

THE KENNEDY SUICIDES

A Short Story Prequel to *The Founding Treason* by

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Chloe Harper could barely breathe. The caller ID was unmistakable. She snatched up the phone and pressed it hard to her ear, as though it might slip from her grasp.

“Please tell me you’ve got good news,” she said as she answered the call.

The voice on the other end was jovial, triumphant. “I’ve got good news. Your request came through. Fulfilled just like you asked. They have no idea.”

Chloe muted the phone and squealed in delight. It had been a confusing and painful journey to get here, but the end was in sight. She didn’t know where that end would take her, but she knew, when it was finally over, she would once again be able to sleep at night, safe from the ghost of her father that haunted her dreams.

She unmuted the phone. “I’m coming over right now.”

“See you soon.”

Riley Monroe lived in Southwood, one of the newer, nicer neighborhoods on the south side of Tallahassee, Florida. Chloe lived in the historic Midtown district, in what was once the northern outskirts of the city. Leaving now, in the height of rush hour traffic, it would take upwards of half an hour to get to Riley’s house.

It felt like a lifetime.

She tried to distract herself from the molasses traffic by thinking back over the past year, and what this breakthrough would mean.

Three years ago, her grandfather—her dad’s dad—had passed away after a long battle with colon cancer. While on his deathbed, he had supposedly confessed to a secret that had haunted him for more than fifty years.

He knew who really killed President Kennedy.

It was a ridiculous notion, one parroted by thousands of loonies over the fifty-plus years since JFK had been assassinated. All of them were certain that their theory was correct. But none ever were.

For some reason, Chloe's dad had accepted his father's death-bed confession as gospel, rather than the lunatic ravings of a dying old man.

Within hours, Chloe's grandfather was dead. But his crazy theory had taken root in his son. And, like his father before him, Jack Harper was an FBI special agent, with the tools to dig into that theory if the urge so struck him.

It did strike, hard and fast.

Over the next two years, Jack dove deeper and deeper into the conspiracy rabbit hole. His father had not given him much to go on, but it was apparently enough to get himself into some serious trouble.

It started at work. At first, he did all of his research at home, on his own time. Then he started availing himself of the Bureau archives to assist in his hunt for the truth. Then his caseload started slipping as his waking hours became increasingly consumed by his obsession with the Kennedy assassination.

People began to talk.

Chloe stifled a pang of guilt as she tried to focus on driving. She was making up for her failures now. Maybe not entirely, but as best as she could.

She still remembered the day her mother left. The Saturday before Veterans Day, the year before last. Chloe had come home for the long weekend, immediately sensing the tension between her parents. Her father, like always over the previous year, seemed distracted, his mind a half-century removed from the present. Her mother, in retrospect, seemed resigned. As though she was just going through the motions one last time.

Friday night dinner was pleasant enough, all things considered, with both of them seemingly happy to have her home. Perhaps she was a distraction to the void in their marriage. Perhaps

she was a temporary bridge over the chasm that JFK had chiseled between them.

Either way, it wasn't enough.

The next day, she and her father were watching a college football rivalry match-up on TV. FSU-Clemson. Her mother was in the master bedroom, reading. And then she wasn't.

Chloe heard the front door open, then close. She didn't think anything of it at first, but after a few minutes, she asked her dad where she had gone.

"Who?" he asked, eyes still fixed on the game.

"Mom. Your wife."

He blinked, then turned from the television. "I don't know."

At the next commercial break, she stepped into the kitchen and called her mom's cell phone. Then she heard ringing.

From upstairs.

Curious, disbelieving, she climbed up the stairs, her father still transfixed on football. She called her mom's number again, following the ringing tone in a one-sided game of Marco Polo. It was coming from the master bedroom.

Some part of her expected what she found inside. The phone was lying in the center of the bed, its memory wiped and restored to default factory settings. Next to it was a handwritten note, atop which rested her wedding rings.

*I can't do this anymore. Good luck chasing
ghosts. May you find happiness in their embrace.*

*Sincerely,
Alison*

Chloe read the note again, picking it up with trembling hands. The half-empty closet and two missing suitcases confirmed the stark message. Was this how bad things had gotten? It had surely been coming for some time, but it was a shock nonetheless. She couldn't imagine how badly it would break her father.

Thank God she had been here to help stifle the blow.

And then, she thought, perhaps her mom had used the opportunity of her presence here with him to take this final step. Her guilt at leaving him assuaged somewhat by the realization that he wasn't alone after all.

