

Your Past Will Find You

A Novella

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SAMPLE

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Will Richardson spotted the woman across the street before he had to close his eyes.

“Who’s the newcomer?” he said to his barber, Leroy, who was trimming his eyebrows.

“Rena Edmunds,” said Leroy. “She bought the old Sullivan place. Know where that is?”

Will opened his eyes and smiled. “Yeah, just beyond Curly Bonner’s ranch.”

He was new to the town five years ago, so people assumed he still didn’t know where things were. *It’s not like finding an address in the Village.* But he had always spent a lot of time at Curly’s.

“She’s a good looking filly,” said the barber.

Will ran a horse business. He bred and sold horses, stabled them for people, and was the only one left in the area that could take a young horse and patiently train it for riding, what was once called breaking, a term he didn’t like. He had worked for Curly and learned the trade, but the old man was now retired and out to pasture himself, so Will had taken the business over. Most people said he was better than Curly ever was at training a horse, but he didn’t think so—the old man could look a horse in the eye, calm him, and become his friend.

“But she might be a bit high and mighty for you, Will. She’s from back east. An artsy type who paints them fancy, high-priced works no sane person can understand...or want on his living room wall.”

“Have you seen her paintings?”

“Well, no, but I heard they’re weird. She’s even on that worldwide web!”

Will smiled. “I wonder what brought her here to our little piece of heaven.”

“You’ll have to ask her.”

Will watched her look along the street with an apprehensive expression and enter the hardware store. *What’s her story?*

“I think I will. How much do I owe you today? No beard trim should make it a bit less.”

“I hope you’re not scratching my car,” Rena said to Will when she exited the store and saw him sitting on the hood of her Land Rover.

He jumped down. “Let me help you with that.” He hoisted bags of seed and fertilizer from a dolly into the back of the SUV. “Looks like you’re going to try to grow a lawn at Pat Sullivan’s old place. Have you broken up that hardpan yet?”

“Mr. Bonner’s going to use his little tractor to break it up for me.”

“Place has some good pastureland, but Pat let that lawn die out years ago, I’m told.”

“And you are?”

Will wiped his dusty hands on his jeans and held out his right hand. “Will Richardson. I raise and train horses. I took over Curly’s business.”

She nodded. “I’ve seen you working there. I thought you worked for Curly.”

“He lets me run the business and keep the horses there. I can’t afford to buy his place. Any other for that matter. And he likes to watch me work with the horses when he can.”

“Some of those horses look pretty wild. They won’t let me get near them.”

“Do you ride?”

“Not really. I’d like to get a few riding horses, though, and learn. I have space for them. If I’m going to adapt to my new home, I should have a horse or two.”

“You’ve come to the right person, then.”

“And here I thought this was a western come-on.”

Will laughed. “Business and pleasure, ma’am. The business is letting you know about mine. The pleasure is introducing myself and welcoming you here.”

“Thank you for that. And for putting those heavy bags in the back.”

“Give me your number and I’ll give you a call.” The apprehensive look returned followed by a raised eyebrow. “When I’m out to Curly’s working with the horses. You might want to try out the tamer ones. I have a few that are nearly ready for inexperienced riders. There’s a big demand. Kids are always asking their parents for a horse, you know.”

“Do you work with young riders?”

“All ages. Kids are just adults without all the problems.” Will tilted his sweat-stained cowboy hat. “You have a good day now.”

“Wait!” She handed him a card. “Give me a call.”

“Will do.” He shut the Rover’s door for her. “Curly has a spreader for that sad little tractor. Pay him extra, and he’ll spread the seed and fertilizer too, I bet. If he can’t manage it, I’ll do it. All you need do, then, is water it and watch it grow.”

Will sauntered off.

Rena looked after him. *That was interesting!*

That night in his room at Mama Dora’s boarding house at the edge of town, Will studied the business card. It said: *Rena Edmunds, Acrylics and Oils*. There was a website URL and 212-area code phone number. He opened his laptop.

Phew! Leroy was right. The paintings on the website were out of this world. It was as if some alien had merged Van Gogh with Picasso and asked the resulting golem to paint his landscapes. And what landscapes and colors! He was sure the laptop screen didn’t do the paintings justice either, but you could still feel the sweet savagery of it all.

Some paintings were for sale and had exorbitant prices. Others were in galleries, two in the MoMA. At those prices, he wondered if Rena had paid for the Sullivan place by selling only one painting. But that led to the obvious question: why had she chosen to come here?

The same phone number was on the website. He dialed it.

“Hello.” He gave a fake name and the name of a gallery he remembered in lower Manhattan. “I’m trying to contact Rena Edmunds. I have a client interested in one of her paintings.”

“I’m her agent, Harry Branson. Ms. Edmunds no longer lives in New York City. I’m afraid you can’t speak with her directly. I can pass your message on to her, or personally help your client with the painting.”

“I’ll talk to my client. I understand Ms. Edmunds is in the Midwest somewhere. My client is from Kansas City. Maybe she can visit Ms. Edmunds out there.”

“That’s not possible. Your client will have to deal with me. I’m sorry.”

Will hung up. He was being rude, but he didn’t like the guy’s tone, even factoring in the traditional snippiness of denizens of the Big Apple’s skyscraper canyons. *Of course, I’m snarky too, which is why I hung up. Rudeness meets rudeness.*

It was clear that Rena Edmunds wanted a private life rather than a public one. But why?

