

Chapter 7

Jim sat on the bench facing the Ohio River again. A slight chill was in the air, but it was calm and clear, and everything was softly illuminated by the full moon peaking above the trees behind him and by the lights of the Silver Memorial Bridge just downriver. He said aloud what he was thinking: "What's she going to do, Smudge... what are we going to do?"

In his mind, Jim was far away, deep in thought about the past and the future when he was startled by a hand that was placed gently on his shoulder. He abruptly sat up and turned his head, half expecting the hand to belong to a park ranger or a public-safety officer, who was going to ask Jim to leave the park, or worse, to take him to the police station. But the hand belonged to Emily, and she was alone.

"Hey Jim... I'm glad you're still here." She waited for a reply, but no words came as Jim's mind slewed to the here and now. "Can I sit down?"

"Please," Jim said.

The two watched a large, brightly lit passenger skimmer floating around the turn from the Kanawha onto the Ohio.

"Have you ever ridden one of those, Emily?" Jim asked, making small talk.

"Yes, a couple times. They are pretty nice... but expensive, that's for sure. That one is the evening shuttle from Charleston to Pittsburg. It'll make the trip back in the morning."

The two didn't talk until the noise of the skimmer had faded, after it rose from the water into ground effect and flew away upriver. Emily spoke first. "Why don't you tell me again how you got Rachel's phone."

"It's been so long... what do you remember from the report?" Jim asked.

"I remember that you said you saw her in the morning, and that she was okay when you left. That's about it."

"That's what I told them. But that's not exactly what happened," Jim said, leaning forward and putting his elbows on his legs. He paused to give Emily a chance to pick up the conversation, and because he wasn't quite sure he wanted to give voice to what he'd never told anyone. But Emily sat silently next to him on the bench, looking out over the river.

"When I got to her apartment after driving through the night, she hadn't answered my messages. She didn't come to the door when I knocked. So I let myself in with the key she kept hidden above the porch light. And when I walked toward the bedroom I could hear the shower running in the bathroom. The water wasn't just flowing, like it was left on, it was splashing and interrupted... someone was in the shower. Not knowing what to do, after I found her unresponsive, I did what I did. I grabbed her phone from the dresser, turned it off and left with it."

"Why the hell didn't you call the police?" Emily interrupted.

Talking with Emily—actually speaking the tragic story out loud—crystalized it into a cohesive whole in Jim's mind.

"I sort of did. I pulled the fire alarm in the breezeway when I left, thinking I'd wait in my car to see who came out of her apartment. It was a lot to process, Emily. I was tired and, well, overwhelmed, I guess. I kind of froze. I didn't feel up to confronting whoever was in the shower right then and there. I waited in my car for a short time... but pulling the fire alarm was a mistake. A lot of people came out of their apartments, and when that happened I started thinking they would see my car with Michigan plates. It went through my mind that I might be accused of murdering her, and I didn't have any kind of alibi.

"It turned out that whoever was with Rachel didn't have a phone. The investigators only uncovered records of two phones in her apartment that day: hers and mine. It was because of my phone that they arrested me after all.

"And before you ask, I didn't tell the detectives about the other person because at first, I didn't remember. I got knocked around pretty good in the crash. But I started to remember things more clearly over the days that followed... and by then, I had decided... you want to know the truth?... well, I decided I wanted to take care of it myself. It was fortunate that detectives didn't find the phone in the wreckage of my car. I went back and got it, after I was released. I thought I would be able to open it and find out who was with Rachel. But... here I am, I was never able to get into it."

Again the two sat in silence for some time, until Emily stood up and said "Come with me; let's go to my condo. Looks like you could use some sleep, and maybe we can take a look at Rachel's phone."

Struck again by how much Emily reminded him of Rachel, Jim said simply "Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure. I live on Main St. a block down from the shop, if you want to park your car down that way."

"Okay, that sounds good. I don't really have room for you in my Jeep, so I'll have to meet you there. Are you okay walking back on your own? I could go with you..." Jim said as he got up from the bench. He and Emily walked away from the river with Smudge at their heels.

"I'm fine walking alone," Emily said, "I'll meet you at the corner of Fifth and Main."

After Jim found a place to park, he got Smudge snuggled onto his platform and grabbed the knapsack. Out on the sidewalk, he locked the Jeep, waved to Emily across the street, and together they walked up to her condo.