Palming the rings with one hand and grabbing the note with the other, she descended back toward the living room where Florida State had just scored a touchdown.

"Dad?" she started, her voice sounding very small to her ears.

He looked at her. She sat down next to him and handed him the note and rings.

He read the note, glanced at the rings, then read the note once more. His jaw tightened as he sucked at his lip absent-mindedly, rocking back and forth ever so slightly. His expression was of a man who had been waiting for the other shoe to drop for so long, all the anticipation had drained the moment itself of any gravity. He folded the note into quarters and dropped it and the rings into his shirt pocket, all the while keeping his eyes on the screen.

"Dad?" she said, putting a hand on his shoulder. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"Not now, sweetheart," he said, never looking away from the game. "Football's on."

She was taken aback, wondering if he had somehow blocked the finality in his wife's words. But then she saw the single lonely tear trickling down his cheek.

She tried to help her father come to grips with his wife's departure for the rest of the weekend, but he had another preferred coping mechanism.

His stupid research.

Retreating into his home office after the Michigan game was over, he spent the final two days of her visit delving into the decades-old death of a complete stranger, leaving the recent death of his marriage completely unplumbed.

Her mother was unresponsive to emails Chloe sent, and leaving her phone behind had left her all but unreachable. Surely her dad had methods of tracking people through his work at the Bureau, but while he seemed fine using company resources to pursue long-buried ghosts from a completely different era, he had no interest of using those tools to chase after his wife and try to salvage their marriage.

Emphatically resisting her offer to call in to work and stay a little longer to help him sort through what had happened and what could happen next, Chloe returned to Tallahassee, bitter at both of her parents. At her mother for leaving both him and her out of the blue. And at her dad for not caring enough to do anything about it.

Against her better judgement, she returned to Tampa for Thanksgiving. Her mom had since answered her emails, describing her soon-to-be ex-husband as “deluded” and “obsessed” with his pet project. They had even spoken on the phone once, with Alison inviting her daughter to her new apartment in San Jose for the holiday. Chloe politely declined. Though her father’s job had dragged them all across the country growing up, San Jose had never been home. She had finished her senior year of high school in Tampa, and it had been her holiday home base all throughout college at Florida State. It may have been shattered since that fateful visit a few weeks ago, but as far as coming home for the holidays, Tampa was the only place she had left.

Within moments of her arrival, she realized she had made a big mistake.

Now that he had the house to himself, the entire home had been dedicated to JFK assassination theories. Even the hallways had been plastered with computer printouts, hand-drawn trajectory models, relationship maps of mob members and CIA assets, timelines, declassified documents, and a slew of other attempts to inject logic and reason into maniacal obsession. The whole house was a temple to madness. And the head priest looked the part.

Dressed in dingy shirtsleeves and rumpled dress pants, Jack Harper looked like he hadn’t seen sunlight—or a shower—in more

than a week. His normally smooth face was marred by a patchy semblance of a beard, as though he had started to shave but gotten distracted midway through.

“Chloe!” he had greeted her at the door before abruptly shuffling away, muttering nonstop. “Come, come, come. Look what I’ve discovered. They’ll never get away with it. Not this time.”

She hadn’t really paid attention to what he was saying. She was in shock. He was clearly passionate about his latest “discovery,” how it was going to blow the doors off JFK assassination scholarship, but all she could think about was how far off the deep end her father had plunged.

And it was clear that this fanatical obsession wasn’t about to loose its talons from him any time soon. *So much more work to do*, she still remembered him repeating. *This is just the beginning*. If only she knew then what she knew now.

“Dad?” she had asked once the shock began to wear off and his insane ramblings had reached a lull. “We need to get you some help. This is not healthy.” She waved a hand in front of her face, fighting off a cloud of body odor. “Or hygienic. When’s the last time you ate?”

Jack screwed up his face, thinking. “What day is it?”

“Oh Lord.” Chloe headed for the kitchen, fighting off revulsion at the stench that emanated from the blackened food clotted to a heaping pile of dishes in the sink. She opened the refrigerator, empty except for a pair of rotten apples caked in the desiccated corpses of fruit flies and a half-gallon jug of milk that bulged to the bursting point from being fermented into cottage cheese.

“Dad!” She stumbled to the window over the sink and pried it open to air out the putrid room. Grabbing a trash bag from under the sink, she threw the dishes and rotten food in, cinched the bag tight, and tossed it out the window. They’d buy some more dishes at IKEA later. But that stink would linger even once it had been washed down the sink. It was time for a clean slate. In more ways than one.

