

# *Finding Shelter from the Storm*



*Jefferson S. Williams*

# Prologue

When the Global War finally ended in 1942, the government and economy of the United States (and most other countries) shifted to a more socialistic approach to provide desperately needed resources for the surviving population. The 17 years of conflict had killed hundreds of millions of people and although the United States fared better than most, devastation was widespread, touching nearly every family. The President at the time, Meg Uditch, was well aware of the need for government spending to pull many out of the torment, yet it was balanced by concern that a permanent shift would forever alter the character of the country if short-term help moved to long-term dependence. Behind a veil of secrecy Uditch created an organization called the "American Sustainability Group" to slowly push policies supporting capitalism. ASG's primary mission was to reduce welfare rolls back to "normal" over time -- to drop the numbers requiring assistance by encouraging policies bolstering personal responsibility, solving one's own problems, learning from mistakes and embracing economic freedom.

ASG's first 25 members were altruistic believers of the cause and their

recommended bills came out of deeply detailed analysis using data-driven information including the possible unintended consequences of proposed changes.

Most bills encountered spirited and open debate on the House floor while the source of the proposals were entirely anonymous. As a result, it often took months for policy recommendations to develop into bills and even longer to possibly be accepted while the staff of ASG worked tirelessly with no appreciation.

The few million dollars of annual investment, however, yielded hundredfold results and for decades the incremental nudges meant to wean citizens requiring assistance worked while the economy grew. Despite the gains, by the mid 1960s an effort was made within ASG to offer information more quickly by reducing the amount of debate within the tiny organization since it seemed redundant. They often watched as House members simply re-argued the same points they already had. Human statisticians who understood the role of nuance within the English language were replaced with some of the first industrial computers to "crunch the numbers."

The makeup of ASG shifted too, from technocrats who relied heavily on science and statistics to bureaucrats who tended to start with a premise, then look for data to support it.

In 1968, Bernard Mertz became ASG's administrator. He believed the group should have even less human analysis and less oversight to speed up the process even more. To achieve that, the computer systems were upgraded to hold tax information, medical records, voting records and everything in between. The nuances of the English language were lost on the machines, which used pure statistics to simply answer questions. The "chaff" as Mertz called it, the role humans once played to weed out cruel ideas or foresee the "unintended consequences," were gone.

Question: "How can the number of people requiring food stamps be reduced?"

Answer: "Raising the bar to obtain food stamps will naturally reduce rolls. Users by choice will pull themselves out. Those truly desperate will remain, then slowly better their situations."

The humans were left to figure out how to "sell it" as Congress still had to approve changes, and debate for that still occurred on the floor. In 1975, Mertz was replaced with Tom Cash, who saw Congress as an obstruction to taking Mertz's positions over the goal line "by any means necessary." Against policy, he used the system to pose questions unrelated to societal economics.

"How can ASG become more autonomous?"

"Operate under the radar. Make information harder to access. Increase privacy. Supply ASG findings to politicians who can champion them. Consolidate power."

Cash ran with it. Just before three congressmen were to hold closed hearings on ASG's already-behind-closed-doors operation, he orchestrated an attack on the floor of the House, killing the three disguised as an unrelated terrorist attack. It scared the nation and law makers to make the capital more secure. All debate moved behind closed doors to not fuel "misguided hatred." The fake terrorists were labeled as people who couldn't cope with or solve their own problems, only bolstering the philosophies of ASG.

Cash immediately removed ASG from all federal funds, operating "off books" by using their systems to make investment decisions. With its coffers overflowing, ASG became an almost shadow government as the core members reduced from 25 to just eight who all shared his philosophies.

