

“Get the girl,” the voice whispered once more.

Slowly, Logan Harper opened his eyes. It had been the dream again, always the dream.

*Get the girl.*

He knew the words wouldn't completely go away. They defined him now. He'd come to accept that. The best he could hope for was to force them to the back of his mind, and make them a distant whisper he could almost ignore.

Almost.

He reached for his cell phone a second before its alarm started softly beeping. 4:05 a.m. It was time to get up, and start pushing the words away.

Creating habits had been the key. He'd developed a strict schedule that allowed him to go from one task to the next to the next. In the two years since he moved back to his hometown of Cambria, California, he'd basically done the same things everyday. In the mornings this meant a six-mile run, a shower, twenty minutes reading, then out the door to work.

The reading had been the hardest part. In the first few months, it had been almost impossible to concentrate on the words. His mind would drift back. He'd see things he didn't want to see. Hear things he didn't want to hear. But he kept at it, finally training himself to focus on the page and not on the past.

At 5:55 a.m., he would close whatever book he was reading, and head out. That Tuesday morning was no different.

Cambria was located on the Central Coast of California, almost exactly at the midpoint between Los Angeles in the south and San Francisco in the north. It had been a good place to grow up, but like most teenagers in small towns, Logan had seen it as confining. He couldn't wait until he turned eighteen and could leave, and that was exactly what he did—Army, college, a great job at a defense contractor based in D.C. He was gone fifteen years before everything changed, and the only place that made sense for him to go was home.

Now, instead of small and confining, he would have said Cambria felt right. But that wasn't really the truth. Nothing felt right to him. What Cambria was for Logan was a place where he could just be, and not worry if it was right or confining or safe or any of those kinds of things.

It was a way station between what was and...what he had no idea.

At his normal walking pace, it was eleven minutes from the front door of his apartment above Adams Art Gallery to Dunn Right Auto Service and Repair where he worked as a mechanic, but only if he was heading straight there. His routine included a stop at the Coffee Time Café for a large cup of French roast, black, and a toasted bagel with a light smear of cream cheese.

Tun Myat had owned the Coffee Time for nearly two decades. He was a seventy-something year old Burmese man who'd moved to the U.S. in the 1980s, and had been a close friend of Logan's dad, Neal "Harp" Harper, for nearly as long. He was always smiling, and never had a problem if a regular was a little short on cash. No one called him Tun, though. He was Tooney, even if you'd just met him.

As usual, the lights inside Coffee Time were all blazing when Logan arrived. He pushed on the door, but had to pull up short to keep from slamming into it when it didn't open. He took a step back and looked at the sign propped in the front window. CLOSED still faced out.

Logan was pretty much Coffee Time's first customer everyday, and Tooney almost always made sure the door was unlocked before he showed up. Peering inside, Logan looked through the dining area, past the glass cabinet that housed the pastries, and into the visible section of the kitchen. He couldn't see anybody, but Tooney had to be there somewhere. When Logan had run by an hour earlier, the lights had been off.

Chances were, Tooney was just running a little behind, and scrambling to get everything ready. If that were the case, he could probably use a little help, Logan thought. He decided to go around back and see.

Coffee Time was the second to last unit in a row of tourist-focused shops on Main Street. Logan headed around the last of the units, then toward the back. Just as he reached the end of the building, he heard a raised voice. He paused, worried he'd almost walked into something that was none of his business, then took a peek around the corner to gauge the situation.

Tooney had parked his old Ford Bronco directly behind the café like he always did, but this morning there was an unfamiliar Lexus sedan sitting beside it. That didn't necessarily mean anything. People had been known to leave their cars back there on occasion.

The door to the café was open, spilling light onto the cracked asphalt. But whatever voice Logan had heard was silent now. It dawned on him that it could very possibly have been a radio with its volume set too loud when it had been turned on.

He rounded the corner, thinking that must have been it, but he only made it a couple of steps before he heard a heavy thud and a short, muffled yell.

Not a radio.

Tooney. There was no mistaking the voice.

Keeping as tight to the wall as possible, Logan moved to within ten feet of the open door.

The voice from moments earlier spoke out again, a man's voice. Logan was close enough now to make out what he was saying. "Nod your head and tell me you understand," the voice ordered. Logan had never heard it before. "Good. Now sit up."