That night Rena Edmunds used Google to search for Will Richardson. He hadn't bothered to change Curly's website or create his own; Richardson only figured as Curly's employee. The website wasn't very up-to-date either. She remembered seeing a lot more horses in Curly's pastures, for one thing, and he looked many years younger. *Of course, people just keep using the same pics on their sites. DMV photos are more up-to-date.*

The information at the site confirmed the services once offered by Curly and now presumably offered by Will. She decided to talk to Bonner the next day about the seeding and about Will.

Sleep always came slowly. There were no city noises on the Sullivan ranch, nothing like Neil Diamond's "A Beautiful Noise." At first, she had found it soothing. Now the quiet caused loneliness...and sometimes fear. She tried to hug herself to sleep. Sometimes it worked, but mostly it didn't. She heard noises and shuddered.

He's probably looking for me.

There was a crash. She ran to the bedroom window and looked out. *Raccoons!* The cute little bandits showed no fear. *I need a watchdog.* She watched the animals for a bit and then went downstairs to her study.

An unfinished painting was on the easel. One could see the hills and hollows between her studio and the boundary with Curly's property amidst the riotous streaks of blues and grays and silvers. *I think I'll call it "Moon Madness."* There was little moonlight that night, so she had to use her imagination.

She began to paint.

Rena knocked on Curly's kitchen door.

"It's open," said Bonner. "You don't expect me to get up, do you?"

She entered. Bonner was unshaven and in his pajamas. He motioned to the stove.

"Help yourself, Rena," he said. "I'm a bit too arthritic today."

She smiled, served her coffee, and sat at the table across from him.

"I met Will in town. He said you could use your spreader to spread the seed and fertilizer I bought."

"That'll cost you. I'll mix the two so it will only take two passes, though, one for the tilling, the other for the seed-fertilizer mixture. You're in charge of everything else, young lady. Watering mostly, but there might be weeds."

"The fertilizer supposedly has something to kill the weeds. I don't know where they'd come from, though. The seeds are supposed to be weed free."

"They come from the ground. That hardpan only had weeds, so they've gone to seed, which can just hang around a while. You'll be planting them too—no seed is 100% pure. Good choice on the fertilizer. That'll help keep them down." He coughed into a Kleenex. "Will might have to do the plowing and so forth if this damn arthritis doesn't let up."

She eyed the spots of blood in the Kleenex. "Maybe you need to see a doctor, Curly."

"Last time I saw one—two years ago maybe—he did a lot of breathing tests and then said I had sleep apnea. I looked that up. He's crazy. What I have is a hole in my heart because my Jenny left me three years ago. I haven't had a good night's sleep since. I call that insomnia, not apnea."

Rena could empathize. "I guess I'm okay with that. I'll talk to Will about doing it. I want to talk to him about buying a couple of horses for riding too."

Bonner brightened. "Will's the man! He sold one the other day to the parents of a four-year-old. The little tyke looked like a fly on the back of that mare, but that horse is as gentle and patient as the little girl's mother. What people won't do for their kids these days. Back when, horses were working animals, from plow horses to cattle-herding quarter horses. Times have changed."

"Those same parents today might own two cars and a plane," Rena said with a smile. "As well as a menagerie of pets that eat better than a lot of people in the world."

Bonner nodded. "That's the New York progressive talking, but my Jenny used to say the same thing. Do you ride?"

"I need to learn, but I'm here, I have room for horses, and it sounds like good and relaxing fun."

"Hmm. I'd start with just one animal and see how it goes. Then go for the companion. Horses get lonely too, just like people."

Two days later, after Will had plowed and spread the seed and fertilizer mixture, she was looking at horses with him.

"I like that one," she said, pointing to dark brown horse with a black mane and tail. "Obviously a male," she said with a smile. "Is he tame enough for me?"

Will smiled back. "Name's Max. You picked the most docile one here. I've been trying to sell him. He's a big fellow, though, and eats like a Clydesdale. Parents like smaller ones for their kids. I've been shopping him around nearby towns figuring a rancher might want him for his own riding."

"Ranchers can be women, you know."

"You'll be growing grass—that's more farmer than rancher, but point well taken. I need to learn to be more politically correct. Your legs are long. Want to try him? Only if you have the time, of course. There's a warmup period."

"Warmup period? What for? Doesn't he get warmed up by riding him?"

"He has to get used to you. That kind of warmup. It's a process. You warm up to him; he warms up to you. Horse meets rider. Either you fall in love or you don't."

"That almost sounds like a romance novel."

"Wouldn't know about them. I read mysteries and thrillers, some sci-fi. The only fifty shades of gray you'll find are in the debris in the bed of my pickup."

"That's erotica, not romance."

"All the same to me. Let's get you and Max acquainted today. I'll then take you into the barn and show you the gear. Tomorrow we'll saddle him up."

"Do I need to buy a saddle and all that for him?"

"I'll lend you the gear until you get your own. I have some spares."

When Rena returned to her place, she noticed the answering machine in the kitchen was blinking. She listened to the message from Harry Branson.

“Hello, Rena, I hope things are going well. I’ve sold three paintings and sent you the proceeds, less my commission, of course.” He laughed. “Should be arriving today. I thought I had another client—someone out in Kansas City—but her agent hung up on me when I refused to say where you are.” She frowned. “He said he knew you were in the Midwest somewhere, so maybe his client could meet you. Maybe he’ll get back to me. If you need anything, give me a call.”