“Dad!” she yelled again. She found him standing in his office, stroking his misshapen beard and staring at an array of colored

strings connecting photographs of JFK, Lee Harvey Oswald, Lyndon B. Johnson, Fidel Castro, Jack Ruby, Marilyn Monroe, and a host of other historical figures she didn't recognize at first glance.

My God, she thought. *My dad is Mel Gibson in Conspiracy Theory.*

"Come on, Dad. JFK's been dead for more than half a century. I think this mystery can wait long enough for you to take a shower and eat a proper meal."

He shook his head slightly. "They're still out there. They got me fired from the Bureau because I wouldn't stop digging. But I'm almost there. And then everything can go back to normal."

She grabbed his arm and tugged. "Let's start with getting you back to *smelling* normal. If warring armies in the trenches can call ceasefires for Christmas, you can take a break from Crazytown long enough to enjoy the holidays with your favorite daughter."

"You're my only daughter," he muttered to himself. But he allowed her to lead him to the bathroom which, while it had clearly not been cleaned in a month, was blissfully free from conspiracy post-its.

A shower, shave, and a change of clothes did wonders for him. So too did being forced to remove himself from his delusional wallpaper plastered across the rest of the house. On the surface, it seemed, her father had returned.

An hour later, halfway through their shopping trip to IKEA to stock back up on dishes and other essentials too filthy to keep, Jack gorged on Swedish meatballs and lingonberry sauce, mashed potatoes, sweet tea, and three slices of pie. "Must've been hungry," he mumbled through a mouthful of potatoes and gravy.

Chloe just smiled, allowing a glimmer of hope to take root.

It didn't last long.

She drove him to Publix, stocking up on groceries for her three-day stay and a week beyond. She loaded up on cleaning supplies to deep clean the house, including three boxes of heavy-duty trash bags and six spray bottles of Febreze. Finally, she stopped by a Christmas tree lot, buying a Frazier fir that would not only help with the Christmas spirit but also help replace the house's current less-than-festive smell.

Giving him direction helped. He had been aimless for so long, no responsibilities, no timetable, that being told what to do seemed to refocus him. She took charge, opening windows and doors to let in some fresh air and daylight. They started by cleaning up the disaster of a kitchen before moving on to the bathrooms and living room. She had him set up the Christmas tree while she ran some laundry, and then she made a mistake.

“What are you doing?” her father asked, his face a mask of distrust. The box of Christmas decorations he had retrieved from the garage threatened to fall from his grasp, as though he was about to discard it entirely to leap into action in a different direction. Toward her.

Chloe held a trash bag full of crumpled conspiracy ramblings, unceremoniously ripped from the wall like the maddening drivel it was.

“Cleaning up,” she said, an unexpected quiver affecting her voice. She had envisioned this differently. She would offer him a bag, ask him to help resetting his home and life, and work together to put this ugly chapter behind them both.

The look in his eyes stopped her cold. A tsunami of fury, threatening to break through the thin veneer of shock that held it at bay.

Then the dam burst. He threw himself at her, grasping at the bag like a desert refugee at the last canteen of water. She tumbled to the ground, physically unharmed but hurt nonetheless. As he grumbled about how important his work was, flattening out papers salvaged from the trash and pinning them to the wall, she came to an unfortunate realization.

This would not be an easy road to redemption.

After a tense Thanksgiving weekend, Chloe promised her father she'd return for Christmas. She drove back to Tallahassee, grateful to escape the suffocating delusions her father had constructed to replace everything that had fallen to pieces in his life. His new job

was solving a half-century-old conspiracy theory. His new family was comprised of long-dead historical figures and the tinfoil voices in his head.

It grieved her. The two of them used to be so close. But there was only so much she could do if he didn't want—and wouldn't accept—help. He wasn't drinking or abusing substances, and he wasn't a danger to himself or others, so neither rehab nor having him temporarily committed would work. He had enough of a nest egg to get by, and all his bills were on autopay, so he wasn't going to lose the house or get his power shut off any time soon. His hygiene was medieval, and his housekeeping skills made a frat house look like *Martha Stewart Living* by comparison, but maybe another few weeks of living in his own squalor would wake him up. If nothing else, perhaps he'd be more receptive to her attempt at intervention when she returned on Christmas.

She called her mom and apprised her of the dire situation. Chloe had hoped to enlist her for a holiday intervention in a few weeks, but Alison wanted nothing to do with the man, especially when he was falling even further down the rabbit hole. Instead of spurring her to action in support of the man she had loved and raised a family with for more than two decades, the news of Jack Harper's slovenly descent into madness confirmed that she made the right decision.