It was clear whatever was going on inside was not just a friendly visit. Logan's first thought was that Tooney was being robbed.

He glanced at the Lexus, automatically memorizing its license number. He knew the car could hold several people, which meant it was very possible the speaker wasn't alone.

Crime in Cambria was rare even at the worst times. For law enforcement, the town relied on the Sheriff's Department stationed out of Morro Bay nearly twenty minutes away. Logan pulled out his phone and started to dial 911, knowing they would never make it in time, but the sooner they were in route, the better.

He'd barely punched in the first number when Tooney's voice drifted out from inside. "Please. Just don't hurt--"

There was a hard slap.

Logan shoved his phone back in his pocket, knowing he couldn't waste time making the call, then glanced around, looking for something he could use as a weapon.

"You open your mouth again, and it'll be the last time. Understand?"

Nothing.

"Good," the voice said.

Logan spotted two three-foot long metal rods, in a small pile of wood along the back of

the building. Both had double lines of slots running down one side. Screw them to a wall, then insert hangers in the slots, and, bingo, instant shelving unit. Or grab one in each hand, swing them around, instant clubs.

He chose option two.

As he moved toward the door, he heard the sound of something moving, or sliding inside.

“...too much, and apparently doesn’t...” the man with Tooney said, the first part covered up by the noise, while the last seemed to just fade out. This was followed by a solid, metallic click and everything went silent.

Logan stepped into the doorway, and looked quickly around the room, ready to help his friend. Prep table, food storage racks, sink, dishwasher, stove, walk-in refrigerator, a stack of empty milk crates, Tooney’s small desk.

But no Tooney, and no man. No anyone.

As silently as possible, he walked to the doorless opening that separated the kitchen from the front of the café. But there was no one there either.

*Where the hell—*

He heard a voice, muffled and indistinct, to his left. He whirled around, his arms cocked, ready to strike. But there was no one there.

As the voice spoke again, Logan realized it was coming from *inside* the walk-in refrigerator.

He raced over and yanked the door open. A flood of chilled air poured over him, but he barely noticed it. Three feet inside, Tooney was kneeling on the floor, facing him. Between them was a man in a dark suit, pointing a gun at Tooney’s head.

Before the man could turn all the way around, Logan wacked him hard in the arm with

one of his improvised clubs. The man let out a groan of pain as he sidestepped past Tooney, and moved further into the refrigerator, away from Logan.

Logan slashed at him again, hitting the man's shoulder, and scraping the end of the metal rod across the man's neck.

"Son of a bitch!" the guy yelled. He twisted to the right so he could bring the hand holding the gun around toward Logan.

In a quick, double motion, Logan swung the rod in his left hand at the man's head, then struck downward with the one in his right at the gun. The man leaned quickly back to avoid being gashed across his cheek, but doing so caused the hand holding the gun to drift upward a few inches, right into the area Logan had aimed at.

Just as the rod hit the gun, the man pulled the trigger. A bullet raced by Logan's hip, then slapped into the wall of the refrigerator. Logan struck at the man's gun hand again until the pistol, a Glock, tumbled to the floor.

Unarmed now, the man staggered back, bleeding from both his neck and his hand.

Logan stood in front of him, ready to strike again. "Tooney," he called out. "Can you get up?"

"I think..." Logan heard a foot scrap across the floor. "Yes...I can."

"Go call nine-one-one," Logan told him.

The would be attacker laughed. "You're not going to do that. Are you, *Tooney?*"

Logan sensed the café owner hesitate. "Tooney, now."

That seemed to break the trance, and Tooney shuffled out the door.

"Who the hell are you?" Logan asked the intruder.

"Why don't you ask Tooney?"

Logan stared at him for a second. “Get comfortable. It takes the Sheriff a little while to get out here, and you’re going to be pretty damn cold by then.”

The guy began to smile. “I can handle a little cold. Can you?”

The last word was barely out of the man’s mouth when he charged. Logan whipped a rod through the air, smacking the man in the side of the head, but it didn’t stop him. With another step, the guy had moved inside the range of the clubs.