Congress became irrelevant and the number of senators dropped from two to one per state. There was no judicial branch to challenge such changes, no constitutional amendments to be ratified and no hearings required. The end result further consolidated power in the executive. What started as an altruistic entity became the toy of a group of

sociopaths, people who felt the world would be better without "leeches" draining limited resources. Cash found several champions in the Senate who naturally wanted to shrink the size of government. Libel laws were strengthened, access to economic data became more challenging for all but ASG, as did legal information, and over a few decades nobody but the core members of ASG were any the wiser. Cash's final question in 1978: "How do we permanently reduce healthcare costs and numbers of future people with expensive conditions?"

Answer: "Make preexisting conditions difficult. Raise deductibles. Institute lifetime maximum coverage, make it difficult for DNA-based abnormalities to propagate for all but those who can pay their own way, and the population will self select."

Cash supplied a laundry list of bills to push through using key senators, chief of whom was Senator Michael Gouss from Arkansas who never met a bill he didn't like if it cut spending. Around the same time he discovered James Carns, who would become Cash's final project. Carns was the first open "Theocrat" in Congress before becoming the lone senator from California. He and his family and friends outwardly believed in a "prosperity doctrine" -- a belief that most wealthy people were wealthy because they made consistently good decisions, abilities

that came from their creator. Ultimately that ease of existence stemmed from ASG, which had made it easier for the wealthy to stay wealthy. Cash planted a seed that Carns, a charismatic and shrewd politician, saw grow to fruition, a promise that there was a source for brilliant decisions that could get him elected President. When Cash set in motion a chain of events recommended by ASG's super server that did exactly that, it further convinced Carns that he was in power largely from an infallible benefactor. Once President, Carns tapped Gouss to be his Health and Human Services director, and together their feelings of superiority flourished even more.

In 1990, Cash died and his chosen successor, Phil Hastings, who always went simply by Hastings, saw former members of ASG as possible security leaks. He began surveilling them and when needed had them killed. With a vast network of assets without any clue who or what they were actually working for at his disposal, Hastings continued feeding senators bills and President Carns executive orders, further tightening the nooses by pulling the levers for almost everything from tax policy to healthcare. Nobody was capable of understanding what was really happening; there was a shortage of information, asking questions could result in libel cases, personal privacy was paramount and solving your own problems was your responsibility. Carns was so

cemented in his beliefs that by 1994, whenever questioned if he'd consider alternate paths, he'd simply reply, "When pigs fly."

However, not Carns nor even the ASG super servers, which seemed to account for everything, were capable of foreseeing two things: Lidia Underwood and Will Milner. For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction and the two almost 21-year-olds were in the final stages of preparing their attacks, when the pigs Carns referred to would try to fly.

But if ASG wasn't capable of adequately understanding the threats two kids posed, then Lidia and Will were certainly at an even larger disadvantage, having only a hunch. Both groups would pay an enormous price for their lack of information on the other.



# Part 1

## Chapter 1

### *Trapped*

*Our situation is simple for him and me.*

*We are two players in a game of Life. I'm*

*A and he's B.*

*The rules of our game the rule makers claim*

*are fair*

*They are not, we are certain, but will anyone care?*

*Play alone or together the board has not a safe space.*

*Every move every option takes us to a dangerous place.*

*So we'll do what we must in order to survive:*

*Try to break this game while getting out*

*alive.*

Lidia often wrote her poems in calligraphy, two skills she learned from Tim years earlier. Her works were loaded with metaphors, double and sometimes triple in meaning. College poetry, philosophy, economics and sociology classes frequently refer to her work for inspiration to this day, while others consider her a destructive weak snowflake with emotional references to safe spaces, despite "the events."

As eloquent and cerebral as Lidia was, she had her other side: sarcastic, witty, occasional pervasive use of extremely salty language and a deep love of irony. She penned the now-famous short poem within hours of learning the larger extent of the problems she and Will faced. With a quill pen in hand set to parchment she spoke. "Man, this blows! We're basically turbo fucked."

He had asked her what she wanted to do about President Carns and Health Secretary Gouss once they knew "enough."