She decided to change her priorities after that message. *Right now I need a gun more than a horse.*

She could use the money Harry would be sending. It would arrive at her PO Box in town, implying another trip to town was required. She’d buy the gun then.

The next morning Will was waiting for her at Curly’s. “Ready for the first riding lesson?” he said.

Rena opened her purse and showed him the gun. “I want some shooting lessons too.”

“How do you know I can teach you how to shoot?” he said, his smile changing to a frown. *What does she know?*

“Don’t all people here know how to use guns?”

“I know this will sound sexist, but not necessarily women. There are a few ladies who go hunting or go to the range, but I’m not sure many carry a weapon in their purse. ‘Course I don’t make a habit of snooping in purses either.”

“So, you won’t teach me?”

“I didn’t say that. Living alone, it might be a good idea that you have a gun handy. But let’s get you riding Max first. We can then think about going someplace where we won’t disturb old Curly’s nap. Maybe your place, down by that creek.”

She nodded. That was as far as she could get from Curly’s place.

She and Max had become friends the day before. The big horse seemed bored when she swung into the saddle. She took the reins and rode him around the pasture.

“Okay, Rena Edmunds, you lied to me,” Will said when she returned to where he was standing. “You ride just fine. What’s the story?”

“I didn’t want to admit it. I’m very rusty. I haven’t ridden for years. I learned in Spain.”

“In Spain? What were you doing there?”

“Sharpening my artistic skills with a Spanish *maestro*. People do that all the time.”

“Wow! I would have just stayed there. I love Spanish food. Tapas and Rioja—can’t be beat.”

“They also have quite an artistic tradition,” Rena said with a smile. She patted Max.

“Max and I are already friends. Name your price.”

“I’ll have to check with Curly. He owns most of Max. Ride a bit more, and then we’ll see about the gun lesson. I’ll talk to Curly tonight.”

The gun lesson didn’t go as well. It took Rena an hour before she even hit the target on the tree down by the creek. The main problem she had was the distraction caused by Will grabbing her hips and her arms to position her and steady her aim. She was angry with herself for

feeling like a teenager awaiting a prom night kiss. But the last man who touched her had been Jake who had caressed her cheek when she gave him CPR as he lay dying on the sidewalk.

"Relax," said Will. "Here. Give me the gun." He put it down on a rock. He shook his arms and rolled his head. "Get loose. You can't be tense. Don't try to copy those Hollywood actors who don't have a clue about how to shoot. Keep your balance and keep your eyes open." He picked up the gun, sighted, and pulled the trigger, all in a smooth motion.

"You missed!" she said with a laugh.

"No, I hit the bulls-eye."

She ran toward the tree to check. She saw the small hole exactly in the center of the target. She returned, shaking her head.

"I'll never be able to do that."

"Maybe not. It takes some practice. How long did it take you to learn to ride?"

"A few months, I guess."

"You'll be shooting well enough at the end of a few months too. Practice. If the range weren't so far away, I'd take you there. I'm a bit rusty myself."

"No one would ever notice."

"Because this is a short distance. Hand guns aren't very good for long ranges, but we can easily triple this distance with your weapon if you get set right. We'll work on it a bit here, and then maybe you can hit the range on your own. But tomorrow I want you to go on a cross-country ride with me. Horse riding over rough terrain is a bit more difficult than in a pasture. You probably haven't done that."

"No, I haven't. Just around the orange orchards in Spain."

Rena watched Will's pickup pull away, bothered about two things. First, she had liked his gentle touch, his patience, and his conversation. *You're a lonely woman!* Second, Will was a mystery. She wanted to know more about him. *He doesn't seem to belong here either.*

She entered her house, glanced at the studio, and decided "Moon Madness" would wait until tomorrow. She found a pint of pistachio ice cream in the freezer and sat down at her laptop.

She was still worried about the strange call to her agent. The gun was some comfort, but she had no confidence in her ability to use it yet. *Maybe I could scare a person off by just waving it? As long as I didn't shoot myself!*

These days she didn't have many emails. There was one from her agent that repeated the message he had left on her answering machine. There were two from Will, the first confirming the meeting at Curly's, and a more recent one telling her to be careful with the gun by guarding it in a safe place and keeping the safety on. A bit condescending, but probably well-intentioned.

The third caused a cold sweat and her skin to crawl. It was disguised as a message about a MoMA exhibit.

"It's only a matter of time and I will find you," it said.

I need to get another email account. But she knew that the damage was done if the sender had any hacking skills.

That night she tested all the doors twice and vowed to get a guard dog. She was afraid of the gun, but she kept it handy in her nightstand drawer.

Will lay awake thinking of Rena. He had given up on finding the right person to share his life with, but she was definitely intriguing. There wasn't any doubt she was running from someone, though. *An abusive husband?* There was no wedding ring, but a jerk can still be abusive after a divorce. What about the distance she created between the Big Apple and where she ended up? What was that about? And why the gun now? In her situation, he would have to describe the desire to learn to shoot as a response to fear. But fear of what?

He wanted to help her, but he didn't want to get involved. He had his own devils to contend with. Fooling around with a famous artist might put him in the spotlight. He didn't need that. He was content with his life, as lonely as it was, because he had some security. No one would be suspicious of a horse trainer from the middle of the country.

He figured Rena would be the last person to tell him to meet his demons head on. They were both in hiding. Hopefully their demons were different so he could keep them separate.

