

## PROLOGUE

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“Looks like it is about time to check on our high-profile prisoner again.”

The deputy exhaled a long sigh and asked, “Where does the sheriff think he’s gonna go?”

“That’s not our concern. We’re just supposed to check on him every hour on the hour. It’s 4:59 a.m., and it is your turn to check.”

“Fine, I’ll go!”

The protocol was not normal, but Victor Youngblood was no normal prisoner. Twelve hours ago, Victor was the guest of honor in Rock Springs, Wyoming (population 23,350), visiting as the Republican vice-presidential candidate in an election that was less than a month away. Having never hosted such a high-profile guest, Rock Springs and the greater Sweetwater County area were aflutter with excitement.

They didn’t know that Victor’s vice-presidential candidacy credentials paled in comparison to those for his primary job as the founder and head of Mouse Trap, the world’s most

powerful and dangerous clandestine criminal enterprise. His role in Mouse Trap had landed him, not in front of a cheering crowd, but inside the holding cell at the Sweetwater County Sheriff's Department under arrest for the murder of Wyoming Senator Grant Wembley, who was also the previous Republican vice-presidential candidate and whose death paved the way for Victor's ascension.

"Just like every other hour, he was sitting in a chair in the middle of the cell, wide awake, staring into space."

"I'm not gonna lie; the guy creeps me out. He's been here for 12 hours, and he hasn't said a word. Every once in a while, he writes in that notebook."

"What's going to happen to him?"

"Great question. I've got no answer."

Circumstances outside the sheriff's office were equally uncertain and chaotic. The two dozen media members who came to Rock Springs to cover Youngblood's campaign appearance had stumbled on one of the biggest stories of the century—a vice-presidential candidate arrested for the murder of the previous vice-presidential candidate. Those first few media members had remained in place waiting for any nugget of news. They had been joined by over 100 more from around the country who, on short notice, came to Rock Springs, Wyoming, by planes, helicopters, trains, buses, and automobiles.

Joining the media outside the sheriff's office were the four aides who had accompanied Youngblood on the trip and who had been on the phone trying to determine what to do next.

The two Secret Service agents assigned to guard Youngblood had similar late-night calls with their superiors in Washington, who eventually told the agents to position themselves outside the building and wait for further instructions.

The fact that the murder involved a sitting U.S. senator raised jurisdictional questions, causing the FBI to send agents from field offices in Cheyenne and Casper to the now buzzing Sweetwater County Sheriff's Department. Although the sheriff had briefly talked with the Feds, he told them to wait outside like every other interested stakeholder, a command that was not well received but nonetheless heeded.

The circus outside was capped off by four deputies posted at the front and back entrances to ensure peace was maintained, a task that was about to become even more challenging.

"What's going on outside?" one deputy asked the other.

"I can't tell, but there seems to be a commotion."

Two black SUVs had navigated their way down Highway 30 and onto West Flaming Gorge Way. Escorted by two Wyoming Highway Patrol cars, they weaved through the media and other onlookers before finally stopping in front of the sheriff's department in an area deputies had kept empty as a buffer zone between the crowd and the department.

"Go wake the sheriff."

"Why do I have to wake him?"

"OK, let's both go wake him."

Sweetwater County Sheriff Buck Earnest had been at his office for close to 24 hours. After 18 hours, he had decided

to take a short nap on his office couch, after giving his deputies strict instructions to wake him if anything unusual happened.

“State troopers? That’s just great! We have the FBI, Secret Service, and city police; we might as well bring some more guys to the party. Let’s go see what they want.”

Sheriff Earnest put on his boots and hat and ambled to the front door just in time to see the procession approaching the building. The assembly included two state troopers followed closely by six men dressed in high-priced suits and \$250 ties.

“Sheriff Earnest?”

“That’s me.”

“Sheriff, these gentlemen would like to speak with Mr. Youngblood. They are his lawyers.”

“OK, but why is the Wyoming Highway Patrol escorting Youngblood’s lawyers?”

Before the troopers could respond, a gentleman who was obviously the lead lawyer pushed past the troopers to engage the sheriff.

“That’s none of your concern. I’d like to see my client. Please take me to him immediately,” the lawyer demanded.

“Now just a second, I’m not—”

“Are you obstructing my client’s right to representation, Sheriff Earnest?”

“Well, no, I’m just—”

“I’d like to see my client now,” the lawyer insisted.

The sheriff threw his hands up in defeat. “OK, right this way.”

Sheriff Earnest started down the hall; as he looked back over his shoulder, he was surprised to see that only the lead attorney was following.

“When will bail be set?” the lawyer asked while following closely behind.

“I’m not sure. That’s not my department.”

“I want to see everything you have on this case,” the lawyer demanded.

Ignoring the lawyer, the sheriff rounded the last corner and gestured for him to enter the door to his left where he finally saw Victor Youngblood.

“Don’t worry, Victor; you’ll be out of here in less than an hour,” the lawyer promised.

After opening the cell door and allowing the lawyer to enter, the sheriff relocked the cell.

“Just push that button when you’re done, and a deputy will be back to let you out,” the sheriff instructed as he left the two men alone.

“Victor, I’m terribly sorry about all of this. We got here as soon as we could, but this is quite a remote location. Now, tell me everything that has happened.”

Finally breaking his stare, Victor locked eyes with his lawyer, shook his head, and said, “No.”

Taken aback by the response, the lawyer muttered, “*No?* I’m not sure what you mean. I want to get you out of here immediately, but I need some information. I—”

“No,” Victor interrupted.

“Victor, you don’t deserve to be in here. They don’t understand who you are.”

“I am going to stay here,” Victor insisted.

“But I don’t understand.”

“I know you don’t, but I do.”

“Victor, I—”

“Go back to Washington,” Victor insisted as he handed a sealed envelope to the lawyer. “Give this to Zeke and no one else. Do you understand?”

Having trusted Victor Youngblood for over 20 years, the lawyer finally conceded, “I understand.”

Victor nodded. The lawyer took that as his cue to leave. He pushed the button, and a deputy immediately returned to let him out of the cell. Victor never looked up as the lawyer glanced back at his client before leaving.

The lawyer walked back through the office, passing the sheriff along the way. He motioned for the other five men to return to the SUVs. The state troopers escorted them out of town and onto Interstate 80, where they disappeared into the still dark morning.

“What was that all about?” a deputy asked.

“I’m not sure,” Sheriff Earnest replied.

The sheriff walked to the cell door, peered in at the prominent prisoner, and mumbled to himself, “What are you up to?”

Turning to the sheriff, Youngblood, for the first time since his incarceration, dropped his stoic demeanor and from the pit of his soul conjured a wry, knowing smile.

The game was on.