flirtation from his students, and he wasn't one to discourage it. "Enjoy the game," she said, biting her lower lip, partially to play the role of doting teenage girl, but mostly to choke back the repugnance billowing in her gut.

Wendy slid the ring off her finger and back into the protective cover in her purse. She had administered a *transdermal-something-or-other* that contained *hydrochloro-blab-blab-blab*. She started ignoring the details of the briefings years ago. The bottom line was that the man would feel fine for the next day or two, slowly feel some stomach flu symptoms, and would be dead within a week.

* * *

The sun was almost blinding compared to the dingy undercarriage of the stadium. Wendy slid casually into the bleachers next to Meg, Amaya, and Tommy, the cold of the aluminum penetrating through

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her thin jeans. She considered bolting after her run-in with Mr. Godwin, but she didn't want to leave her friends behind. She couldn't leave Amaya. Not yet.

"Hey, Wendy, just in time." That was Meg. Sweet girl, but she tried a little too hard.

Amaya leaned back and flicked Wendy's right ear. That was the sort of attitude that drew her to Amaya almost instantly.

Wendy was a name she wasn't necessarily comfortable with, but it was fine for the time being. She wouldn't have it for long. To her it always felt a little too 1950s goody-goody, like she should be in a poodle skirt singing The Name Game.

Wendy, Wendy, bo-bendy. Banana-fana, fo-fendy.

Wendy Lockheart (for lack of better nomenclature) didn't normally gravitate toward the crowd that would spend a Saturday morning at a school football game, but this group was different. They weren't there because they were rah-rah cheerleader wannabes or because they were so cool that it was ironic to pretend to have school spirit. They just did whatever they wanted to do and yesterday Tommy said, "Hey, let's go to the football game tomorrow." Once she learned Mr. Godwin would be there, she was on board.

Tommy smiled at her, just barely catching her eye before looking down, as if something beyond fascinating was happening right at his feet. It was normal for a high school girl to crush on a high school boy, so Wendy played along. Tommy was cute enough, and she enjoyed watching him squirm as she gave him mixed signals. For her, it was a game. The agency taught her to remain unattached. Her time was always limited. But she kept up appearances, laughing at his lame attempts at jokes, going along with his banal, small-minded ideas (like this football game). In all honesty, it wasn't Tommy that brought her up from the stadium underground to watch her so-called peers smash each other's

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helmeted heads together. It was Amaya.

* * *

Wendy had found her way to countless different schools since her induction into the agency, and the first days were always similar. Some schools make you introduce yourself to the class. Other schools just tell you to take a seat and try to ignore you as best as they can until the blaring ring of the school bell.

The first afternoon in the cafeteria is generally the same, and it began as such at West Elmdale High School (Go Cardinals). Wendy collected her tray of somewhat discernible meat and potato product with a side of nearly gray string beans and found a corner of a scarcely populated table. This was her favorite part. She enjoyed seeing what types of people attempted to make contact. She was part space alien and part lab rat about to be dissected.

As she popped the lid off her Kiwi Strawberry Snapple, a girl named Lara at the far end of the table scoffed. “That is seriously revolting,” she spat. Wendy scanned the area, searching for context. “Yes, you.” She caught Wendy’s eye.

“You don’t like kiwi?”

“It’s not your drink, you biohazard,” Lara said, pointing at Wendy’s forearm, which was bleeding onto the chipped particleboard table.

So much for blending in.

Wendy snagged a napkin and covered the cut she thought had healed. It was a souvenir from her previous target who got a little overzealous with a switchblade. She pulled a cardigan from her backpack and threw it over her Toucan Sam tee shirt, which she hoped would pass as vintage, but was really a Goodwill purchase.

“Ew, seriously? That’s not much better,” Lara said. “That sweater is literally falling apart.”

Wendy tugged at a large hole worn through the left elbow.

Blood rushed to her face, partly because of embarrassment and partly out of rage.

“God, she’s a mess,” Lara said to a well-dressed girl to her right. “Stay away. She probably has lice.”

“Lice? I got you, cuz.” A strange little girl with dark-rimmed glasses and a streak of purple in her otherwise jet-black hair hopped up behind Wendy, a foot on either side of her on the cafeteria bench. The girl straddled Wendy from behind and feigned picking nits out of her hair like a wild monkey. She even threw in a few monkey noises as she did it. “Ooo ooo, eee-eee!” Her primal eyes scanned the room as she pretended to grab the lice and eat them. “There. Think I got them all. I’m Amaya Malone. At your service.”

Amaya hopped from the bench, stood beside the table, and mimicked an overly exaggerated curtsy. And that was Wendy’s first introduction to Amaya. It was instant chemistry. Lara rolled her eyes as she and her posse of prep school posers shuffled off in disgust.

“This here’s my bitchy friend, Meg.” Amaya gestured to a sweet-looking girl with braces and afro puffs with a zigzag part.

“She’s kidding,” Meg retorted. “She’s always kidding. Hey, you’re really pretty.”

She wasn’t.

“You have such pretty hair,” Meg added.

She didn’t.

“Pretty eyes, too.” Meg shied away as she attempted that compliment.