Logan quickly let go of them, then grabbed the man by the shoulders and tried to guide the attacker’s momentum passed him, not through him. He was only partially successful, though, deflecting the man away from his chest, and into his shoulder.

The man staggered, then started to go down. Reaching out, he latched onto one of Logan’s belt loops, and they both ended up tumbling to the floor.

Logan found himself on his back, with the man on top of him. He threw a quick punch into the man’s ribs. But instead of responding in kind, the man shoved Logan in the shoulders, and pushed himself up.

As soon as he was on his feet, he started searching the floor, obviously looking for the gun, but Logan spotted it first. He kicked the man in the hip, knocking the guy sideways into a stack of egg crates, then got his foot on the gun, and shoved it out the door.

The moment it passed through the opening, Logan realized it was a mistake. He jumped to his feet, but the man raced outside first.

Almost immediately the door began to swing shut. The guy was doing to Logan what Logan had been planning to do to him.

Logan pressed his hands and arms against the door, trying to stop it from shutting. But the man had the leverage, and the door kept getting closer and closer to sealing Logan in. Then,

with just a few inches to go, it suddenly jammed to a halt. For several moments, the man continued pushing, trying to close the remaining gap, but the door wouldn't budge.

There was a grunt of frustration, then the pressure from the other side ceased. Logan pushed the door open just in time to see the man grab Tooney and throw him into one of the storage racks, then race outside.

Stepping quickly out of the refrigerator, Logan spotted what had kept the door from closing. The Glock had caught between the door's lower lip and the refrigerator frame. He scooped it up, and started for the rear exit, but a moan stopped him before he could get there.

Tooney was trying to get off the floor, but wasn't having much luck. There was blood on the side of his head, and a dazed look in his eyes.

"Stay down," Logan said as he knelt beside him. "I'll call for an ambulance and let the Sheriff know what's going on."

Tooney jerked under Logan's hand. "No," he said. The look in his eyes wasn't fear. It was terror. "No police. No ambulance. I be okay."

Outside, the sedan's engine started.

"Tooney, you're hurt."

Tooney sat up. "I'm okay. Just cut. Can clean myself. No problem. No police. Please, Logan. Don't call them."

Logan stared at the old man, confused.

"Please," Tooney said again.

Though Tooney was injured, nothing looked fatal. Logan thought for a moment, then grabbed the keys he'd spotted earlier on Tooney's desk, and headed toward the back door.

"What are you going to do?" Tooney asked.

But Logan was already outside, so even if he'd had an answer, Tooney wouldn't have been able to hear it.

There were only two ways out of town—either north or south, both on the Pacific Coast Highway. North was the tourist direction, the scenic route. It went past Hearst Castle and then up a long, winding road through Big Sur to Monterrey. It was a slow drive with few outlets for a hundred miles or more. The one to the south led to Morro Bay, then over to San Luis Obispo and the 101 Freeway. From there, the whole country opened up.

Logan barely paused at the red light before turning south. It was the only way Tooney's attacker would have gone. Once on the highway, he jammed the accelerator to the floor, then pulled out his cell phone. But as hard as it was not to, he didn't call the Sheriff or an ambulance.

"Jesus, Logan. What time is it?" his father asked, sounding half-asleep.

"Get over to Tooney's café right away," Logan told him. "Have Barney drive you. He used to be a doctor, right?"

"Why? What's going on?"

"You'll need a first aid kit."

"Logan, what happened?" Whatever sleep had been in Harp's voice was gone.

Logan hesitated. "Tooney's had an accident."

He could hear his father throwing back his covers. "My God. Is it bad?"

“He didn’t think he needed an ambulance.” Logan knew it wasn’t exactly answering the question, but it was the best answer he could give.

“I’ll call Barney... Wait. Aren’t you there?”

“Not any more.”

“Why not? Where are you?”

“Just hurry, Dad,” Logan said, then hung up.

Nearly four minutes passed before he spotted the Lexus’ taillights climbing up the other end of the valley past Harmony. At least he hoped it was the Lexus. It was about the right distance away, and he couldn’t see any other lights further along.

He did his best to close the gap, but the other guy was driving a late model sedan, while Logan was trying to get all he could out of Tooney’s old Bronco. Still, he was able to trim the sedan’s lead to less than a mile by the time the other car disappeared over the lip of the valley.

