

1.

Grassley Oaks

Present Day.

IF SOMETHING WAS going to go wrong, but wrong in a big way, it was going to happen somewhere between three and four a.m. At that time, the remnants of the night owls crossed paths with the advance team of the early birds, like that old Warner Brothers cartoon where the coyote and sheepdog meet as they punched their timecards.

The only thing was: this is Grassley Oaks. Nothing ever goes wrong here – at least not in a way that anyone would ever notice. Grassley Oaks, or *GO* as people liked to style it, was a small town in the San Bernardino Valley. East of anything that happens. High school kids suffer heartbreak and broken nails. Local homeowners are beset by drought every year, and every year it is “the worst drought in 150 years.” Grassley Oaks, founded in 1854, hasn’t been around since the worst drought.

He wondered what they were saying back then? Worst drought since the future?

Things like this sometimes niggled at the keen-edged mind of Raymond R. Winston of Winston Private Security and Investigative Services. With his feet on the edge of the desk, he lancinated the question gingerly, turning it over and reassessing it, until he heard footsteps in the outer office. Annie didn’t like seeing his heels scuffing the desktop. He brought them down quietly and began shuffling the papers on his desk (it

was actually a kitchen table not an office desk; no matter, it could still scuff). He wrinkled his brow meaningfully as the adjoining door swung open.

"Hey Ray," Annie said, addressing the collection of fragmentary black marks on the edge of the desk. She threw down a small stack of folders. "Receipts. Don't lose them."

Winston raised tired eyes at her and had no response.

"Is it about the Thimbleton kid? Have you been here since it came in? You have to get some sleep Ray. Or find her. What are you doing here?"

The call had come in at 3:20 this morning. Even the ringtone on his phone sounded frantic before he grabbed it. The ring was the siren blast from Ironsides.

"Yeah?"

"Mr. Winston! She's gone! Our Dorothy's gone. We've been looking for her all day and all night!"

"Yerruhmm...Who? Who's gone?"

Winston shook his head and the words wobbled.

"Dorothy Thimbleton? We called you yesterday and you said you'd find her? Mr. Winston?"

"Yeah ok. Mrs. Thimbleton, let me call you back in a minute."

"No more minutes, Mr. Winston. You PROMISED!" Her shrill pitch pierced his inner ear and jostled past the anvil and stirrup.

No one can wait. Nothing happens between now and breakfast. Do I even have any coffee? Or socks? The diner on Baltic will be open, unless Ken fell asleep on the flour sacks again. Something about familiar things at three in the morning makes you feel better. Like, hey! you're supposed to be sleeping, but aside from that everything is A-OK, as it should be. Lined up. Except the Thimbleton kid that is. Everything else is ok.

"And by the way - can't someone tell Elvira Thimbleton that I am not a cop? She should call them in to find her," he concluded. Annie was frowning.

"They can't jump in on a missing person so soon, you know that," she chided. She was looking through the papers on his desk. He pushed her browsing hand back. "A missing person isn't official until 24 hours. I think."

“True.”

When he arrived on the scene (was it a scene? A girl was missing so we don't know where the scene is), he asked Mrs. Thimbleton what she could tell him. And why were they standing in the middle of Pennsylvania at 3:52? Elvira Magie Thimbleton, from the moment he walked up, began to unravel. She had been running on pure adrenalin ever since realizing that Dorothy wasn't coming home after school. Dorothy was supposed to come home with a friend (Tia Carretilla, Winston jotted it in his notebook) because they had big Spanish exam the next day. Today.

“Dorothy might have changed her mind, I thought, but she made such a production about making food for her and Tia and cleaning the living room and everywhere. She likes this girl and wants to get into her circle. I take it she's kind of popular.”

Clearly, the plan went awry somewhere along the way. It could easily have been that Tia just changed her mind. It could have been that they argued. Maybe Dorothy went to Tia's instead. But they were stationed right now in front of Tia's parents' house. 282 Pennsylvania Avenue, before the Short Line railroad crossing. Dorothy had not come here. Neither had Tia.