Chloe had never felt so alone.

She tried to lose herself in her job, pushing the jarring images of her father to the periphery. Every couple of days, she would call him or send him an email. The emails he wouldn't answer. When she called, if he answered, his words were guarded and vague, certain that the all-powerful invisible "they" had tapped his phone line, that it wouldn't be safe for him to divulge what he had found. But he was almost there, he always promised. And when he finished, it would change everything. He'd tell her all about it when she came for Christmas.

So much for another three weeks of squalid isolation shaking him out of his delusions.

On the four-hour drive to Tampa, Chloe was fraught with anticipation, fear, and the tiniest sliver of hope. She considered

herself an optimist, but this situation thus far had given her no upside. At every turn was more bad news, another sign the family she once knew was slipping irretrievably into the abyss.

Her father's failure to answer the phone today was also bothersome. He knew she was coming today. They had planned it weeks ago, and discussed it the last time they'd talked. Maybe he figured the planning they'd already done precluded the need for further communication, and he'd turned off his phone so "they" couldn't spy on him. Maybe he was now neck deep in conspiracy ramblings and had completely forgotten about their weekend altogether. Or maybe, just maybe, he had snapped out of his fantasies and was furiously working to restore order to a chaotic home. She thought the latter option was the least likely, but it was the season of miracles after all. She couldn't give up hope yet.

Whatever the reason, his silence was so far removed from the father she had always known. He would always call to check on her if he knew she was traveling. Jack Harper lived for his little girl. Now he only cared for the incomprehensible puzzle wall he had cobbled together and incessantly smashed his head against.

She rang the doorbell when she arrived, roller suitcase by her side. After five minutes of knocking, ringing, and calling his phone, she let herself in with her key. The place was a wreck, somehow even worse than last time. Stained clothes were piled against one side of the dining room, like he had forgotten where the laundry room was and how to use the washer. She hoped he hadn't run out of clothes, opting to dive into his conspiracy research in the nude. That would take what was already shaping up to be the most awkward Christmas ever to the next level.

The stench hit her like a physical force. She coughed violently and pulled the neck of her shirt over her nose and mouth. It smelled like he had clogged up a toilet and just left it for weeks on end. No, somehow it was even worse than that.

"Dad?" she called.

No response. Had he finally left the house? Decided the stench was too much and moved his operation to a hotel somewhere? His car was out front, but perhaps he had Ubered—assuming the

driver would let someone who smelled and looked like her dad did would let him into their car.

Or maybe he was just in the zone, like he used to be when investigating real cases with the FBI. He would be deep in thought, ferreting out the details that other agents had missed, oblivious to the world around him. Her mom had once joked that if the house caught on fire, someone would have to carry him out because he'd be the last to realize it. As annoying it would be to have him completely ignore calls for dinner throughout her childhood, it was that dogged tenacity that had solved seemingly impossible cases and won him several awards from the Bureau and the greater law enforcement community.

She opened the door to the study and immediately reeled back. The epicenter of the fetid stench. And then she saw its source.

Her father, gray in pallor, dangled from the exposed rafter that transected the vaulted ceiling. A frayed rope, the color of an old broom, held the silent marionette aloft.

She turned from the loathsome scene and retched. When her stomach was empty and could heave no more, she stumbled from the room. The next hour was a blur. Somehow, she had managed to dial 911 and report the death. She was sitting at the kitchen table, staring at nothing in particular, when the doorbell rang. She let the coroner in, followed by the detectives. She forced herself to watch as they cut him down, verified that the putrid gray corpse of her father was, in fact, dead, and wheeled him out of the house. It was awful, but she owed him that much. After all, she had failed him when he needed her most.

Once the coroner was gone, the detectives invited her outside—for some fresh air—and asked some perfunctory questions about when she had arrived, if there was any sign of a struggle—not that she would have been able to tell from the extreme state of disarray her father kept the house in—and whether there had been any changes in her father's mood lately. Once she'd answered the last question, the detectives shared a look and closed their notebooks. Open and shut suicide. They'd probably seen dozens over their career. Write their report and move on.

It wasn't so easy for Chloe.

After the cops were gone, she went for a walk to clear her head. The neighborhood was festooned with blow-up lawn Santas and verdant wreaths hung on front doors and over garages. Even the mailboxes were wrapped in red and green ribbons and twinkled with tinsel. A painful reminder that her dad's house was the only one bereft of decorations. She had celebrated the last six Christmases there with her parents. Now she would never be able to look at the holiday the same way.

