

THE
MINE

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CHAPTER 1

Gabe Riplinger sat in the dark and watched.

Cold drizzle gathered on the windshield and he hit the wipers once. He punched the electric door locks again, and then cracked the window an inch to fight the fog. The acrid smell of burnt steel and diesel blew in. Passing traffic threw rain spray between tall buildings. Dark and monolithic, the structures and steel fences formed a seamless box around the lot, a trap with one entrance. He had parked against a building, facing out, to maintain a view to the street. A police cruiser sailed by with lights flashing. An hour previous, a dark sedan had parked across the street, deep in shadows, and killed its lights.

Gabe watched the car and winced as his heart pulsed painfully. For an old man with angina, arrhythmia, and a dozen other ailments, a dilapidated industrial zone was not where he wanted to be on this cold November night. In the darkness, resting on the seat next to him was the box.

He glanced at the vague form and rubbed his bristled face with shaking hands. A large cardboard box labeled *Harry and David*, it sat heavy with its contents: Five hundred thousand dollars. Not apples and pears, but five hundred thousand in fifty-dollar bills. Two hundred bundles were each bound by a red

rubber band. On a recent night, the cash and a 45-caliber revolver had covered his wife's quilted bedspread, and with his arthritis, he had lost count twice. Now the box crouched next to him like a dangerous animal. The money frightened him. This place frightened him.

It had been the bills, the endless hospital bills. The sickness had come on her quietly, starting in her brain and working down into her spinal column, attacking and destroying. His eyes clouded as he stared at the car's dark outline and remembered her suffering. Cancer wasn't a fluke, one cell gone bad. It was conscious, intentional evil.

Doctors responded en masse with heavy radiation and drugs, toxic concoctions that wracked her feeble body, but the assault never paused. In desperation, they tried experimental treatments, exotic new medicines that he didn't understand. The insurance company refused and happily dropped her. It didn't matter. He would have done anything had there been time, Mexican faith healers, witch doctors. The church ran round-the-clock prayer vigils, but it all came to nothing. Poor Mavis. His wife and best friend of 38 years, Mavis was dead in ten hideous months.

He buried her early that summer. When the insurance bailed, he was left with the bills. He took a new mortgage on the old home and maxed out the credit cards. It wasn't enough. Impossible bills. Impossible. And they knew. They used her death to get to him. They approached him as he sat alone in a church pew.

The money arrived like an answer from God, or perhaps someone else. The box appeared magically on the back porch of his home. Resting inside, on neat stacks of cash, the contract was printed on a single slip of paper. One word: *Justene*.

Across the street, the sedan was barely visible in the drizzle. There had to be another car nearby. Gabe rubbed his hands and shivered. Heat was out of the question; the motor's fumes could reveal him to police. He was exhausted and had been for months, but was wide-awake. Fear did that. Fear kept him awake at all

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hours, fear of her dying and fear of the loneliness, of the future. They had been childless. It had turned out that he was shooting blanks. He could never give her a life and in the end, he couldn't save hers.

He wrapped the steering wheel with his arms. He rested his chin, breathed in the acidic air, and stared at where the car had parked, and the peripheral world melted away. His vision collapsed down to that elusive shadow until it evaporated.

Gabe hit the wipers. He scraped his burning eyes and stared. The dark line re-emerged. They were waiting. "Why?" Gabe whispered. "What the hell are they waiting for?"

If he could just get this night over with, just get past this! He had made a mistake! He had taken the bait, the worst decision of his life. Now he was their prize. He was their big fish, a fat June hog.

Gabe released the wheel of the Cherokee and smeared his bifocals on his sweat-soaked shirt. Traffic was gone. Save for a few distant streetlights, the world was hidden. He should go to them, he thought. Go and tell them. It had to be them, who else would be out here in the middle of the night, in the rain? They picked this spot, who else? He clutched the keys that hung in the ignition. Just go tell them.

Twin shafts of silver cut into the night. The dark car surged across the road and gained speed. Gabe grabbed for the keys as the car swept up and stopped, inches away. He fumbled with the locks as the big man threw the door open and bodily yanked Gabe out. Broad hands ripped the jacket and shirt, exposing his white belly to the bright headlights. Another one stood in the dark and watched.

The big man threw Gabe face-first against the Jeep, and then whipped him around again. "He's clean!"

"So how much?!" the voice in the dark demanded. "What'll it take?"

