

PROLOGUE

"I DON'T WANT TO DIE!"

"Shut up, Chuck. We're not going to die."

If he doesn't quit his whining, I'll kill him myself, Melanie thought as she ran her fingers along the concrete blocks feeling for an opening. "Katie, can you find any cracks on your side of the room?"

"No, Mel. However Wyatt built this place, he made sure whoever or whatever he put in here wouldn't be able to get out."

Katie tried to clear the dust away from an area on the floor next to Eric and Chuck, who had already resigned to their fate several minutes earlier. "I give up," he sighed, slumping down onto the dirty concrete.

"Melanie, you should listen to Katie and take a break," Chuck groaned. "I'm sure Wyatt will be back soon to let us out. He wouldn't seriously leave us in here to suffocate to death."

"I don't know, Chuck," Eric continued to run his fingers over the concrete wall. "That warning shot he fired at the ceiling looked pretty threatening to me. Then he forced us into this windowless room with apparently no means of opening the door from this side."

"If we could even find the door," Katie said.

"Eric, you're overreacting as usual. When that bullet flew over your head, your freckles nearly jumped from your skin," Chuck teased. "Look, I know we've both been part of Wyatt's shady dealings, but I don't think he's capable of cold-blooded murder. I know he bragged about how he tricked us into helping him execute his master plan and that he didn't want to leave any witnesses, blah, blah, blah. He sounded more like an actor reciting lines from a very bad horror movie than making an actual threat. You know how Wyatt liked to play practical jokes in high school. I just can't imagine he'd really want us all dead."

Chuck didn't feel as confident as he hoped he sounded.

"Yeah, well when Wyatt pulled that trigger it sure as hell didn't appear that he was joking. He scared the shit out of me," Eric argued. "I'm beginning to think Wyatt is capable of anything. If Katie's hair wasn't white already, I'm sure it would have turned as soon as she heard that thing go off."

Ignoring Eric's insult, Katie tried to reassure the others. "Look, guys. Wyatt may be a lot of things..."

"Like a liar and a blackmailer..." Eric cursed.

"And a manipulative prick..." Chuck added.

"With an ego the size of Montana..." Melanie tried to lighten the mood.

"...and a few small countries," Katie added with a laugh. "But one thing I know for certain is that Wyatt Gaynes is not a murderer."

"I'm not so certain, Katie. He's isn't the same hot jock high school football star wannabe who dated a different cheerleader every month," Eric began.

"Two or three at the same time as I recall," Chuck added through clenched teeth. "And he always managed to get away with it with that fake boyish charm."

"Still jealous, Chuck?" Melanie said, grinning slightly. "While that might have been true once, thirty years can change a man, and not always for the better. One thing I do know about Wyatt, is that every plan he concocted always contained one major flaw, and that includes the construction of this room. All we have to do is find it. Get your lazy ass off the floor and help us look!"

"We've been looking for more than three hours, Mel. I'm telling you, it's hopeless."

"Chuck, the only thing that's hopeless in this room is you. Now I know why your software company nearly went bankrupt. You have no backbone for a challenge."

Insulted for the last time, Chuck brought his paunch-bellied frame to full standing. The bald spot on his head brushed against the three dim light bulbs dangling from the concrete ceiling causing a spotlight to alternately shine on the desperate expressions of his three former classmates' faces.

"Dammit," Chuck cursed, "You sound as if this is all my fault. Eric and I were doing just fine before you girls showed up."

"You're right, Chuck," Eric immediately joined sides with the only other male in the room, "If you and Melanie hadn't interfered with our plans back in the computer room, we wouldn't all be locked in this damn dungeon, running out of air."

"We have plenty of hot air with the two of you blaming us for your predicament," Katie shot back. "At least we're trying to find a way out of here."

"Girl," she said to her friend, "you look exhausted. Ignore these jerks and take a break."

"I think you're right, Katie. We need to conserve our energy. If you two useless men will just be quiet for a few minutes," Melanie gave Chuck and Eric a piercing stare, "I'm taking five."

Melanie leaned against the cold concrete and wiped the sweat from her forehead with her shirt sleeve. The dampness in the cramped space had turned her wavy auburn hair into a wild frizzy rat's nest. Every muscle in her almost fifty-year-old body was on fire from her thwarted attempts to break out of their prison.