When they stepped into Emily's place she asked "Where's the dog?"

"I left him in the Jeep to keep an eye on it overnight," Jim replied. And after finding a seat on a comfortable chair in the main living area he asked "Did you decide what you wanted to do about the phone... and about me?"

Emily walked into the kitchen area and answered Jim's question from behind the counter. "I want to try to unlock it. I can make us something to drink and we can try tonight if you want. But if you would rather get some rest, I understand. We can look at it in the morning."

"No, let's do it now," Jim said, reaching into his jacket pocket for the scrap of paper again.

"Would you like coffee or tea? Or a drink?" Emily asked.

"I'll just have some water, if that's okay," Jim replied.

Emily brought two glasses of water back from the kitchen and sat down on the couch, placing the phone on the coffee table in front of her. She tapped the phone's face to illuminate the passcode screen. Looking away from the image of her and Rachel smiling back from the past, Emily said "Let's see what you've tried."

Jim handed Emily the scrap of paper. It was heavily worn with age but the passcodes he had tried were legible. "I've tried combinations of her birthday date, and other birthdays... and combinations of words and numbers I imagined might have been meaningful to her," Jim said.

They sat in silence as Emily looked over the list of numbers. "What's this in the middle?" she asked, pointing to a sentence Jim had written after the third number on the list.

“That’s the passcode hint. The phone offered it after I tried the third number. ‘You’re in the doghouse if you forget.’ That’s the hint. I thought it meant the passcode was a date, but now I’m not so sure.”

“Yeah it sure seems like it would be a date. I see you’ve got all our birthdays on your list. I assume you looked those up online? Did you try our parents’ anniversary date?” She asked, looking over the list.

“No, I didn’t look that one up. Didn’t think it seemed likely,” Jim said.

“Maybe... but Rachel was really close to mom. You know, Rachel’s middle name, Lynn, came from mom’s first name Lynnette. So maybe it is mom’s birthday, but in a different order. You’ve tried month-day-year dates. Maybe it’s mom’s birthdate in day-month-year format, or backwards.”

“That might be worth a try,” Jim said. “I’m out of ideas.”

“What’s this number here, the last one on your list? Three six four four six eight seven three.”

“That’s the word doghouse transposed to numbers on the keypad. You know, A B C is 1, D E F is 2, and so on,” Jim replied.

Emily looked at the keypad on the phone and confirmed the sequence. “Letters for numbers... that opens up a whole bunch more possibilities, doesn’t it,” she said.

“Right. That’s why I figured I would need help, after I tried a few times. What can you remember from when you and Rachel were kids, anything that had special words or numbers in it?”

Rachel didn’t answer right away. She got up and walked around the living area looking off into the corners of the room. Eventually she said “The address of the house we grew up in was twelve twenty-six. We had a

dog named Mars. Oh, and mom's maiden name was Johnston... spelled with a t... it has eight letters. That's about all I have right now."

"Johnston... right. See there, the sixth number? I tried it," Jim noted.

Emily confirmed that JOHNSTON transposed to the sixth passcode Jim had tried. Then she said "My mom spelled her first name L Y N N E T T E," spelling it out loud for Jim.

"What's that in numbers?" Jim asked.

Emily transposed the name to numbers and wrote the sequence on the pad and said "So we could try that, or mom's birthdate again, in a different order than you tried,"

"And we've got three tries," Jim reminded Emily. "Or two, depending on what you want to do with the phone. After the third try the phone will wipe itself. If that happens, I'm not sure, but I don't think the police will be able to recover anything from it, if you were thinking to give it to them."

Emily looked at the numbers on the list and took a drink of water. "Let's try mom's birthdate again in day-month-year order. What do you think?"

"I'll follow you're lead, Emily. Go ahead and try it," Jim replied.

Jim watched Emily key in the sequence. She paused when she got to the last digit—a 9—and looked over at Jim. He nodded an affirmation, she tapped the 9... the phone jiggled in her hand and the display returned to the passcode screen: 'You're in the doghouse if you forget.'

Emily put the phone back down on the coffee table and the two sat in silence.

"Okay, let's try mom's first name," Emily said after a few moments, picking up the phone again.

