

A close-up photograph of a brown dog's face, likely a Boxer, looking directly at the camera. The dog's fur is a rich reddish-brown color, and its muzzle is black. The background is a soft, out-of-focus green, suggesting grass.

**JENNI
WILTZ**

**REDACTED BY THE WITNESS
PROTECTION PROGRAM**

**I NEVER
ARKANSAS
IT COMING**

I
NEVER
ARKANSAS
IT COMING

Jenni Wiltz

Copyright © 2011 by Jenni Wiltz

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law. Permission requests may be made through the contact form provided on <http://jenniwiltz.com>.

Author's Note: This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are a product of the author's imagination. Locales and public names are sometimes used for atmospheric purposes. Any resemblance to actual people, living or dead, or to businesses, companies, events, institutions, or locales is completely coincidental.

Book Layout ©2013 BookDesignTemplates.com

Cover Design ©2013 S.A. Hunt

I Never Arkansas It Coming/Jenni Wiltz — 1st print ed.

ISBN-13: 978-1493557622 / ISBN-10: 1493557629

*For everyone who has ever left home.
And for Meat Loaf.
Definitely Meat Loaf.*

CHAPTER ONE

All Revved up with No Place to Go

Before we begin, let me clear the air with regard to the rumor that circulated through the Atomic Vaquero last Saturday: I did not, repeat *did not*, use a potato peeler to shave Bobby Beckman's head. This is a lie of vast and vile proportions. Everyone knows it's impossible to get all the way down to the skin with a potato peeler. That's why I used a cheese slicer. There. Now you know. Let's move on.



Life here in Little Falls, Arkansas, is pretty boring. There isn't much to do other than pluck chickens or say howdy to the camo-loving folks who come to Walmart, and that's exactly why I'm here. I was put in the Witness Protection Program two years ago after I testified against Jimmy Sicily, New York's second-most-wanted Mafia boss. The U.S. Marshals gave me a new name, a new bank account, a small business loan, and a warning never to mention *The Da Vinci Code* again. You'll understand why later.

In upstate New York, I'd been a librarian. I couldn't be a librarian in Little Falls because protected witnesses aren't supposed to recreate their old lives in their new digs; they'd be too easy to spot. Instead, I branched out a bit and rented myself a small storefront two blocks down from the Cliffs, the one ritzy area in town. I intended to run a bookstore, but after three months of business and a whopping \$46 in sales, I realized people in Little Falls don't know how to read.

So I liquidated half my inventory and moved in a desk and filing cabinet. I pointed a silver gooseneck lamp at the crappy folding chair next to the desk and decided to re-christen the place. Such was the grand opening of Books & Looks, Little Falls' first bookstore/detective agency. So far, I spend my time tracking down cheating spouses and finding missing cars. It's a living.

The rest of the money the Feds gave me went toward a down payment on a house in west Little Falls. It's made of brick, with a professionally landscaped yard and enormous front windows. The first things I bought were thick velvet curtains, a spray-on frosted tint to apply to the non-curtained windows, and a doormat that says "Leave."

I didn't have a housewarming party because the Feds wouldn't let me, plus there was no one to invite. My misfit parents had been disowned by their families when they eloped. I never knew any aunts, uncles, cousins, or grandparents. Strangely enough, my parents decided not to have any more kids after me. They didn't tell me much about where they had come from, but our name left no doubt as to our origin: there was spaghetti in our DNA. They died within one

year of each other, both from cancer, shortly after I graduated from college.

It was for the best. My lawyer had promised me that Jimmy Sicily would do two things if I contacted anyone associated with my old life: find and kill *them*, and then find and kill *me*. Point taken.

It wasn't as hard as I thought it might be to uproot my whole existence and become someone else. As a general rule, I don't like people and I want them to stay away from me. The rare times I'm desirous of human company usually pass like kidney stones: painfully but quickly. Suffice to say, no one had to sign my Memorandum of Understanding but me.

Just before I began my new life, my hair went from long and black to short and brown. The Feds paid for me to have LASIK so I could ditch my glasses. I stressed away twenty pounds during the trial and went from a pleasantly rounded size twelve to an angular size six. Cheekbones popped, hip bones protruded, and without even trying, I looked as though I'd been to the best plastic surgeon in Manhattan. Too bad there's absolutely no point in looking good when you're buried in a living grave.

The Feds assured me I'd be safe in Little Falls because (a) there wasn't a single New York-style pizzeria in town, so encroaching mobsters would probably starve to death before discovering my whereabouts, and (b) the mental acuity of the local population would render them useless in providing information about me to curious outsiders. The average IQ here is probably the same as the speed most Arkansans drive when on the freeway, which is to say, at least 10 miles per hour be-

low the posted speed limit. Toto, we are not in Kansas anymore.

Yes, there is a Toto in this tale, but instead of a cute and fuzzy terrier, he's a big farting boxer. His name is Dude, and I brought him home two weeks after I got the house. I meant for him to be my backup protection, just in case my alarm system went on the fritz. The Marshals had given me backup, too, in the form of a single phone number that would connect me with my handler. Still, I didn't feel good about relying on a desk jockey who cared more about his pension than my pulse. A dog with big teeth and a scary-ass growl suited me better.

Things didn't actually work out that way. Despite the assurance of the breeder that he'd be a good guard dog, Dude loves company and would let Charles Manson inside without a yip if he had any comestibles handy at all. By the time I figured out he was a crap guard dog, we were already attached to each other. There was nothing I could do. I'm not completely heartless.



