

THE WILDE

“When exactly did your daughter go missing, Mr. Dalton?”

The middle-aged father lowered his head in response, scratching at it. He still wore the same look of barely contained fright that had lingered on his face since the detective had arrived. “A couple weeks at least. To tell you the truth, Mister Marlow, I’ve been so worried lately that I’m having trouble remembering.”

“It’s been exactly a month. She last stopped here on the tenth of September.” The wife fidgeted with a bracelet restlessly beside her husband. She seemed annoyed that he couldn’t remember how long their only child had been gone. Only moments ago, she had been elated to see someone finally arrive to help.

The detective noted their demeanor. He had arrived at the modest Boston home only ten minutes ago. The early morning hour meant he could get a quick start on any leads garnered from the pair. They were frazzled—must have been up all night.

“I wish the police would have agreed to stop here as well...” the wife mumbled bitterly.

“Ah, yes. Over the phone, you mentioned contacting them already. What did they say?”

“They wouldn’t help us,” Mr. Dalton said bluntly.

Marlow looked up from his notepad with surprise. That didn’t sound like the police department he had known and worked with for nearly ten years. “Their reason?” he asked.

Mr. Dalton looked to his right at a wood table and lifted a shoebox he had placed there earlier. The bothered man fished around inside before finding what he wanted—a small letter. He handed it to Marlow. “We’ve gotten a few from her. She doesn’t say where she has gone or why, and she never puts a return address. Her phone doesn’t seem to be getting our texts either. Katy here has tried every day.”

Marlow shifted his pen and notepad to one hand, then gingerly accepted the envelope. He flipped it and noticed a red postal stamp on the back. It had been sent from Boston. He opened the envelope and pulled the letter out just enough to glimpse the back. Red marks were on it. Someone had kissed a postcard before sending it off. He frowned and slid it back inside the envelope.

“The police said our daughter isn’t technically missing because she has contacted us. But it sure feels the same when we can’t find where she’s gone or even write back. I almost yelled at them over the phone,” Mr. Dalton said.

“These are definitely from her?” Marlow asked.

“Yes. It’s her handwriting. And she refers to me and Katy by the same silly names she used when she was little. She doesn’t do that around anyone else, except maybe one old friend,” the father replied.

“You didn’t call the main station in this part of Boston, right?”

“We first tried the local one. We’re on the outskirts of the city, more or less,” the mother answered.

Marlow released a breath of relief. “That’s good. I have a contact at the downtown station. I’d be upset if they had turned you down. I think I can wrangle some help from there.” Marlow pocketed the letter in his duster jacket.

“Detective—that’s the most recent one she sent, which is why I wish to keep it.” The wife gently nudged her husband in the ribs. “Might he have another one, dear?”

“Do you happen to have a copier?” Marlow inquired, his tone reluctant. “The writing might prove useful.”

“We have a scanner that will print. Katy, will you please go make copies of these?” Mr. Dalton handed his wife half a dozen envelopes. The woman grimaced, then headed towards a small home office at the back of the house.

“That’s quite a lot,” Marlow quipped.

“Hmm?”

“Six letters. That’s more than once per week. It’s odd that she would run off suddenly but still write to you so often. She must miss you both a lot.”

“We received a few of them all at once. That’s why I didn’t panic when she didn’t come home that first weekend. But it’s been getting longer between letters.” Mr. Dalton poked through the box again and retrieved a smaller envelope this time—one that a baseball card would fit in. “She sent a few of these as well. I have no idea why.” He held out the coin envelope and poured the contents onto Marlow’s hand. A circular object with a dull yellow hue rolled out. “My wife thinks it’s gold. But we can’t figure out how our daughter could have gotten these.”

Marlow turned the metal item over in his hand. No markings at all. Not even a faint engraving. It looked just like a coin blank that had not been stamped. “I can have this checked out for you.”

“That’s great. Whatever it takes to find her. There is one more thing.” Mr. Dalton moved towards a staircase, close to where the trio had been speaking. “There are some trinkets in her desk. Follow me.”

Marlow frowned as he watched the older man ascend the stairs. He quietly followed, already formulating a plan. The girl's room was unremarkable, hardly lived-in. "How old is your daughter?" Marlow asked as he examined the bare walls.

"Twenty-five. She just finished her associate's degree, and was looking to continue at a larger school." Mr. Dalton knelt by a large desk in the center of the room. "She was upset it took so long for her to go to college, but she finally found the time and money for it."

"What did she go for?" Marlow asked, watching the man rummage through the desk drawers.

"Psychology. She actually finished in September before disappearing. Oh, here they are." Mr. Dalton scooted back and groaned as he stood up. In an open drawer were small glass vials, the kind found in a chemistry set. Marlow quickly counted five of them, with double that number partly visible in the back of the drawer. "Now these I did have checked. I was worried my little pumpkin had gotten into drugs of some sort, but the lab found nothing. Most are empty."

Marlow stepped closer. Each vial possessed a gold-leaf decoration. A vine pattern spiraled around the glass, ending at the rim of a plastic cap that sealed each one. The markings looked handmade. "Was she into crafts?"

Mr. Dalton shook his head. "When she was little, yes. But she hasn't done anything like that in years. She likes to sing—that's the closest thing to art she does now."