I'll do the ride-along with her tomorrow and then forget about her.

Will followed Rena. In some flat areas, they let the horses gallop, but they slowed them down to pick their way through rough areas and hilly terrain. She pulled up in a grassy area bordered by a copse of trees. Will saw the other end of the brook sparkling between the trunks.

"Probably good to let the horses sun themselves and cool down, right?" she said, dropping from the saddle and tying Max to a tree trunk.

He patted his steed; she was named Rosa. "They didn't work up much sweat. Let me walk them down to the brook where they can get some water too. There's plenty of grass for them."

She nodded and stretched out in the sun.

When he returned, she was napping. He clapped his hands.

"Don't do that!"

"You were going to get burned."

"It's cloudy."

"You can still get burned."

"I have makeup on with sunscreen."

He shrugged, sitting down near her. "Okay. Sorry. Go back to sleep, then."

"I had a bad night. I have a stalker. I might have to move again."

"A stalker? No wonder you wanted a gun. When he comes around, shoot him. It's the best solution."

"That's pretty violent. I don't believe in capital punishment."

"Call it self-defense then. I can't imagine anyone I know around here being a stalker."

"Back in New York. Obsessions."

"Your paranoia or his perversion?" Will said that with a smile.

"Both. A whole bunch of pretty explicit emails describing what he's going to do to me."

"Did you go to the police?"

"NYPD Special Victims Unit. They tried to trace the emails. When he sent my pic Photoshopped with a hatchet in my head, and the message said, 'If you don't want me, no one else can have you,' they began to get worried. I thought he might also be the person who killed my boyfriend. They called that a gang feud gone bad." She shuddered. "I got a stakeout for a

week, but there were no more emails. I wasn't going to take any chances, though. I can paint anywhere."

"Makes sense. So, why the gun?"

"The motivation for that came from someone from the Midwest insisting on meeting me before buying one of my paintings. Fortunately, I have my New York agent well-trained. And he can't say where I live because he doesn't know. Only a PO Box."

Oops! That was me. His interest in Rena had fed her paranoia. "After we finish our ride, let's go over to your place and take a look at that email."

She sat and leaned over. Her lips brushed his cheek. "Thank you. That would make me feel like I'm doing something proactive."

"It'd be more proactive if we talk to Sheriff Jolly about it."

She frowned. "I don't know. I don't want anything to go public."

The email had been sent from a smart phone. Will didn't know how to trace that.

"I want to establish a history, a timeline of how this has progressed. Also, were you seeing anyone at the time who broke up with you and might have a grudge?"

She blushed. "I haven't been lucky in finding that one special person. It was looking like Jake might be, but then he was killed. I dated more in Spain—the Spanish are so gregarious and enchanting—but nothing came of it. I also dated some in college."

He held up a hand. "No need for more details. You're so nice that it's hard to imagine someone having a grudge, but it might also be a case of transferring identities."

"That sounds like psycho-babble. What does it mean?"

"Some guy—hell, these days, maybe even a gal—lost someone special and identifies you with that person. In other words, the rejection could have originated with someone else. Or, there was a car accident and a special someone died. People go off the deep end for multiple reasons."

"You sound like a cop."

He frowned. "Remember, I read mysteries. Call me an amateur psychologist who studies criminal and insane minds—fictional ones, of course."

She shuddered again. "Okay, so someone could become obsessed with me without me doing anything. What next?"

"From the email, it looks like he or she still can't find you. That means you successfully escaped from the Big rotten Apple. I'd get a new email account and don't use your real name. Do you have many people in your list of contacts?"

"Maybe a dozen."

"Send them all an email from your new account with the message to use that new address. Do you use social media?"

"Not anymore."

"Good. You don't need it here. I assume your agent is trustworthy."

"I'd trust Harry with my life. "

"Okay, but keep him in the dark. He's probably trustworthy, but you don't want him leaving your personal info lying around either." He tapped the laptop's screen. "I can't see that we can do anything more. Other than go to Sheriff Jolly. It might come to that."

"I'd like some more shooting lessons."

"You certainly don't need more riding lessons. Tomorrow we'll drive to the range and get you started there. I'll be away for a week meeting potential customers after that."

Rena liked most of the people at the gun range. Every day that Will was gone, she went there, dropping by to visit old Curly on the way home.

"Didn't figure you for a gun enthusiast," he said once over the brim of his mug.

She pushed the plate of cookies back to his side of the table. "Didn't figure you could bake cookies."

"Got all my wife's recipes. It's not hard when you get the hang of it. She always had a plate of cookies around."

"Well, they're going to make me fat."

"Riding Max will tighten up that butt and shake off a few pounds. Draggin' that hose around the yard will too. You should get a sprinkler system. That lawn's big."

"How's that work with a well?"

"Don't know. Fellow over yonder runs a truck farm. He sprays veggies with an overhead sprinkler system. You'll have to ask him. Proves you can do it, though." He eyed her. "Back to the gun. Does Will shoot as well as he trains horses?"

She laughed and turned red. "Maybe better. He's been a great help."

"He done give you a good deal on Max, for sure. Might be sweet on you. Makes me a bit jealous, you know."

"I'm here with you now," she said with a wink.

"So you're afraid of something or someone? No one around here is going to bother you, kid. We're decent folks. You left the perverts back in New York City."

"Maybe I'm afraid one will follow me here," she said in a whisper.