"Do you want to just kill them? Because we could do it." Properly motivated, Will could be the closest thing to an angel of death, and nothing gave him more motivation than punishing those responsible for harming Lidia.

"No. There's a fate worse than death; we just need to find it."

She'd find that fate herself while searching the playground of her imagination, a place where anything was possible -- a dozen different ways to kill not two but three birds with a single stone, scratch five itches with a single scratch, all while coming up with absurd chains of brilliant misdirection to keep true intents hidden. If wired slightly differently, Lidia would've been an excellent serial killer. Her crimes so spectacular, she'd stump Sherlock Holmes as body after body dropped around him, clueless until the end when he too died, not by something as uninspired or cliché as a bullet or knife, but instead something ironic and darkly humorous, like being smashed by an out-of-control delivery truck covered with "Safety First," "How's my driving?" and "We hire only safe, courteous drivers" banners. If Will approximated an angel of death, then Lidia approximated the angel of mercy and Loki, the Norse god of mischief. Whether a fan or detractor, every person alive unknowingly owed their very existence to her; without her the plan would have been far bloodier. As it was, the plan was plenty bloody, so outrageous and so filled with pieces of both of them that friends, strangers, investigators and even foes would have no choice but to wonder what the hell had happened for things to go so right *and* so tragically wrong.

# Chapter 2

*Thursday, March 28, 1996*

After three hours the novelty was gone. The initial clacking and rocking, almost charming at first, was uncomfortable, loud and cold, and they had eleven hours left. Their final errands were not grocery runs or trips to the coffee shop or gym, it was 14 hours in a rail car from Denver to Omaha for a car and remaining supplies. They couldn't have driven Lidia's 32-year-old 1964 VW Bug. It couldn't have made the journey, but more importantly, they needed a car nobody knew with papers difficult to trace, because if Kyle Bitner so much as sniffed betrayal they were doomed and their few friends would all be ruined by President Carns.

The railroad had no reason to clean the stock car of "debris" from the cattle that had occupied it just hours before. If found, they would have been tossed, beaten or both, which would have been a death sentence for Lidia. The staples holding her mid-section were still vulnerable. A well-placed punch or a hit from a baton and it would be over before they even got out of the gate.

Ironic really -- had it not been for Lidia's appendix rupturing days earlier Will wouldn't have panicked and they wouldn't be on the train,

yet they'd be less safe because they wouldn't have known what they knew. The twisted logic and paradoxical ramifications of it all kept the pair entertained for the first 30 minutes, but soon the aroma of cow feces and urine fueled Lidia's nausea. Add the rocking of the train, her recent surgery and a steady diet of mostly creamy soups, and she was desperately trying not to puke, a few times losing that war.

Each time she'd begin again with saltines, water and a wintergreen Certs, Lidia's "road hurling kit" of sorts. After a few hours they were either used to it -- or the stiff winds of the Colorado prairie were clearing the air more regularly.

"Will, I have a question," She said as they entered the Fort Morgan area.

"It better not be 'are we there yet?', because if it's *that* shit again I'll ..."

"You'll what? Push me off the damned train? You and I both know that's not going to happen. You wouldn't last 20 minutes without me."

Will chuckled. It was too true.

"Although, I've got to say, had I known about this horrific smell? I would've just called Kyle and President Carns to negotiate. Maybe they'd pick me up in town and we'd all share a large Shimmy Shake, chocolate mocha to be specific."

They burst out laughing. With their lives hanging in the balance they found humor in the absurd, just as they had done since first meeting a year earlier.

Shimmy Shake was a high-end malt shop of sorts with several Front Range locations. A large Shimmy approached \$8, and was Lidia's version of comfort food. During times of great stress, she could justify the expense and they had bought many lately.

When the laughter died down, Will got serious. "What's your question?"

"Are we there yet?"

"Goddamn it! How many times am I going to fall for that?"