Wendy’s eyes were, in fact, unique. The agency had little control over that. The rest was all by design. It was part of her training. Don’t be too attractive—attractive girls stand out. Don’t be too homely either—ugliness garners as much attention as beauty. The idea was to blend in. To be as invisible as possible. Her eyes, however, were outside of the agency’s oversight.

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At seventeen years old, Wendy wore her brown, mousy hair in a shoulder-length bob with neatly trimmed bangs. She wore very little makeup—just enough to keep up with the status quo. She wasn't too tall, and she wasn't too short. Perfectly average. Her eyes were like a mosaic of different colored tiles. Similar to a chameleon, the primary hue shifted depending upon the surrounding colors.

When she was in Portland for six months, she had long blond hair and her eyes sparkled with a tinge of blue. She was a redhead in Decatur with grayish-green eyes to match. Today, in West Elmdale, New Jersey, her hazel eyes favored the light brown spectrum to complement her nondescript brunette bob.

"Thanks. I like your puffs," Wendy replied, nodding toward Meg's hair. "I'm Wendy."

She had been Wendy for less than twelve hours at that point, but the words rolled off her tongue as if she had been Wendy her entire life.

"I have an inverted nipple," Meg blurted out, immediately regretting it.

"I'm sorry. What's that, now?" Wendy asked.

"Nothing." She blushed.

"Why would you tell me that?"

"I don't know. We don't get many transfer students here. I got nervous. I overshare when I'm nervous." Meg pulled away and sat at the bench across from Wendy, her face turned down as she anxiously poked at her lunch.

"Doofus," Amaya chided, as she smacked Meg on the shoulder. "Don't scare the new girl away."

"Oh, I don't scare easily," Wendy explained.

"Good. For all intensive purposes, Meg is the saner one of us two."

"Um, did you say, 'intensive purposes?'" A tall, slightly muscular boy sitting at the table next to theirs had overheard the

conversation.

“Stand up.” Amaya gestured for the boy to rise. He did. Amaya had a commanding presence that didn’t quite match her small stature.

“You know the expression is ‘intents and purposes,’ ri—?” Amaya slammed her knee into the boy’s crotch before he could finish his question. Hunched over in pain, he stumbled back to his cafeteria bench.

“That’s Tommy Vasquez, one of West Elmdale’s finest,” Amaya explained. “He’s hot, but he’s an asshat.”

Wendy glanced over at Tommy and gave him a shy smile. “You know he was right, though. Don’t you? About the expression?” Wendy asked.

“Doesn’t matter. It’s a little game I like to play,” Amaya said. “I intentionally say an expression wrong and if anyone is douchey enough to correct me, I hit ‘em in the balls.”

“What if a girl corrects you?”

“Seriously? Nine times out of ten it’s a boy trying to mansplain.” Amaya made her way next to Meg and straddled the cafeteria bench.

“Well, what about that one time out of ten?”

“Then I punch a tit.” Amaya shrugged as she tossed a tater tot into her mouth. “That’s how Meg, here, got her inverted nipple.”

Meg’s eyes widened in horror. “That’s not true. She’s kidding again. She’s always kidding.”

* * *

The *buzz* of the scoreboard jolted Wendy back to the present. Her life left no room for sentimentality. She was going to miss her friends. Meg had a kind soul, and Tommy was nice to look at, but Amaya was something more. She connected with her in a way she hadn’t with anyone else in any other town in this godforsaken

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country. She wasn't supposed to get attached, and it typically wasn't much of a struggle to abide by that rule, but it got lonely never having a genuine friend. For the first time, she dreaded what her next mission might be, or when it might begin.

She had no control over that aspect of the job. In fact, she had very little control over any facet of her purported existence. She even lacked the means to reach out with an inquiry, content to wait for instructions to reach her. Because the agency raised her, she never found the communication system aberrant, although she imagined outsiders may view it as somewhat peculiar.

Wendy received all intelligence via a stick of randomly flavored Wonder Rush Happy Funtime Bubblegum.

* * *

A middle-aged woman scratched an itch on her leg as she wrote her name on the whiteboard. Wendy's sensitive ears cringed at the sound of her wool skirt rubbing against her pantyhose.

The letters spelled out "Mrs. Ratchford."

The words almost teased the students as they read them. This woman needed no introduction. She was the go-to substitute teacher at West Elmdale High School and not well-liked.

Wendy could forgive the dated attire. She herself was no fashionista, but how Ratchford never seemed to notice the stale lipstick on her teeth, Wendy could not figure out. Once or twice, fine, but every day? At some point she must look in a mirror, right? A tight bun pulled her greasy hair to a slick shine, matting it to her skull.

"Class, I'm Mrs. Ratchford." She gestured to the whiteboard. "I'll be your substitute today for English Literature. Mr. Godwin has fallen ill."

So it begins.

It was Monday. Mr. Godwin was probably feeling a little

nauseous. Maybe some vomiting. If not, he would have that to look forward to soon. Maybe a slight fever—100, 101—nothing to cause too much alarm. Some Tylenol should keep it in check for now.

“I understand that you have been discussing Macbeth,” Mrs. Ratchford continued. “We’ll be watching clips from the 1971 Polanski film adaption today.”