It all started the day after I shaved Bobby Beckman's head. It was late afternoon and I was at work, watching a little old lady flip through a Johanna Lindsey novel. She was searching for a sex scene, skimming a few lines on each page then flipping anxiously to the next. I moved to the front of the store to get a clear view of the title printed on the spine. "Page 83," I said.

She jumped like she'd been poked with a cattle prod.

"Just trying to help," I added.

With a sweet Southern smile, she wrenched the book open hard enough to crack the spine. Then she put the creased book back on the shelf and walked out the door. I swore and went to retrieve the book, putting it on the half-off shelf.

When I turned around, I saw a woman about my age coming to the door. Her shoulder-length blonde hair was thin and greasy. Dark sunglasses perched on her head instead of on her face, holding back stringy bangs that were still growing out. She wore a blue velour tracksuit that hugged every bulge and loved every panty line.

Whoever she was, it didn't look like she'd come for a book. "Can I help you?" I asked, moving over to my desk.

The woman raised one drawn-on eyebrow. "Are you really a detective?"

"Yes." I motioned for her to sit down opposite me. "I'm Brett Sargent. This is my agency."

Her blue eyes were ringed with shadows the way my bathtub was ringed with soap scum. They darted from side to side, inspecting the aisles.

"Don't worry," I said. "I don't have any other customers right now. Or ever, really. Can I help you?"

"I hope so," she said, sitting in my chair and putting her fake Louis Vuitton purse on the floor. "It's my husband. He hasn't come home for two days."

"Where do you think he is?"

"I don't know. If I did, I'd go find him myself."

I looked at her nails. They were long and painted but they weren't fake. The index fingers and thumbs were much short-

er than the rest, as if they'd been broken recently. "What's your name, ma'am?"

"Elaine Tubbs. I need you to find my husband, Hank."

I leaned back in my Office Depot task chair and pretended to look thoughtful. Really, I was just evaluating her ability to pay me for a solved case. She'd come in with a purse; that was a good sign. "When was the last time you saw him?"

"Two days ago, in the morning."

"Did he say anything unusual to you that day?"

"He said he was going to the library, but he never came back."

I sat up straight. *The library?* It was a ballsy lie, especially for someone living in a state where literacy was a skill less prized than proper aim with a 12-gauge. "Where is your husband from originally, Mrs. Tubbs?"

"Back east. Does it matter?"

"Never mind. You've already answered my question. Does your husband regularly disappear for short periods of time? Camping trips with the boys, or road trips to Memphis?"

"No, of course not. We're real private. Hank doesn't have many friends."

"Where do *you* think your husband is?"

She flattened her lips like pancakes. "That's why I'm here. I don't know. It's your job to find him."

Something about the way she said it set me on edge. It was like she already knew what had happened, but was too afraid to say it. In most cases, avoidance like hers signaled a fear of public embarrassment. "Is he having an affair?" I asked.

"Something terrible has happened to him, I just know it!" Mrs. Tubbs grasped the seat of the folding chair with both hands. Her eyes, red-veined like the "before" picture in a Visine commercial, searched my face for hope. "Please help me find him."

"If you really think he's in trouble, why not go to the police? Two days is a long time to wait."

"I can't go to the cops. He's had run-ins with them before. I don't think they'd be in too much of a hurry to find him. I guess..." Her voice trailed off and she dropped my gaze. "I guess I hoped he'd just come back on his own."

"Mrs. Tubbs, the police are in a hurry to find anyone who's been missing for two days. Why do you need me?"

"Please," she whispered. "Just find him."

All my intuition told me something was wrong here. This woman knew more than she was telling me, and her obvious distress did not bode well for the safety or sanity of her missing husband. But next month's rent bill was staring me in the face and there was nothing else in the hopper. I sighed. "Mrs. Tubbs, I can try to find your husband, but we need to set a time limit on this. I'll look for 36 hours, and if I haven't found him by midnight tomorrow, you're calling the cops at 12:01 a.m. Agreed?"

She nodded, still squeezing the chair.

"I'll need anything you can supply that might help. A current photo, names and phone numbers of his friends, a list of places he liked to go, what he was wearing when he left, and anything else you can think of."

“I can do that,” she said, reaching for the notepad on my desk. I handed her a pen and she gripped it fiercely, scratching deeply into the paper. I watched her scribble with the brisk efficiency of a high-school teacher grading a stack of essays, surprised at what she had memorized. I barely know my own phone number, let alone the phone numbers of any long-lost relatives.

From her purse, she produced the requisite photo of Hank. He was about her age—early thirties, or so it appeared. In the photo, he held up a fish he’d caught, with a great big grin on his all-American face. He had close-cropped brown hair, dark eyes, and an average build. There was very little to distinguish him from the general populace, other than the fact that he disappeared en route to the library.

I thanked her for her obvious preparation, and she gave me a ghost of a smile. “I’ve been thinking about him for two days, wondering if he’s lying in a ditch somewhere. I just want to know that he’s okay.”

“I understand,” I said. “I’ll get started right away and call you as soon as I learn anything.” I thought about adding something like, “It’ll be all right,” or “I’ll find him,” but I have a thing about lying to clients.