Gabe's white torso trembled. "Wha, what?"

"Greed! How much more, Mr. Riplinger?"

Gabe's heart slammed convulsively. "No, no! I want out!"

A moment of sheer incredulity passed in the driving rain.

"What?" the big man almost laughed, his broad face, a contorted mask in the lights. "What?"

"I don't want the money! Please!" Gabe pleaded. "It's here, all of it!"

Gabe slowly turned, reached inside the Jeep, and wrestled the heavy box out. He pushed it at the tall man, who had taken a couple steps back. "It's all here. I just want out."

The two stood. Gabe again shoved the box at the taller man, but he took another step backward.

The one in the dark barked angrily. "It doesn't work like that! We have a deal!"

Gabe knelt carefully down and dropped the heavy box on the wet pavement. He then stood and climbed back into the Jeep, avoiding their eyes. Move fast. The nearest hospital is six miles away. Any second, just keep moving! The door slammed and the engine caught. Gabe threw it into gear, ducked low, and burned a wide, howling arc around the car.



Ten weeks later.

Trees blocked the light from the street, cloaking the house in darkness.

"Hold the light for me," the man whispered.

He handed her the small flashlight while he fished the key from his pocket and tried to slide it into the corroded lock. No luck. He turned the key over and pushed it in. Two clicking turns. He turned the knob and pushed.

A loud creak announced them. The black entry yawned.

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The woman's hand found the light switch on the wall and the toggle gave a sharp snap. There was only darkness. "Oh, great!" she whispered.

She panned the flashlight across the black room. Under the small orb, dark wooden floors stretched bare up to the walls. A black woodstove sat on a brick pad against the far wall. She strained to hear any sound, any noise, and her mind spawned images of mice, rats, or maybe a homeless person camped in an upstairs room. The dark house was a tomb. On the front porch, a wind gust pushed them. He nudged her in, picked up a box off the porch, and after stepping inside, closed the door with a thud.

"Ryan!" she whispered.

His voice smiled. "Cool!" he teased. "Let's light the fire."

"Should we be here, now?"

He stepped toward the woodstove and set the box down on the brick base. She trailed, holding a boxed pizza, a medium Hawaiian with extra pineapple. Under the flashlight, he fished out two short, red candles. He lit both and slowly set them on the mantel. Reluctant flames cast a feeble light. From his box, he crumpled a few pages of newspaper and stuffed them inside the stove. On this, he placed several pieces of dry pine kindling and a few larger pieces. He lit another match and the dancing yellow curl spread slowly. The pine caught and began popping.

He closed the stove door and whispered. "The bags."

They exited the house and hurried down the dark steps to the truck. Wind gusts carried fat raindrops. Inside the truck, he grabbed sleeping bags; she took a plastic bag containing two bed pillows. They returned to the front porch as a loud deluge of rain commenced. Once inside, she locked the door.

He rolled out the sleeping bags in front of the fire. She laid the pillows at the head. He produced an opener and opened a bottle of wine, a brand just expensive enough to warrant a cork. He set two stemmed glasses on the brick and filled them. They glowed ruby in the firelight. She unlaced her black boots and slipped them off and he followed her lead. They peeled off

winter coats and sat down on the bags. He took both glasses and handed her one.

She smiled and whispered. "We did it."

Smiling broadly, he lifted his glass. "To us."

They tapped glasses. "To us."

She took a sip. He tipped his back and emptied half of it. They rose on knees and embraced, arms enfolding and hands exploring. But then she pulled away. "It's cold."

He opened the stove and filled it with pine. He rubbed his hands furiously while the storm drummed the windows and the house cracked with the wind.

She turned toward the black windows, and then the deep shadows that cloaked the hallway and stairs. "You're sure we're alone?"

"Just us."

Her eyes hesitated in the shadows. "How do you know?"

He filled his glass again and topped hers off. "Meggy, take your clothes off."

She returned to him and took a brave gulp of wine. The growing fire poured heat into the room. She smiled mischievously. "You don't want any pizza?"

He shook his head. "Not pizza."

She arched up and pulled the sweater over her head, disheveling glossy brunette hair that tumbled down over her shoulders. He gazed at her, in snug jeans and a black bra. He emptied a second glass of wine. She reached behind and slowly released the bra, and the firelight danced across her breasts. He fought off his sweatshirt and they entwined again, all at once kissing and struggling to rip off the other's jeans.