

Behind the Scenes: *Her Last Goodbye*

Like many of my books, the story of *Her Last Goodbye* sprung from a headline about a desperate husband pleading for the return of his kidnapped wife. I clicked through and watched the video recording of the press conference. The raw emotion in the clip moved me. The husband held a baby on his lap and another child sat in a grandparent's arms next to him.

Many of my books start this way. I see or read about an event on the news that sticks with me. Something that is just plain wrong. Something that shouldn't happen. A young mother *should* be able to go out on an errand without fearing for her life. This husband's desperation, his unfathomable grief, was palpable and heartbreaking. A young family had been ripped apart. I couldn't get them out of my head.

Her Last Goodbye began as the story of the desperate young husband and father. Tim has faults. He and his wife had recently argued. Now that his wife, Chelsea, is missing, he is regretful for every unkind word, every selfish thought, and the fact that he never had the chance to apologize, no opportunity for a last goodbye.

But when I completed the first draft and began to revise and hone the book, an interesting thing happened. Chelsea's voice stood out as the stronger of the two. My editor and I decided that the story would have better focus if Chelsea's character was further developed, and Tim's point-of-view was dropped.

As a writer, I find it continually surprising and fascinating how my characters develop their own voices as the plot unfolds. Regardless of how *Her Last Goodbye* began, it became clear that the story I had told wasn't Tim's. It was Chelsea's.

So here is Tim's first scene. (This scene has not been edited, as it became collateral damage in the editing process.)

Deleted Scene: *Her Last Goodbye*

Three-year-old Bella appeared at the bottom of the stairs. "Where's Mommy?"

Tim glanced at the clock.

Good question.

Bella pressed her balled-up blanket to her cheek. As always, Tim's heart swelled at the sight of his firstborn. She was perfect. From her deep brown eyes to her disheveled head of wavy hair, she was his mini-me.

Shifting the baby to his shoulder, Tim walked from the living room into the foyer and sat down on the bottom step next to his daughter. "What are you doing up, Princess?"

She leaned on his arm. "Will woke me. Can't you make him be quiet?"

"I wish I could." As Tim spoke, his colicky son protested the lack of movement with

a wail.

“Why isn’t Mommy home?” Bella whined. Her rosebud mouth pursed into an adorable pout.

“She should be home soon.” But Tim worried as he bounced the baby on his shoulder. His wife, Chelsea, had said she’d be home by ten. It was nearly eleven now.

Four-month-old William burped then went back to sobbing.

“Why don’t you lay on the sofa?” Tim balanced the baby and guided his daughter to the living room. He turned on the TV and started her favorite “Winnie the Pooh” DVD.

Before Will, they hadn’t allowed her to watch TV, but after Will was a whole new world.

The baby inhaled a hitchy breath, his tiny body trembling with the effort.

“I know, Buddy,” Tim said. “You’re hungry.”

Tim walked back to the kitchen and grabbed the bottle from the counter. Shifting the baby from his shoulder to the crook of his arm, he offered him the nipple. William turned away from the bottle as if it was full of poison. His little nose wrinkled, he sucked in a huge breath of air, and let out an ear-splitting wail.

“OK. OK.” Tim put the bottle down and returned the stiff baby to his shoulder. “You’re going to have to let me feed you. Mommy isn’t always going to be at your beck and call.”

Tim and Chelsea had been spoiled with their first. She’d been an easy baby. Chelsea had gone back to work three months after giving birth. Of course, they’d been in Colorado then. They’d had her family to pitch in. They hadn’t been prepared for the chaos that accompanied their second baby after moving to New York State. Neither of them had slept through the night scene they’d brought William home.

William howled in Tim’s ear.

“I’m walking.” Tim resumed his lap around the first floor of the house.

How did Chelsea do this every night?

A small sliver of guilt poked through his concern. He worked too much, leaving Chelsea to deal with William ninety-five percent of the time. Tim tried, but he hadn’t bonded with his son, not the way his wife had. He tried to help by giving Bella her bath and putting her to bed every evening. But it wasn’t enough. He knew that. But unlike their first child, William had refused to take a bottle. Period.

Tim had argued that they had to be firm. That it was important that *he* be able to feed his son. But the more William screamed, the more air he swallowed and the worse his colic became. Chelsea couldn’t bear to hear her baby suffer. She always gave in and nursed him. While he understood her maternal instincts, the end result was a child that was far too dependent on one person.

One person couldn’t possibly be available every moment of every day.