Winston was directing Elvira Thimbleton toward his car and then slowly back to her home as he ran through all the possible benign outcomes. She slowed and allowed herself to be directed and calmed. It was as if passing the burden on to Ray Winston made her feel a little better, more confident. He had a good record they told her. You could count on Ray Winston, they said.

“I'll do what I can, Elvira. I'll call you tomorrow.”

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No one could call when he was awake.

After having spent the better part of the day mulling in his office, a practice that Annie pointed out was less than productive, he finally gave up and headed back to his place to try his hand at sleeping. Maybe he would dream the answer. As it happened, he was in and out of dreamlike states already as he drove down the middle of the road, swerving in time to his closing eyes, then jerking suddenly awake. He made it home all right, but he might have done a better job parking. He placed one hand on the hood of his 1969 Dodge Charger, the warm metallic yellow rising up to meet him (he thought). No one will mind for now, he thought, left the car at its 47-degree angle from the curb, and went in to crash onto the sofa.

Like many things in his curated existence, the Charger held a special place for Winston. Not a race car, the muscle car belonged to his Uncle Ig until he decided to sign it over to his nephew Ray just minutes before the IRS pulled up with a SWOT team of auditors. Quick on his feet, Uncle Ignatius managed to squeeze by the bookkeeping stormtroopers every time. Although this time it had cost him a sweet ride.

The Charger did not have a single original part from 1969; the poor machine had been repaired and had parts swapped out and replaced so many times over the years that now this vintage roadster had a net age of about 17 months. But it ran like a dream, and it *looked* like the real thing – that was the important part to Winston. It had to be real. The idea of having an original '69 Charger parked in front of his 2020 duplex was all part of what made life good, even while it was dumping shit on him. The car was a moment of solace and comfort.

And the logo plate welded to a (fairly new) grill was a 1969 original.

From his prone position on the living room sofa, Ray Winston had not moved an inch during the intervening 14 hours since he landed here at eight last night. Now the phone's sirens reminded him why being in bed might have been better for him. Pain shot down his neck, across his shoulder, and caused his hand to spasm, dropping the phone onto the stained parquet below. God!

"What!?"

A pause. Someone inhaled nervously.

"Ray Winston? Did I wake you?" a tentative voice asked. "Ms. Parker said I should call you here."

"Yes, ok. Sorry. I was just... This is Ray Winston. How can I help?" Winston righted himself and strained his eyes open.

"I called your office earlier. Spoke to a Miss Annie Parker? She said you were the one who was helping Elvira Thimbleton find her daughter?"

"Yes, that right. Are you the father?"

"No – sorry! I am Neil Knudsen. I'm a friend of the family. I just wanted to call because we don't need you to work on this anymore. You can invoice Elvira for yesterday, but that will be all. And thank you."

“Did Dorothy come home?” Winston had to admit feeling a little relieved. He had not made a lot of headway on this so far. No headway. “What about Tia, her friend? Are they both back?”

“Just send the bill to Mrs. Thimbleton. Or you could send it to me if you want. I’m at 34 Marvin Gardens, above the pharmacy.”

Family friend Neil Knudsen hung up.

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The coffee was finally beginning to infiltrate his synapses as he sat on the front steps, wondering how he could have left the Charger like that last night. He had not even been drunk, just over-tired. He re-parked and sat back down. The coffee was still hot. His brain was starting to tick over. But not in a big hurry.

Only yesterday, in the middle of the night, he had been roused to come find a vanished girl – and her friend. After spending the better part of yesterday trying to figure out a plan, he finally decided to sleep on it. Now, barely finished with the sleeping part of the plan, he had been unceremoniously called off by a person that one might liberally describe as a stranger. Who is he and why had he called off the search. Where was Dorothy? Did someone know something about her?

This is why people called him. When they needed help, he helped. When they changed their minds, they could fire him and that would be that. Can’t do that with the cops. Once the police get into something, they take over all the decisions. No worrying about getting paid for a job well done. Or screwed up. Or ignored. Winston had never wanted to be a cop, but he could see the advantages sometimes. He would like to investigate something without having to worry about the expenses, the fee, or making the client happy. Really do a job from start to finish.