A dark gray Dodge Charger was parked in the driveway caught sight of the house again. The undercover cop's vehicle of choice in many cities. Had the police found something else?

As she approached, the driver exited. The guy was clean-cut, wearing a government-issue suit and an unreadable expression.

"Ms. Harper?" he asked, flashing his FBI credentials. "Agent Bill Taylor. I'm sorry about your father. I'd like to ask you some questions, if you've got a few minutes."

"I already talked to the locals."

"I understand that, ma'am. The Bureau just wants to make sure nothing gets overlooked. Jack may have left us on less-than-glowing terms, but he was still a dedicated public servant. As much as we can, we want to do right by him and his memory."

Chloe lost it. "Then you shouldn't have tossed him out like an embarrassing stepchild. His whole life was the Bureau. You took that away from him, he went crazy, and now he's dead."

Taylor took her attack in stride. "I know how hard this must be for you. My uncle—a career detective with the NYPD—killed himself about a year after retirement. It's not easy, making that shift. And the circumstances in which your dad was forced out, well, personally, I think it was pretty shameful."

That calmed her down. "So what do you want to know?"

Taylor looked up and down the block. "Would you rather do this inside?"

Chloe glanced at the door. "No. It's rank inside. His cleaning habits had taken a nosedive in recent months, and after he killed himself..."

“I understand. I’ll make this as brief as possible, then. Did your father ever tell you why he left the Bureau?”

“He was forced into early retirement for using Bureau resources for a personal pet project of his.”

Taylor nodded. “And did he tell you what this pet project was?”

Chloe sighed. “He was convinced he could figure out who really killed JFK.”

“Lots of those conspiracies around. Have been since the sixties. I think all the uncertainty of the era—from Cold War tensions with Russia and Cuba to the War in Vietnam to the emerging counter-culture movement—must’ve triggered some mass paranoia after the president was assassinated. But then, one look at InfoWars or 4Chan shows that new conspiracy theories still abound today.”

“Yeah,” Chloe said absentmindedly.

“Did he settle on a theory?” Taylor asked.

She shook her head. “No. He was kind of scattershot about it all. I guess mental illness can do that to you.”

The agent sized her up, nodded, and put away his notepad.

“Fair enough. Again, I’m sorry for your loss. Jack Harper was one heck of an investigator in his day. It’s a shame how things ended for him.”

“Thank you, Agent Taylor. Now if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got a funeral to arrange.”

She left him standing by his car and entered the house, struck again by the stench. As soon as the door was shut behind her, she darted through the house to the side door, slipped back outside, and crept to the edge of the house. Taylor unlocked his car, dialing someone on the phone as he climbed in.

“Hey. It’s Kellerman,” he said. “No, she doesn’t know anything. We’re safe. I’m heading back now.”

It’s Kellerman.

So much for “Bill Taylor.”

She had thought he looked familiar moments earlier, but at first she had discounted it as a lifetime of seeing Bureau agents in similar unremarkable suits. But she had seen him before. Three

weeks ago, as she was packing her bags to leave after Thanksgiving, he had been watching from a car down the street.

Taylor, Kellerman, whoever he was, had been watching her father. Which meant there was more to the agent's questions than it seemed.

She doesn't know anything.

We're safe.

The FBI didn't waste resources surveilling retired agents privately chasing conspiracy theories. Her father had been onto something. Which meant he wasn't crazy. Which meant....

She slipped back into the house as the agent drove away. From the sideboard in the dining room, she grabbed the scented candles she'd purchased on her last visit—unused, of course—and a box of matches. Steeling herself, she lit the candles and entered her father's office. Her dad had been suffering from monomania, not depression. She had to know why he was dead. It was the only way she could get through this. The thought that, somehow, she could make sense of the horror that had befallen her family.

That maybe her father hadn't killed himself after all.

It took hours to comb through the scattered paperwork of his office. Every inch of corkboard and drywall was layered with notes, maps, photographs, and printouts pinned in place. Stacks of official government reports, online conspiracy screeds, and alternative theory books penned over the past half-century were piled on every flat surface, each annotated by her father's hand. There was no smoking gun, no eureka moment. And if he had found something, it should've been sitting front and center on his desk or penned to the middle of his corkboard.

Unless he had been killed because someone wanted to keep whatever he had found a secret. And they had taken his discovery with them.

But her dad was always careful to protect the integrity of his investigations. One slip, one errant comment, and the suspect could be in the wind. He was even more careful when it came to this case. Paranoid was more like it, but still, he would have taken steps to safeguard anything important that he found.