He pivoted on one heel, frustration sharpening his movements. William jolted and cried harder.

Tim stopped and took three long breaths. Getting angry wasn’t helping. One of them had to be calm, and it wasn’t going to be William.

But how could anyone think with all this screaming?

He crossed the living room and set the baby in the bassinet. “Sorry, pal. It’ll just be for a minute. I have to call Mommy, and I can’t hear a thing.”

He took his cell phone from his pocket and called his wife.

Behind him, William's cries approached the decibels of an ambulance siren.

"I need one minute," he called to his son in a comforting voice. "I'll be right back. I promise."

From the fury in William's tone, he wasn't buying it.

Tim checked his messages—again—but Chelsea hadn't responded to the text he'd sent earlier.

The baby settled into a steady, despondent *waa-waa-waa*, like a bleating sheep.

Using a megaphone.

On an endless loop.

"Daddy!" On the sofa, Bella covered her ears with her hands.

"I'm sorry." Tim dialed his wife's cell number. After three rings, Chelsea's voice mail picked up. Tim left a quick message. "Where are you? Call me back. William is freaking out."

Shoving the phone back into his jeans, he went back to the living room and stared at the baby in the bassinet. William's arms and legs were flailing. His face was pinched and red. Tim took a deep breath and waded back into parenthood. He picked up his son. The baby's cries softened, and he whimpered against Tim's shoulder.

There was no doubt about it. William had to learn to take a bottle. This was ridiculous.

Damn it, Chelsea.

Tim took a few more turns around the first floor. Living room, kitchen, dining room. Repeat. No wonder Chelsea had lost all of her pregnancy weight already. If she had a Fitbit, she would have logged twenty thousand steps a day without leaving the house.

He passed the clock on the microwave. Eleven-fifteen.

Where was she?

Shifting the baby, he scrolled for the number of Chelsea's best friend, Fiona. He pressed Call with his thumb.

Fiona answered on the second ring. Voices and music drowned out her "Hello?"

"Have you seen Chelsea?" Tim raised his voice, knowing she wouldn't be able to hear a thing over the din at the club.

"Hold on," Fiona yelled. A minute later, the background noise quieted. "Sorry about that. I had to go outside. What's wrong?"

"Where's Chelsea?" Tim asked.

"What do you mean, where's Chelsea?" Fiona's voice sharpened. "Isn't she home?"

"No." Apprehension slid down Tim's spine like an ice pick. "What time did she leave the bar?"

"Leave?" Fiona asked, her tone growing worried. "She never showed up. I assumed something came up with the baby, like the last four times we tried to get together."

Tim glanced at the clock on the microwave. Eleven twenty-five. "Thanks, Fiona. I have to go look for her. Maybe she got a flat tire or something."

"She had a problem with her battery last month." Fiona's tone was accusatory. "She was stranded at Walmart. I had to pick her up."

What a bitch.

What did Fiona know about working and taking care of a family? She was single and had no responsibilities except for herself.

But Tim held his tongue. "The battery was replaced and the car serviced."

Fiona snorted. "Call me when you find her."

"Right." Tim ended the call.

William hiccupped in Tim's ear. He rubbed the baby's back. "It'll be OK."

But would it?

Tim rushed up the stairs to the master bedroom. Chelsea's iPad was on the nightstand. Tim sat on the edge of the bed. Keeping one hand on the baby's back, he put the tablet on the bed next to him, then turned it on, punched in her passcode, and opened the Find My Phone app. It found her in seconds.

What the . . . ?

That couldn't be right. The cursor blinked in the middle of nowhere. He zoomed in on the map. The icon hovered about twenty miles north, in Grey's Hollow, at the very edge of the county. Her phone wasn't even in Scarlet Falls. He watched the icon for a few minutes, but it didn't move.

Sweat broke out between his shoulder blades and anxiety clenched in his stomach. She wasn't supposed to be in Grey's Hollow.

He looked down at the baby, and the first prickling of fear rushed through him.

This isn't right.

Not going there. There had to be a simple explanation for Chelsea's phone to be twenty miles from home. There had to be.

Worry gathered like shards of glass in Tim's belly. They'd both been so stressed since William had been born. They'd argued. He'd said some stupid things. Been an ass on occasion. She'd been short-tempered with him, too, and had said things she'd later claim not to have meant. But she'd never leave him.

Right?

The baby squirmed.

One thing was certain. Even if Chelsea were angry with Tim, she would never, ever leave her children.

Something must be wrong.