As I watched her walk out to her car, a sense of responsibility settled uncomfortably on my shoulders. This was definitely the most important case I’d had so far. During my two years in Little Falls, I hadn’t done much more than call impound lots to locate towed cars and follow kids to find out where they went when they skipped school.

This was different. A human life could be at stake, and I had no idea what I was doing. I started wondering whether it was too late to change my career. Right about now, something like “donut taster” sounded pretty good. That was the level of responsibility I was comfortable with.



You’re probably curious about why I shaved Bobby Beckman’s head in the first place. Here’s the deal. He hired me to find his missing ATV, and I found it ten minutes later in the ditch behind his farm, next to a few empty cans of Bud. It had overturned and was partly hidden by some overgrown weeds and grass. I righted it, cleared away some of the weeds so the vehicle’s red color was clearly visible, and went back to Bobby’s house.

He met me at the back door and promptly fired me. He said he’d just remembered where the ATV was and no longer needed my services. This was, of course, a total crock of shit and I insisted he pay me \$50 for my time and trouble. Instead, he offered to buy me a drink. I value my time at a great deal more than five dollars an hour, so I told him to meet me at the Vaquero on Saturday night. You know the rest.



The main branch of the Central Arkansas Library System is a gray four-story building across the street from the downtown promenade. All around the top of the building, they’ve etched the names of famous authors into the stone: Austen, Fitzgerald, Dickens, Pythagoras. Only in Arkansas does an eight-character theorem count as quality reading material.

I parked under Austen and went straight to the circulation desk. "Excuse me," I said to the black woman seated there. She was old and large and bored. The color of her lipstick was like a radioactive Orange Julius, spilling beyond the boundaries of her lips. "I'm looking for someone who may have been here Tuesday morning. Can you tell me who was working then?"

"I was," she said, laying down her pen. "Who you need?"

"A man named Hank Tubbs. Let me show you his photo," I said, reaching into my purse.

When she saw Hank's snapshot, she gasped and held a fat-fingered hand to her ample chest. "Lord a-mighty, that's him! The pervert!"

CHAPTER TWO

I'd Lie for You (and that's the Truth)

The librarian fanned her face with her hand. I watched the mound of fat beneath her arm sway back and forth like a suspension bridge during an earthquake. “Whoo-eee,” she breathed. “I’d know that one anywhere.”

“A pervert?” I said, glancing down at Hank’s photo. “I thought he looked pretty normal.”

“Girl, I been watchin’ him for months. He come in here all the time, lookin’ at dirty pictures in magazines. Even after supper, when a good man should be at home.” The librarian tapped the empty ring finger of her left hand. “You know what I mean?”

“Yeah,” I said, even though I didn’t.

A guy in the checkout line behind me cleared his throat. The librarian looked over my shoulder and pointed to the self-checkout kiosk. “I’m conductin’ important li-bary business, sir. Please use the automated checkout stand.”

The man shuffled over to the kiosk, but I knew he'd be back. Most automated things in Arkansas don't work, or don't work well enough to complete the process for which they were intended. To wit: Kroger's self-checkout stands, which constantly assume I'm stealing the frozen pizza that doesn't fit in the plastic bag.

"Ma'am," I said, "did you see this man on Tuesday morning? It's important."

Her eyes shifted from side to side to make sure no one was within range. Then she leaned forward and whispered softly, "What's he done?"

"I'm not sure yet. Please just tell me if you've seen him."

"I seen him, all right," she said. "He was over in the magazines, lookin' at all the *National Geographics* with nekkid African women."

"Did he take any of the magazines home?"

She licked her glowing orange lips as she paused to think. "No, he never did. Just looked at 'em, over and over again."

"Sounds like you kept a pretty close eye on him."

"I was afraid he was gonna rip out all the nasty pictures for hisself. That's destruction of li-bary property."

"Could you show me which issues he looked at?"

The librarian blinked. "How's that gonna help?"

I had no idea. "I might need to fingerprint them," I lied.

The librarian shrugged and didn't think to ask where my handy CSI kit was. She rolled off her stool and lumbered out from behind the circulation desk.

I followed her past the man trying to use the automated kiosk. He was scanning the same item over and over, only to be met with an angry beep each time.

When we reached the magazine racks, it took her only a moment to flip through them and whip out the issues she'd seen Hank looking at. "I know which ones it is because all I see is the cover," she said. "He holds 'em up to hide his face. You lucky I notice things like that."

"You've been very helpful," I agreed.

When she'd compiled a stack about half a year thick, she nodded. "That's all. I never seen him look through any of the others." She glanced toward the unsuccessful self-checker. "I gotta go now. That man's gonna break my machine."

"I appreciate your help."

I sat down with the stack she'd given me and briefly wondered if I was onto something with the fingerprint idea. Maybe the most vital evidence in the whole case would turn out to be his grubby prints all over some Congolese woman.

Get real, I thought. Hundreds of people had probably touched these magazines since Tuesday. It was *National Geographic*, after all, not *Quantum Mechanics Monthly*.

I grabbed the magazine on the top of the stack. It was the July issue, with stories on endangered gorillas, gypsy marriage ceremonies, New York skyscrapers, and a weird river in Asia. I flipped through the issue, but didn't notice any folded pages, handwritten notes, or other evidence that Hank was looking for something in particular.

The next couple of issues followed a similar pattern, highlighting things like Serengeti lions, endangered Florida wet-

lands, the New York subway system, the fascinating world of sand skinks, and a weird river in Asia. All standard *Geographic* fare, with nary a naked bosom in sight.