The gray eyebrows raised. "Maybe you should talk to Sheriff Jolly then. Will seems to know a lot about police procedures and all, but Gerald Jolly is a real pro. Nothing gets by them eagle eyes. He had you pegged as a city slicker from day one. 'Course, when he heard you can ride old Max like a seasoned cowhand, he had to eat his words a bit."

"So Will was talking about me?"

"Not Will. Me. You can trust Will with the president's nuclear codes, maybe more than him. Will knows how to keep a secret. I suspect he has a few himself. Jolly often wonders about him. Thought he might be in witness protection or something. You know, that FBI thing."

Yes, I've heard about that! She had often thought she needed to be in that program. But maybe Will was right about the stalker. If he couldn't find her, he was harmless.

Rena woke up in a cold sweat. *The phone's ringing!* She checked the clock. 9:50 a.m. Another nearly sleepless night had ended in exhaustion and sleeping in. She put her slippers on, went to the kitchen, and checked the number. She didn't recognize it. Fear gripped her. *No, it can't be!*

She picked up the receiver.

"Rena, Will." She relaxed. "I'm in a bind here. I've almost made a sale. The owner wants to see a copy of the horse's history."

“You mean his pedigree?”

“Not much of a pedigree. He’s just an ordinary quarter horse, but I keep ancestry records. Name’s Gadfly. The papers are in my room at my boarding house. Mama Dora will let you in when you explain. If you could fax copies to me, I’d appreciate it.”

“Okay. I was going into town anyway before going to the shooting range. I want to cash some more checks and make a transfer to my New York account. Give me the fax number. I didn’t know anyone uses faxes anymore, by the way.”

“You’re in the West, kid. The attitude here is that if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it. Thanks a million. I’ll make it up to you by treating you to dinner at Big Mike’s.”

“That’s too much like a New Jersey diner.”

“I know, but Mike makes a mean T-bone and lots of other goodies. You’ll be pleased.”

“Okay. I’m sure Mike has you on retainer for PR and marketing.”

“Mike might know what a retainer is, but I doubt he knows or cares about PR and marketing. Thanks again.”

After doing her banking, Rena went to Mama Dora’s. Dora Hutchins was a big woman with a ready smile and good humor. *Maybe eats a lot of her own cooking?* She wondered if her food was better than Big Mike’s.

Dora opened the door using a key from a huge ring. Rena was surprised at how neat the room was.

“Will keeps a tight ship, not like some of my other guests. I—” A bell ring interrupted her. “Someone’s at the front desk. You just rummage around, dear. Not that many places to look. Don’t know why he don’t keep things out at Curly’s, but maybe he does bookkeeping here at night. All that old man does is talk, talk, talk, so it’s probably hard for Will to add two to two and get four out there.”

After she left, Rena had to decide where to start. *Damn Will. He should have told me where the papers are.* She looked around the room. The bureau was a possibility.

But the bureau only had clothes. She wasn’t about to search through his underwear either. She smiled when she noted he wore boxers, though. When she was young, the girls would always try to guess.

The nightstand was only a table. She opened the closet. Two old cardboard filing boxes on the shelf looked promising. She lowered the one labeled A-M and carried it to the bed. Gadfly had his own file containing three sheets of legal paper; his ancestry was written in longhand by two different people. *Probably Curly and Will.* She then saw the old wallet standing on edge at the end of the box.

I wonder why he didn’t toss this? It looks pretty beat up. Was Will a hoarder? He didn’t seem to be.

She opened the wallet, finding a few credit cards and a driver’s license, all in the name of Richard Wills. The NY state license was long expired, but the picture was Will’s—a much younger man with a fuller face and intense blue eyes. *Aren’t Will’s brown?*

She put the wallet back like it was a hot potato. *I don’t want to know Will’s secrets! He just wants copies of Gadfly’s papers.*

That night, between popcorn and glasses of cabernet, Rena tried to resist temptation. She couldn't. She figured that Richard Wills was too close to Will Richardson for Will to be in witness protection. *So what is going on?*

She went to her laptop and began a search for Richard Wills. It was a common name. Among the persons she found, there was a killer cop and a Baptist minister. She kept searching. A series of articles caught her eye. They were about a cop killer, not a killer cop. NYPD sergeant Richard Wills had burned to death in a car crash on the Cross Bronx freeway. They had ID'd the charred body by the remains of his badge. The police expected foul play because cellphone forensics had shown a mob hitman was in pursuit of Wills. His killer was still at large, according to newspaper articles.

That doesn't make sense. Will is very much alive. Could he be the hitman? Impossible!

She stuffed in another handful of popcorn and washed it down with wine. She glanced at her studio. Her painting was waiting.

Finishing a painting was like finishing a book. You just had to go after it and get it done. You also had to know when to quit. Sure, you could make a few touch-ups here and there, but you always ran the risk of making it a muddy display of your indecision.

She worked for an hour but then stopped in the middle of a broad brush stroke. *What if Will is the cop and he doesn't want the mob to know he's alive?* He seemed to know a lot about police procedures and could shoot like the Lone Ranger. Of course, that could describe the hitman too, but Will seemed like too nice a guy to be an ice-cold murderer.

She heard the ping from her laptop and froze. *Incoming email.* Was one of her few remaining correspondents her stalker? She hurried back to her desk to see the message.

"Glad to see you're still selling paintings. I'm coming for you, my sweet."

