

CHAPTER 16: ROBERT

Manassas, Virginia — Monday, May 1, 2023

Robert studied the picture. Like a perceptive sleuth, he examined a two-year-old family photograph and looked for clues and answers.

He did not find any. Though he scrutinized every detail of a photo taken at a company picnic, he did not find a smoking gun. He did not find anything that suggested where the Lane family might be hiding now.

He lay the photo on his dining table, settled in his chair, and folded his hands behind his head. Then he searched his mind. He tried to think of something — anything — that might help him in his quest.

Robert did not like stop lights. As a corporate titan, he was used to blowing through intersections, running over obstacles, and moving quickly from Point A to Point B. He was used to immediate gratification.

The chairman rubbed his chin, took a deep breath, and tried again to divine wisdom from an image. He looked at a fugitive family like it was a problem on a midterm quiz, a puzzle waiting to be solved.

When he looked at Mark and Mary, he saw two people who favored structure, tradition, and stability. He saw adults who probably regretted their decision to leave this time. He saw a couple that was tired of running.

The older children, he guessed, called the shots now. Jordan had already started a family. Laura was headed in that direction. She was no doubt planning a future with the traitor Randy Taylor. Jeremy was an adult no longer bound by parents or convention. He was a free spirit.

That left Ashley, the bright, restless, teenage baby of a family that had eluded its determined pursuers for nearly two years. She was the chick who still remained in a rapidly emptying nest. She was the wild card.

Robert gazed at the girl in the photo. He tried to remember the things he wanted, valued, and sought at her age. He tried to put himself in the mind of an adolescent he barely knew, a girl who would soon turn fifteen.

Ashley, a top student, would surely want a school, activities, and friends she could call her own. She would want a full educational experience.

She would insist on a time, a setting, or a circumstance that reminded her of what she gave up in 2021. She would badger her parents into giving her something resembling a normal life. She would play on their guilt.

Robert was certain the fugitives had gone forward in time and remained in the twentieth century. He could almost picture them in a small, safe, leafy town in the 1950s or 1960s. He could see them putting down roots.

He could also see them striking back. Though he did not want to think about that possibility, he knew he had to. He knew he could not afford to take his enemies lightly if he hoped to find and destroy them.

Robert looked again at the photo, part of a large dossier he had compiled on the Lane family, and wondered, for the umpteenth time, if he had missed something important. He tapped his fingers on the table.

Then he heard a sound. He heard Liz bust through the front door of their spacious suburban home. He looked at his longtime companion when she entered the dining room and tossed her purse on the table.

"Did you find anything?"

Liz smiled.

"I sure as hell did."

Robert turned to face her.

"What is it?"

Liz pulled up a chair, sat next to Robert, and placed a large manilla envelope on the table. Then she reached inside the envelope and retrieved two black-and-white photos that had been cut from magazines.

"Take a look."

So Robert did. He carefully examined two images that seemed mostly identical in content and quality. He studied pieces of a puzzle.

The old photo showed Martin Luther King Jr. spelling out his dream on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. Taken from the front, it showed the speaker and more than two dozen people sitting behind him.

The new photo, taken from the same angle, showed much the same thing, with one notable exception. It showed three spectators who had no business listening to a civil rights speech in Washington in 1963.

"It can't be," Robert said.

Liz grinned.

"It is. Tony confirmed it. He ran the image through the scanner and confirmed the identities. Three of our 'friends' attended that speech."

Robert studied the picture again. Even without his glasses, he could easily recognize Randy Taylor, Laura Lane, and Jeremy Lane.

"Who's the blonde?"

Liz looked at her partner.

"She's Sarah Gustafson, a college student from Minnesota who spent several weeks with Jeremy in 1941. She moved to Hawaii to live with her father, a Navy warrant officer, and disappeared shortly after he died in the attack on Pearl Harbor. She was last seen the day the Lanes eluded us and presumably traveled to another time. Now we know *which* time."

Robert massaged his temples. He attempted to digest news that was as surprising as it was helpful. He tried to discern what this meant.

"What else do you know?"

"I know that Sarah grew up in St. Cloud. She graduated from a high school there in 1939, attended the University of Minnesota, and then moved to Oahu in June 1941. I also know that she was preparing to write a history thesis on Ivy Trudeau, the socialite who caught Jeremy's eye in 1893."

"How do you know this?"

"Tony told me," Liz said. "He researched Sarah right after he confirmed the identities of the other three. He was very helpful."

Robert smiled. He silently praised himself for sharing at least the broad outlines of Hawaii with Tony Janson. He needed his help now.

He had booted Tony, Bill Schilling, and Kevin Sayers from his inner circle following the debacle on Block Island. Tired of listening to people who doubted the wisdom of his schemes, he cut them out of the loop.

Then he invested his faith in others. He researched, planned, and launched the mission to rewrite December 7, 1941, with the help of the only people he could trust and depend on. He leaned on Liz and Silas Bain.

Now he was glad to have the help of others. He was glad to have the assistance of people he might need to defeat the Lanes.

Robert pondered the days and weeks ahead. Then he returned to the present and the resourceful woman who had made his evening.

"How did you find the new photo?"

Liz looked at him thoughtfully.

"I found it by accident. I found it reading a local history journal I have subscribed to for years. I nearly fainted when I saw it."

"Why would the journal run it now?"

"It's playing up the sixtieth anniversary of the speech and some of the key events of the civil rights movement. It's getting an early start."

Robert nodded his understanding.

"How old is the picture?"

"Tony guesses a month. He found a similar image, published in March, that does not show the fugitives. He also called the history journal and learned that the new photo was pulled from a musty archive."

"I see."

Liz let out a breath.

"Robert?"

"Yes?"

"There's something else."

The chairman tilted his head.

"What's that?"

"Laura is pregnant," Liz said. She frowned. "She's at least seven months along in that photograph. She's in no shape to travel far."

"Is that important?"

"It could be. It could be a clue that the Lanes returned to their roots when they traveled to 1963. They could be living in Fredericksburg."

Robert agreed. He could picture them returning to the only home most of them had ever known. He could see them completing a circle.

"You're on fire today."

"I'm just using logic."

"Yes, you are."

Liz met Robert's gaze.

"So what's next? Do we dig more? Do we turn Tony loose and see what he can find in the coming weeks? Or do we give Silas a call?"

"We dig and wait."

"Why not act now?"

"I'm not ready," Robert said, "that's why. I want more facts before I commit to another mission. I want to know if there is more to all this than meets the eye. I want to know if the Lanes picked 1963 for a reason."