

Chapter 6: Man Down

The remainder of the day passed uneventfully. A little after 5 p.m., Tom decided to head home to unwind. A full day had elapsed since the explosion, and they had managed to locate roughly half of the students who were meant to be at the school that fateful day. Tragically, one-third of these students had lost their lives, succumbing to blunt-force trauma from falling debris and being trapped under the rubble of the school. In this short span, Tom bore witness to more death and devastation than he had encountered throughout much of his career. Although he had been present at scenes of school shootings where 15 to 20 students were injured or killed by a lone gunman, the sheer scale of HUNDREDS of young lives lost to a single individual, not to mention the use of explosives, was a grim experience unlike any other.

Upon arriving home, Tom took the time to wrap his arms and knee in an effort to keep his injuries dry. He then indulged in a dip in his backyard pool. While many people might turn to television, hot showers, or alcoholic drinks to decompress from a challenging couple of days, Tom found solace in swimming. Swimming provided an outlet for his emotions, allowing him to momentarily decelerate after a seemingly non-stop two and a half days. He glided through the pool, relishing the comforting warmth of the water and the picturesque Midwestern sunset. The myriad hues of blue, pink, orange, and yellow that adorned the sky struck Tom as a genuine masterpiece, a sight he wished could stretch into eternity.

Engaging in laps and aquatic movement for the better part of two hours, his cell phone's ring disrupted the tranquility. Scrambling out of the pool, he grabbed the phone from his lounge chair, noting the incoming call from the police chief. He answered with an anticipatory tone, saying,

“Hey, chief, what's up? Please tell me you have some good news for me”

"Tom, I have some very distressing news. One of your agents has become unhinged. He's on the debris pile, service pistol to his head, threatening suicide. He claims he can't bear witness to all the deceased students and is weary of the gang violence, where innocent lives are caught in the crossfire. You must get here as soon as possible," Chief Jackson's somber voice conveyed.

"I'm on my way, chief, I'll be right there," Tom responded, ending the call and promptly exiting the pool. He dashed into the house, redressed in his work attire, and hastened out the door, ensuring to grab his Kevlar vest.

Driving swiftly yet responsibly, Tom activated his lights and sirens. He arrived at the school in a mere four or five minutes instead of the usual ten or fifteen. Stepping out of the car, he hurried toward the debris pile. Atkins City police officers were present, hands resting on their holstered guns, attempting to reason with the agent who had a firearm pressed to his temple.

As Tom approached the mound of rubble, he promptly recognized the agent as Special Agent Will Jokic. Closing the gap, about fifteen feet from Will, Tom implored,

"Come on, Will. Lower the gun. You don't want to harm yourself or anyone around you."

Will Jokic, his focus diverted towards a junior police officer attempting to negotiate with him, swiftly turned his gaze toward Tom.

His voice agitated, and he declared, "I don't want to hurt anyone else, just myself. I'm so FREAKING TIRED of witnessing kids perish in classrooms, killing one another on the streets, or becoming collateral damage in the feuds of rival gangs. I'm weary of these kids acquiring guns and trafficking drugs. THAT is the reason for their violence, and I'M JUST TIRED OF IT!!!" Will's words reverberated through his scream.

Tom, maintaining composure, met Will's turmoil with calm resolve. Positioned a few feet away, he endeavored to persuade Will, asserting, "Listen, I'm worn out from it too. Yet, it's precisely why we're in this line of work—so that we might one day prevent kids from taking each other's lives or committing horrendous acts like school shootings and bombings. You can't surrender like this, my friend. It won't resolve anything."

"Don't pretend you understand me, Tom!!! You're not privy to my experiences, especially what happened to me in Junior High and again in High School," Will shouted, pressing the pistol's muzzle against his temple.

"Then tell me what you went through, Will. It always helps to have someone to talk to about what's bothering us." Tom urged, continuing his efforts to reason with Will.