She shut the laptop down and hurried to her bedroom. She took the gun out of her nightstand drawer and took off the safety. *Does 'I'm coming for you' imply he's close?*

A knock on the kitchen door jerked Rena awake. The half-filled coffee mug went flying. She grabbed the gun.

"Rena, you in there? I wanted to thank you for sending Gadfly's papers."

Will Richardson! Or Richard Wills? She put the gun on the table. "Just a minute."

She hurriedly collected the shards of the coffee cup, wiped up the spill with a paper towel, and trashed it all. When she opened the door, she realized she was hanging out of her robe a bit.

"Sorry," she said, covering up.

"That's certainly one of the nicest good mornings I've had in a while." She saw him stare at the gun. "Anything wrong?"

"He said he's coming for me! You'll remember I went to the bank to make a transfer. Somehow he spotted that and sent me an email to the new email account. I was afraid that 'coming for me' meant he's already here and on his way."

"You're trembling. I think it's time to go see Sheriff Jolly. You should tell him about this."

She went to the table, sat, and hugged herself. "I don't know. Everyone will start talking. The stalker will only have to walk into Big Mike's, have a coffee, and listen to the gossip."

Will smiled. "That's a pretty good description of Big Mike's ambiance. It's like that old TV show. Everyone knows your name."

"Do they know yours?"

"What do you mean?"

"Are you Richard Wills, ex-NYPD detective?"

He took a seat at the table and frowned. "The wallet. I forgot it was in that file box. I didn't really have any other place to put it, though. Mama Dora often straightens things up in my room. I'm neat, but she's obsessive. It's not nice to snoop, you know. I only wanted the papers."

"I know. Mea culpa. But you didn't answer my question."

"It's a long story, but here's the summary: I put the mob's hitman into the car in my place. I made it look like I was a victim and ran for my life. Not only did I kill one of theirs, but I made them look like cop murderers. My life wasn't worth a dime. Still isn't if they find me."

"Why were they after you in the first place?"

"I was in narcotics working undercover. I cost them a lot of profits when I told my buddies about a warehouse with hundreds of pounds of heroin ready to hit the streets."

"So it was payback? And NYPD wouldn't back you up?"

"They would have gone through the motions, but that kind of grudge is held a long time."

"I'm glad you told me. I won't say a word. You're still Will Richardson."

He smiled. "Okay. Now let's see that email."

"I hate to learn this reason for you coming to our little town, Ms. Edmunds," said Sheriff Jolly, tapping the copies of the emails. Rena had explained why she had fled New York and come west. He had read the emails. "I can increase patrol frequency out by you, but there's not much else I can do."

"How about telling your deputies to keep an eye out for strangers?" said Will.

"Sure, I can do that too. We do that anyway, just as general principle. A lot of crimes are just crimes of opportunity a drifter might take advantage of."

"Wow, that's comforting," said Rena. "I'm new here. Guess I'm high on people's suspect lists then?"

"You've been around long enough to get beyond that, but when you just arrived, that's a fair assessment. Can't change people, Ms. Edmunds."

"Call me Rena. I'm not getting a good feeling here. I'll still be alone most of the time at my place. That sounds like stalker nirvana."

"This is a big county, Ms. Rena," said Jolly, "and we do all the policing except when Feds come in and lord it over us. That's police life in the boonies."

"I guess it was smart to buy a gun, then," she said.

"Duly registered, I hope." She nodded. "And you can shoot?" She nodded again.

"That's the way of the West, ma'am. The Big Apple can have thirty thousand cops, but the number per capita is about the same as here. You have to adapt."

"More like thirty-five thousand," said Will, "but you're probably right, Gerry. It's hard to justify a large force here." He turned to Rena. "I can help. You have a TV room with a sofa, right?" She nodded. "I'll stay with you at nights. Saves me a drive from the boarding house to Curly's anyway, and I'll be a shout away from there too. Would that make you feel better?"

She smiled. "Okay, if it works for you."

"It will until I have to travel for another horse deal. The last buyer's thinking he might need two more to keep Gadfly company. That's too good to pass up."

Two days later Sheriff Jolly called Rena. "Deputy Murray saw someone snooping around Mama Dora's. Took a pic with his smart phone. I guess it won't help much because you never saw your stalker. I called that NYPD SVU that handled your case, by the way. They sent copies of the case file. NYPD also sent the file some time ago to the FBI to get a profile. I've also got that. Seems like your stalker's a real weirdo."

Rena shuddered. "Can you send me the pic anyway? I'll at least have someone to look out for."

Jolly took her number; she soon had the pic. he studied it. It was more a side view, but the stranger to town had a strong chin and stubble, slick, black hair, and sunglasses riding over a long, hooked nose, thin lips, and sunken cheeks. He looked more like a mob hitman than a stalker.

Hitman? She dropped the phone to the floor. She picked it up and examined it. *Kaput!* But the pic was frozen on the screen. She ran to the old rotary and called Will, who was still at Curly's.

"You need to get here quick!"

"The stalker?"

"I don't think so. More like someone looking for you." She explained that he'd been seen snooping around Mama Dora's.

"Your guy would go there too if he thought you might be staying at her boarding house. But you're right. I'll be there in a moment."

Will showed up accompanied by Curly, who jumped out of the pickup with his shotgun.

"Gives new meaning to the phrase of riding shotgun," she said from the porch. One hand was on her hip; the other held her gun.

"The original meaning," said Will.

Curly frowned when he saw the gun at her side. "You look like a poster girl for the NRA, honey."