"Guess what, William?" Tim picked up the baby and the iPad. "We're taking a ride."

William sniffed.

"On the bright side. You like car rides."

But one did not simply *go* anywhere with an infant and a three-year-old. Tim changed William's diaper and strapped him into the car seat. Bella had to go to the potty and put on her coat.

Tim grabbed a flashlight and the spare key to Chelsea's car. Then he checked the diaper bag, tucked a blanket around his son, and hauled everything out to the car. He clicked the rear-facing seat into the latches. Bella climbed into her car seat by herself and waited patiently for Tim to fasten her harness.

"That's a good girl." Tim tucked the blanket around her. "This will make him sleep. OK?"

"OK, Daddy." Bella looked as exhausted as Tim felt.

As much as he kept telling himself that there must be an explanation for Chelsea's strange location, it gnawed at his nerves, fraying his efforts to keep calm.

Everything about the night felt wrong. Just plain wrong.

He checked the map again, then drove out of their neighborhood and turned onto the rural highway. They lived in Scarlet Falls, a sleepy suburban community in New York

State about an hour north of Albany. The town wasn't hip or happening in any way, and there were few reasons for anyone to be out this late.

When he neared the interstate, he followed the icon on the map and chose the northbound on-ramp. Behind him, William went blissfully quiet. Bella nodded off as soon as her baby brother stopped fussing. Tim didn't risk turning on the radio. Usually, he prayed for silence, but tonight, it ate at him as the miles passed.

Watching the icon, he took the exit for Grey's Hollow and followed the map on the iPad. He drove through a group of small, widely spaced homes. Ten minutes later, he passed a rural train station. The Grey's Hollow station wasn't much more than a concrete platform with a small gravel parking lot, now empty. A cafe and sandwich shop next to the tracks was closed at the late hour.

After the station, the road led into the country. To the right, an empty meadow flanked the road, with the black silhouette of thick woods growing beyond it. On the left, a broken fence divided the road from a plowed cornfield.

The silence, and Tim's apprehension, rose to a crescendo, as speculated about why his wife's phone was out here in the middle of the countryside. As far as he knew, she'd never been here. When they went into Manhattan, they parked at the train station in Albany, because there was no reason to drive thirty minutes north to take the train south.

A quarter mile past the entrance to the station, his headlights swept across a white Honda Accord parked on the shoulder of the road.

Chelsea's car.

He cruised to a stop in front of her empty and dark vehicle. Thirty feet in front of her car, the road intersected with the train tracks. The railroad crossing sign stood, its twin red lights dark. The first stirrings of real panic twisted his gut.

There was no *good* reason for his wife's car to be parked in the middle of nowhere. Horrible possibilities began to flash in his mind. He glanced back at the lights of the train station.

Stop!

Tim puts the brakes on his brain before it took off on a paranoid tangent. Grabbing the spare key and his flashlight, he got out of his car. A cold wind wrapped around his neck, and he zipped his jacket to his chin. The darkness closed around him as he turned in a circle, hearing nothing but the sounds of the wind blowing and leaves rustling. He turned on the flashlight and pointed it to the empty field. He pivoted to illuminate the dead, mostly plowed tract of corn stalks. The lights of the train station glowed in the distance. The closest house was on the other side the station.

There was nothing here.

Absolutely nothing.

He walked back to the Honda and put his hand on the hood. The metal was cold. Bending over, he peered in the driver's side window. He took the key from his pocket, opened the door, and shone his flashlight inside the vehicle. Chelsea's purse wasn't in the car, but the sequins on her phone case glittered from the passenger seat. He leaned into the vehicle and picked up the phone. He turned it on. The battery had plenty of juice. He put the spare key into the ignition and turned it. The engine turned over immediately and the car hummed like the reliable vehicle that it was.

He withdrew from the car. The cold in his belly spread until he felt both panicked and numb. This had to be a bad dream. It couldn't be happening. He was trapped in a

nightmare crime show sequence.

A raindrop struck his cheek, the fat plop of it jolting him. Another landed on his hand. Dark spots began to dot the road.

This was wrong. So wrong.

He knew it in his gut.

Fear rolled through his belly as he returned to his car and used his own cell to call 911.

The dark country road through his windshield spurred his anxiety. Behind him, William began to whimper, protesting the stillness.

Tim gave the operator his location. Ending the call, he rested his forehead on the steering wheel and turned his gaze inward.

What had she been doing out here?

He lifted his head and took in the emptiness of the road in front of him, he knew instinctually that nothing would ever be the same.