She was looking in the wrong place.

Leaving one of the candles burning in the office, she took the other to her old bedroom. Her parents had partially converted it to a rec room. An exercise bike was positioned in front of an old flatscreen TV, and a modest weight rack sat dusty against one wall. The periphery of the room still held some of her old furniture, including her bed. Chloe was pleasantly surprised that the room was devoid of notes about the JFK assassination. A sacrosanct place that her father, even in his crazed state, wanted to preserve as it once was.

She went to her closet and pulled down an old pastel pink box from the top shelf. It was the first jewelry box her father ever bought her. She brought it down and sat on the floor, nearly defeated by sorrow and nostalgia. Her dad used to leave little notes in there for her when she was growing up. Sometimes just a post-it saying how much he loved her or how beautiful she was. Other times, if he was having to go away for a few days to interview someone or attend a conference, he would leave her a charm locket from Claire's or a pair of earrings from Forever 21. It was their secret place, a kid version of a dead drop in classic spycraft, and it made her feel like she was a super important investigator, cracking the impossible case, just like her dad.

Her breath caught in her throat as she opened the lid. A folded note, the paper fresh. She felt her heart racing as she unfolded the handwritten message.

My dearest Chloe,

I'm sorry I haven't been myself lately. Ever since your Grandpa died, I've been like a man possessed, and I've failed you as a father and your mother as a husband. None of what I am about to say will ever make up for that, and if you are reading this letter instead of talking to me face to face, it means I won't ever get the chance to fix the mess I've made either.

Chloe wiped at the tears streaming down her face and blinked to clear her vision. She had to be strong. Deep breath.

I've found something truly extraordinary. A light at the end of the tunnel, the final steps of my crazy journey down the rabbit hole, as it were. Grandpa's deathbed confession set me on the track, and I've spent the better part of the past two years chasing down leads and chasing off my family. Again, I wish I could turn back time and do everything differently. But these men behind Kennedy's assassination. Chloe, it's bigger than you could ever imagine.

I've left a brief summary of my findings between your mattress and boxspring. The federal government has a classified document which I believe is the key to unraveling this whole thing. I'm trying to ferret out a contact who can help me access the document, but since I'm basically persona non grata as far as the Bureau is concerned these days, it's been challenging. If they found me, it's likely because I reached out to the wrong person.

I'm sorry I couldn't tell you all this over the phone. Although if you're reading this instead of hearing it from me, it means my paranoia was well founded—and my efforts to stay out of their sights were woefully inadequate.

I'm not going to tell you what to do. I don't want to put you in danger, but I can't promise that my actions haven't already put you in their cross-hairs. At the same time, I know your heart for justice. You've always had a strong sense of right

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and wrong, and I know that if I held on to this final piece of information and let my killers go free, you'd never forgive me. I leave the choice to you. Either way, know that I love you more than anything, and I pray that you never have to see this letter. Stay safe, my dearest one.

*Love always,
Dad*

Chloe read the last paragraph again, hanging on every word like a tether keeping her father from slipping away for good. She should have been here. She shouldn't have written him off so easily. He was a smart man, a seasoned investigator. She should have known he wouldn't throw everything away for a wild goose chase.

She stood on wobbly legs and walked to the bed. Hefting the mattress, she saw an array of numbered manila folders, stuffed with documents, just like her father's note had promised. She leaned the mattress against the wall and began to thumb through the first folder. She recognized some of the documents—an excerpt from the Warren Commission report, an autopsy photo of JFK's head, a diagram of Dealey Plaza—but many of them were foreign to her. She couldn't make sense of how it all fit together. But she would.

Her father knew her well. There was no way she could let this rest. Someone had killed her father, staged the suicide, and gotten away with it. But not for long.

Whoever it was, whoever Kellerman was working for, they were going to pay.

Chloe arranged her father's funeral and spent the next few weeks tidying up his affairs. Her mom, grieved by his ignominious end, came back to Tampa to help settle things, though she would hear no talk of conspiracies or staged suicides.

When Chloe got back to Tallahassee a week after New Year's, she dug deeper into the notes her father had left her. Somehow, he had distilled the chaos of his note-covered walls into an intelligible and strangely compelling case for a shadowy conspiracy being responsible for the Kennedy assassination. He hadn't yet found the smoking gun, but he was close. And he wasn't the only one.

JFK's own brothers were somehow tied into the conspiracy.