This case. He has been released. He should forget about it, go check in with Annie and see what else was going on. He could get the invoice written up and signed today – pad it a little and send it to Knudsen. He’d never question it. He called Annie. He told her about Knudsen and the phone call. Annie confirmed that there was no news about the girl yet.

“Did you call Mrs. Thimbleton and confirm that we’ve been handed our hats?”

“I did, but I didn’t talk to her. There was an answering machine on. She must be out at breakfast or beating the bushes.”

Ray Winston started back toward Sam's Diner to get more information and a side of eggs. The diner wasn't too big, a little dingy around the edges, but it was the only place to go in the morning for breakfast and chatter. If you wanted something quieter you could head out on the freeway to the I-Hop, but that's a lot of work for a little grease and quiet. Winston winced painfully at his own wisecrack and pushed open the door, jingling the useless bell. Elvira Magie Thimbleton was holding court in the back booth, a throng of white and blue haired ladies hung around her like geriatric Zeppelin groupies.

"Elvira."

"Oh hello, Mr. Winston!" She passed a knowing look around the table, as if to confirm that a character from her story had just appeared on cue. Her mood and demeanor had improved dramatically since last night.

Elvira Magie, her maiden name, had been the one girl that every man in Grassley Oaks dreamed about. In high school, she needed not walk in or stroll about as others would. She floated, feet barely skimming above the ground, at the center of a movable swarm that navigated the streets and walkways around her, seemingly adrift, but unmistakably directed by the will of the beautiful Elvira Magie.

After Tommy Thimbleton captured her heart, she remained the cynosure in Grassley Oaks with her steadfast entourage. Most had been with her since high school. Winston sneered at them as rock star hangers-on. Annie would call her an *influencer*. Whatever that meant.

When Winston came up, the groupies dispersed, although not very distantly, and he sat down across from the mother of the missing child. She did not seem as worried or as panicked as she was when she hauled him out of bed in the middle of the night. She had a brightly colored going-to-church kind of dress on, blues and greens, nothing garish. It appeared to be new. Winston clocked a very pronounced crease along the side that might have been a department store fold. He would have a look at Maurice's at the mall and see if they had the model. Elvira probably shopped there.

Elvira Thimbleton, far from grieving, was glowing. A spark glinted in her eye. A new dress. Winston had to ask.

"So I guess Dorothy's back safe and sound? Where was she?"

"No. She's not back," Mrs. Thimbleton whispered sharply. Her eyes narrowed. She leaned in slightly. The look from last night swept across her face again, and Winston was suddenly sorry he suspected anything strange. "I hoped you were coming with good news, Mr. Winston. I expected it from you."

“Nothing new, I’m afraid,” Winston averred, playing the hand he was dealt. “I had been planning to get the police in on it now. The missing persons’ deadline will be up soon.”

“Do you think they will bother with this? It’s no secret that Vernon’s a little lazy,” she spoke in hushed tones, afraid of being overheard and making sure she was all the same. Chief Vernon Hadley was not a very well-liked police chief but he was the only one they ever had, the only one to run for the office in GO. Winston sighed.

“It’s his job, Elvira,” he said and then leaned in conspiratorially toward her. “Besides, I thought you weren’t so happy with my services so far.”

“Why would you say that? I *called* you, didn’t I?”

“Then who’s Neil Knudsen? I’ve never heard of him before. Says he is a friend of your family?”

Now we would see which way the wind was blowing.

*

Grassley Oaks had one bar. It was called Bar.

Some liked to call it the Sports Bar because they went there “to watch sports” while, incidentally, drinking many beers. It was somehow more socially acceptable to gather some place where televised sports were being screened to take in a lot of alcohol. The reality of small-town life is that there isn’t much reality. Things are called by one name because the other name less palatable. He likes his wine - he’s a drunk. He has an eye for beauty - he’s a skirt chaser. There are appearances to keep up, expectations not to disappoint, and examples to be set.