“Wasn’t Polanski a rapist?” someone at the rear of the classroom asked.

There were scattered chuckles among the class, then another student piped up, “You showing us a rape film, Ratchford?”

“Who said that?” Mrs. Ratchford demanded. “Just settle down and watch the film.”

Wendy wasn’t sure what it was about substitute teachers that caused such disrespect, but it was the same in every school. Maybe it was the lack of recourse. Would a sub have the audacity to issue a detention? Does she even carry such authority? Would she send a student to the principal’s office? Probably, if provoked enough, but she would surely let a minor infraction slide. She wanted to get through the day like anyone else.

It surprised her to see Amaya partaking in the antics, but she was pleased at how unique her approach was. Most modern TVs have “smart” capabilities, and Amaya downloaded the manufacturer’s app months ago. Today was not her first tussle with a substitute. With a simple swipe of her phone, she could cast any video she wanted in front of the entire class.

Amaya gave Wendy a “check this out” nod and tapped a button on her phone. Instantly, the screen switched from Jon Finch rattling off some Shakespearean mumbo-jumbo to two frogs, mid-intercourse. Wendy laughed out loud, startling even herself. She rarely found standard teenage fare humorous, but Amaya seemed to know the right buttons to press.

“Oh, now what is this?” Mrs. Ratchford exclaimed, jumping

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from her chair. “Must be a faulty connection or something.” She jiggled the plugs on the back of the TV as if a loose wire could transform highbrow English drama into amphibious copulation.

After a hearty reaction from her peers, Amaya switched the video back to Macbeth. Mrs. Ratchford seemed pleased, as if her wire jiggling adequately addressed the problem.

“Here. Pick something,” Amaya whispered to Wendy as she passed her phone.

Now Wendy faced a conundrum. The agency taught her to fit in with those around her, which would justify her casting a video and pranking her teacher. On the other hand, she was trained to stay out of trouble, which implied that she should quietly pass the device back to her friend. On the other, *other* hand, she was actually having fun. There wasn’t a lot of that in her life, and she kind of liked it.

Wendy tapped a few buttons and an ISIS beheading video popped on the screen.

“Wendy! Oh, my God!” It was even a little too much for Amaya. She grabbed the phone from Wendy’s hand and switched off the video just as a sword nearly sliced through the neck of a hooded man on his knees.

“Dude, you are seriously twisted,” Amaya whispered. “I frigging like it!”

“Which one of you is Wendy?” demanded Mrs. Ratchford. One of the other students gestured, and Mrs. Ratchford grabbed Wendy by the arm and pulled her out of her seat. Sure, Wendy could have taken Mrs. Ratchford down easily, but she wanted to give Ratchford the win.

“And you.” She pointed to Amaya. “Are you responsible for the fornicating frogs?”

“Guilty as charged, Ratchet.”

“Excuse me, young lady, my name is Mrs. *Ratchford*.”

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Amaya clenched her fist and gave Wendy a look like she wanted to hit her for the correction. Wendy's eyes widened, and she shook off Amaya's gesture.

* * *

As it turns out, substitute teachers do have the authority to issue detentions. Wendy and Amaya sat in desks next to each other as the unlucky teacher whose turn it was to supervise detention unfurled a newspaper at his workstation. The room was silent as a few other students slumped in their chairs alongside the two girls.

Thugs. That's what Wendy thought they looked like. Then she chuckled out loud. Amaya gave her an odd look. Who was Wendy to think of these students as thugs? What could they have possibly done? Arrived late to class? Cursed out a teacher? Forgot their gym clothes at home? Wendy had literally just killed her English teacher. Okay, so he wasn't dead yet, but *alea iacta est*.

That phrase always stuck with her from a Latin class she had in... Des Moines? No, maybe it was Cleveland... No, it was Des Moines. She remembered the kid who sat next to her in Latin always wore an Iowa Hawkeyes tee shirt. It's funny the things that stick with you. The phrase meant, "The die is cast." Suetonius said it to Julius Caesar during one of the Roman wars. The Romans always seemed to be fighting someone. Once the die was cast, there was no turning back. For Wendy, her die was cast almost immediately after her birth, and she was never given an opportunity to stop it or even slow it down.

"*Alea iacta est*," she mumbled.

"What is wrong with you?" Amaya whispered. "Don't tell me this is your first time in detention."

"No. Of course not," she whispered back.

It was.

She had stabbed people, poisoned others, strangled a few,

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even shot one, but she always followed the rules at school. The agency insisted on it. There was no need to draw attention from teachers, the principal, or foster parents.

What would be the ramifications of this? Teachers always threatened to put things on your permanent record. She doubted there was such a thing. Even if there were, she figured she wouldn't be Wendy Lockheart much longer. Whatever identity she had next would have a clean slate. Maybe her foster parents would find out, but she doubted it. They didn't question her when she came home late from school. She could be at an after-school club meeting or hanging with friends. They gave her some leeway. Wendy never gave them any reason not to trust her—another edict from the agency. A suspension they would hear about, but probably not a detention. She thought she was most likely safe. She would be on Mrs. Ratchford's radar, but she was a sub—a temporary employee. Wendy leaned back in her chair, relaxing a bit. Things could be worse.