Exhausted, she closed her eyes, took a few deep breaths and mentally began replaying the events of the past few days which had led her fellow incarcerates into the dark hole from which there seemed to be no escape.

Although their individual lives had taken them on very diverse paths, they all shared the unfortunate common denominators of possessing a diploma from Abbeyville High School and being caught in the insidious web of Wyatt Gaynes; a web whose epicenter began in the heartland of Minnesota and stretched throughout the European continent trapping everything in its path.

When the undercover agents first approached Melanie and Kathleen the night of their thirtieth reunion party, the women could never have imagined that the innocent spy game they had played against Eric and Chuck nearly four decades ago would become a real life confrontation with one of the most insidious criminal minds of their generation.

Chapter One

Six Months Ago

This program has performed an illegal operation and will be shut down. If the problem persists, contact the program vendor.

"Dammit, not again."

Melanie cursed at the annoying error message on the computer monitor which cut off her instant message in mid-sentence. She clicked the re-set button then went to the kitchen to get a cup of coffee while she waited for the system to re-boot.

One of these days, I'll have to connect to DSL, she thought as the annoying buzzing of the dial-up connection permeated the room. She had been in the middle of a friendly argument with her best friend about their upcoming high school reunion, and Katie's insistence that she attend was starting to wear down her resolve to keep her attendance a secret. When the computer error occurred, she was almost relieved. Melanie didn't want to let Katie know that she had already made up her mind and she wanted her friend to be surprised.

When Katie first began talking about their reunion nearly a year ago, Melanie had no interest in attending. She'd left small town Abbeyville Minnesota, and everything connected to that lifestyle, as soon as she graduated high school and there was no one from her past she was the slightest bit interested in seeing. Then, a few months back she'd received a surprise phone call from another former classmate, Stuart Janns, who had gone on to become a successful movie and theater critic.

Stuart had told her that he was in Los Angeles for the Golden Globes and thought she might like to attend with him. They spent most of the evening talking about, or rather trashing, their old high school class and he eventually convinced her to go to the reunion, if only for the sheer entertainment of making fun of everyone else. Melanie decided she could spend a few days back in her hometown, but it was going to be a quick trip.

When the computer came back on line, Katie had signed off, but not before leaving one final insistent email:

I just got an error message and was booted off. I need the final count by tomorrow. C'mon Mel, I know you'll have a great time. I'm going to put your name on the acceptance list and hope you'll reconsider.

Melanie shut down the computer, momentarily staring at her reflection in the now dark screen. Thirty years since high school and she was pleased that she had managed to keep the sands of time from etching lines into her face without any help from Hollywood's plastic magicians.

It was well past lunchtime and Melanie was still in her underwear. Since Friday was a short taping day, she didn't need to be in the studio until mid-afternoon. Melanie Tyler might have the most recognizable voice on television, but no one knew what she looked like, and that's the way she liked it.

Melanie moved to Los Angeles a week after getting her Abbeyville diploma. Her plan was to hit the ground running as soon as she graduated from U.C.L.A. found an apartment, a job and an agent. The first two items on her list had been fairly easy to obtain, the third proved to be much more difficult. It wasn't long before Melanie discovered she was just one of more than a thousand hopeful wannabe actors in a city that squashed dreams like mudslides crashing down on Pacific Coast Highway.

Her college graduating class was nearly ten times the size of the population of her entire high school. She soon discovered that the diplomas she'd received from both institutions were as worthless as the paper they were printed on.

While she had been able to find small parts as an extra, enough that she finally qualified for a SAG card, the competition for roles was intense. She went on a few cold calls and received several offers from overzealous producers, but she was never willing to take the short cut to stardom via their office sofa. It seemed as if her career train had become derailed before it had even left the station. After six months of rejection, Melanie was ready to pack her bags and return to Minnesota, but fate had other plans.

A month before her apartment lease was up she was invited to a party by a former classmate who had found work at a local radio station. He told her they were looking for someone to record the station's public service announcements and thought Melanie had the perfect voice for the job.

The next day, she went for an audition and recorded the announcement for the A.S.P.C.A, using a wide range of voices and accents. The response had been so successful that she was hired as their spokesperson. Melanie soon discovered that even though she didn't have the anorexic actor-figure in front of the camera, her voice was magic behind a microphone. It wasn't long after that first broadcast her agent was contacted by the producers of a new animated family series, the Franklins. After only one audition she landed the part for the female lead and instead of moving back to her house three miles from a Minnesota lake, she moved into a condo across the street from the Pacific Ocean.