Fortunately for Ray Winston, he couldn’t give a rat’s ass about any of that.

He pushed by the “boys” who were absently watching a lawn darts championship on ESPN over cold Rainiers and took a seat at the far end of the counter. Lifting his eyebrows at Marisa behind the bar, a Maker’s Mark appeared before him, and Marisa’s hand was ready to refill already. Winston smiled and thanked her. Not today. He had to think a little.

What did we have? Elvira Thimbleton wasn't much help. She hadn't seen anything. Dorothy never told her anything useful. She was caught in the upswing of fame and recognition around town and the downswing of the dismal realization that her daughter was still gone. Still he should talk to her some more. She had given him a little insight into Neil Knudsen – not much, but enough to give his crowbar a place to pry from.

Knudsen wasn't from around here, which explained why Winston didn't recognize him. Neil Knudsen was a corporate lawyer on retainer for the Atlantic City-based investment shop, Broad Hayes and Thimbleton (BHT Global). Elvira's husband, Thomas Thimbleton was great-grandson to the founder, Clarence Stoke Thimbleton and technically an heir to this big deal brokerage. The reality was that he had been cut off a few years ago by his father over Tommy's persistent resistance to work. He and the family were set up very nicely, but the company's reigns would never pass to Tommy or any part of his line of Thimbletons.

Elvira was appalled, but not shocked when the decision came down. Thomas (she never liked calling him Tommy) was more sensitive than the rest of his family. He had a good position as a bank manager at First Equity Savings of Southern California. He was an appointed Grassley Oaks alderman. He just didn't have the trademark ruthlessness (apparently) that was needed for money management. Real money. Not First Equity's Monopoly money. Knudsen, in fact, hadn't even stopped by the bank first to give Thimbleton a head's up before calling Winston off the job. He called Winston, fired Winston, and disappeared as quickly as he had appeared. The bank manager knew nothing about it until Winston started asking.

But why would he get called off before having done anything? And why would anyone kidnap or abduct Dorothy Thimbleton. Why was she so important? He was low on motive, and low on ideas. He waved Marisa back for the refill after all. And he called Annie.

Annie Parker had worked for Raymond R. Winston Investigative Services for about eight months now. Ray hired her to help fill in when his regular assistant, Lori Winkelhausen, stomped out saying something about looking for a "real" job. She was working for the Water Works off Ventnor Ave now. Is water more *real* than uncovering Truth and Solving Mysteries? Actually, it probably was. Grassley Oaks did not really need an investigator most of the time. Winston got by and had enough work to keep the lights on, sometimes more, but the Fortune Magazine was not about to call him and ask for his picture.

When Annie came in, fresh from UC Irvine and a bachelor's in social psychology, she was excited and surprised to find both a private investigation agency and a possible job for her right here in GO. It was the perfect place for her to see if she liked this kind of work. *Cutting her teeth* was the expression, but Annie never quite like the implications.

Ray hired Annie in about eight minutes when she applied. It would have been six but he lost time hunting for his smartphone under the mounds of paper on his desk.

Smart, quick on her feet, and young enough to stay enthused about the work, Annie was exactly what Ray needed. Lori did her job, of course. But it was always a job for her. At 5:31 every day, the office door was swinging closed behind the click of her heels on the sidewalk.

“Stuck Ray?”

He motioned for Annie to take a seat and let Marisa give her whatever she wanted. Indian tonic please.

“There’s so much we don’t know about this,” Winston was speaking half to her, half to himself, and facing the back of the bar. “We have a victim, but no motive, no reason, no obvious avenues to pursue, and a walking notice from Atlantic City. It adds up to a pile of nothing.”

“And Mrs. Thimbleton didn’t seem to know about being fired by Knudsen either. I mean, *now* she knows,” Annie mused and took a sip of tonic. “What connects all these people together?”