"Fine, Tom, you wanna know what happened? I'll tell you exactly what the hell happened!!! I survived two school shootings, the first while I was in Junior High. Twenty-two students lost their lives, and an additional fifty-six, myself included, were wounded!!! I spent nine agonizing months in the hospital, reliant on a tracheotomy. I had to relearn basic skills like walking, speaking, and feeding myself. I had to learn as a baby. Do you realize how embarrassing that is?"

Taking a deep breath, Tom responded, "No, Will, I truly can't. but trust me, that's no reason to do this Come on, you got a lot to live for, man"

"You don't know anything, Tom. I live with immense amounts of pain physically and mentally just to come to work and see more death and pain. I can't do this anymore." Will uttered, drawing a deep breath, shutting his eyes, and ultimately pulling the trigger on the service pistol aimed at his own head.

"NO WILL!!!!" The collective shout rang out, and the assembled individuals rushed to intervene, but their efforts were in vain. Upon reaching Will, they observed his closed eyes and the wound on the

side of his head. Yet, there was no sign of life. Tom swiftly joined the group, his fingers searching for a pulse in Will's neck, yet the grim truth was undeniable—Will was gone.

With a mixture of frustration and despair, Tom turned away and lashed out, kicking the nearest vehicle. He then squatted down, burying his face in his hands, his anguished screams muffled by his palms.

“SHIT SHIT SHIT!!!! DAMMIT!!!! I could have stopped him”

Approaching Tom, the police chief placed a comforting arm around his shoulders and conveyed, “No Tom, Will was bound to do this today. There was nothing anyone could have done to stop him. His life was filled with secrecy and internalized pain. It's very clear that in those shootings, he was a victim and had more psychological damage than they really did physically. He had a lot of internal demons that nobody probably knew about. You did everything you could”

Tom took a few moments to regain his composure before addressing the group, stating, "For anyone who needs a break from this case, take it. There will be no reprimands or pay deductions. This case has exacted a toll on all of us, whether we're willing to acknowledge it or not. We'll bring in officers and agents to relieve you. If anyone opts not to return to this case, it won't be seen as weakness or cowardice. You're dismissed."

Having dismissed the team, Tom retreated to the sleeping quarters within the mobile command center. There, he settled at an unoccupied desk; his head bowed in thought. He devoted hours to contemplating whether the outcome could have been altered. Eventually, he came to understand that regardless of his actions, the conclusion likely wouldn't have diverged from its tragic course.

He remained in that position for nearly another hour, finally retrieving his cell phone from his pocket. With slow and deliberate dialing, as if dragging out the process might make conveying the

news to the FBI director less arduous (though Tom knew it wouldn't), he dialed the Illinois FBI office.

He felt compelled to delay the inevitable. Upon pressing the "SEND" button, it took only seconds for the secretary to answer the call.

"Federal Bureau of Investigation, Illinois Division, how may I direct your call?" the operator on the other end of the line inquired. "Yes, I need to be connected to Director Matt Wilson, please?" Tom responded.

After a brief hold, the operator connected him, and within seconds, the director's voice came through.

"Director Matt Wilson speaking, How can I help you?" The voice on the other end was prompt and professional.

Taking a deep breath, Tom began, "Director Wilson, this is Agent Driscall...I'm afraid I have some bad news. I'll be honest; there is no easy way to say this, so I'll just come on out and say it..."

Tom took a big deep breath and then slowly let it out before he said, "A little over three hours ago, Special Agent Will Jokic committed suicide. He was standing on the debris pile of the school bombing site when he put his service pistol to his head and pulled the trigger.

Director Wilson audibly gasped, his voice carrying a mixture of shock and concern, "Oh my god, what happened? Why did he do such a thing?"

"Well, Director, we aren't COMPLETELY sure why, but from the way he was talking, he was just tired of seeing kids dying in schools and gangs killing each other. He was also tired of seeing innocent people getting caught in the crossfire of those gang gunfights.

He also mentioned that he was a survivor of two separate school shootings growing up, the first in Junior high and the other in high school,” Tom explained, striving to provide every detail of Will's words without omission.

“Well, I will make arrangements to have his remains sent back to Wisconsin so his family can arrange for his funeral. Speaking of his family, have you called his mother yet?” the director inquired gently.