Lidia's shrug matched her devious grin. "Until we're there -- speaking of which are we? Yet? You know, there? Yet?"

Will looked up, faux calculating. "No. But given the frequency and accounting for variations we'll have *this* conversation another 135 times."

"I'll look forward to each of them with a sense of awe and wonder."

She said as she softly pushed him. The train started to slow for town crossings.

They scooted away from the edges, where the light of the still-early morning sun was just starting to penetrate the lowest wooden slats.

Not quite April, their breaths hung within the car after each respiration. Both nearing 21-year-olds were covered head to toe against cold and for anonymity. Minutes later the train returned to 60 mph, the countryside interesting for a while; a few cars peppered amongst 18-wheelers along I-76, which occasionally ran parallel. They passed farms, grain elevators and a few wind turbines, a novel new source of power. Lidia was transfixed, never thinking such devices could exist. They were living in a time of some discovery. Four decades earlier biplanes ruled the skies, now one could travel by jet to Hawaii, an island chain discovered by ship just 100 years earlier.

They sat, walked around the car, grazed on snacks and drank water, much like the cattle that had their own rail journey hours earlier. A case could be made that the bovines had the better deal; they, at least, had been well cared for before heading to a slaughter they weren't even aware of. Lidia and Will were all too aware of the terror they were about to encounter.

She steadied herself and looked up through the slats at a plane cruising at high altitude. It was headed west, so maybe Los Angeles, she thought. She had never been on a plane. In fact, the recent train rides were her first times leaving Colorado, but as a young girl she often lay on her back with her hands behind her head in the grass of her Great



Aunt Elise's backyard in Fort Collins, just off Laurel Avenue. Right next to her was Tim Knotter, two doors away and a year older, best and only friend, and a stutterer and swearer of epic fricken proportions.

The two took turns speculating.

"W-w-w-where you th-th-th-think that o-o-one's going Lidia?" 8-year-old Tim had asked.

"Seattle. Two kids like us are on there to see the Space Needle."

"Th-th-they'd n-n-never let two a-a-assholes like us there."

"There's actually only *one* asshole here."

"Aw, th-th-thanks Lidia. I w-w-was just i-i-including myself t-t-to be nice."

They laughed until they rolled at that exchange, just as they did at many before and many after.

Lidia had tried to cure Tim of his swearing, but it hadn't taken long before she surpassed his salty mouth with her own. Swearing like a trucker by age 12 -- just as Tim had gotten away with it, so too would Lidia. She never made fun of Tim's stutter and was suspended from school for fighting those who did. That loyalty cut both ways. He'd walk with her to the cemetery, sitting for hours at the tiny placard proving that her mother Kendra had even existed, and helped her with school. But Tim had given her so much more than just calligraphy,

tutoring, foul language and friendship.

Lidia continued to watch the plane as a single tear dribbled down her cheek.

Will studied her face. As different as they were their backgrounds were eerily similar, but it was far more than that. They had respect, appreciation and above all an unwavering trust that together they'd see their way clear of multiple foes.

"You okay Lidia?" Will asked with a warmth that could have heated the rail car.

"Yeah thanks, been a long couple of days." She wiped her face and returned to scanning the sky, stopping her gaze at the moon, now lit by the growing sun.

"You think we'll ever go there?"

"Our dance card's a little full to add a moon landing attempt to our wish list."

"Piss off, Asshole. Do you? Man?"

"Technologically? Probably doable someday. I hope it's a woman first. Maybe our future daughter?"

Lidia saw an opening to ditch her melancholy.

"Slow down, cowboy. Just because you saved my life don't get any big ideas. I'll tell you what, why don't we discuss *that* next week? I'll

pencil you down for say Tuesday at 2:30? We'll do lunch. In the meantime? I'm keeping *my* horizontal dance card options open."

They cracked up again, then talked for hours about their incredibly complicated plan and all the things left to do.

Eventually Will just closed his eyes and was unreachable.