"I hate the NRA. Anyone who thinks you need an AR-15 for hunting and target practice has to be demented. Only the military should have such weapons." She glanced at Will. "And there are too many guns on the streets of America."

"Amen," said Will, coming around the front of the pickup. "Cops are often outgunned in the big cities, not to mention massacres like Sandy Hook, San Bernardino, Parkland, and so forth, where many innocents died because people used automatic weapons." He stepped onto the porch. "I told Curly a little about your situation."

"What about yours?"

"Just let me see the photo."

"My cellphone's dead, but the pic's still there."

"That means the battery's still okay, but some circuit's fried. Let me see the pic." They went into the kitchen, Curly following as if he were going hunting for pheasant. Will studied the pic. "Good for you, bad for me. I think it's Johnny Four-Fingers."

"What kind of name is that?" said Curly. "It sounds like some mob guy from a bad TV show."

"Precisely," said Will. "Sit down, Curly." Will told the old man his story. "You now understand why I'm asking you to go home. This isn't your fight."

"I'll be safer here," Curly said. "He'll be looking for you at my place first. Safety in numbers. But I think we need to call Sheriff Jolly."

"That exposes Will," said Rena.

"Seems like that's the case already."

Will nodded. "Curly will take the sofa, I'll take the recliner," he said to Rena. "You have another house guest. And we're leaving Jolly out of this for now. My ID isn't even that good."

"Why Four-Fingers?" said Curly.

"His left thumb was chopped off when he was a teen. He shoots with his right hand, though. He's a well-known hitman for the mobs. Unfortunately, there will be more to follow him if he doesn't succeed. They're persistent."

"You need to go into witness protection now," said Rena.

"One thing at a time. My goal now is to stop the collateral damage."

"Meaning Rena and me," said Curly.

Will nodded.

That night Johnny Four-Fingers looked for Will at Curly's place. He'd picked up gossip at a local diner as he enjoyed his meal. He'd been forced to eat unhealthy food and found that amusing. The diner didn't even bother to have seafood on the menu. Even Jersey diners always tried to be fancy and offer fish that was never fresh but frozen. *Ugh!*

The house was dark, so he broke in. In the kitchen he found an old-fashioned book for jotting down phone numbers and addresses on the counter and eyed the edges. Two tabs were well used. The owner talked often to two women: Rena Edmunds and Dora Hutchins. *Mama Dora?* Because he had been at the boarding house, the hitman figured that Wills might be at Rena's, Curly being the common connection. Wills worked at Curly's. From the address, he could see Rena Edmunds's place was the next one over.

He smiled. It made sense that the ex-cop had a girlfriend...and she was conveniently nearby.

He had left his rental car between the two ranches at the side of the road. He intended to leave it there and keep walking to Rena's. He opened the trunk and took out a backpack that contained another gun, some more clips, a few tools for torture, ties, and duct tape. *I'll have to kill both of them.* He smiled. *Wills is probably making out with his new squeeze.*

His smile turned to a frown when he saw that there was no tire wrench. He heard gravel crunch behind him. He managed to turn a bit, but someone hit him, sending his face into that same gravel. He turned over to face the barrel of his own gun.

"Thanks for the equipment, old man. Sorry I didn't have time to chat."

The bullet hit him in the forehead. In a second, pain and then darkness swept all thoughts away.

Rena shook Will. "Do you hear him?"

"What? Who?" Curly jumped up from the sofa, and Will brought the recliner down with a thud. Both men reached for their guns.

"Max never makes night noises," said Rena. "There must be someone in the barn."

Will and Curly listened. They all heard the snorts and whinnies of the horse now.

"Better than a watch dog," said Curly with a smile. "Might just be a varmint, though."

"Rena, go upstairs and lock your bedroom door," said Will. "Curly, stay here and watch both front and back entrances. I'll check out the barn."

"There's a back door to the barn," said Rena. "Let me get you a key."

Rena had motion-sensors that turned on floodlights. Will knew enough not to trigger them, but it made his trip to the back of the barn circuitous. He listened at the door but heard nothing. He keyed the lock and went in. Max sensed him and snorted. He switched his penlight on and put it in his mouth, freeing his left hand to brush away cobwebs while holding the gun steady with his right.

He knew that the light would make him a target, so he sat it atop a post after shining it on the horse's stall. Max recognized him and snorted again.

"Easy boy, you might have some unwanted guests."

In an empty stall, he saw two eyes in the dark. He picked up the flash and directed its beam there. A raccoon stared angrily at him. Will relaxed.

"We'll call this masked fellow the Lone Ranger," he said to Max.

That's when the trapdoor to the hay loft dropped down and someone jumped him.

"Will, that you?" said Curly peering into the darkness. He readied his shotgun, but he had trouble determining the direction of the noise. A board creaked behind him. He swung around, but the gun was knocked out of his hands before he could fire. One of Rena's Spanish urns smashed against the side of his head.

"My love must have a menage-a-trois going here." The stalker bent over to exam Curly. "Nope. Maybe this is Curly." He pointed the gun at the old man's head but didn't shoot when he heard the noise on the second floor. "Maybe I'll let you live, old man. No way you could have seen my face. That Will wouldn't have either, so he'll live too, unless he's defiled my Rena like that Jake. I'll collect my love and be gone."