After that, they entered a stretch of the road that wound through the hills toward the ocean, making it almost impossible for Logan to keep track of the other car. Every once in a while he would catch a glimpse of lights ahead, but that was it.

As the miles passed, night began to finally lose its grip on the land. On most days he would welcome the dawn, but not today. The taillights that had been easy to spot in the darkness were becoming harder and harder to pick out. Then, as the hills on the right fell away to reveal the bay, there were no lights ahead at all. Logan knew the guy still had to be up there somewhere, so he kept going, driving through Morro Bay, then inland to San Luis Obispo.

But not once did he see the Lexus again.

A block from the entrance to the freeway, he reluctantly pulled to the side of the road. There were just too many directions the man could have gone from there.

Logan had lost him.

For several minutes, he sat motionless, feeling the weight of his failure in his chest. He'd done it again. No matter what his intentions had been, he'd failed.

Finally, he put the Bronco back in gear, turned around, and headed for home.

Just as he passed the San Luis Obispo city limits, his cell rang, the display screen simply reading: DAD.

"Where are you?" his father asked.

"Slo, but I'm heading back now." Slo was local slang for San Luis Obispo.

"Don't."

"Why not?"

"We're coming there."

It wasn't until that moment that Logan noticed the distinct hum of tires coming from the other end of the line.

"Why?"

"Barney talked Tooney into letting us take him to the hospital." Cambria was too small for its own hospital. The closest was in Slo. "He's worried Tooney might have some internal bleeding, and he doesn't want to take a chance. Me, he says, I only need a few stitches."

That last part was such a matter of fact add-on that Logan almost missed it, but the second it sunk in he hit the brakes and pulled to the side of the road. "What do you mean stitches?"

"I'm fine. Don't worry about it."

Over the line, he could hear Barney yell out. "He knocked his head against a storage rack when he tried to help Tooney stand up."

“Dad! What the hell?”

“What the hell what?”

“What the hell were you doing trying to help him up? You’re eighty years old!”

“I’m not eighty for three months!”

“Dad!”

“What was I supposed to do? He couldn’t get up on his own.”

Logan rubbed a hand across his eyes. “How many stitches?”

“None yet.”

“I mean, how many does Barney think you’ll need?”

“I have no idea.”

Logan knew there was no use arguing with him. “Which hospital?”

Logan watched from the window of the Hamilton Memorial Emergency Room as the others arrived. But it wasn't just Barney, Tooney and his dad like he expected. The rest of his father's buddies—Will Jensen, Jerry Kendrew, and Alan Hutto—walked in right behind them. They referred to themselves as the Wise Ass Old Men, or WAMO. Which, of course, didn't make sense to Logan at all since the M and the O should have been reversed.

When the nurse at the reception desk saw Tooney enter with Harp under one arm and Barney under the other, she called out to one of her colleagues who then rushed over and took charge. Soon Barney was sitting in a wheelchair, being rolled toward the back with Logan and the WAMO troupe following right behind.

One of the orderlies asked, "Can someone tell me what happened?"

Logan was about to speak when his father, sporting a large square of gauze taped to the side of his head, blurted out, "He was mugged," then shot his son a look that was clearly telling him to keep his mouth shut.

"Mugged? Where?" San Luis Obispo County was a far cry from being the crime capital of California.

"Cambria," Barney said.

“He was on his way to work,” Harp quickly added.

“Cambria?” the orderly said, even more surprised.

“Probably one of those tourists,” Will said.

“Did anyone see it happen?”

Again Logan’s father glanced at him, then shook his head and told the attendant, “I was going in for an early coffee and found him in front of his café. Barney here’s a retired doctor. He was close, so I called him.”

“I thought it best if we brought him in right away,” Barney explained.

The automatic door to the examination area slid open as the group neared, but the orderly held up his hands, stopping everyone except his two colleagues and Tooney. “I might have some more questions later, but you’re all going to have to wait out here.”

“Hold on,” Logan said. “What about my father?”

“Your father?”

Logan grabbed Harp by the shoulders, and turned him so that the gauze on the side of his head was clearly visible. The orderly stepped over and pulled the bandage back.