“No, that's on my agenda to do as soon as I hang up with you....although I'm not really sure how to explain that to a grieving mother,” Tom responded somberly.

“Just be honest with her and say you all are working on a very stressful case involving children, and he just couldn't take the violence anymore, and he snapped,” the director advised candidly.

“Director Wilson, I have given the agents here time off to relax and unwind from this unusually stressful case, would you be willing to send me a fresh group of agents so we can continue to investigate this bombing and catch the suspect that did this?” Tom asked with a hit of urgency in his voice.

“Of course, Tom, The new team of agents will be there later tonight, close to midnight or 1:00 AM. You should only lose a few hours of work time. Anyway, I must debrief your new team. Good luck talking to the mother,” the director responded.

“Yes, sir. Thank you for taking my call,” Tom conveyed before concluding the conversation.

Subsequently, Tom settled at an unoccupied desk, extracting his laptop from his bag. After plugging it in and logging into the FBI Illinois Agent's database, he accessed Will's work file.

He then dialed the emergency contact number listed and waited for a response. After fifteen seconds, an older woman, likely in her fifties, answered the call. "Hello? Jokic residence, this is Peggy speaking."

"Hi, Peggy, my name is Tom Driscall. I am a Special Agent with the FBI office your son Will works at," Tom introduced himself, sensing his throat tighten and anxiety taking hold.

"Hello, Tom How can I help you?" Peggy's voice held a gentle tone, yet inwardly she questioned why someone from the bureau would be calling her instead of Will.

"Well, ma'am, I'm afraid I have some bad news....there's no delicate way to say this, so I will tell you as gently as I can. Little over three hours ago, I responded to a call from an agent who was in mental distress and had a gun to their head.....When I arrived...I found your son Will standing in the rubble of a school where we had been working on a case with his service pistol pressed against his temple.

"I tried to talk Will into putting the gun down, and he and I could talk one-on-one, and there would be no repercussions of any kind, but there was simply no talking him into putting it down, and I'm sorry to inform you that a short time later Will took his life. Tom said as his voice cracked.

"OH, MY WILLIAM!!! NOT MY WILLIAM!!!" Peggy's anguished cry echoed through the phone. Tears welled up in Tom's eyes as he listened to this grieving mother mourn the loss of her cherished son.

He remained silent, empathetic to her pain, allowing her tears to flow for several minutes before resuming his dialogue. "Ma'am, I am so sorry for your loss. I truly wish that there was something I could have done to stop him. I feel like I failed him as his superior on this case by not keeping him safe, and therefore I feel like I have failed you as it was my job to keep him safe from any harm"

“Why didn't someone try and stop him? Why aren't your agents going through regular psychological counseling? I'm sure that it's a mandated part of the job, isn't it?” Peggy inquired, seeking answers amidst her grief.

“No, actually, it isn't mandated, but I agree with you. I think it should be. I feel absolutely horrible about what happened, and I was away from the scene for a bit, so I couldn't do my best to stop him,” Tom explained as he stared blankly at the laptop screen before him.

The conversation seemed to taper off, and Tom noted the time—it was swiftly approaching midnight. Politely excusing himself, he indicated his intention to conclude the call. He also expressed the hope that Peggy would inform him or the director of the funeral arrangements, ensuring their attendance.

Peggy agreed to reach out when the arrangements were finalized. After exchanging farewells, the call concluded.

Instead of returning to his beach house that night, Tom opted for one of the few remaining unoccupied sleep rooms within the mobile command center. His slumber was fitful, his mind restless as he spent most of the night tossing and turning. The replay of Will's suicide played in a loop within his thoughts, as he grappled with the question of what he could have done to prevent such a tragic outcome.

Deep within himself, Tom recognized that he had not erred and that Will's actions couldn't have been thwarted. Nonetheless, he harbored the wish that no further harm or loss would befall the team throughout the ongoing case. Only time would reveal the unfolding events.

Chapter 8: Saying Goodbye to a Friend

A few days passed with very few leads in the investigation. The team was still awaiting results on possible fingerprints found on the letter and envelope left on the body of Zeus Flores. It had been almost five days since Will Jokic committed suicide on the debris site.