The document her father sought was still classified, more than half a century after the assassination. His attempt to gain a copy had gotten him killed. And even though she wasn't the one who had been ousted from the Bureau for pulling the threads of this apparently real conspiracy, she feared that too much pressure might earn her the same fate.

She reached out to a contact her father had mentioned in his notes, a JFK conspiracy guru who apparently witnessed the assassination as a child. He didn't have anything concrete to offer, but he did give her a word of advice.

Be patient. The floodgates are about to open. It'll be a lot easier to hide in a crowd.

The dam finally burst in October 2017, when the President John F. Kennedy Assassination Records Collection Act of 1992 finally expired, allowing for the mass declassification of tens of thousands of records pertaining to the assassination. Some documents were held back, citing continued national security concerns, but the vast amount of documents now available and the countless researchers eager to get their hands on the long-buried trove of primary sources provided the perfect cover.

Still, she needed to make sure. Kellerman had interviewed her, and while she was fairly certain she had assuaged his fears, she didn't want to give him or his employers a reason to look at her again.

Enter Riley Monroe.

Her dormmate freshman year at Florida State, Riley and Chloe had stayed friends throughout college and in the years since. They even both worked for the state, Riley putting her accounting degree to good use at the Department of Revenue, Chloe working

as an analyst at the Florida Department of Law Enforcement. But while they were still friends, they didn't hang out or even communicate online nearly enough for Kellerman's people to draw a strong connection between the two.

They went to coffee the day before the JFK Records Act expired. Chloe explained her plan, and Riley, while skeptical, agreed.

The next day, Riley submitted a Freedom of Information Act request for the very document her father had sought. And now, several months later, it had arrived.

She was so close.

Two minutes later, she turned off of Capital Circle Southwest and into Southwood. Two minutes after that, she pulled into Riley's driveway. She slammed the car into park and raced to the door, knocking excitedly.

No response.

Riley knew she was coming over. Was she in the bathroom? Chloe texted her, waited a moment, then called her for good measure. It went straight to voicemail.

Her stomach suddenly felt heavy. This felt familiar in all the wrong ways. She glanced behind her, up and down the street. A man walking a golden retriever. A pair of women jogging together. A young couple pushing a stroller. Nothing suspicious. She was overreacting.

"Riley?" she called, knocking again. Her friend did like to rock out when she was alone, a fact Chloe had learned the second week of classes when her professor had cancelled last minute. Chloe had walked in on Riley, belting Bon Jovi's "It's My Life" and sliding around the dorm room like Tom Cruise in *Risky Business*. Chloe chuckled at the memory, letting the moment of levity brighten her mood. This was what she had been waiting for. Bad juju from a year ago in Tampa couldn't take that away.

She put her ear to the door to listen for some power rock anthem. No music, but the door swung inward. She had to catch herself from falling, and stumbled into the foyer.

The bad feeling was back.

She shut the door behind her, pricking her ears for any sign of life in the silent house. Nothing. Everything looked in order. But

there was a faint scent of something foul, seemingly from Riley's bedroom.

Balancing speed and stealth, she picked up a brass candlestick from an entryway table and slinked through the house. The smell got stronger the further she went. The pit in her stomach grew larger.

Reaching the bedroom door, she cocked the candlestick, ready to strike, and eased open the door.

No.

Not again.

Riley was sprawled across the comforter, an empty bottle of pills next to her. Foam had collected at the corners of her mouth, and the room stank of postmortem bowel loosening.

Chloe's knees threatened to give way. This couldn't be happening.

Knowing it was futile, she rushed to her friend's side, checking for a pulse. Nothing. Her skin was already cooling to the touch.

"I'm so sorry," Chloe said, brushing her fingers across Riley's forehead and closing her lifeless eyes.

She had done everything right. The FOIA request was legal, the document was declassified, and she put what should have been sufficient distance between herself and the request. And still, someone else she cared about had been murdered in a staged suicide.

Chloe wanted to run. To put this whole mess behind her and never look back. But she knew she'd never be able to live with herself. She had to know. She had to put this right.

Trying not to look at her friend, she looked around the room, then across the house, for the envelope from the National Archives. Nothing. If the killer had taken it with him, then Riley had truly died for nothing.

Chloe felt the room tilt. She couldn't give in to the darkness. No, there had to be a way out.

Then she realized there was one place she hadn't checked. Returning to the bedroom, she clenched her jaw and approached her friend's body.