* * *

By the time Friday rolled around, Mr. Nelson, the school principal, joined Mrs. Ratchford in front of the English class.

“Class, this is difficult to say,” he began. “As you are aware, Mr. Godwin has been under the weather lately. I'm very sorry to inform you he passed away last night.”

Job complete.

“He went in his sleep and doctors say he didn't suffer.”

That's disappointing.

“Mr. Godwin had some pre-existing medical conditions, and his immune system just wasn't strong enough to fight off the flu.”

And there was the beauty of the entire plan. The agency knew exactly what pre-existing conditions Mr. Godwin had, and they knew his “flu” would be fatal. Such an elegant solution. There

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would be no investigation into foul play because he died of natural causes. They would never question Wendy or even suspect her.

“I know this can be very difficult for students to deal with,” Mr. Nelson continued. “I imagine you may have a lot of questions or want to talk to someone. Counselors are available for all of you.” Mr. Nelson hesitated. “You may also... hear some rumors... or read some things online.”

“Guys! Godwin was a full-on pedophile!” exclaimed a student from the back of the class. He held up his phone, which displayed a news article.

There was some rumbling among the class.

“Now, let’s allow the authorities to investigate,” Principal Nelson interjected.

“Seriously,” the student continued, “he had a hard drive full of kiddie porn and a studio in his house where he shot his own!”

This was not news to Wendy, naturally. It was all part of her briefing—the part to which she always paid attention. If she was going to eliminate the scum of the world, she wanted to know why. The rest of the details she generally ignored.

Removing dregs like Melvin from society was a tremendous source of accomplishment for Wendy. It’s what kept her loyal to the agency. That, plus the fact that killing people made her feel really, *really* good.

Chapter 2

RYAN

The gentle click of the digital shutter seemed to attenuate the horrifying scene it captured. Detective Barnes missed the days when cameras held film and a temporarily blinding flash accompanied the rigid shutter snap. That seemed more apropos considering the grisly scene he was witnessing, like something out of an old black and white film noir.

He stepped over a placard, labeling an eyeball, staring him down from a dried crust of blood that had saturated the once-beige carpet. The optic nerve trailed from the back like an electrical wire, searching for its missing outlet. Barnes removed a handkerchief from his suit jacket pocket and grimaced as he covered his nose and mouth, attempting in vain to squelch the wretched stench.

“Two victims. One male, mid-sixties. The other female, late-fifties,” Officer Hardison reported to Detective Barnes. “She’s the one trying to peek at you from over there.” Hardison gestured toward the eyeball on the carpet.

“Classy, Officer,” Barnes retorted. “What are we looking at here?”

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“Peter and Abigail McMahon, according to the neighbor who called it in and corroborated by the gas bill in the study,” Hardison stated. “No sign of struggle from the husband. He has a fresh incision on his chest that’s been sutured. Looks like a recent heart surgery. Poor bastard seems to have slept through most of the attack. Multiple stab wounds to the chest. The wife...” Hardison double-checked the name in his notebook, “... Abigail looks like the one who fought back, or at least attempted to.” He gestured to her face and body. “Bruising on the neck, arms, and rib cage.”

Blood stained the bed a dark maroon, almost black color, fading into a harsh crimson around the edges. Husband and wife lay side by side, Peter on his back. His gray beard blended into the matted, blood-soaked hairs on his chest.

Abigail rested on her side as if posed there intentionally. A dark caking followed from her left eye socket and onto the mattress, a remnant of what was once a violent flowing of sanguine fluid.

“Been sitting here probably three or four days,” Hardison continued.

“No one noticed?”

“Neighbors called once the mail piled up. We’ll check work records. If Peter recently had heart surgery, my guess is he had some time off from work.”

“And her?” Barnes inquired.

“Not sure. Homemaker maybe?”

“How did she lose the eye?”

“The eye itself was punctured and ripped out of its socket.”

“We talking about a knife? Screwdriver?” Barnes asked.

“The puncture wound is thin. Barely detectable. Maybe a surgical needle? The husband’s chest has the same markings. Fifteen small puncture marks. Straight to the heart.”

“So, we have a gentleman who we can assume was recently

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released from the hospital, and the murder weapon is a syringe?"

"Seems to be."

"All right, let's get the hospital records. Crosscheck every doctor, nurse, technician, candy striper against the database."

"Givens is already on it."

"I want to know if either of these two made any enemies over there. What type of patient was Peter? Did he complain? Was he aggressive? Threatening? Did he eat all his Jell-O? I want to know everything. Let's find this miscreant."

* * *

A metallic *ting* emanated from a large kitchen knife as Grace Barnes slid it from the butcher block. She chopped a collection of peeled potatoes, sliding them from the cutting board to a large pot of boiling water.

"When's dinner, Mrs. B?" The small voice belonged to a crooked little boy with thick glasses.

"Not for an hour, sweetie. Do you want some carrot sticks to hold you over?" Grace asked.

"That's okay." He looked disappointed.

"What's wrong?"

"It's just that I need some help with homework, but you're busy."

"I can help him." Wendy bounced down the stairs, almost poetically.