The stalker tiptoed upstairs. On the landing, it wasn't hard to figure out which bedroom was Rena's. The other four doors were open. *She must have hers locked. An inconvenience.*

If he wanted to take his time, he would have to return and kill the two men, but someone might have called the sheriff by then. *Like Rena!* It was better to be a bit more aggressive. He shot out the lock and threw open the door. *Where is she?*

Before he had time to dwell on that problem, the door slammed into him, sending him flying. Rena stood over him, her gun shaking.

"If you even blink, I'll kill you!"

"Would you kill an old friend?"

"Harry? What the hell?"

She lowered her gun just enough for Branson to kick it away. He then attacked her. She clawed at his face as he choked her. She was unconscious by the time he heard someone running up the stairs. He found his gun and hers and turned to face the door. *Was it the young lover or the old man?*

Will lay flat and pushed the partially closed door open. He was greeted by a barrage of bullets that sailed over his head. He only needed one. The stalker went to his knees, his two normal eyes staring at infinity while the third between them oozed brain matter and blood. He fell on his face.

He went to Rena and found her carotid artery. *Still alive!* He began to give her CPR.

“Come on, Rena! You can’t let this bastard win!”

He continued for five minutes before her eyes opened.

“I always imagined your kisses to be a bit gentler. My chest hurts.” Her voice was a rasp.

“The compressions.” He helped her to her feet, picked her up, and laid her on her bed.

“Just rest.”

He went to the body and turned it over. “It’s not Johnny Four-Fingers.”

She was trembling on the bed. “No, he’s my agent!”

“Your agent is—was—your stalker?”

“I guess so. He didn’t know exactly where I live, but I guess he found out. I needed help to sell my paintings. He’s been my agent for more than a decade.”

“I wonder how many of those years he’s been obsessed with you.”

“I guess we’ll never know.”

“We’re both going downstairs to check on Curly. The sheriff will want this scene undisturbed for his forensics. We’ll call him from there.”

“Sign here.” The FBI agent shoved the witness protection papers toward Will. He signed his old name and his new one, Robert Mills, and then Karla Mills nee Rena Edmunds signed too. “We usually only do this if we get something in return.”

“How about eliminating a wanted hitman?” said Will.

The agent smiled. “The stalker probably did that. We’re still trying to get into Johnny’s iPhone, though. If a contract was sent to him and we can trace who sent it, that’s a good exchange. We’d love to get rid of a few more mob members.” He put the papers into his briefcase. “Try to stay out of trouble, folks, and have a good life.” He stood and they shook hands. “The sheriff would like to speak to you both in one of our interrogation rooms, by the way.”

“Will you keep us informed on what you learn?” said Will.

“Probably not. And don’t even think about going near an FBI office to ask. Your cover as a narcotics cop was nothing in comparison to what you’ll have, but it will stay intact only if you stay under the radar. Your jobs are to become Mr. and Mrs. Suburbanite with two-point-five kids.”

Will winked at Rena. “Maybe we’ll round that up to three.”

Sheriff Jolly put his coffee down and smiled at them when they entered. "I guess congrats are in order. I thought you might want to know the rest of the story. And I know the FBI won't be telling it."

"Mine or Will's?" said Rena. "I mean, Robert's."

"Both. First, Johnny Four-Fingers died on the road between your place and Curly's. We suspect it was your stalker, Rena, because he had Johnny's backpack with all his tools of the trade. Can't prove that, but it doesn't much matter." Jolly shuffled some papers. "NYPD raided your agent's apartment. In the second bedroom, his study, there were corkboards with hundreds of your pics plastered all over them, many from the opening of your shows in Manhattan galleries. Not too weird for an agent maybe, but in retrospect he was definitely obsessed. And we have a clue as to why. They found some other photos too. He had a girlfriend in college who broke up with him; she looked a lot like you. Your looks probably started him down that dark road, I guess. A lot of guys and gals have break-ups in college and don't go down that road, though, so this guy was really mentally deranged."

"As often happens, he hid it well," said Will. Rena nodded.

"I guess Will can continue his horse business wherever the FBI is sending him, but what will you do, Rena?"

"I'll continue to paint, but I'll have to change my style a bit, I guess, and sign them Karla Mills. I just hope experts can't make any connections with Rena Edmunds. Or, maybe I'll just teach art and not try to make money off it anymore. We're not starting out with zero finances, after all."

"I don't even want to know how that works. I called in a lot of favors to get you into witness protection, but they let me have one in return by letting me say goodbye. Good luck to you two. I think you've both had enough excitement in your lives."

After he left, Will kissed Rena. "I guess it's time to go find the U.S. Marshall who will be our chauffeur. Are you ready to start a new life, Mrs. Mills?"

"Indeed I am, Mr. Mills."

They walked arm-in-arm from the interrogation room.

To readers: You have just finished the novella “Your Past Will Find You.” I hope you enjoyed it.

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About the Author



Steven M. Moore was born in California and has lived in various parts of the U.S. and Colombia, South America. He always wanted to be a storyteller but had to postpone that dream to work in academia and R&D as a scientist. His travels around Europe, South America, and the U.S., for work or pleasure, taught him a lot about the human condition and our wonderful human diversity, a learning process that started during his childhood in California's San Joaquin Valley. He and his wife now live in Montclair, NJ, just thirteen miles west of the Lincoln Tunnel. For more details, visit him at his website <https://stevenmmoore.com> and follow him on Facebook, Twitter, and Goodreads where he participates in many discussions with readers and writers. Steve is a member of International Thriller Writers.