“What happened to you?”

“He fell trying to help our friend get up,” Barney told him.

The orderly frowned, then waved for Logan’s dad to follow him. “Let’s clean that out and stitch you up.”

The rest of them stood there until the orderly and Harp disappeared inside, and the door closed again.

Turning to Barry, Logan said, “You want to tell me what that was all about?”

“Harp should tell you,” Barney said.

“But *he’s* not here.”

“I’m sure he won’t be long.”

Before Logan could ask anything else, Barney and the others headed to the front corner of the waiting room and sat down. Instead of joining them, Logan took a seat right next to the examining area door, and waited.

Growing up, he had always been close with his dad. Working at the Dunn Right, camping on the beach, watching football all day on Sundays, these they did together right up until Logan left home. It was Logan who actually caused them to drift apart. As he became more and more involved in his new life, he lost touch with his old one. His relationship with his parents became a monthly call at best, and then, after his mother died, that call became holidays only.

When he moved back home, he’d expected Harp to be less than excited to see him. But that wasn’t the case at all. His father had treated him like he’d never been gone. It was exactly what Logan needed, and it had made him feel all the more ashamed. All those wasted years when he had forgotten what a good man his father was. Better than himself, for sure. He knew he could never—*would* never—let something like that happen again.

That’s why his father’s actions that morning were so confusing. What were his dad and his WAMO buddies up to? It just didn’t make sense.

It was about twenty minutes before the doors opened again, and Harp reappeared. A nice square portion of his head had been shaved, and in place of the missing hair was a new bandage. He took a couple steps out, stopped to adjust his shirt, then started up again, walking right past Logan without noticing him.

“Dad?”

Harp turned, surprised. “Did everyone else leave?”

Logan shook his head, and pointed to where the others were sitting, then said, “You want to tell me what that was all about?”

“The stitches?”

“Don’t play dumb, Dad. You know what I’m talking about.”

Harp sighed, then nodded toward his friends. “Let’s sit over there.”

“I think maybe you and I should talk alone, don’t you?”

But his dad was already heading across the room, so he reluctantly followed.

Once they’d joined the others, Logan said, “You lied to that attendant, Dad. What’s going to happen when he tells the police what you told him, and it doesn’t match the truth?”

“Who’s saying it’s not the truth?”

Logan stared at him for a moment. “Me. I’m saying that. I was the one who was there, not you. Remember?”

His father looked uncomfortable. “If we all tell the same story it is the truth.”

“If we *what*?”

“Tooney doesn’t want to make a big deal of this.”

“I don’t care what Tooney wants. It *is* a big deal. That guy was *not* trying to mug him.”

Harp took a breath. “He’d just rather not have the police involved, that’s all. I would think you, of all people, would be sensitive to that.”

“Excuse me?”

Trying very hard not to look at his son, Harp said, “It’s just...It’s over. He wants to move on.”

There were nods all around, the wise men suddenly existing in some kind of alternate universe from the one Logan inhabited.

“You told that guy Tooney was mugged. Mugging’s a crime, too, Dad. The hospital’s probably already called the cops.”

“We had to tell him something,” Barney said. “He looks like he was in a fight.”

“That’s because he was!” Logan told him, surprised once again. “For God’s sake, you’re a *doctor*.”

“Retired,” his dad threw in.

“I don’t *care* if he’s retired,” Logan said to him, then turned back to Barney. “Aren’t you morally obligated to do the right thing?”

Barney glanced at him for a second, then looked away. “In this case, I believe that we are doing the right thing.”

Logan sat back, and took in the lot of them. “Have you all gone senile?”

“Hey, that’s not funny,” his father said.

Logan didn’t care if it was funny or not. At the moment, he almost meant it. “You know what? You and your buddies can do whatever you’d like, Dad, but I know what the guy looks like, *and* I got the license number of his car. I’ll tell the police myself.”

He started to get up, but his father put a hand on his shoulder. “Logan, you can’t.”

“Really? Why not?”

“Because that’s not what Tooney wants.”

“We’re going in circles here, Dad.” This time he did stand. “I’ll check in later to see how he’s—”

“At least do me this much. Wait and talk to Tooney first. I’m asking you as a favor.”