Marlow reached to pick up a vial. "Is that wise, Mister Marlow? I touched one to take to the lab, but what if these have fingerprints on them or other evidence?"

Marlow turned to smile, beginning to warm to the fellow. The father's concern over preserving the scene reminded Marlow of his own instincts. "Fingerprints don't last forever, Mr. Dalton," he said.

“And I’ll need to examine everything if I’m to find your daughter. From what you’ve told me, it doesn’t sound like anyone else would have been up here to touch these.”

“Oh. Well, I suppose you’re right.” Mr. Dalton backed up to give the detective more space.

Marlow looked back and lifted a vial. He twisted it between his fingers and noted a clear residue at the bottom. After slipping it into a pocket, he knelt and peered below the desk. He fished a pen light out to check the floor. Nothing. He pulled the few drawers out and checked under them, then within the desk.

A glint caught his eye. He reached in to find another vial. This one was full.

“Looks like she missed you too,” the detective muttered. He reseated the drawers, leaving only the one with the empty vials out. He pocketed a few more for his investigation before reseating that drawer too. “Did you check the rest of the house? See anything else that raised suspicion?”

“I checked. But these were all I found. She took most of her things after finishing school. There are only a few shirts and pants. The rest of the closet is empty, and so are the pockets of her clothes.”

Marlow sat on the plush carpet floor, facing Mr. Dalton. The detective was careful not to crush the vials he’d just pocketed. He examined the full one against the sunlight peeking through a window adorned with thin white curtains just behind the older man. The material had a translucent quality—clear, but the gel-like substance also fractured the sunlight just enough to notice. “Does she have a car?” Marlow asked as he gazed at the vial. Mr. Dalton shook his head. “What about a boyfriend or someone else she might stay with?”

“I think most of them left for school long ago. Her grandparents all live in this state, but they would have told me if she was with them. She’s our only child. Her best friend, Alexandra, left too. There

was a boy who stopped by with flowers, but that was long before she even graduated. He didn't know she was in college, and I didn't volunteer that information," Mr. Dalton explained.

Marlow pocketed the full vial alongside the empty ones. The clink of glass nudging glass was loud in the room. He rested an arm over his knees while thinking. "Do you know the boy who stopped by?"

"No. But I did find a picture of him among some scrap paper in the wastebasket. I think he went to high school with her. He looks about the same age."

A sound caught Marlow's attention. He turned just enough to see the wife climbing the stairs to meet them, letters and a box in her grasp. Her blonde hair bobbed slightly as she moved. "Klein, I made the copies. I put them in the box already. Where did the detective go?"

The husband smiled from his far-off corner and pointed down at the desk. The wife looked to see Marlow grinning at her from thigh-height. He waved with his left hand and then tipped his Dakota hat.

"Oh, there you are!" she exclaimed with a laugh as she backed up and lowered the letters to cover the zipper region of her jeans. "I copied the front and back of each card. We already tried looking, but maybe you can locate where they were sold. There's no information on the backs of them."

Marlow playfully stood to accept the box. The wife blushed as she handed it over, the original letters tucked against her chest.

"Mister Marlow, what are the chances you can find her? We've never been through anything like this. It's turning us into nervous wrecks," Mr. Dalton asked.

"The odds are good. Most kids who run away don't send letters, let alone several times."

“Unless someone made her write them,” Mr. Dalton added nervously. His wife tensed at the mention of this and looked at the floor, clutching the letters tighter.

“Something tells me that isn’t the case here,” Marlow said reassuringly as he reached into a pocket of his duster jacket. “Mrs. Dalton, here is one of my cards. Feel free to call me or have your husband call if there’s anything else either of you remember that might help.”

“Please call us if there are any other questions you have. Or if you find any leads. Please,” the woman said with worry in her voice. Marlow nodded and turned to Mr. Dalton to bid goodbye. The trio made their way back downstairs, halting in the front hall.

“It was good to meet you. May I get your first name?” the wife asked as she stood by the front door.

“It’s Marlow. Higgins is my last name,” the detective answered warmly.

“My goodness. I did it again,” Mr. Dalton said aloud. “I grew up in the South. We often called adults by their first name in that manner as children. Mister this and Missus that. I sometimes do it even now. That must sound strange to a New Englander like yourself, Mister Higgins.”

Marlow smiled. “Not at all. I spent some time in the South too. Your accent reminds me of Georgia.”

“I’d like to thank you again for taking this matter seriously and arriving so soon. I assume your wife took your children to school today,” Mrs. Dalton surmised.

“That’s one thing I don’t have to worry about quite yet. Well, two things, I suppose.” Marlow raised his left hand and wiggled his fingers gently. His ring finger was bare. No tan line. It had always been that way.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I just assumed a man of your age...”

“Don’t apologize. It just means I have more time to devote to your case. I’ll find your daughter.”

The mother smiled and opened the front door. She then quickly hugged Marlow before hurrying off to the back of the house in tears.

Mr. Dalton grimaced while moving away from the foot of the stairs. “I hope you do find her, Mister Higgins. I don’t think my wife has slept much since this all started.”

Marlow nodded as he set a hand on the door. He was about to leave, but then turned back. “I completely forgot to ask. What is your daughter’s name?”

“Sarah.”