Maybe Hank had the travel bug and just wanted to see what life was like in the real world. Lord knows I filled my Netflix queue with movies that took place anywhere but the South. It was a reasonable action for someone who'd lived somewhere else and could never go back.

I put the magazines back on the rack, feeling disappointed. I wasn't supposed to come to a dead end on the first day of an investigation. There had to be something I was missing, a common denominator.

Shit, I thought. I suck at math.

I gave my name and number to the librarian and told her to call me if she remembered anything else about Hank.



After my strikeout at the library, I went home to strategize and console myself with junk food. As soon as I let Dude out of the laundry room (his home while I'm gone), he barreled into the living room and flung himself onto the carpet. He *lives* for carpet. He rolls around on it like a crowd surfer, with his back down, feet up, and eyes rolled back in ecstasy. This will continue for several minutes. Then he'll lie so still it seems like he's dead. If you touch him, the whole thing starts over again. There is only one way to break the spell.

"Dude," I called from the kitchen. "I've got Cheetos."

When he didn't respond, I said it again, only louder. This time, I heard him flip over, shake, and trot into the kitchen. I

turned around to greet him with his favorite orange snack, but he already had something in his mouth.

It was a small framed photo of me and a guy I used to date, taken during a trip to the city—one of those self-inflicted shots that do more to capture the essence of your nostril hair than the scenery behind you. Times Square shimmered in the background as LED displays hawked Coke, Pepsi, and the musical *Wicked*.

My heart felt smaller just looking at it.

“Let it go,” I said, holding out my hand. Dude dropped the frame, and two trails of drool, onto my palm. I popped a Cheeto in his mouth as a reward.

I thought I’d destroyed or hidden all the reminders of who I used to be, both for safety’s sake and to keep me from dwelling on what I was missing. New York had everything. Little Falls had next to nothing. There wasn’t even a real Thai restaurant in the whole place. Being here felt like suffocating one day at a time.

Homesickness was an occupational hazard for any protected witness, but today was worse than usual. I’d been fine until I looked at all those articles about New York in *National Geographic*—subways, skyscrapers, and sewer systems, oh my. Every damn issue had something to remind me of what I could never have again. But no matter how painful it was, I knew I’d go look at those magazines again. I had to. They were my only connection to home.

And then I knew.

Hank wasn’t looking for nudity in those magazines. He was looking for sanity. Elaine had said he was from back

east—could she have meant New York City? Maybe Hank was feeling the pain of life in Little Falls and self-medicating with doses of *National Geographic*.

I needed to learn more about Hank, but I wasn't sure his wife was the person to ask. Tomorrow I'd get a background check on him and go back to the library for another look at those magazines. I was sure I'd missed something important.

In the meantime, Dude decided he wasn't satisfied with one measly Cheeto and snatched the entire bag out of my hand. By the time I chased him to the living room, he'd peed on the carpet with joyous abandon and strewn most of the bag across the room.

"You are so busted," I said, and put him back in the laundry room. The rest of my evening was spent trying to remove the smell of pee.



The next day was Friday and the library didn't open until 10 a.m. All night, I'd tossed and turned, dreaming of various bad things that could have happened to Hank. This was Arkansas, after all. Maybe he'd been eaten by a family of starving opossums or held for ransom by a disenfranchised armadillo. A lot could happen between midnight and 10 a.m.

I rolled out of bed with dark circles worthy of a nosferatu and shimmied into some jeans and a t-shirt. I fired up my laptop and logged onto the website I used to pull background checks. I'd signed up for an account when I started the investigative portion of the business, but until now, I'd never used it to look up anyone other than my ex-boyfriends.

I typed Hank's name into the database. Within minutes, I had a detailed printout of the public record for Henry J. Tubbs. It confirmed all the major points Elaine had given me: he was indeed employed by J.B. Hunt, and had been for just over two years. The home address listed matched the one she wrote down, as did the landline and cell phone numbers. But one thing didn't match. There was no next of kin, no names listed under "related searches," and no joint accounts. No Elaine, no mother, no father.

I glanced at the second page of the printout. Prior to living in Little Falls, Hank had lived in St. Paul, Minnesota. The printout listed another trucking company as his employer there, with a five-year career. So he'd only been in Little Falls for about two years, just like me. If he and Elaine had married recently, there might not have been time for her to show up on his records. Still, it seemed odd. Elaine hadn't looked like a new bride.

I folded the report and put it in my trusty detective kit—a khaki messenger bag stuffed with paper, mace, my smartphone, a GPS unit, a digital camera, batteries, a flashlight, handcuffs, and a tape recorder. The GPS, digital camera, and tape recorder were probably overkill because my phone could do all those things, but to be honest, I couldn't figure out how those functions worked so I had to double pack. I slung the bulky bag over my shoulder, put Dude in the backyard, and hopped in the car.

The library was deserted. There were only three cars in the parking lot, with a homeless man asleep on the bench just outside the automatic doors. I parked beneath "Curie" and

headed inside. The *National Geographic* stack was right where I'd left it.

I picked them all up and took them to a table, arranging them in sequential order. Then I took a piece of paper from my bag and prepared to take notes. The blankness of the paper intimidated me. I'd have felt better if it were monogrammed, or stolen from a hotel, so there'd at least be a name, number, and address on there to get me started. I'd already missed the main clue once. What's to say I wouldn't do it again?