"Oh, thanks, Wendy," Grace replied. "You're a doll."

"Aren't I, though? Come on, Corey. I'll give you a hand."

Corey had just turned six and was in Kindergarten. Born with cerebral palsy, he walked with the aid of a set of metal crutches. He hobbled over to a small table and took a seat. Wendy squatted into a chair that was clearly designed for someone at least half her size.

"What are we working on tonight? Algebra? Physics?"

Voltaire?”

“Volt-what?” Corey giggled. “I have to color a picture of a tree at the park,” Corey said, looking dejected.

“You don’t like to color?”

“Well, my hands kind of shake and I can never stay in the lines.” His head bowed in embarrassment.

“Hey, look at me.” Wendy tilted up his chin gently with her index finger. “I have a secret and only you can know it.”

He looked intrigued.

“The best things in life happen outside the lines. Why would you want to stay inside them? That’s so boring. Let me show you.”

Wendy picked a crayon out of a plastic tub in the middle of the table. The label called it “Electric Lime.” She colored the top part of the tree, intentionally scribbling a good portion outside the black line, barely missing a bird flying overhead. “See what I mean?”

Corey smiled. “Yeah, it looks good.” He reached for an asthma inhaler, took a puff, and grabbed another crayon—“Mountain Meadow”—and began scribbling wildly.

They both colored simultaneously, leaving the tree about twice its intended size.

“Now listen,” Wendy said. “The entire world is going to give you lines to stay in. When that happens, just remember this tree. It’s so much bolder and fuller and more exciting now that we made our own lines. Live outside the lines.”

Corey gave her a big hug as the front door creaked open. Wendy quickly released Corey and quietly started coloring again.

“Hey, honey. Hi, kids.” Detective Barnes kissed his wife on the cheek and removed his suit jacket, revealing a badge and handgun at his waist. He stepped over to a gun safe built into the wall, blocking it with his body as he entered a six-digit code. Removing his gun from his belt, he placed it carefully into the safe

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and closed the door, pushing a few more buttons to lock it into place.

Wendy paid no attention. Barnes was very secretive about the safe combination, and rightly so. Not even his darling wife knew the combination. Of course, Wendy already did.

About a week after she moved in with Grace and Ryan Barnes, the latest in a long string of foster families, Wendy deciphered the code. All she needed was a small slipup. Ryan must have had a particularly trying day, so he poured himself a whiskey before opening the gun safe. He placed the glass on a small shelf over a coat rack before retiring his firearm for the night. Again, he blocked the keypad with his body, but in Wendy's eyeshot was a distorted, mirrored image of the numbers reflected off the curve of the whiskey glass. She only needed to glance through her peripheral vision to pick up the sequence—1-0-1-7-0-6.

October 17, 2006? Maybe an anniversary. Maybe just random numbers. It didn't matter; she had the code. She tested it after school one day before Ryan was home and while Grace was busy upstairs with Corey. Ryan's service pistol was on him, but she was pleased to see a spare revolver in there. Loaded. Whether Ryan was home, she would always have access to a firearm.

The agency never distributed guns. They were too loud and drew too much attention. They were also too easy to trace. However, Wendy got extensive firearms training. Even if they would not give her a gun, she needed to know how to use one, and she needed to be clever enough to know how to get one from someone else if the situation warranted it. She didn't know if she would need Ryan's gun, but she rested assured knowing she could get her hands on it if things turned south.

Wendy's experiences with foster parents had been mixed. She lumped them into three different categories. The first she called "Sunnies." They were a constant ray of sunshine. Everything was

wonderful and amazing and perfect. No matter what happened, Sunnies handled it with a smile and a hug. These were people who fostered because they truly wanted to help people while improving their chances to make it through the Pearly Gates. Sunnies usually wanted you to call them “Mom” and “Dad” and always talked about being one big, happy family. Sunnies made her want to vomit.

The second group she called “Breakers” because they would do everything in their power to break you. They weren’t afraid to smack you around a little and they knew where to hit you, so the marks weren’t visible. Breakers left scars—both physical and psychological. She was afraid of Breakers when she was little, but she almost looked forward to them as she got older. The look on a foster parent’s face when you can take a punch and then return it with even more gusto was priceless. It also gave her an opportunity to vent some of her aggression. She had to be careful, though. Breakers often had difficulty knowing when to stop breaking.

Finally, there was a group she referred to as “Bambis,” who were timid and unsure about how to handle foster kids. They were typically fairly new at fostering and acknowledged that they weren’t your actual parents. They tiptoed around rules and problems to avoid conflict. The Barneses were Bambis. She liked Bambis. Bambis didn’t hover or get in your business. It was a lot easier to get away with things with Bambis—detention, for example.

The twist with the Barneses, though, was Ryan’s occupation. You would think having a detective in the house would complicate things for someone like Wendy, but she actually found it exhilarating. The imminent risk of capture would probably make most people apprehensive, but Wendy saw it as a challenge. She was also rather cocky, so thinking she was smarter than a trained detective, while imprudent, was also mentally stimulating. She needed a challenge sometimes, and Ryan was it.

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“You know I hate bringing work home, but I just can’t shake this case,” Ryan said to his wife. Wendy continued coloring with Corey in the next room, indicating in no way that she could hear their conversation.