Today, Tom and four other team members boarded an early morning flight heading to Wisconsin for Will's funeral and burial service. The flight lasted a little over two hours, and the agents only carried locked gun safes that also held extra magazines for their firearms, just in case.

Upon landing, Tom and the others went directly from the airport to the funeral home. The drive from the airport to Will's hometown of La Crosse took only half an hour. They arrived at the funeral home thirty minutes before the service was scheduled to start.

At the entrance of the funeral home chapel, they were welcomed by an older woman in her early 60s. She said, "You must be Tom, and these must be the rest of the agents on Will's team"

"Yes, ma'am, I am Tom and these are only about one-sixth of the agents that were present the day Will passed. How did you know it was me?" Tom asked, his voice faltering for a moment before he continued.

"We are so sorry for your loss Peggy. I especially feel bad because I feel like there was something I could have done to try and stop him," Tom said, his eyes welling up with tears as he looked at her.

"No, Tom, I should have told you on the phone Will had a lot of inner demons, and he kept it all locked away until it took him away from all of us," Peggy replied, hugging Tom. She continued,

"I was so lost in my own grief that all I could think about was placing blame on someone when I

shouldn't have. Anyway, enough sadness. Why don't you guys go ahead and go up and give your respects, and then Tom, during the funeral, I would like you to get up and say something. It doesn't have to be anything major just talk about Will. In the days leading up to his death, he texted me and expressed, "You were one of his favorite team leaders and that you taught him a lot about self-respect" Tom was taken aback.

Firstly, he wasn't sure what he could say about Will, having only known him directly for about three days before his death, despite seeing him a few times around the regional office. Secondly, Tom had no idea that he had made an impact on Will's life. Fifteen minutes after the four agents went up to pay their respects and say their final goodbyes to Will, once the chapel was filled, the funeral service began.

The preacher began with a warm welcome to all the friends, family, and coworkers, acknowledging those of us sitting on the side of the room. He then transitioned to one of Will's favorite bible verses, Psalm 23. As the preacher began reciting the verse, all of us quickly joined in. When the preacher finished, Peggy approached the podium, thanking everyone for coming and expressing how much Will would have appreciated their presence, making him feel special.

Peggy started her speech by sharing stories about Will as a child who always wanted to be in law enforcement. She recounted how he and his younger brother would play cops and robbers, with Will often taking on the role of the cop.

As Peggy stood at the podium sharing this anecdote, she said, "Will bought a pair of handcuffs with allowance that his father and I had given him one weekend and he would chase his brother Alex around the house and our yard. It would go on for fifteen or so minutes, and finally, Alex would get tired and either give up or Will would get close enough that he could tackle him, put the cuffs on his brother, and declare a victory for the good guys." The audience smiled, and laughter filled the air as everyone enjoyed hearing this story.

She talked about how Will was a man of faith and highly involved in his church across town. She even mentioned that he participated in church events beyond the church itself.

Peggy spoke for about half an hour before saying, "I have asked one of Will's coworkers at the FBI to come up and talk about Will for a few minutes. Please welcome, FBI Special Agent Tom Driscall.

Tom rose from his seat and approached the podium, pausing for a moment before he began, "Good Afternoon, everyone. I knew Will for about eighteen months. He came to the Northern Illinois Regional FBI office as a recruit, and I instantly knew that he would be different from all of the other recruits.

"Will was always willing to learn something new and he was always great at listening. I worked at a distance with Will these last eighteen months, and he was part of a team I put together to solve an ongoing investigation about a school bombing down in Illinois.

"Will told his mom that I helped him work on his self-confidence, which I can honestly say is the biggest compliment someone can give me. I was devastated when Will passed, and I wish there were something I could do to stop it. Fly high, Will, and solve that big FBI Case in the sky," Tom concluded. The audience applauded Tom as he stepped away from the podium and returned to his seat.

At the burial site, the preacher talked about Will's character and the kind of person he was and then said a prayer, and then a couple of people from within the bureau made speeches about Will.