Concentrate, I thought. *You can do this.*

I pored over each New York article, looking again for underlining, folded pages, or other indications of additional attention. I jotted down the subject of each article, just in case. The first few issues turned up nothing. The pages were as slick and glossy as the day they were printed, with nothing but a couple of oily fingerprints in the corners.

I slowed down a little when I got to the November issue, with an article on Coney Island and the hotel some big developer wanted to build there. The article showed a side-by-side comparison of the current park and the developer's mock-up.

Those pictures almost did me in.

Wooden rails, peeling paint, and a million tiny lights...the Cyclone would always be the best thing about Coney Island. I'd had my first kiss on that coaster, spent Senior Ditch Day there, and turned down my first (and only) marriage proposal there. True, it was from pimple-faced Roger Lipinski and we'd been 16 years old, but it was probably the only one I was going to get and I remembered it fondly.

I loved that coaster the way a fat kid loves cake. The puking, the scream-sore throat, and the tangled hair were always, always worth it. For a minute and fifty seconds, I was free. Nothing—not even the laws of gravity—could keep me safe from the coaster’s vertiginous claws.

And I would never see any of it again.

Fuck.

I reached out and ran my fingers over the photo. But they felt more than the famously slick *Geographic* paper. There were long indentations on the page, like the ones on a notepad when someone pressed really hard while writing on the top sheet.

I held the magazine up, letting the library’s fluorescent light slide over the indentations. They covered the space of the roller coaster photo and no more. It only took a few seconds to copy what I saw onto my piece of paper. When I’d completed this to the best of my ability (I flunked art class, by the way), I looked down and realized maybe Mrs. Fleischman had been right. I was a terrible artist. The scrawl I’d traced looked nothing like writing, unless Hank’s hobby was writing cuneiform with his toes.

Then I remembered something from *Prison Break*, which I watched in entirety as soon as I landed in Little Falls so I would know what to do when being pursued by people who wanted me dead. Coded messages sometimes had to be read upside down or in a mirror.

I turned the piece of paper upside down and smiled. *Bingo.*

Instead of chicken scratch, I now had a string of what looked like six numbers—probably a street address, with no city or zip code. I pulled out my phone.

My map app found one local hit for that street number, not far from the library. It also brought up a name and description. The address belonged to a motel called the Minuteman, across the river on 23rd Street. With a smile on my face, I packed up my bag and put the magazines back on the black wire rack for the next pervert to look through.

A sleazy motel, I thought. What a cliché.

Hank was probably holed up with some waitress he met in a dive bar, playing horizontal rodeo while Elaine cleaned house and worried. It wasn't anything I hadn't seen before. A quick snap of the camera and this case would be solved. Hank would be embarrassed and probably in the doghouse, but not the subject of a tri-county manhunt.

I hopped in the car and floored it down the freeway. Once you cross the Arkansas River, you leave Little Falls and enter North Little Falls. Local snobs treat it like a ghetto, but that's just because there aren't any sparkling new Krogers or river-front condos. Instead, you have a bunch of used car lots and partially vacant strip malls. There's really nothing wrong with it except that it's old. I guess people are shallow everywhere, even in the Bible Belt.

The Minuteman wasn't far off the main drag, sandwiched between a rust-stained white-brick apartment complex and a Church's Chicken. The hotel's marquee read, "American Owned and Operated. God Bless Our Troops. We Remember

9/11.” The building was painted in bright shades of red, white, and blue.

Places like this give me the creeps. I’m as American as the next girl, but there’s something excessive about encouraging passersby to patronize your establishment based on your nationality, or rather, what nationality you *aren’t*. America is supposed to be a meritocracy, and if a Chinese or Indian guy can give me a better nightly rate and a free continental breakfast, you better believe I’m gonna take him up on it.

I parked, slung my bag over my shoulder, and headed for the office. Three small bells jingled when I opened the door. There wasn’t anyone behind the counter, but someone was making noise in the back room. I waited a moment, and when no one came out to greet me, I rang the big silver bell on the desk.

A fat, bearded white guy emerged, wearing a camo t-shirt and matching trucker cap. Beneath the cap, his mud-brown hair skeezed out in all directions. “Yeah?” he said, reaching for the pack of Marlboros on the counter.

“I’m looking for my boyfriend,” I said, reaching for Hank’s picture. “I think he’s here with another woman. Have you seen him?”

The man’s eyes never left his Marlboros. “Ain’t seen nothin’,” he said, lighting up.

“I don’t think you understand.” I cast wary looks around the office and then leaned as close to him as I dared. “He’s cheating on me with this girl he met at the Indian buffet. She gave him an extra helping of tandoori, and now he’s back for seconds, if you know what I mean.”

“What in the hell’s a tandoori?”

I adopted my best Scarlett O’Hara accent to cover up the faux-pas of being familiar with another culture’s cuisine. “Ah just know he’s here,” I whined. “Ah don’t want to make a fuss, but what’s a girl to do?”

“An Indian?” he said, scratching his beer gut.

I nodded, choking back a false sob. “Her parents own the La Quinta up the street.”

“Now that ain’t right,” he said, clamping down on his cigarette and reaching beneath the counter. He came up with a shotgun and cocked it with one hand. “Where is the bastard? I’ll set him straight.”

“You don’t need that!” I said, shedding more crocodile tears. “Just tell me where he is, and I’ll give him a talkin’ to. If he don’t come around, I’ll let you try.”