She would have hummed or sang but her voice was still raw, so Lidia just found a clean corner and thought about the last week -- both in and out of the hospital, Will's memory issues, their friends, jobs, school, crazy neighbors, the revelations of their pasts, just how awful the truth might be, and of course Kyle Bitner.

After many hours virtually alone and just before the Omaha switching yard, where workers would search the cars before they'd be cut and added with precision, Lidia woke Will as only she could. She grabbed a black plastic garbage bag and hugged it tight, and after he wrapped his arms around her they jumped into a weeded area using part parachute landing, part stop, drop and roll.

Will landed flat on his back, protecting Lidia from any damage. She got up, then he rolled to the side and pushed himself up.

"That had to hurt."

He tipped his cap. "No problem ma'am. Just bein' neighborly. Hope you reward this here cowboy with some feelings of amorousness in a

few days time, when we discuss sealin' our courtship over lunch." He walked away grabbing his back and limping a fake injury.

"Piss off, Asshole." It, or a variation thereof, was her calling card of sorts, a go--to.

They began the four-mile walk following a spur of tracks heading northwest, and once clear of the train found a stand of large cottonwoods bordered by a wire fence. Will stepped on the bottom while pulling the top as high as he could; he didn't want Lidia bending anymore than required as she slipped through. Within 36 hours she'd have no choice but to be nimble but at 20 years old every hour of healing counted.

Not wanting any proof of any kind of where they had come from or how they got there, they stripped down to their underwear and washed their hair with shampoo and water pulled from the bag to remove the cattle smell.

"Your robe, Madam Mosel," as Will wrapped Lidia in a large beach towel.

He then dried himself as best he could with a smaller towel before adding his to dry Lidia's hair more. He'd think of dead kittens to not turn the situation into another embarrassing scene involving obvious proof of arousal.

In minutes they were in different clothes, coats, gloves and hats.

Everything that was worn on the train sealed into the bag.

"Is it possible Kyle knows our plan?" said Lidia, resuming the walk.

"Our plans are really out there but you know as well as me, he's smart and if he catches wind he can blow us away and not just get away with it, but be celebrated."

"Ain't happening. Even if it works it's still going to suck ass."

"Nice to know a lifetime with me, regardless of duration, is such a downer."

"You know what I mean," said Lidia, painfully smiling.

"I know. It's going to hurt a lot of people, including us. I have an addition to the plan."

"If I can't have my moon landing I might veto."

"Fair enough. Let's write some letters in advance, open upon A,B or C sort of things for Rose?"

"It's a great idea but they'd have to be calligraphy and we don't have time. Fortunately, I already wrote them."

"*When?*" Will, stopping.

"You were in the zone-out of the century the other day, had hours. I should've told you."

"That's okay, your surprises tend to work out." Resuming their walk.

"Good, 'cause I might have another."

Will just shook his head. He didn't push; he, too, had surprises.

"If it works Lidia, all of it; President Carns ..."

"I know. I'd pay top dollar to see the look on everyone's faces when that goddamned pig enters the room."

Will smiled broadly.

"This plan's 90 percent yours, and it's truly brilliant."

Lidia didn't do well with praise. "We're a good team."

# Chapter 3

"What a shithole."

"Yeah, missing the train already," Will added sarcastically.

At least the 27-year-old Volvo looked ready to roll. Old Man Hooper appeared from the scrap yard shack and explained how the car was from an estate sale without heirs, some sort of accident, before alluding to an arrangement with the bank. The plates and papers were still valid and it had a full tank of gas.

The man was a pro after lots of "walk ups," but he'd never encountered Lidia Underwood. He worked to close the rip-off by first accusing them of being scofflaws, then of having enough cash only by selling drugs. Will had to leave the conversation.

