

THE WILDE

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

The older man lowered his head to think. A look of barely contained fright had lingered since the detective’s arrival. “To be honest, I have been so worried, I cannot remember, Mister Marlow.”

“It’s been exactly a month. She last stopped by this tenth of September.” The wife fidgeted with a bracelet as she waited impatiently by her husband. She appeared annoyed he couldn’t remember how long their only child had been gone. Earlier, she’d been elated to see someone finally show up to help.

Marlow made a note. It was morning when he’d arrived at the small Boston home, so he hoped to get a good start on any leads. The couple were frazzled—must have been up all night.

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

“Yes. Over the phone you mentioned contacting them. What did they say?”

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

Marlow looked up. That didn’t sound like the police department he knew and had worked with for almost ten years. “Their reason?” he asked.

Mr. Dalton looked to a shoebox set on a table nearby. The bothered man fished around inside before finding a small letter which he handed to Marlow. “We’ve gotten a few so far. She doesn’t say where she has gone or why, and there’s no return address. She doesn’t seem to be getting our texts either. My wife has tried every day.”

Marlow shuffled his pen and notepad to one hand and gingerly took the envelope. After flipping it over, he noticed a red postal stamp on the back. It had been sent from Boston. He opened the

envelope and slid the card out. Red marks outlined where someone kissed it before sending it off. He frowned and slipped the card back inside.

“The police say our daughter is not technically missing, since she has contacted us. But it sure feels the same when we cannot find her or even write back. I almost yelled at them,” Mr. Dalton explained.

“These are definitely from her?”

“Yes. It is her handwriting. She refers to me and Katy by the same silly names she used when she was little. She never does that around anyone else,” the father replied.

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

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

Marlow sighed happily. “That’s good. I have a contact at the other one. I’d be upset if they had turned you down. Maybe I can wrangle some help from there.” He went to pocket the letter.

“Detective—that’s the most recent one she sent. I’d prefer to keep it.” The wife gently nudged her husband. “Might he have another, dear?”

“Do you happen to have a copier?” Marlow asked. “The contents might prove useful.”

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

“That’s quite a few,” Marlow mentioned.

“Hmm?”

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

“We got a small batch all at once. That was why I did not panic when she was gone that first weekend. But it has been getting longer between letters.” Mr. Dalton poked through the box again and retrieved a smaller envelope—one that would fit a baseball card. “She sent a few of these as well. I have no idea why.” He turned the envelope over Marlow’s hand. Two objects with dull yellow hues rolled onto the detective’s palm. “My wife thinks these are gold. But we do not know how our daughter could have possibly gotten them.”

Marlow turned the items over in his hand. No markings at all. Not even a faint engraving. They looked like coin blanks. “I can have these checked out for you,” he suggested.

“That is 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 mused as the older man ascended the stairs. He followed, wondering how to best start investigating this case. He hesitated briefly after stopping at a doorway. The room was unremarkable, hardly lived-in. “How old is your daughter?” Marlow asked as he examined the bare walls after entering.

“Twenty-five. She just finished her associate’s degree and was looking to continue at another school.” Mr. Dalton knelt by a large desk centered in 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 search through desk drawers.

“Psychology. She actually finished in September, before disappearing. Here they are!” Mr. Dalton scooted back and grunted as he stood. In an open drawer were small vials, the kind one might

find in a chemistry set. The detective quickly counted five of them and could easily tell double that number were scattered elsewhere in the drawer. "Now some of these I did have checked. I was worried my girl got involved with some sort of drug, but the lab found nothing of the kind. Most are empty."

A gold-leaf decoration adorned them. A vine pattern spiraled around the glass, ending under the rim of a plastic cap which sealed each one. Marlow stepped closer. The markings looked handmade. "Was she into crafts?"

Mr. Dalton shook his head. "Only when she was little. Singing is the closest thing to art she still does." Marlow reached out to pick up a vial. "Is that wise, Mister Marlow? I touched some to take to the lab, but what if these have fingerprints on them or other evidence?"

Marlow turned and smiled. The other man's concern over preserving the scene reminded the detective of his own instincts. "Fingerprints don't last forever, Mr. Dalton. 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 space.

Marlow looked back and lifted a vial. Rolling it between his fingers caused a prickly and rough sensation. The decoration was mostly simple glitter. A gold-hued lacquer kept it stuck to the glass. There lay a clear residue inside. After slipping it in a pocket, he knelt to peer under the desk. A pen light whisked from another pocket let him check the floor. Nothing. He pulled the few drawers out and checked behind and under them, then within the desk.

A glint in one corner caught his eye—another vial. He eagerly reached for it. This one was full.

"Looks like she missed you too," he whispered. Marlow reseated the drawers, pocketing a few more of the empty tubes of glass first. "Did you check the rest of the house? See anything else odd?"

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

Marlow sat on the plush carpeting, careful not to crush the full vial just found. He examined it against the sunlight peeking through the thin curtains in the room. The material inside possessed a translucent quality, but it also fractured the light 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?"

"Most of her friends left for school long ago. Her grandparents all live in this state, but they would have told me if she was with them. She is our only child. Her best friend left years ago too. There was a boy who stopped by with flowers once, but that was some time before she graduated. He was not aware she was at college, and I did not volunteer that information," Mr. Dalton explained.

Marlow pocketed the full vial alongside the empty ones. A clink of glass nudging glass unsettled the room. He rested an arm on his knees. "Do you know who that boy is?"

"No. But I did find a picture of him among some scrap paper in the desk. 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, Katy, climbing the stairs, letters and a box in her grasp. Her blonde hair bobbed as she moved. "Klein, I made the copies and put them in the shoebox. Where did the detective go?"

From his far-off corner the husband pointed down by the desk. The wife looked to see Marlow grinning at her from thigh-height. He waved 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 block his view of her zipper. "I copied the front and back of each card. We already tried looking, but maybe you can find where they were bought."

Marlow playfully stood to accept the box. The wife blushed as she handed it over, tucking her daughter's original letters against her chest afterwards.

"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 write, let alone several times."

"Unless someone made her send those," Mr. Dalton added nervously. His wife tensed at the notion and looked at the floor, clutching the letters tighter.

"Something tells me that isn't the case here," Marlow said reassuringly. He reached into a pocket. "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 which 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 three ventured downstairs, stopping in the front hall.

"It was good to meet you. May I get your first name?" Katy asked.

"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. Your accent reminds me of Georgia."

"Thank you again, truly. Your wife must be minding your children today," Mrs. Dalton surmised.

"That's one thing I don't have to worry about quite yet. Well, two things." 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 her."

The woman smiled and opened the front door. She then hugged Marlow before hurrying off to the back of the house in tears, setting the letters down on a table so she would not ruin them.

Mr. Dalton stood at the foot of the stairs. "I hope you do find her. I don't think my wife has slept much since this all began."

Marlow nodded, but paused before exiting. "I almost forgot. What is your daughter's name?"

"Sarah."