The man appeared unconvinced (and perhaps disappointed) that he wouldn’t get to shoot anyone. It was time to lay it on thick.

I reached forward with my hands clasped. “Ah just know ah can make him see the light! My daddy’s a preacher, and he taught me just what Bible verses to say when a man tries to deny his family responsibilities.”

The man propped his shotgun against the wall and nodded. “Okay, you tell him. I’ll be here if he don’t wanna listen.”

I wiped my eyes and smiled. “Thank you kindly, sir. Which room?”

“Corner,” he said, jerking his chin in the direction of the Church’s Chicken and plucking a key off the corkboard to his

right. He set the key on the counter and winked at me. I fled the office immediately and hoped never to return.

The corner room was right in front of my parking space.

Damn it, I thought. If I'd known he was in that one, I wouldn't have parked there. Some cheating spouses have a sixth sense for when to flee the scene, the same way animals know when an earthquake or tornado is on the way. There was nothing to do but hope he hadn't made his escape while I was talking to the manager.

I slipped the key in the lock, took a deep breath, and prepared to bust his ass. The problem was someone had beaten me to it.

CHAPTER THREE

Not a Dry Eye in the House

It didn't even occur to me to scream. My body's immediate reaction was to turn around and send projectile vomit across the parking lot. Once my breakfast had been evacuated, I stepped inside the room and closed the door behind me as quietly as I could.

Hank was dead. There was no question about it. If the pool of blood spread across his chest wasn't evidence enough, the knife sticking out of him certainly was.

He was face-up on the bed, spread-eagled and fully dressed. It was the most horrible thing I'd ever seen, not at all like death in the movies. His eyes were open, wide and afraid. His mouth gaped in horror at whoever had done this to him. A thick, metallic smell floated over the bed like smog.

I tasted more vomit in the back of my throat. *Please God, I prayed, don't let me have a further contribution to the crime scene.*

It was too late to run and pretend I'd never been there. My pathetically obvious encounter with the manager made that

impossible. I hadn't even disguised myself, so he'd be able to describe me accurately to any cops who came around asking questions. The only thing I could do was keep moving and try not to make any more stupid mistakes.

"Get a grip," I said to myself—except I was shaking so badly it came out more like a Lady Gaga chorus: "G-g-g-g-et a grip-p-p-p." I reached for my phone, but when I pulled it out, I realized there was something I had to do before I called the police.

"I'm so going to hell," I said, opening my phone and pressing the camera button. When the viewfinder popped up, I snapped a few photos without looking too closely at the previews. All I needed was proof for Elaine that I was telling the truth. Blood is blood, out of focus or not.

Tears pushed against my lashes as I documented the scene. Why did Hank have to be dead? Why did I have to be the person who discovered him? If I'd wanted to be involved with dead bodies, I would have stayed in New York and waited for the Mafia to do their worst. This was not what I'd signed up for.

I blinked the tears away and put my phone back in the bag. I knew better than to touch anything and place myself at the scene, so I couldn't even close Hank's wide, staring eyes. I watched the trail of blood ooze down his side and widen the pool spreading on the pale comforter.

How long, I wondered, did it take to accumulate this much blood? The killer couldn't still be here, could he?

Oh, holy Jesus, of course he could.

He could be hiding in the shower, waiting for the right moment to jump out and stab me.

“Fuck,” I said.

Once again, I’d messed up royally. I could have played it cool with a gentle knock and a harmless announcement like “Housekeeping!” or “Pizza delivery!”, but no. I had to bust in, unannounced, and let the killer know I had no business being there. I swore again and again, with a variety of intonations, while I waited for a black-cloaked figure in a Scream mask to jump out of the shower and kill me.

But no one came out to do away with me. I couldn’t bring myself to go into the bathroom and investigate or push aside the shower curtain. If the killer was back there, he was going to get away with it just by being patient.

I looked back to Hank. There was no reason not to call the cops and tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Every morally fibrous cell in my body told me to quit whining and let my fingers do the talking. But if I did that, I’d have to confess that I knew he’d already been missing (and possibly in danger) for two days.

Was that obstruction? Would they consider me some sort of accomplice? Why the hell hadn’t I taken the trouble to read up on this stuff?

The last thing I needed was a record on file under my new name. I couldn’t let anything jeopardize my new identity, not even a casual statement given to the police. If I did, I could end up with an extra breathing orifice, just like Hank.

I wondered what it would feel like to have a knife rip straight through my skin and the delicate tissue underneath.

Hank knew, but he'd never be able to tell me. At the thought, panic exploded in my veins like the contents of a shaken-up soda can.

My eyes flickered toward the knife and I couldn't pry them away. But now I noticed something I hadn't seen before—something beneath the hilt, curling up at the edges. I crept closer and leaned over the body for a closer look.

It was a piece of paper, stabbed to Hank's chest and drenched with his blood. The black ink was still visible. I blinked hard to clear the tears, and then bent down to read.

Hard to snatch with a hole in your chest, isn't it? You can get a new name and a new face, but the Family will always find you.

If there were any more words on the note, I never read them. The room went black and my knees gave out. I crashed to the floor, gasping for air. I had always known this could happen, but I'd never really expected it would.

I crawled over to where I'd dropped my bag and grabbed the phone. My fingers shook as I dialed the number I swore I'd never call, not as long as I lived.

It rang once.

Twice.

Three times.