He went to the edge of the yard overlooking a neighboring wheat field. Their money was all that remained from the wrongful death benefit of Will's father on a fishing boat 3 years earlier. Eric Milner had taken significantly less pay since the vessel was one of the few with liability insurance. Most in the industry worked for more pay but with all the risk, yet most of those fishermen were still alive. The paradox of his father's death plagued Will every minute of every day, just like all the others. The boat captain tested positive for amphetamines trying to

catch the quota of fish when he inadvertently knocked Eric, a deckhand, overboard in high seas off the Oregon coast. The funds were, in a way, from drugs, but not of Will's choosing.

"You should have dealt with him, he's the reasonable one," Lidia said to Hooper as she nodded towards Will. "Instead you insult us for no reason while lecturing about honesty when you and I both know you'll never report this sale? I'm now countering with \$3,100. Let's get this done before we freeze to death."

The howling wind and concealed buyers would have made giving descriptions impossible.

"The price is \$3,500 if you want no papers, lady, otherwise I'm calling the cops."

"Now we're getting somewhere." Lidia pulled an envelope out of a coat pocket. Hooper smiled, outstretching one hand while the other dangled the key. At \$3,500 he was going to make a lovely profit. Before handing the envelope over, Lidia carefully removed \$400. Hooper counted while Lidia waited.

"This is only \$3,100. You expected to pay \$3,500. I saw you stuff \$400 into your pocket," he said, nodding towards her left side.

Lidia reached but instead of removing the \$400, she pulled out two mini-cassette recorders, both running. She opened one and handed the



cassette.

"What is this? That's a serious offense," Hooper chided indignantly.

"We each keep one as copies of our contract. I'll give you \$3,100, which we both know is still a rip-off, especially since the heater barely works, something your ad didn't mention, and we'll go our separate ways." Lidia paused, letting Hooper catch up. "Or call the cops. Now we buyers will get heat for the *very* illegal recordings and lose our money and get locked up with solid meals for a while, which actually is starting to sound kind of pleasant." She waited again, letting it build.

"While the government goes out of its way to make an example of you by seizing your yard while tearing your banker friend's life apart. My guess is he's a close friend, maybe even family, won't *that* be awkward?" Lidia said condescendingly.

"Or kill us and bury us out here, but I told my parents we were coming out west for a car, and it wouldn't take long before the police come calling."

Hooper almost soiled himself.

"\$3,100's a win-win. Or a not-lose on our side and a not-get-ruined on your side. I'll crush my copy with my heel when we get back to Indianapolis." She waved her recorder, still running.

Hooper knew he had lost for the first time.

"Can we do \$3,200? My kids have to eat." He lied, he had no family.

"We *are* kids and *we* have to eat. It's about to drop to 3K."

"You better not get pulled over, you little hood bitch, because it isn't even traceable to the family estate without a ton of work. So I'll put this on your tape: I go down, my friends put your family down."

The man all but threw Lidia the key and stammered back to the shop.

He'd never report the sale, and Lidia would never crush her tape.

She turned and mumbled into her cassette, "Pleasure doin' business with you, you pig-eyed sack of shit." She stopped the recording and trotted to Will.

"I'm driving. Let's get the *hell* outta here."

Hooper's threats were largely exaggerated but it wasn't a place she wanted to be for long. Hooper made \$240 on the car and he'd worry over it until the day he died.

In minutes they merged onto I-80 westbound for the long drive back to Denver. Lidia's eyes were straight ahead as she casually whistled like a Sunday driver.

"What did you hand Hooper?"

She turned. "What you've told me about your father, Will, he was aces."

A nod was all he could muster.

"So, since you'll never forget what that dickhead said, maybe our

receipt will reduce the sting," she said, handing him the recorder.

Will held the device against his ear to overcome the road noise and the wind in which the conversation had taken place through a coat pocket.

He could barely make out Hooper's words but Lidia's were crisp.

When finished, he smiled.

"If the plan doesn't work, there's *still* hope."