All of her co-workers at the animal shelter gave her a going away party, and a cocker spaniel puppy she'd fallen in love with at first sight. Along with the puppy, she also had taken the agency's executive director, who had fallen in love with her at first sight, or so he said when he asked her to marry him. He quit his job as soon as the ink was dry on the marriage license and used Melanie's income to try and produce his own animated series. As it turned out, he was much better dealing with stray animals than he was with human relationships, business or otherwise. Three years later his company, as well as their marriage, ended. He kept the dog. She kept the Santa Monica condo.

Melanie took her coffee into the living room. She found the faded blue and gold yearbook jammed in between some dusty photo albums on her the bookcase. She ran her fingers over the gold embossed seal which read Honor, Integrity, Knowledge, surrounded by the phrase "Let each one find the truth he is seeking" on the cover just below the title Abbeyville, Minnesota Class of 1972.

She sat down on the couch and began flipping through the pages which had yellowed a bit over the years. The black and white faces, hair styles and clothes from that era were quite dated, but the memories were so clear in her mind that she felt as if the pictures were taken yesterday. She paused to read some of the messages that were scribbled over the faces of people she hadn't bothered to stay in touch with over the years. She stopped on the page where the Ts were listed and found her photo. Staring at barely familiar face, Melanie grimaced at her naive foolishness. How could she have ever thought trying to look like everyone else would work for her? She thought. Judging by her photograph, she had bought into the straight hair parted-in-the-middle look of that era. Fortunately, her older more secure self had outgrown the need to conform and now she no longer spent the time, or the money straightening her naturally curly hair. But unlike Katie, who was perfectly happy with her natural color, Melanie's vanity wouldn't allow even one gray one to be seen. It was her only vice, and unlike many in the acting profession, her breasts, nose and fingernails were totally natural. Her light skin tone intensified her deep blue-green eyes which had remained sharp and thankfully glasses free. Her figure had held up extremely well over the years, even if she did have to work at it a bit harder than when she was in high school.

Turning a few more pages she found the picture of her best friend, Kathleen Conner. Melanie and Katie had been classmates and best friends since Kindergarten. The small town of Abbeyville, population 5001, had only one school building which was built on a ten-acre lot. Melanie's older brother had been killed in Vietnam and Katie didn't have any siblings. Consequently, their friendship had developed into a very close sisterly relationship. Melanie read the inscription her girlfriend had written and laughed out loud: I hope you become a great Hollywood actress, and work for U.N.C.L.E on the side.

It reminded her how, in the sixth grade they had played spies from the old television show. They even had a secret room which Melanie had converted from the tornado shelter her parents built in their basement. Every Friday night after the show was over she and Katie would take their notes into the secret room and discuss every detail of each episode. The girls would even create their own adventures, imagining their classmates were T.H.R.U.S.H. agents and their teachers were undercover spies.

Those were some fun times, Melanie thought. Stuart might be right. At the very least the thirtieth reunion would be interesting. Stuart promised it would be fun to see how the popular clique had let themselves go once they landed a good husband and several children and how badly the sports jocks had fared over the years. Perhaps after three decades the old wounds of the past would have had enough time to heal, even those which had left permanent scars.

Melanie continued to glance through the rest of the photos, until she found the one of the person who had been on her mind the moment she decided to attend the reunion; Wyatt Gaynes. He wore his shaggy blond hair in typical seventy's style. The photo captured the twinkle in his soft brown puppy-dog eyes, and highlighted a smile which was a bit too much on the impish side. He had written that his ambition was to "become someone who can help others and bring peace of mind to those who need it." Somehow Melanie didn't think Wyatt had accomplished any of those goals.

His description mentioned he had been heavily involved with sports, reminding Melanie that he had also been heavily involved with a long list of football groupies, none of whom had been her. Until the night of their senior prom, when in typical cliché fashion, she had lost her virginity to him in a sleazy motel room on Route 9. Her only other memory of that night was his promise that he would call her, and how she'd waited two weeks for a phone call that never came.