Then the connection opened. "What?" a gruff man's voice answered, barely audible over a loud rumbling noise. In the background, a PA system announced an arriving train.

"Y-you have to help us," I whispered, clutching the phone tightly. "They know who we are!"

He responded, but the train drowned out his words.

"What?" I cried. "What did you say?"

Then I heard a muffled thud, a grunt, and a wheeze. A loud banging noise rang in my ear, and the phone clattered to the ground.

"Hello?" I cried. "Are you there?"

The rumbling of the coming train dimmed as someone picked the phone up off the ground.

"Hello?" I tried again.

No one answered.

"What's happening?"

Still nothing.

"Who is this?"

"Your worst nightmare," an Italian-accented male voice said. Then my phone beeped and lit up briefly. The call had ended.

"No!" I cried. I slammed my finger against the redial button, but nothing happened. The call went straight to voicemail.

Someone had just killed my only contact with the Marshals, and now they had my cell phone number. I was as good as gone. A death squad would be sent out to my house, where they'd do something horrific like remove all my skin with a razor or decapitate me with a steak knife.

All this because I tried to do the right thing and keep a mobster from killing a federal judge. *Next time*, I thought, *I'm letting the judge fry.*

That's when it hit me. If there were two witnesses in Little Falls, what were the odds there were five? Or ten? Were the Feds really stupid enough to put all their eggs in one basket?

I knew the answer without having to ask.

I put the phone down. I could still call 911 and have the cops come out, but if they didn't keep this under wraps, word would spread. Pretty soon, every pissed off gangster would send his able-bodied goons to Little Falls, looking for the stool pigeon who sent him to Sing Sing. My own safety—and that of any other witnesses in Little Falls—rested on the shoulders of the Little Falls PD.

There was only one answer. I couldn't let them know Hank was a witness.

I crept up to the bed and hovered over poor Hank. Gloves were the one thing missing from my detective kit, but I couldn't risk leaving a viable fingerprint on the body or the weapon.

I dashed over to the sink and grabbed the boxed shower cap. I wrapped my hand in it and hurried back to the bed. The notepaper was sodden with blood and tore easily. I tried to pull it as near the entry wound as I could to make sure nothing was left behind. It came apart in several small pieces, which I gathered up and wrapped in the shower cap. I shoved the whole mess into my sock, beneath my pant leg.

Before I left, I knelt beside the bed and offered a moment of silence for Hank. Then I put the room key in my pocket, locked the door from the inside, and wiped the doorknob clean with my jacket sleeve.

Everything outside the motel room was peaceful and quiet, as if nothing had changed. But the whole world was different now. I got in the car and drove like a bat out of hell back to west Little Falls, trying not to cry.

Keep it together, I commanded. You have no proof they know who you are or that Hank was involved with Jimmy. You're so vain. You probably think this murder is about you.

I kept up the internal pep talk until I got home. Then I went inside and took the shower-cap-wrapped note out of my sock. I put the entire mess in a resealable plastic bag and shoved it in the freezer, behind a bag of frozen shrimp and a bottle of cheap vodka.

There was one more thing I had to do, and it wasn't going to be fun. I put Dude in the car and pulled out my phone. I dialed the number Elaine had given me and told her I needed to see her right away.



Elaine Tubbs lived in an older section of town about fifteen miles northeast of my subdivision. It only took me a few minutes to get there and find street parking. Most of the houses were freshly painted, with well-kept yards and recent model cars. Two of the houses on the block had lawn signs welcoming a new baby.

Dude followed me happily as I walked up to the door and knocked. He was the only thing I could think of that might ease this moment. I'd never done anything like this before, but I remembered my dog breeder telling me that boxers were sometimes used as nursing home companions to comfort

those on their way out. I was hoping Dude could transfer some of that ability to the one left behind.

Elaine answered the door in a fuzzy blue bathrobe, with red eyes and tear tracks sluicing down her cheeks. Her blonde hair was tied back in a ponytail. "Come in."

"I brought my dog," I said, unable to look her in the eye.

"That's all right." She closed the door behind me and locked it with a deadbolt and chain. Her eyes looked up at me with hope. "Did you find Hank?"

I looked away with shame. "Let's sit down."

Elaine lowered herself into a sand-colored recliner, and I chose the beige sofa next to it. Dude curled up on the floor between us, with his head perched on her feet and his butt on mine. Then he started licking the carpet.

I looked around the room, searching for evidence of how long they'd been married, but the few snapshots I saw were of Hank and his guy friends. *Shit*, I thought. *Maybe they really are newlyweds.*

"I found Hank," I began, feeling even worse. "Something happened to him."

"What is it?"

I couldn't find a way to say it that wouldn't hurt. "Mrs. Tubbs, I'm afraid he's gone."

A quick moment of confusion registered on her face. "My name is Elaine," she said, looking around as if she didn't know where she was or who I'd addressed as Mrs.

"Someone else got to him before I could. He was gone by the time I got there. I'm so sorry."

I reached over to touch her hand and saw that all her nails were bitten off. She recoiled from my hand, as though letting me touch her meant accepting the truth of what I was saying. "I'm sorry," I repeated, looking down at Dude for help. *Come on*, I urged telepathically. *Help me out here and do something comforting.*

"I was afraid of this," she whispered. "He promised he'd stay out of trouble." She shook her head and pulled her bathrobe around her. Tears were already gathering beneath her lashes. Without the poorly applied makeup and trailer trash tracksuit, she looked like a little girl in her father's chair. "T-tell me what happened to him."