After the graveside procedures, an FBI Honor Guard unit, dressed in their blue uniforms, with blood-red sashes attached to their left shoulders, marched in single file, about fifty yards from the grave site, but within sight of the attendees, especially the family.

Each member was armed with an M1903 Bolt Action rifle, Port Arms, with the rifles held out in front of them.

“Detail, halt!” the Guard commander ordered crisply. His voice was low so that only the unit could hear the command. The unit stopped as one. They stood shoulder to shoulder, facing forward.

“HONOR GUARD, ATTENTION!” The Commander snapped, his voice carrying over the field, clearly heard by the officers and family surrounding the grave site.

“PARADE, REST!” In unison, all seven put their rifles vertically at their sides, buttstock down, feet shoulder-width apart. As one, the unit jutted their arms out, so that the rifles were facing upward at an angle facing away from them, their left hand snapping to the small of their back.

The Commander inspected the unit, walking briskly down the line, making sure that their positioning was correct. “HONOR GUARD, ATTENTION!” The rifles snapped smartly against their right legs, legs together, left-hand ramrod straight down the seams of their dress uniform pants.

“RIGHT FACE!” The unit turned to the right, facing toward the gravesite.

“PORT ARMS!” The unit brought their rifles diagonally across their chests, barrel pointing to the left. “READY...” The unit chambered a round, expert fingers moving in synchronized motion.

“AIM...” The unit brought the weapons up and to the left, their gaze never wavering from their straightforward stare “FIRE...” With a cacophony of percussion, the seven rifles fired at once.

“READY...” The ‘chink’ of the ejected shell casings resonated across the open field, as the unit reloaded. “AIM...”

The rifles returned to the position, awaiting the command. “FIRE...” The reverberation of the rifle shot cracked the still air once again. Once more, the unit recovered, and the Commander took a deep breath.

The three commands came quickly, and after the third volley, the Commander gave the last command. “PRESENT ARMS!” The unit stood at attention, the rifles held out before them in a salute, as a bugler, posted just in sight of the gathering, began the first notes of “TAPS.”

Halfway through the first stanza, a second bugler, out of sight, joined in, causing an echo effect. The chills of the finality of the playing of the time-worn song weren’t lost on the officers in the Guard.

Even at attention, the sharp intake of breaths and the errand tear escaped from the eye of even the most hardened, betrayed the humanity of the uniform.

When TAPS concluded, the military representatives chosen to fold the flag approached. They carefully removed the flag that had been draped over Will's casket and meticulously folded it. Once the flag was neatly folded, the senior officer from the group stepped forward, holding the folded flag against their chest.

Kneeling before the family, the officer spoke, “On behalf of the president of the United States, (the United States Army; the United States Marine Corps; the United States Navy; the United States Air Force or the United States Coast Guard), and a grateful nation, please accept this flag as a symbol of our appreciation for your loved one’s honorable and faithful service.” Standing at attention, the senior officer saluted the family members seated in the front row.

After a brief moment of silence, a woman in a suit walked up to the mourners, carrying a radio.

Over the radio, everyone heard, “500-Charlie1614?”

followed by five seconds of silence.

Then the radio responded with another call, “500-Charlie1614?”

and another five seconds of silence ensued before eight consecutive beeps sounded.

Then, a voice announced,

“Attention all units.....Attention all units. 500-Charlie1614 is 10-7. All units be advised Special Agent Will Jokic is 10-7 for the final time. End of watch March 23rd, 2023, in Atkins, Illinois. You will be sorely missed by your FBI brothers and sisters, but rest easy, and we will take the watch from here. Godspeed Special Agent Will Jokic.”

Once the radio transmission for the 10-42 signal concluded, a horse entered the field from the left side, guided by an officer on foot. The horse's boots were placed backward in the stirrups, a solemn display known as the riderless horse.

As the casket was slowly lowered into the ground, family members approached, placing flowers on top of the casket before departing from the graveside service.

After the service concluded, Tom and the other agents approached Peggy once more, offering their hugs and condolences before they had to depart for a flight back to Illinois.