“We found a husband and wife brutally murdered on their bed,” Ryan continued.

“How awful,” Grace replied. “Were they shot?”

“No, actually. Stabbed.”

Grace shuddered.

“With a syringe of all things.”

Wendy’s ears perked up.

“Yeah, I’ll spare you the gruesome details, but I just can’t get the image out of my head... or the smell. They sat there rotting for three or four days.”

Wendy smirked and thought, *Five, actually.*

Chapter 3

POPPY

“I’m just saying, if you’re gonna collect kiddie porn, why keep it on hard drives just lying around your house? Store it in the cloud, or something.” Tommy seemed to have it all figured out.

“Is that where you keep yours, Tommy?” Amaya teased.

“Storing it in the cloud would make it too easy for authorities to hack,” Wendy clarified.

“Oh...”

Silence.

Tommy contemplated this way too hard.

“You’re not the brightest knife in the drawer, are you there, Tommy-boy?” Leave it to Amaya.

“Isn’t the expression...?” Tommy stopped as Amaya got ready to kick.

“Don’t you ever learn your lesson?” Amaya hit him twice in the shoulder instead. “Two for flinching.”

“He probably just shouldn’t have collected kiddie porn in the first place. Then he wouldn’t have to hide it on a hard drive or a

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cloud or anything.” Meg’s simplicity brought a smile to Wendy’s face.

It had been a week since Mr. Godwin died and was subsequently outed for his dirty hobby, but it was still anyone wanted to talk about. West Elmdale, New Jersey, was a relatively small town, and the biggest news before this was the Whole Foods that was going to open in the spring. All the lacrosse moms were excited to stock up on gluten-free bread or some trendy fodder like that.

The three girls strolled down the sidewalk in the town square while Tommy trailed behind.

“What if you just have, like, normal porn in the cloud?” Tommy asked. “Can the feds hack into that, too? I mean, like, hypothetically?”

“No one wants to see your collection of lesbo porn,” Amaya consoled. “Relax and whack off with a clear conscience.”

“Ah, cool!”

“Just make sure you cover your webcam.”

“Wait, what? Why?”

Amaya ignored the follow-up question.

Tommy’s step hustled as his concern intensified. “Amaya...?”

Amaya’s face scrunched up as her walking slowed. “Hang on,” she said. “I gotta sneeze.” She cocked her head back, grabbed Wendy’s arm and sneezed right into the crux of her elbow.

“Dude!” Wendy objected. “What’s your deal?”

“They always say to sneeze into an elbow, so you don’t spread germs.”

“Yeah, your *own* elbow.” Wendy shook her arm in exaggerated disgust, but she couldn’t hold back her smile.

“Eh,” Amaya replied. “Tomayto, tomahto.”

Wendy wasn’t accustomed to much human contact. She wasn’t hugged often as a child. She never kissed a boy or even held

one's hand. There was something almost intimate about Amaya's gesture. Disgusting, but intimate. It made her feel connected.

Up ahead, a familiar logo in a convenience store window caught Wendy's eye. The sticker bore the image of a yellow smiley face. Something like an emoji on steroids. The eyes were wide and blue, and it pursed its lips into a perfect O with a bright pink bubble protruding from them. It raised its eyebrows in a way that suggested that this little smiley face was exuberantly excited about the bubble it was blowing. A thumbs-up was superimposed on its side, showing approval of its gum choice.

"Hey, guys. I need to pop in here. I'll just be a sec," Wendy said.

"No biggie. We'll come with," Amaya replied.

The group entered the convenience store, and Wendy grabbed a pack of Skittles and a pack of M&Ms.

"Diet of champions," Amaya said.

Wendy smirked and tossed the bags of candy onto the counter. "I like to mix them," she explained to the cashier.

The cashier reached under the counter and grabbed a plastic bag and placed the Skittles and M&Ms inside.

"Three twenty-five," the cashier said.

Wendy gave her the money while peaking inside the bag. She saw her Skittles, her M&Ms, and a pack of gum bearing the same emoji image from the store window. The label on the gum read, "Wonder Rush Happy Funtime Bubblegum."

"That is so repulsive," Tommy said as they left the store.

"I rarely agree with Tweedle Dumbass over here, but that is a pretty nasty combo, Wen," Amaya concurred.

"I don't know," Meg said with an air of cheerful support. "It could be good."

"Here. Try it." Wendy called her bluff. She grabbed both the bag of Skittles and the bag of M&Ms in one hand and tore the top

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off both simultaneously. Wendy tipped the bags into Meg's hand, sprinkling a few of each together.

Meg tossed them into her mouth and reluctantly chewed. Her chewing slowed as she choked down the candy and feigned a smile. "It's not too bad." Her smile widened to reveal bits of candy stuck in her braces, but she looked like she wanted to regurgitate it all onto the sidewalk.

Wendy smirked. The saccharin sweet people of the world usually turned her off, but Meg was genuine. In all honesty, it was a disgusting combination. She never even tried it herself. It was a code the agency came up with, knowing no one would ever really combine the two, let alone feel the need to announce it to the salesclerk. It would be like ordering a pizza with extra anchovies. It was possible, but highly improbable. On the off chance that someone would not only buy Skittles and M&Ms intending to mix them and announce said plans to the convenience store clerk, well, all they would get would be a free pack of gum.