"What would that be?" asked Lidia, driving three mph over the speed limit.

"That someone stumbles across that recording and makes it public, because that was *awesome!* You are a class A badass. What made you think to even do that?"

"I reused a small piece of the bigger plan. Figured if we're going to record Kyle then maybe we'd need to record something else. In fact, I literally called an *audible.*"

"How long you been sitting on *that* pun?"

"Since I saw the recorders at the pawn shop."

"You mean PWN shop? Because Hooper just got pwned! I wondered what you bought for \$1.24."

"I'm officially penniless and it's liberating. Anything I do from here President Carns is right, my simple problem is that I live beyond my means."

"Actually, you created a windfall of \$400. Any thoughts on how to spend this newfound fortune?"

She channeled Thurston Howell III from Gilligan's Island. "First, I was thinking of waxing the Jag here," tapping the dash, "maybe get in a quick 9 before downing a few \$22 gin and tonics at the country club bar. Lots of options, kitten."

She stiffened as a Nebraska State Patrol car entered behind, before passing 15 mph over the speed limit. Lidia nodded as the trooper gave her a look, smiling upon realizing she was attractive.

"Bullshit, wear a badge you can speed. Be born into privilege you can party your way through college and get a good job. Be a politician and legally rip people off, be part of some damned conspiracy, hell, be the worst kind of heartless dick bag like Kyle -- all bastards and you'll have it made."

Although he knew Lidia would be on point despite the long drive and stress, Will had to respond.

"You've restored some of our funds by paying a fair price instead of getting screwed *and* made me feel better, which makes you a winner in a losing game."

Will patted her leg. "So, like I said, class A badass. Those bastards you just spoke of? They're about to have a *very* bad day."

"They're going to have a bad rest of their goddamned lives. Thanks, Will, I needed that."

"And so did I." Nodding to the tape. "We *do* make a good team."

They drove in silence for a while.

"What?" said Lidia, feeling the eyes.

"There's one problem with Hooper having a tape. Your voice is going to be everywhere and it could prove we were in Nebraska."

"First, *his* recorder didn't actually work, the tape's blank, and thanks to the gloves, no prints." Wiggling her fingers.

"And second?"

"Pretty sure the first one's good enough, lovey." As Howell again.

"As for the savings, how about *one* brand-new two-person sleeping bag instead of two used singles? You and I both know we're going to get it on if we live." Lidia wasn't lamenting possible death, just facing reality.

"A nice, new double bag it is."

"We'll consider the bag situation practice sex. Our real one *will* be in a real bed." She paused as if doing math. "So I'm willing to go for ...

*10* practice rounds, *10*

awkward as hell, full-fledged what-the-fuck-just-happened sexapocalipses ... How long will this take?"

"Minute and a half." Instantly.

"*Each?*"

"No, total."

"Hmm, 90 seconds, 10 times equals 9 seconds per. What if we include foreplay?"

"That was in the number, Lidia."

Passing in the left lane was a 1985 Toyota Corolla with Virginia plates loaded with boxes. Mary Wren, fresh from FBI training in Quantico, was at the wheel as her husband Paul slouched in the passenger seat looking out his window. Paul started laughing.

"What?" Mary asked chuckling; anything breaking the monotony of the nearly 1,700-mile journey was serious conversation fodder.

"Those kids we just passed in the old Volvo are laughing their asses off. It's kind of infectious."

Mary looked in the rearview mirror and grinned widely. "Must not have a care in the world."

Her first case at the Denver office would be an investigation into two missing persons that would escalate into a chaotic ball of threads so interconnected that unraveling one only tightened others. It would push her relationship with Paul to the brink and question her allegiances to everything she believed. She'd shed more tears for Lidia and Will than

she'd think possible and emerge the most well-respected FBI agent in the country --but it would exact a heavy toll.

# **Thank you for reading the prologue and first three chapters of: Finding Shelter from the Storm.**

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