I gave her the briefest, gentlest tale I could and told her everything except that I had taken the murderer's note. Half-way through the story, she bent down to pet Dude, stroking him while tears slipped down her face. When I finished, her hand stopped moving. It rested on Dude's head, as still as Hank's body.

"Elaine," I asked, "why didn't you tell me Hank was a witness?"

She sniffed and tried to swallow her sobs. "The Marshals told him to keep it secret from everyone."

"Then how do you know about it?"

"He told me, even though he knew they wouldn't want him to. We were going to be married, and he said he wanted to look me in the eye when he made his vows. He made me swear I'd never tell, no matter what happened to him."

"There's something else," I said. "No one knows Hank is dead but you and me."

“You didn’t call the cops?”

“I wanted to ask you something first.” I took a deep breath and mentally crossed my fingers. If she didn’t want to go along with my plan, I was screwed. “I don’t want you to tell the police that you hired me to find Hank, and I don’t want you to tell them Hank was a witness.”

“I would never tell on Hank,” she said. “He told me not to.”

“Will you tell on me?”

“Why would the police care that I hired you?”

“I left the crime scene. If they find out and anything goes wrong with the investigation, I’m an easy target to blame.”

“Then why did you do it? Why not call the police right away?”

I sighed. There was no way I could tell the truth here, as badly as I might want to. “You’re my client and my first responsibility is to you. Now that I’ve told you, we can alert the police. All I ask is that you not say anything about us working together.”

“I won’t,” she said, wiping her eyes with the sleeve of her robe. “The cops out here can’t be trusted. Hank used to say that all the time.” I saw her gaze flicker to the wall, where a small trio of snapshots hung together—Hank fishing, Hank hunting, Hank in front of a racecar. “He was a good man.”

I hung my head. Asking the bereaved widow of a murdered witness to lie to the cops was surely going to put me on the fast track to hell. But I couldn’t stand by and let Hank’s killers get me, too. “I should leave you alone,” I said. “The cops will be by once I call this in.”

She tried to smile, but it turned into a sob. “T-thank you, Ms. Sargent. For everything.”

“I’ll be in touch,” I said, patting her arm and pulling gently on Dude’s leash. He got up and farted, grinning broadly. “You embarrass me,” I said to him, leading him out the door and back to the car as quickly as I could.

On the way home, I stopped at a payphone outside a crowded Sonic. I covered my hands with napkins, dialed the cops, and quickly told them where they could find the body of Hank Tubbs. Then I bought Dude a frozen yogurt and cried all the way home.

I Never Arkansas It Coming

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thanks for reading! I hope you enjoyed the beginning of the story. There's a lot more coming for Brett and Dude. Here's where you can buy the book to find out what happens next:

DIGITAL

PAPERBACK

AMAZON

B & N

AMAZON

KOBO

SMASH
WORDS

WHAT READERS SAY



*“fun,
likable
crazy
character”*

- AMAZON
REVIEWER

WHAT'S IN STORE



*Ordinarily I wouldn't
mind being shackled to a
guy who looked like a Polo
Ralph Lauren ad, but Jake
was hostile, volatile, and
dressed like Vanilla Ice's
backup dancers.*

JENNIWILTZ.COM

I Never Arkansas It Coming

ALSO BY JENNI WILTZ

Click or tap to read the first three chapters on my website.

HISTORICAL

A VAMPIRE IN VERSAILLES

Jean-Gabriel de Bourbon is a vampire whose survival is tied to the French royal family. As long as a king sits on the French throne, Jean-Gabriel lives. But the year is 1788, and the French Revolution draws near. Is anyone, even a vampire, strong enough to stop the force of destiny?

**READ
NOW**

LITERARY

THE RED ROAD

Emma's dad has always promised to send her to college. But when an act of gang violence almost takes his life, Emma can't move on. Her family and friends all want her to focus on school. Will she do what they want and focus on her future...or will she jeopardize everything to seek revenge?

**READ
NOW**

THRILLER

THE ROMANOV LEGACY

Natalie knows Nicholas II, last Russian tsar, left behind a secret bank account. But getting someone to believe her is harder than finding it. Diagnosed with schizophrenia, Natalie hears the voice of an angel named Belial. No one takes her seriously...until a Russian spy kidnaps her, claiming she's the only one who can lead him to the treasure.

**READ
NOW**

ROMANCE

THE CHERBOURG JEWELS

Ella Wilcox is cataloging the jewelry collection of the wealthy Cherbourg family when someone steals the gems out from under her. As Ella and Sébastien Cherbourg race to find the thief, danger ignites an uncontrollable passion...and reveals a secret that threatens to destroy them both.

**READ
NOW**

I Never Arkansas It Coming

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Readers like you are an inspiration –
I'd love to hear from you!*

EMAIL

author@jenniwiltz.com

WEBSITE

<http://jenniwiltz.com>



ABOUT JENNI

Jenni Wiltz writes fiction and creative nonfiction. She's won national writing awards for romantic suspense and creative nonfiction. Her short fiction has been published in literary journals including *Gargoyle* and the *Portland Review*, as well as several small-press anthologies. When she's not writing, she enjoys sewing, running, and genealogical research. She lives in Pilot Hill, California.

SOCIAL

I'm shy and anti-social in real life, but pretty darn social online.