The last time Melanie had seen Wyatt was at Katie and James' tenth year anniversary party, and although Katie had mentioned that Wyatt had moved back to town and opened some kind of stationery store, there was very little more she wanted to know about him. Melanie closed the book and returned it to the shelf along with the memories of a past life which seemed to belong to someone else. She no longer needed, wanted nor desired anyone or anything from those long ago far away days.

Especially Wyatt Gaynes.

This program has performed an illegal operation and will be shut down. If the problem persists, contact the program vendor.

"Darn! I thought DSL would have taken care of this by now," Katie yelled at the computer. While she waited for the re-boot, she opened her year book and began putting colored stickers over the photographs; green for those who had sent in their reservation checks, blue on those who said they were definitely coming, but had not as yet paid, and red on those she hadn't heard from at all. Looking at the small number of green compared to the other two colors, she was beginning to think that her girlfriend was right. Less than half of the class had responded to the committee's invitation and if they didn't get a better response in the next six months, there might not be much of a reunion for them to attend.

High school had never been kind to Katie. She never felt pretty or popular and wasn't very comfortable around people. As a result, she had kept a low profile through most of her high school years. She didn't want to stand out, or become anymore of an oddity than she felt.

She married James O'Brien, the first boy she fell in love with, three months after graduation. Now, the mother of two grown sons, and the wife of a Minnesota State Senator, she finally found the confidence she'd lacked in her youth. Over the years a very determined, strong-willed woman began to replace the shy, insecure teenager whose image was permanently captured in between the yearbook jacket.

Katie looked at the photograph of a girl she only barely recognized. Back then she'd worn her light brown hair short and parted it in the middle like everyone else. Her blue eyes were hidden behind thick black rimmed glasses, but not like everyone else, she had received a perfect score on the SAT. She smiled when she read her ambition was to work for the C.I.A. An ambition which had been inspired by the old sixties television show and the game she and Melanie had played. Katie recalled how they had creating secret dossiers on two of their male classmates, Charles Haussman and Eric Kramer. Two boys neither one of the girls could stand and the feeling had been mutual. She also remembered how exciting it had been going undercover and creating a entirely new personality, if only for a little while. But children grow up, television shows get canceled, and real life begins, she thought and she really did enjoy her present reality a great deal more than the fantasy life of her childhood.

Katie looked in the mirror and admired the reflection. Like her mother, she started to turn gray at an early age. She decided to let it go natural so her hair was now a soft silver, and it had helped turn her into a striking woman. Marriage, a family and a husband who was a prominent political figure had given her self-confidence a huge boost which was apparent at every fund raiser and social event she hosted.

She was both flattered and surprised when Stuart Janns suggested she chair their thirtieth reunion committee. Except for sharing Honor Society status with him in high school, she didn't think he'd even noticed her. Remembering the terrible experience and lack of cooperation she'd received from the other committee members when she chaired their twentieth, Katie had refused at first, but after discussing the proposal with her husband, he reminded her how much she had enjoyed the experience, even with the headaches. Besides, it was an election year and any good publicity would help his campaign, so she'd sent Stuart an email agreeing to chair the reunion one last time.

Now, looking at the small pile of acceptance cards, she was beginning to think she had made a mistake. In typical politician fashion, James told her not to worry. The reunion was still six months away, and like an election, most people wait to send in their absentee ballots, or simply show up at the polls at the last minute.

Katie wrote the totals in her record book. Well, since it was James' insistence that I chair this thing, she thought, he's going to have to pay for a high speed modem and a printer.

This program has performed an illegal operation and will be shut down. If the problem persists, contact the program vendor.

"DAMMIT Joe, I thought you told me you fixed that bug. You had better be sure that no one else noticed."

Wyatt Gaynes' face was bright red as he nearly threw his fist into the computer screen. Shaken by the sudden violent outburst, the younger man began typing as if his life depended on it. If the rumors about his employer were true, he had little doubt that it did.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Gaynes, but this is a common error. I don't think anyone would give it a second thought."

"Not even if every computer from here to Los Angeles has the exact same error at the exact same time?"

Wyatt began pacing the floor. His hand moved the cigarette from his mouth to his side in rhythm with each step.

"I'm not an expert, Mr. Gaynes. I'm only a second year college computer tech student."

Joe started to argue, but the cold glare coming from Wyatt's eyes froze his vocal cords.

Noticing his obvious anxiety, and realizing Joe needed to calm down until he fixed the computer glitch, Wyatt softened his voice.