* * *

Her bedroom door creaked as Wendy gingerly slid it closed. She heard Grace and Corey talking about something downstairs, but she couldn't quite make it out. Wendy turned the lock clockwise until it clicked into place.

This was it. Wendy took a deep breath and sat on the side of her bed, tossed her phone next to her, and reluctantly opened the bag of candy. It was as if she were defusing a bomb, and if she cut the wrong wire, the whole thing would explode.

Wendy grabbed the pack of gum and tossed the rest of the candy aside. She stared at it for several seconds, rolling it around between her fingers, her knee nervously bouncing up and down. The rectangular package was banana blond with that godforsaken smiley face glaring at her in obnoxious neon yellow. She recalled

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fond memories of that smiley face as a child. It represented new and exciting experiences for her. She even named it “Poppy.” Not the most original name, but she was probably five or six when she came up with it. She didn’t know if the agency had a name for it and she never shared hers. She even wrote a jingle for Poppy when she was a child.

*Poppy, the popping gum.
Chew, chew, chew till you’re all done.
When the flavor starts to gush,
That’s the Happy Funtime Wonder Rush!*

Thinking of that jingle now just put a pit in her stomach. Today, she greeted Poppy with trepidation. Today, it represented the possibility of walking away from Amaya and her life as Wendy.

She picked at a small red tab sticking out from the side of the pack of gum, gripped it in between her unpolished fingernails, and slowly tore it off, leaving the top of the package resting like a hat on the sticks of gum underneath. Wendy took another deep breath, hoping for pink.

Wonder Rush Happy Funtime Bubblegum came in a pack of ten flat sticks of gum. Nine of those ten were wrapped in plain white paper. The tenth was color-coded, featuring a picture of Poppy in the center of the wrapper. If the paper was pink, it represented a new mission. However, a blue wrapper would inform her she was about to get a new identity. It was a signal for her to pack the few belongings she had and get ready to go somewhere else and be someone else. She hoped that paper was pink. She wasn’t done in West Elmdale. She wasn’t done with Amaya.

Wendy pulled the top off the pack of gum and breathed a sigh of relief.

Pink.

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She inhaled deeply and then slid the pink stick out of the package and unwrapped it. It appeared to be a standard stick of gum. It was a deep rose color, somewhere between pink and red, rectangular and flat. It had no visible markings and wouldn't stand out in any way to the outside observer, but Wendy knew differently.

Opening her mouth, Wendy dragged the stick of gum slowly across her tongue and reached for her phone. The saliva uncovered a pattern across the gum, a collection of dots and dashes, squares and circles. It looked like hieroglyphics you might find inside a cave on a foreign planet, strange and alien.

Wendy tapped an icon on her phone in the shape of Poppy, which brought up the camera app with four right angle anchors, one on each corner of the screen. Holding the phone above the stick of gum, Wendy aligned it inside the four corner anchors. Immediately, a map popped up with a blinking yellow dot indicating a destination. A second blue dot appeared (Wendy's current location), and finally a red line connected the two. There was a date and time printed underneath. Tomorrow. 8:00 am.

Wendy slid the gum into her mouth and chewed away the evidence.

Strawberry. Her favorite.

* * *

Wendy hopped off the public bus with her backpack on her back and started walking. She was playing hooky, but she had to look like she was going to school when she left the house. A text alert vibrated her phone.

Amaya: *Dude, where are you?*

Wendy ignored the text. Then a few seconds later:

Amaya: *Pop quiz in pre-calc. Who am I going to cheat off of?*

Wendy smiled and shook her head.

Wendy: *Copy from Alex. He's smart.*

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Amaya: He also reeks!

She included an emoji that looked like it smelled something rotten.

Amaya: Seriously, where are you?

Wendy: Sick.

She added an emoji with a thermometer sticking out of its mouth.

Amaya replied with an angry emoji. No “get better” or “I’m sorry you’re sick,” just an angry emoji. That made Wendy happy. She didn’t need anyone checking up on her or offering to make her chicken soup. She never had a mother, and she didn’t need one now.

Wendy turned a corner down a seedy-looking alley between two abandoned buildings. It was not the place you would want to be if you were an innocent high school girl. Luckily, Wendy was far from innocent.

She passed two men discreetly carrying out an illegal transaction of some sort, trying to be surreptitious. She caught their eye, and they quickly stuffed whatever it was they were dealing into their pockets. One man wore a black skullcap and a dirty tee shirt with the sleeves cut off. The other had a baseball cap on backwards and untied work boots.

“Hey, little lady,” Skullcap shouted. “Ain’t no place for no one like you ‘round here.”

Wendy put her head down and kept walking. She didn’t want any trouble.

“Why don’t you come here and give me a little sugar, baby?” Baseball Cap joined in.

Wendy kept walking, but they stepped in front of her, blocking her path.

“How’s about you be a little more friendly?” Skullcap asked. “We’re just lookin’ to welcome you to our ‘hood.”

