

## Chapter One

### **E**arly October 2015

The tall old man pressed against the rough concrete block wall, pushed his wispy silver hair—what was left of it—back along the sides of his head, and waited. The footsteps grew fainter then stopped, followed by the distant sound of a car door opening.

He had disabled a wall-mounted security light with a rock, but it still had a strange blue glow that didn't do much to illuminate the side of the store; he still felt exposed. He pulled his worn olive-drab coat tighter against the night chill, pushed up his thick glasses and controlled his breathing as best he could as the headlights of the saleslady's car swung around the corner then pointed toward the main road. After a moment, it receded and almost total quiet returned.

Wayne Robbins flexed his hands, scratched the psoriasis on his elbow, and shifted his weight, trying to relieve the stiffness that had formed in several joints as he had stood motionless in the semi-darkness. Damn the saleslady: why didn't she leave on time? And damn this fucking arthritis. And damn the knee surgery. At 73, he was still tall and trim and broad. *Why didn't my insides look as good as my outsides?* he thought briefly but then returned to the task at hand.

A string of cars on US 41 passed and he used the ensuring silence to slip around to the front corner and peek inside the store. All was deserted; the I.J.C. sign was unlit outside and the lights were off inside; the security alarms and lights and cameras were dead—as planned; he had taken care of that earlier in the day. Robbins looked along the faces of the other stores in the strip center: Only the Subway at the other end had some action. Except for the occasional storefront sign, the center was dark enough. No problem.

He crept silently to the fancy French door and studied the latch; his device was in place: To the saleslady, the bolt would have sounded like it penetrated the hole in the jamb and it would sound like it was secure. And for thirty seconds, it would even feel like it was secure. But, of course, it wasn't.

He felt for the fob in his pocket and pressed the blue button. He was rewarded with a soft 'click'. *Brilliant!* Every time it worked he thought that this invention definitely could find a market; maybe he should start *toolsforthieves.com*. He had proven its effectiveness eleven times before this. That success rate wasn't something he could put on a web site, though, but maybe...

*Back to now, Wayne!* he ordered himself. *Concentrate!* Ten more seconds passed and another ‘click’ was heard. He tried the door and it slid away from its home far enough to allow the man to slip inside. He removed the device from the strike plate and re-locked the door. In the faint light from the parking lot, he felt his way around to the back room then to the rear door. No lights were on, no alarms went off, and the red light on the security camera was dead. As planned.

Betty was there, pressed against the outside wall, waiting, her blue/white/blond hair reflecting the partial moonlight. She had her old pea-coat pulled tightly around her.

“It’s cold out there,” she said as she entered and gave her accustomed sigh; it was part relief that no one could see her now, and part excitement, and part—a big part—a complex fear. After 72 years of living, the cruel cancer hadn’t yet taken control of her body or mind. She used to be tall and thin. But now she was noticeably shorter, stouter, and starting to hunch. *Damn Osteoporosis!* It was eating at her as surely as the cancer was. But from that face, which had wrinkled and tightened over the cheekbones that Wayne still loved even after 48 years of life together, her eyes shone with the fire of youth.

“Let’s do it,” she said, after clearing her throat louder, Wayne thought, than was appropriate under the circumstances.

“Seriously?”

“Sorry. Reflux.”

“Jesus. Stop already,” Wayne said as they moved toward the display room up front. “Anyway, I still don’t think it’s reflux.”

*Find a way to keep your heart-rate up, Wayne,* their doctor had said. *You too, Betty.* Keeping their hearts strong would at least delay the inevitable—his heart disease and her cancer—but it would give them a better quality of life. *Keep the Adrenalin up,* he said. *Find a way.* He had.

Wayne tried to quiet his own pumping heart. “I don’t think Doc Stevens would approve of this method of adrenalin control.”

“You say that every time, honey,” Betty said as she moved past him, drawing her hand lovingly across his stubbed white beard, and into the display room.

“Consistency is important.”

They crouched and kept to the shadows of the display room. Wayne got the key from the drawer under the cash register which he had taped open while the saleslady was busy earlier that day. He methodically unlocked every case as Betty pulled her reading glasses from her pocket then methodically followed, opening each drawer, removing the most valuable items: diamond rings, expensive watches, solid gold anything.

It took only ten minutes to gather their ‘take’, almost \$250,000 worth of jewelry at retail, Betty estimated. Of course, Benny would give them 30 percent, but that was up from 20 percent earlier in their career—less

than a year ago. Wayne had said that they should now get 40 percent after this job; a lowered risk factor had been proven; it was simple business. She agreed.

“You made a good choice, my dear,” Betty said. “Good location. Good quality stuff.”

“*We* made a good choice, partner,” Wayne responded softly with a broad smile. “We’re a team. And the stores still have a good selection. That’s something. He hasn’t cheapened the merchandise yet. Did you get the engagement ring you picked out?”

“Got it. By the way, was that a proposal earlier?”

Wayne laughed quietly. “Let’s get out of here. Check-check?”

“Check.”

Wayne moved to the electrical panel.

“Wait,” Betty called to Wayne.

“What? Jesus, be quiet.”

“I gotta pee.”

Wayne could see her smirk in the dark.

“Sorry, my dear.”

“Oh, for fuck on a stick. Hurry up.”

Several minutes passed before the toilet flushed and the door finally opened.

“They need to clean that bathroom. It’s not good.”

“I’ll call Paulson in the morning,” Wayne exclaimed sarcastically in a whisper. “It doesn’t matter.”

“It does to me. I care what people think. You done?”

“Yes. No one could ever tell the store had been compromised.”

“You’re so good at this. I’m proud of you,” Betty as she patted his shoulder and slipped out the rear door.

Shaking his head, he removed the last of four devices from the electrical panel, stood back and waited. The night lighting in the display area was now on.

He moved to the security panel. With a glance to Betty, he pushed the ‘Arm’ button and removed the device. After six seconds he heard the gentle ‘bing’ of the alarms being reset then turned and followed Betty through the rear door. He counted down in his head the 60 seconds it would take before the system would be re-armed. He relocked and closed the door then followed Betty to the Toyota Yaris (*the perfect Toad*, the salesman had said), climbed in and removed his latex gloves.

He threw the gloves on top of the ‘Palmer Electrical Services’ uniform he had worn earlier and smiled.

Five seconds later the security light over the rear door went on. “Done,” he said.

“What a rush. I love this,” Betty said as she drove along the back of the strip center to the south exit and pulled onto US 41 for the 30-minute drive to the KOA RV park in Forsyth, Georgia. “It’s easy.”

Wayne didn’t disagree as he watched the scenery pass by.

“My support hose itch,” Betty said.

“We’ll be home soon.”