Good. Let’s go back to that. That’s why he called Annie; she didn’t waste time moping. They are connected by the Thimbleton family name, despite their rifts and issues. They are connected by Neil Knudsen, presumably acting for Clarence Stoke Thimbleton III – although we should check that end of it too. We need to find out why we were pushed out.

“Could they have put another agency on it?” Annie asked him.

“Why take someone from AC? We are the ones in here in GO. What could they do better from there? But I’ll ask around,” Winston exhaled the words. “Nothing... It doesn’t make any sense. It’s like doing a puzzle we never saw, in the dark. With gloves on.”

“We need a plan.” Annie took out her phone and got ready to make notes.

“Yes!” Winston liked the action-oriented attitude. He didn’t exactly know what action to take yet, but let’s make a list anyway. “First of all: ask Knudsen what’s going on. Ask him where Dorothy is. That might rock his resolve a little. Second: we need to talk to the GOPD. They were already alerted by Elvira, but now it is time to work.”

“Good. Ok. What about calling BHT Global? Getting an official statement from the elder-thimble?” She smiled, hoping the name would stick.

“And we need to figure out why anyone would take Dorothy. What’s the treasure hidden here?” Winston sighed a little and leaned back. “I still wonder if she didn’t just run away and join the circus. Do people still do that?”

“And what about Tia Carretilla?”

Tia. With all the focus on the Thimbleton girl, what happened to her friend, Tia? The parents had not come forward or called. Tia disappeared on the same day and ostensibly was with Dorothy when they both seemed to vanish. He asked Annie to look up the Carretillas. Winston would go talk with them and see what they had to say. Tomorrow was already starting to fill up.

On the way home, Winston swung the Charger round by the office to grab his notebook. He wanted to go over his ideas (such as they were) some more before sleeping; it sometimes helped him process when the facts of the case were not giving up anything useful. He had a sense that he left something there else too but couldn’t remember what it was. Nothing, probably.

The office was never completely dark. White shafts from a streetlight just under his window glared through the blinds, leaving jailbird stripes across his desk and on the wall across. He could see the notebook, and he made a braille search of the desktop around it for anything else, the thing he forgot, whatever it was. His fingers touched on an envelope, heavy, with bas-relief texturing on vellum. It wasn’t here before.

Winston dropped into his chair and switched on the desk lamp.

It was a high-grade envelope, elegant, nacreous, and slightly old school, placed in the central area of the desk, facing the chair but not neurotically symmetrical. The handwriting was deliberate and ornate, saying only “For Mr. Raymond Winston.” He was about to call Annie and see if she forgot to tell him about an envelope being delivered. But it was getting late. He could ask in the morning. He twirled the envelope between his two index fingers and brought it close to his nose. A diminishing scent of lavender.

He looked around instinctively, still puzzled as to where it came from, and tore it open with a finger. Inside there was a single white card, of the same grade of paper as the envelope, and written in the same elegant handwriting was a sentence:

“Bank pays you a dividend of \$50.”

2.

Atlantic City
1933

MAVIS HAD NEVER been to California. She had never been to Philadelphia or anywhere at all west of the Alleghenies. It seemed so far away from anything known to her. She lived all her life in and around Atlantic City. Here is where she knew what things were and what they meant. As far as she knew, her poor sister Lizzie had never been farther west than Chicago, where she journeyed to join the rally for the representative rights of women in City Hall. Lizzie was always fighting for someone, someone else. Now she was probably fighting for her life.

There was no direct route. Mavis Stanhope showed her tickets and boarded the Santa Fe Super Chief, serving Los Angeles from Chicago Union Station, eleven hours ago. The 20th Century Limited took nearly a full day and night to get her there from New York. Mavis calculated she would get to Grassley Oaks, taking a bus from Los Angeles, by sometime tomorrow in the late afternoon. She had not brought very much with her, for fear of having to carry it all herself, but that wasn't the thing that bothered her.

What bothered her was that she had no idea what she would be looking for in the small town of GO, as they called it. Madame Erzsabet had not been very helpful on that front. Only saying that she had to be there, that the answer would be there.

And the question? Lizzie.