Two hours and fifteen minutes after leaving La Crosse, Wisconsin, Tom entered his house carrying his gun bag. Feeling hungry but not in the mood to cook, he decided to order a pizza. When the pizza arrived thirty minutes later, he set it on the coffee table along with a cold cherry cola. Seating himself on the couch with the TV remote, he turned on a sports program and enjoyed his dinner.

Around 9 p.m., fatigue started to set in, prompting Tom to place his pizza leftovers in the fridge and dispose of the empty soda bottle. He then turned off the TV and headed upstairs to retire for the night. Lying down in bed, Tom soon drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 13: The Final Face-off

The morning after learning of Jaquan's murder happened to be Tom's day off from work. At 8:15 a.m., his phone rang, and glancing at the caller ID, he noticed an unusual caller: his grandmother.

Intrigued by the unexpected call, he answered, “Hey grandma, everything okay? You don't usually —”

“THOMAS, PLEASE HELP ME!!!! THIS CRAZY TEENAGE GIRL HAS A GUN TO MY HEAD, AND SHE SAYS SHE'S GOING TO KILL ME IF YOU DON'T—” Ellise's frantic voice pleaded.

Then was interrupted as Melissa seized the phone, addressing Tom, “Good morning, Agent Driscall. So, this lovely lady who I have the pleasure of having as my guest today is your grandmother, huh? It would appear that I have your full attention now, do I not? By the way, how is Jaquan doing?” She taunted with a laugh.

“Yes, you certainly have my attention. Please, just don't harm her. She's not involved in any of this. Let her go, and we can talk. I promise, but please, don't hurt her. And as for Jaquan, I know you had him killed. I will apprehend you, and you will pay for that ,” Tom implored, his words a blend of desperation and determination, trying to persuade Melissa to release his grandmother while simultaneously conveying his resolute stance.

“I'm sorry, Tom, but that's not how this is going to work. I won't be releasing your sweet old granny just yet. We're going to play a little game called “Where's Granny and Melissa?” I'll call you with a clue about our location. If you guess right, she lives. If not... well, you can guess the rest,” Melissa declared as Tom hastily got dressed while keeping her on the line.

Simultaneously managing the call, Tom muted his end and dialed the police chief on the landline.

Chief Jackson picked up, asking, "Chief Jackson, who is this?"

"Chief, it's Tom Driscall. , That psycho teen bomber has kidnapped my grandmother and is and is holding her hostage with a gun pointed at her head. I've got her on my cellphone. I need you to trace the number on my phone, please," Tom pleaded.

"Alright, Tom, give me 30 seconds and keep her talking. If you need to mute me, do it so you can talk to her," Chief Jackson instructed.

"Tom, are you there?" Melissa's voice came through his cell phone.

Quickly muting the chief on the landline, Tom responded, "Yes, Melissa, I'm here. I'm sorry. I'm just trying to process all this."

"Tom, Tom, Tom, it's not wise to fib to the lady holding a loaded revolver to your lovely grandmother's head. I'll let it slide this time, considering you're likely trying to trace my location. But here's the deal, you won't find us, at least not until I'm ready. I'll spare you this time, but don't push it. Keep your phone on and close. Goodbye, Agent Driscall," Melissa said, her confidence evident, before ending the call.

Once Tom confirmed the call with Melissa was disconnected, he asked the chief, "Were you able to trace the call?"

"No, Tom, the call was too short for us to triangulate the location. I'm sorry. Do you want us to try again when she calls you back?" Chief Jackson offered.

"No need. She somehow caught on to my attempt to trace the call this time, and she's given me a pass for now. But she made it clear she won't be lenient next time. I can't risk my grandmother's life by

pressing further,” Tom shared, his mind racing to figure out the next move.

“I understand. If you need me today, I won't be far,” Chief Jackson's voice held a hint of something unsaid.

“Thanks, Chief. I'll reach out if it's safe for me to do so without endangering my grandmother,” Tom replied, ending the call.