Logan closed his eyes for half a second. His father almost never asked for favors. He stood for a moment longer, thinking about it before he gave Harp a single, terse nod, then sat

back down.

Harp patted him knee. "Thanks, Logan. Thanks."

The others looked relieved, too.

They waited for thirty minutes before the man who'd asked them the questions earlier finally returned. Turned out his name was Mayer, and he wasn't an orderly. He was one of the doctors on duty.

"Mr. Myat wanted me to give you an update," he said. "The good news is that there doesn't appear to be any internal bleeding. What he does have is a minor concussion, a cracked rib, and some cuts and bruises. We'd like to keep him overnight, but he's insisting on going home." The doctor paused. "He told me he lives alone. I would feel more comfortable releasing him if there were someone he could stay with for a few days."

"I got plenty of room," Harp said right away. "He can stay with me."

The doctor looked skeptically at Logan's father, his eyes glancing briefly at the new bandage on the side of Harp's head.

"What?" Harp asked. "It's just a cut. You saw it yourself." He tapped the bandage with his hand. "See. Doesn't even hurt."

"Harp's fine," Barney said to Dr. Mayer. "But I'll check in on both of them a few times a day, too."

"Okay," the doctor said, looking only semi-reassured. "I'll have him released. He should be out in just a bit. But..."

"But what?" Harp asked.

The doctor paused, then said, his tone even more serious than before, "It's procedure for us to report crimes of violence."

Logan shot his dad a quick told-you-so look.

“Since it happened in Cambria, I understand that falls under the Sheriff’s jurisdiction,” Dr. Mayer went on. “They’re sending someone over, but I don’t believe they’re here yet. So we’d appreciate it if you could hang around until they can talk with Mr. Myat.”

“Of course,” Harp said. “No problem. But, eh, Tooney doesn’t have to wait in back until they show up, does he?”

The doctor smiled. “Not at all. I’ll send him out as soon as he’s ready.”

“Thanks, doc. Appreciate it.”

After the doctor left, Harp eyed his son nervously. Logan was content to remain quiet, knowing it wasn’t helping his dad’s state of mind.

Tooney was wheeled out ten minutes later. Everyone smiled and told him he looked great and was going to be fine. The second part was hopefully true, but the first wasn’t even close. With a nasty bruise on his cheek and a couple of cuts—one on his nose and one near his temple, Tooney looked like a man in a lot of pain.

As the reunion ebbed, Logan caught his father’s eye, silently suggesting that now might be a good time for that talk he promised. Harp sighed, then nodded, and said, “Tooney. Logan’s having a hard time understanding the...eh...mugging issue. Thinks we probably should tell the truth when the Sheriff’s department shows up.”

“Not probably, Dad,” Logan corrected him.

His father frowned, but continued to look at his friend. “I thought it might be better if you explained to him...you know...”

Tooney gingerly turned his head in Logan’s direction. “Logan, thank you so much for helping me this morning.”

“I’m just glad I was there,” Logan said.

“I want you to know, I understand your concerns. But this matter...personal.

A...mistake.”

“A mistake?”

“A miscommunication, that’s all.” He hesitated, then added, “Please, Logan, for me, say nothing.”

“Tooney, he was going to kill you.”

“Please,” he said, his eyes pleading. “I beg you. This most important to me. Say nothing.”

A glance at Harp told Logan that his father, and probably the rest of the WAMOs, knew whatever it was Tooney was unwilling to share. Apparently, it was enough to convince these old men to lie to the authorities for their friend.

Behind Logan, the door to the outside opened. Given the way Tooney and his father tensed, it didn’t take a genius to know the Sheriff’s deputies had arrived.

Tooney glanced at Logan again, panic now joining the fear on this face.

“I really don’t understand,” Logan said, then hesitated. He was confused by the fact the six men in front of him, men who he respected, were asking him to do something that didn’t make any apparent sense. But respect was one of the things his father had stressed to him growing up, and it was hard to go against that, especially with this group. “I know I’m going to regret this, but if that’s what you want, fine.”

Without another word, he stood up and left before the sheriff’s deputies could be directed their way. Apparently, he didn’t have anything to say to them anyway, because, according to the others, he wasn’t even there when the incident happened.