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“I’m on my way to an appointment,” Wendy explained. “I really must be going.”

“An appointment? Oh... ‘scuse me,” Baseball Cap interjected. “We’ll be nice and quick. Don’t you worry that pretty little head of yours.” He stroked Wendy’s hair as Skullcap pulled a knife from his pocket.

Wendy laughed and shook her head.

“Something funny?” Skullcap asked.

“You guys have no idea what you walked into,” she responded. “This is going to be fun.”

Wendy kicked Baseball Cap in the crotch with a solid thud. As he bent over, clutching his jewels, she linked both of her hands together and sprung her arms up into his nose, bursting it instantly. Blood gushed from the center of his face. To put a cherry on top, she punched him directly in the windpipe, and he dropped to the ground like a marionette with its strings clipped.

Skullcap just stood there in shock with the knife in his hand. It had all happened in a matter of seconds, and he didn’t have time to react. Wendy spun around and swept her leg at his feet. Skullcap fell hard, tossing the knife in the air as he lost its grip. Wendy caught the knife mid-air and slammed it into Skullcap’s chest. She ripped off a section of his already torn tee shirt, wiped her fingerprints from the handle, and pelted it down onto Skullcap’s stomach.

“Anything else you have to say?” she asked Baseball Cap, who was on the ground, grasping at his throat. He tried to speak but couldn’t. He just pulled himself to his feet and hobbled away, gurgling as he tried to form words.

* * *

The large steel door looked old and worn through multiple layers of chipped paint, the outermost being a putrid green. In the lower corner was a Poppy sticker, its jovial countenance juxtaposed

against the hideous filth of the decrepit building. She was in the right place.

Inside was dark and glum. An echo of dripping water pulsed through the room from some unseen, distant corner. Each of Wendy's steps reverberated loudly against the filthy linoleum floor. Suddenly, a flash of blinding light filled the room, accompanied by the electric hum of what sounded like a thousand bumble bees. Wendy shielded her eyes with her forearm, as if staring into the sun.

"Wendy Lockheart," a shapeless voice gestured to a chair in the middle of the room. "Have a seat."

"God, you always have to be so overdramatic," Wendy said. "How about a couch and a couple of normal lamps with those LED bulbs? Let's be a little environmentally conscious here."

"I'll be sure to install a suggestion box," the voice replied. Even before he stepped into the light, Wendy knew who it was. The strain on the vowels as he spoke failed to mask the Bulgarian accent.

"How have you been, Genko?" Wendy asked.

"We will skip the small talk. Yes, child?"

Wendy nodded. She knew by calling her "child," Genko was attempting to belittle her and assert his dominance. She was well-versed in the agency's mind games after all these years.

Genko handed her a tablet with a photo of a man in his mid-sixties with gray hair and baggy eyes. "The target is Peter McMahan."

Wendy flipped through a few pictures of him from different angles. She swiped through quickly until she reached a financial document. She glanced at it momentarily before swiping to the next one.

"I'm not an accountant, Genko. What am I looking at?"

"Peter McMahan is the President and CEO of McMahan Investments in the city," Genko explained. "He runs a Ponzi

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scheme where he swindles his clientele out of most of their money. Some are Wall Street pricks who deserve to be taken down a rung or two, but some are normal people just trying to save for retirement—teachers, nurses, middle management. A librarian gave him her entire life savings and *poof*. Gone. All of it. She hung herself and he bought a new shore house.”

“Sounds like a case the feds can handle,” Wendy said.

“They tried. Nothing seems to stick to this guy. He has offshore accounts funneling to other offshore accounts. Fall guys who get a slap on the wrist. McMahon always seems to walk away clean.”

“Okay, so what’s the play?”

Genko handed Wendy a wooden case about the size of a pencil box. She opened it up to find a syringe on one side and a dropper bottle filled with a blue liquid on the other.

“His lavish lifestyle finally caught up with him and he had a heart attack.”

“I’m crushed,” Wendy said sarcastically.

“Unfortunately, he pulled through. He’s recuperating in the hospital now and being released this afternoon. He’ll be back in his bed at home tonight.”

“You want me to poison him?”

“No. The liquid is nothing more than a sedative. The same active ingredient as Ambien, which he already takes nightly. A little more in his system won’t look suspicious. Give him a dropper full of that while he sleeps, wait thirty minutes, and he won’t wake up for anything.”

“What’s the needle for?”

“He’ll have a few sutures on his chest from where they made the incision for his surgery. Stick the needle right in there, straight into the heart, and just inject the air from the syringe.”

“Air is going to kill him?” Wendy asked.

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“His heart is weak. His chest was just opened. A little air in the heart will cause a gas embolism and lead to another heart attack. This time, fatal. In his condition, no one would be surprised or even suspect foul play. Easy-peasy.”

“Any kids or a spouse I need to be aware of?”

“The kids are grown—out of the house. The bastard snores like a chainsaw, so the wife, Abigail, sleeps in a spare room. She shouldn’t give you any trouble. Any other questions, child?”

“Just one,” Wendy said. “On your way out of here, you may bump into a douchebag with a black skullcap and ripped tee shirt. Oh, and he also has a knife sticking out of his chest... Can you clean that up for me?”