He swiftly finished getting dressed, ensuring his Glock 19 was loaded and ready, accompanied by three additional magazines on his gun belt, and waited for his phone to ring once again. His AR-15 was secured in its case. Donning an unmarked Kevlar vest over his attire and placing a baseball cap on his head, he left his house and hopped into his car. Frustration fueled his driving as he aimlessly navigated the streets, but his phone rang, and seeing his grandmother's number, he hastily pulled over to answer.

“Hello?” Tom spoke anxiously into the phone.

Agent Driscall, there's been a change in plans. The carnival is in town, and I want to play games and have some fun— though, these aren't your typical carnival games. Meet me at the county fairgrounds racetrack on West Street. Come alone, or your grandmother dies.” Melissa stated before abruptly ending the call.

Before merging back onto the road, Tom drew his pistol, ensuring a round was chambered, and holstered it again. His drive continued, bringing him to the county fairgrounds and city racetrack in relatively short order.

Tom paid for his carnival admission, secured a parking spot, and retrieved his AR-15 from the bag on the passenger seat. He slid the tactical sling over his head and one arm and equipped four full magazines in his vest pouches before stepping out of the car.

Carrying his rifle slung across his back in a non-threatening manner, Tom entered the carnival area, maintaining a relaxed posture with his hands at his sides to avoid alarming fellow attendees. If questioned about his presence, he could assert that he was assisting local police with security. Amid the bustling crowds of adults and children vying for prizes, he scanned faces, attempting to spot his grandmother or Melissa amidst the throng.

Navigating through the assortment of people engrossed in various games, Tom's attention was momentarily caught by what he thought was a gunshot. His reflexive hand on his holstered pistol proved unnecessary when he realized the noise had been generated by a balloon being popped at a dart game.

Progressing toward the carnival rides, a distinct shot echoed from his left, sparking panic that sent visitors scattering for the exits. Swiftly unholstering his Glock 19 9mm, Tom sought cover beside a game booth, meticulously surveying the area.

The rapidly dispersing crowd made it challenging for him to discern any potential threats. Amid the chaos, Tom finally spotted Melissa standing across a row of games, holding a revolver to his grandmother's head.

Her voice resonated in a yell, demanding, “WHERE ARE YOU, TOM??? GET OUT HERE WHERE I CAN SEE YOU”

Balancing the urgency of his grandmother's safety against the potential danger, Tom stepped forward into the open aisle, his pistol held at his side.

With careful consideration for his grandmother's well-being, he ventured, “Are you doing okay, Grandma?”

“Considering this crazy ass teenager has a revolver to my head and an arm around my neck dragging me, I've never been better,” Grandma Ellise retorted back sarcastically while still being dragged.

“I understand, Grandma. Just relax, this will all be over soon enough, I promise you,” Tom reassured as he stood there, his gaze fixated angrily on Melissa.

She noticed Tom's look of anger and disgust, and remarked to him, “What's the matter, Tom? Don't like it when family is involved to help other people get what they want? But you know, I seem to remember you kidnapping my father to get closer to me.”

“You know damn good and well that we ARRESTED him because he fled from us in a foot chase, and that is a crime in ANY jurisdiction. So don't hand me that crap that we kidnapped him,” Tom countered firmly, his eyes locked on Melissa.

“Okay, Tom, I am tired of talking. It's time for you to play follow the leader...Let's see if you can keep up,” Melissa declared.

She then fired a shot at a transformer just above Tom's head, creating a shower of sparks and hot metal that rained down on him. Distracted momentarily, Tom allowed Melissa the opportunity to break away, fleeing with his grandmother in tow right beside her.

Tom quickly recovered from the shower of sparks and began to search the carnival area with his pistol held at shoulder height and the muzzle of the gun pointed downrange in the high ready position, ready to shoot if a threat presented itself.

He hurried past the game where you knock down bottles with a baseball and the ring toss game to win goldfish, checking his 9 o'clock and 3 o'clock positions to ensure he wasn't walking into any kind

of trap. Tom caught a glimpse of Melissa and his grandmother ascending a short flight of stairs into a building called “The Earthquake,” so he followed them swiftly.