Jim sat back in the chair and exhaled heavily. "Sure. Why not? But after this, there's only one try left," he said, raising his arms slightly with his palms up then letting them fall back to the armrests adding "I don't think we're going to get it."

"Okay, look, Jim," Emily said, leaning back in the couch. "You asked what I wanted to do about you... I'm not sure I believe what you've told me, but at the same time, I don't have a reason not to. How about this: If we're not able to open the phone, I will take it to the police. I'll tell them I found it in a box of Rachel's things... not anything about you. If they find something that corroborates your story I'll just let everything be as it is. If not, I'll tell them you were here."

"Okay, fair enough," Jim affirmed.

Emily leaned forward, picked up the phone, and without hesitation carefully keyed in the sequence 59663883. The phone jiggled. The passcode was not correct.

"Can I take you up on that drink?" Jim asked.

Emily looked up from the phone and said "I was thinking the same thing. I have some whiskey, believe it or not. It's the real thing. I save it for special occasions, and I can't think of anything much more special than this. Do you drink whiskey? How do you take it?" Not waiting for his reply, Emily stood up and started walking to the kitchen again. "I'll just get the bottle and a couple glasses. Let me know if you want ice."

"Just the glass is fine," Jim said.

Emily came back with two glasses and a half-full bottle of Maker's Mark. She poured generous portions into each of the glasses and picked them up, handing one to Jim. "Cheers," she said, reaching to clinking her glass against his. After they both took a drink from their glasses Emily said "Tell me how you met Rachel."

"We met at Tu-Endie-Wei park," Jim started, thinking he probably owed Emily at least that much of the story. "I was finishing up the installation of the small wind turbine that used to be there. I didn't see it yesterday, I guess it got taken down or destroyed in the flood. It was a technology demonstrator; it didn't generate much electricity, but GE was installing them in public places around the country to highlight how important wind-generated electricity would become to the Nation's energy infrastructure.

"Anyway, Rachel had her students at the park that day. They were fifth-graders I think, and she was hoping that the out-of-classroom location would inspire them to learn about Point Pleasant's history. She wanted them to go through the mansion house museum and look at the civil war monument, but the kids were all over the place. It was pretty funny, to me at least. One kid I remember was running around pretending to be mothman. Rachel didn't think it was too funny, though... she looked exasperated.

"While she was doing her best to corral them, one kid came over my way and asked what I was doing. I told him about the turbine. And then another kid came by and started asking questions... probably just checking that they weren't bothering me, Rachel introduced herself and before long, most of the kids were there, asking all kinds of questions about electricity and the wind turbine. We turned it into some kind of teachable moment... although not about history and the past, but about science and energy and the future."

"That must have been one of the first years she was teaching," Emily said. "And fifth grade, you're right. She loved teaching those kids. Did you know that there is a memorial to Rachel in the park across the street from her old school?"

"No, I didn't know that," Jim said. "Maybe I'll go see it before I leave." He took another swig of whiskey and went on. "So, later in the day, when I was packing up, Rachel came back to the park to say thank you

for helping with the kids. She brought me some cookies... and we ended up sitting at the park and talking until pretty late. After that, we stayed in touch..." At this point, Jim's voice trailed off.

"There's something that's bugging me," Emily said. "Not about what you've just told me, but about how the investigation played out. When they realized that the DNA evidence didn't implicate you, it kind of seems to me that they just gave up. There was never a suspect after you. Did you ever think about that?"

"Heck yeah I did. I still do. To me it seems that they were disappointed when they couldn't charge me, and after that they more or less closed the investigation, threw up their hands and closed the case when they didn't find a DNA match in whatever databases existed then. That's one reason why I wanted you to look at the phone with me, instead of just taking it to the police."

"It's a little strange," Emily said. She finished her drink and stood up and added "I'm not sure what to make of it. But thank you for telling me how you met Rachel. I'd like to know more, but I'm tired and it looks like you are too. Will you be okay here on the couch?"

"Yes, the couch is fine. Thank you for letting me stay here. This is all a little hard to process." Picking up the phone he asked "What do you want to do about this?"

"I don't know yet. We'll talk about it in the morning," Emily replied.

Emily brought Jim a pillow and blanket, and walked off to her bedroom without saying more. Jim finished his drink and soon the alcohol and the fatigue of the past few days pulled him off to sleep.