

Prologue

Arriving at his modest home a bit later than some mornings, Warren Dawes took the delay in stride. Rain was at fault and that couldn't be helped. He drove as a substitute for the local school system, and rainy days were a sure thing for him. Regular drivers would call-in sick for fear of dealing with the screaming kids and the weather. A wreck could mean the loss of the job and worse. The two didn't bother this man. He had patience if nothing else.

Sliding down from the seat of his pick-up truck, the man fought off the urge to grab at his stiff and sore lower back. It was just over ten years since the accident. The injury he sustained prevented any work other than his part-time job of driving a school bus.

A slow and deliberate step up to his backdoor led to the warm interior of the house. He threw his keys on the kitchen table and noticed the red blinking light on his phone. Caller ID showed an odd number for the incoming call. It read 1-800-555-1115. The voice message was only one word, "Jamie."

Without reaction to the message, the man made a pot of coffee and took four aspirins from a large bottle in the cabinet. Washing them down with a handful of tap water, he leaned against the sink and watched the brewer do its work. When it was finished, he sat at a small, round table and stared at the phone as he drank two cups. Then he checked his watch. It was 10:45 A.M.

The number on the caller ID was really the message. In code, that number told him another call would come in on a burner cell, one of several he stored in a box on the shelf in his hall closet. The serial number of the correct one would end in 331.

Shifting through the box he found the correct phone and put a battery in it. Then laying it on the kitchen table, he poured yet more coffee, sat down with it, and waited.

At 11:15 A.M. the cell phone rang.



"Welcome to Oxford," the warden had said to her. He then leaned back in his large leather chair and smirked uncontrollably.

Natalie Barrett stood before the desk in her orange jump suit, hands shackled. She raised them as high as she could.

"I must admit," she glared at the warden. "I didn't expect this."

"Not sure what you expected, Miss Barrett. But this isn't a spa. You screwed that up for yourself."

The prisoner said nothing in response. She did react to the guard pushing a chair up behind her.

"Sit," the warden suggested.

"I'm fine," she muttered.

“You won’t think so in a few days,” he shot back. “This is Wisconsin, lady. Martha Stewart didn’t come here.”

He motioned for the guard to leave and leaned forward, both arms on the desk top. “Why did you screw up your stay at Alderson?”

“Didn’t like being a sitting duck,” she smiled.

“Somebody after you?”

“Everybody has somebody after them,” her eyes dropped to the floor.

“If you felt you were in danger you could have just said so....you didn’t have to set fire to your mattress and endanger others around you.”

Again, she had no response.

“Your old boss wouldn’t be pleased,” he said with a tease.

Barrett looked up into his eyes and glared at the man for what seemed a long time.

“You think he is my boss?” she laughed. “He’s nobody; we’re finished with him like everyone else. He’s not my boss... and he’s not who the guy is after.”

“You’re a smart woman, Barrett,” he said like it was difficult for him. “Who do you think is after you?”

Natalie Barrett raised her head and tilted it to one side.

“We’ll see,” she said softly.

“Nobody can get to you in here, Miss Barrett...nobody.”



The instrument chirped and danced around on the table top for nearly a full minute. He’d watched it from his leaned back position in the wooden chair, finally reaching out and putting his cup down. The part time bus driver then picked up the cell phone and answered it.

“Jamie?” he asked curtly.

“This is Jamie,” the voice responded. “Is this Warren?”

“You know it is,” Dawes said picking his cup up again. “What can I do for you?”

“You still into wet work?” the caller asked in a matter-of-fact tone.

“That depends, my friend,” Dawes answered calmly. “Who do you represent?”

“You worked with us before...in Arkansas in ’14.”

“Okay,” the man responded. The strange voice and name meant nothing to him, but that date sure did. “How deep is this job?” he asked.

“We need one individual sanctioned.”

“One?”

“Yeah...just one. But getting to him will be your challenge.”

The man turned his cup up and finished it off. He twisted his head as though loosening up and spoke again.

“Particulars to box 826 and then call me in a week,” he told this voice called Jamie. “We’ll talk then.”



Prisoner number 37624-88 responded to a knock on the wall of his cell in the maximum security wing of Oxford, Wisconsin’s Federal Correctional Facility. A note appeared through the crack near his wall-mounted bunk. Propelled by a soft draft of air, blown through a plastic straw, the folded paper jutted through the broken concrete.

The prisoner reached up and pulled the paper from the wall. He unfolded it and read the simple note several times.

Your release possible, it read in miniscule type, your talents needed for job.

At the very bottom were two other words, typed in separate locations, interested on one side... and no on the other.

Jackson Terrell stood and walked to his far wall, some four feet away. Leaning his head against the cold, rough surface the thought process didn’t take too long.

He still had seven years before any consideration of parole. He tore the word, “interested” loose from the small paper and folded it. Wadding the rest into a tiny ball, he swallowed it whole and stepped back to the crack in the wall. The folded one word response was slipped back into the crack. He pulled his own plastic straw from a cup on the sink and blew the paper deeper into the wall. Then he tapped the wall with his fist.

Prisoner 37624-88 lay down on his bunk and smiled at the ceiling.

Whatever they want is better than rotting in here, he thought quietly.