"I know you are, Joe, but you're also the brightest computer hacker I know and I'm on a deadline. Something as simple as a synchronized error message could put this entire operation in serious jeopardy. And we wouldn't want that, now, would we?"

In spite of his attempt at a gentler tone, the way Wyatt said the word jeopardy made the hairs on the back of Joe's neck stand straight up. He quickly typed a few more keystrokes and the screen returned to normal.

"That should do it, Mr. Gaynes. If that's all for today, I really have to get back to the dorm. If you want my advice, you need to get someone in here who can better understand what you're trying to do."

"I already have him, Joe. You were only his temporary replacement until he came back from a little assignment I sent him on. Take this and forget you were ever here. Understand?"

Wyatt put five one-hundred dollar bills onto the console. Joe grabbed the money without bothering to count it, stuffed the bills into his pants pocket and climbed up the stairs to the exit, three at a time.

As soon as he heard the outside door close, Wyatt pushed a hidden button under the console and a wooden panel slid open behind him, revealing a computer nerd's idea of heaven. A world map with over five hundred tiny lights lit in red, green and yellow covered the entire back wall. The red LEDs were placed on the cities where Wyatt's plan was already underway, the green ones signified the locations of his contacts, and the yellow were future sites yet to be established.

Wyatt pulled five green lights from the board and replaced them with red ones, then he replaced all but three of the yellow with green. Things were going well, he thought, but not fast enough.

Wyatt had a plan and although he was right on schedule, he needed help to complete the final preparations. He was an intelligent man, and an intelligent man knew his limitations. Joe was right; Wyatt did need experts on his team and friends he could rely on. Especially friends with weaknesses he could exploit to his own advantage. He was almost amazed at how easy it had been to manipulate those very friends who were now fully entrenched in his organization. It had only taken a little charm and some cold hard cash to convince them, and he had plenty of both.

Wyatt's plans were set to take place during the weekend of their thirtieth high school reunion. All the players would be in place and he could hardly wait another six months. Wyatt hit a switch and pages of his old yearbook appeared on the wall. The faces of familiar friends filled the screen and from somewhere deep within Wyatt's youth, flashes of warm memories emerged. Katie Conner, he recalled how she hated him calling her K.C., yet she had written that as her nickname next to her graduation photo. Seeing those initials brought an uncharacteristic smile to his face. He looked at the photos of Charles Haussman and Eric Kramer, two boys who had no idea back then how important they would become to him in the present.

Wyatt paused for a moment when an all-too familiar photo of someone he hadn't seen for nearly twenty years filled the screen. He stared at the photo of Melanie Tyler a lot longer than he had the others, finally forcing himself to turn the page to the athletic teams section. He stared at his sports photos with disdain. Alongside his name were the captions; second string quarterback, second place wrestler, second string basketball squad. And the nickname title Mr. Silver that was printed under his photo and labeled him for all eternity.

Well, he'd show them, he thought. By the time their reunion was over, no one in Abbeyville, or anywhere else in the world was ever going to refer to him as Mr. Silver again.

After nearly thirty years, he was back in the game and this time no one, not even his big brother, was going to stop him from taking home the gold.

This program has performed an illegal operation and will be shut down. If the problem persists, contact the program vendor.

In an underground conference room located a few miles from Wyatt's operation, two men read what appeared to be a common computer error message, but as soon as it came on the screen, lights and buzzers blared a warning that put several systems on high alert.

"Don, did you see that?" Stuart Janns said to his partner.

"Yes. That bug originated right here in Abbeyville."

"Seems like Wyatt's computer system isn't as secure as he thinks it is."

"For now you're right, Stu, but he still has six months before your reunion to get it operational," Don said. "We should have our operatives in place well before he has a chance to debug his system, but just in case something goes wrong, how is plan B coming?"

"See for yourself," Stuart turned off the lights and two photos appeared on the screen. "It took a little arm-twisting, but they'll both be positioned exactly where we'll need them when the time comes."

"They look perfect, especially the one on the right," Don said, pointed to the yearbook pictures of a bobbed haired, horned-rimmed-glasses wearing Katie Connor O'Brien. On the right, wearing bell bottoms, tie-dyed t-shirt and holding up a two-fingered peace sign was one rebellious protestor named Melanie Tyler.