“I’m so sorry,” she repeated as she patted Riley down, checking her pockets for the envelope. It wasn’t there. All she found was her iPhone, tucked in her pocket. The battery was dead. That was why it had gone straight to voicemail when she’d called from the front door.

But the battery was working when Riley had called her less than an hour ago. After the FOIA results had arrived.

Chloe scrambled off the bed and located a charger next to the nightstand. She plugged in the phone and pushed the power button. The phone began booting up, a thirty-second process that seemed to take hours. The screen then prompted her for a four-digit passcode.

Praying that Riley still used the same passcode from college, she punched in 3662. Jon Bon Jovi’s birthday.

The phone unlocked.

Her heart panged that she knew this intimate, goofy detail about her friend that she had gotten killed. Never again would Riley be able to rock out to “Livin’ on a Prayer” or “You Give Love A Bad Name” or go full fangirl at a concert. She was gone. And it was all Chloe’s fault.

She shook off the guilt-riddled pity party, tried to hone her feelings into indignation and action. Scanning the icons on the phone’s desktop, she tapped the Photos app, praying that her hunch was right. That Riley, the meticulous digital archiver of every important document her professors or the dean ever gave her, hadn’t grown out of her quirky habit.

The All Photos album opened by default, filled with selfies, nature photos, and screengrabs of potential Tinder matches. But the three most recent photos were of her three-page FOIA response.

Thank you, Riley.

She tapped on each photo, scrolling through the text. It was innocuous without the proper context. That was why her father was confident he would succeed where others had failed. It was an end run, a forgotten backdoor into the heart of the conspiracy that apparently was still being protected today. If he hadn’t raised

so many flags on his crash out of the Bureau, they might never have gotten him.

Her face suddenly went numb as a new realization hit her. Her dad and Riley, both killed in staged suicides. She thought the connection was the document. But it was classified when her dad tried to procure it. If the document was the problem, Kellerman's people would have found a way to keep it from being declassified. Which meant that the only connection between her dad's murder and Riley's was her.

She had to get out of here.

Chloe retraced her steps, wiping away potential fingerprints from every surface she had touched since entering. She used her own phone to photograph the trio of images, then deleted them from Riley's. Rubbing the glass against the comforter to remove any latent prints, she powered the phone down and slipped it back into Riley's pocket.

She wanted to call the cops, to tell them everything. Or at the very least report Riley's death. But she couldn't. They'd never believe her story about someone murdering people for digging into the JFK assassination. At worst, they'd arrest her for involvement in Riley's death—and maybe even her dad's. At best, they'd take her report and laugh it off. Either way, Kellerman's people had already proven to have significant intelligence resources at their disposal. Any police report would immediately paint an even bigger target on her back.

She couldn't go home now, either. This was it. The point of no return. She had been targeted, and the only way out of this now was to finish what her father had started.

Moments later, she was back in her car, heading for the nearest branch of her credit union to wipe out a significant chunk of her bank account. At a stop light, she emailed her supervisor about a family emergency that would have her out of town for at least a few days, maybe longer. She would buy new clothes, new toiletries, whatever she needed once she was out of town. In cash. But for now, she kept her head down, casting suspicious glances

at every passing driver and keeping a wary eye out for dark gray Chargers.

Her father was right. The next step indeed dealt with JFK's brothers. In particular, two cryptic items given to Senator Ted Kennedy by fellow senator and leading presidential contender—before his own assassination—Bobby Kennedy. The items were donated along with many other personal effects to the National Archives after the death of the so-called “Liberal Lion of the Senate” in 2009.

They had no idea what they were sitting on. Exactly what her dad had been counting on.

Suddenly, she felt a little more hopeful about getting out of this mess alive. She remembered a news article she had read a few weeks back, deriding the hiring of a controversial scholar at the National Archives. He had made waves a few years before when he brought down a domestic government killing squad, exposing a horrific national secret in the process. Many people weren't too keen on that, with some even dubbing him a traitor, the Edward Snowden of historical secrets.

Chloe had done her own research on the scholar. She had been given a few hard lessons in becoming persona non grata for doing the right thing, and she felt that if anyone would understand her plight, it would be him.

Fifteen minutes later, now flush with cash from her savings account, she set a course for Washington DC. She didn't know how she'd make it out of this alive. She had no idea who she was fighting or what victory could even look like. But she knew that, with Jon Rickner by her side, she might actually stand a fighting chance.

For Riley, and for her dad, she'd complete her father's quest. She'd bring down Kellerman and everyone else behind their deaths. She'd restore the memory of her father and her friend. She'd set right everything she'd done wrong.

Or she'd die trying.