Upon entering the building, the ground began to shake, reminiscent of the day of the school bombing. His vision blurred slightly, but after a minute, Tom regained his bearings and slowly moved through the structure, cautiously watching his left, right, and rear to avoid an ambush.

Soon, Tom reached an exit without any sign of Melissa or his grandmother. Stepping outside, he spotted Melissa running with his grandmother, hurriedly trailing behind her, struggling to maintain her balance as Melissa held her arm around her neck. They were headed toward the carousel ride.

Approaching the carousel with his gun ready, Tom saw the ride start to turn. After observing for a moment, he realized neither his grandmother nor Melissa was on the carousel, indicating that they had continued running. Looking around from side to side, Tom finally caught sight of Melissa running behind the carousel toward the haunted house, still dragging his grandmother. Quickly following their path, Tom entered the haunted house with his gun held at the high ready position.

He turned on his gun-mounted flashlight and carefully exposed only the barrel of his gun as he advanced around each corner ahead of him. As Tom carefully navigated the haunted house, he encountered mainly eerie statues and spring-loaded figures designed to startle visitors. About five minutes into the haunted house, as Tom turned a corner, he spotted an individual holding a pistol. Instantly, he raised his gun and fired two shots, the reports reverberating throughout the haunted house. His well-aimed shots brought down the person. Approaching cautiously, Tom checked the unidentified male for a pulse before resuming his advance.

Continuing through the haunted house, Tom encountered two more individuals concealed behind barrels, each armed with a pistol. They both took shots at Tom, prompting him to swiftly return fire. One was struck in the shoulder, and the other received a center-mass shot, causing them both to drop.

Tom pressed on, his pace picking up slightly. As he rounded another corner, a figure emerged from the darkness, firing an AR-15. Fortunately, their aim was poor, giving Tom enough time to take cover and retaliate, incapacitating the figure.

After what felt like an eternity and three gunfights later, Tom reached the haunted house exit. Stepping out into an open area of the carnival grounds, he started to cross when a shot rang out, the bullet narrowly missing his head. Reacting swiftly, Tom sprinted toward the Hall of Mirrors.

Before entering, he texted the police chief, notifying him of his location at the carnival and the presence of snipers taking shots at him. "I'm on my way with snipers of my own," The chief texted in response.

"Thanks, chief. Tell them not to shoot the guy wearing the FBI vest," Tom quipped before stowing his phone away.

As he stepped into the hall of mirrors, he quickly became disoriented amidst the myriad reflections of himself. He navigated by touch, feeling his way around each mirror until he located a passageway on his left side. Progressing to the next area, he encountered another set of mirrors—four in total. After exploring, he found a passage on his far right, which he followed down a short hallway.

Coming upon a pane of glass surrounded by two others, he carefully examined each until he discovered that the far left one swung open, leading to the next section. He spent about five minutes maneuvering through the mirror maze. Suddenly, the reflection of Melissa appeared on all four mirrors ahead, holding a gun to his grandmother's head, a twisted grin on her face, while his grandmother appeared terrified.

Taking a significant risk, Tom aimed his pistol at the second mirror pane from the left and fired a single shot, targeting the image's forehead. However, the outcome was a shattered mirror, and when he

fired, Melissa swiftly evaded, disappearing from his line of sight. He had missed his mark. Undeterred by the miss, Tom continued to navigate the labyrinth of mirrors.

He caught fleeting glimpses of Melissa and his grandmother, Ellise, but the brief moments weren't enough to take a stable and safe shot without endangering his grandmother. After a few minutes, Tom seized his next opportunity to take a shot. Confronted with a series of six mirrors, he spotted Melissa's image with the revolver still aimed at his grandmother's head. Tom lined up his pistol with Melissa's head, but just as he squeezed the trigger, an assailant approached from behind and struck him on the side with a rifle buttstock. The impact caused his shot to veer slightly, hitting Melissa in the shoulder.

Remarkably, Melissa refrained from harming Ellise, sparing Tom's fears. However, Tom had little time to dwell on this as he was grappling with someone intent on overpowering him. Swiftly redirecting his focus to the assailant, who was in the midst of a physical and brutal attack, Tom countered just as the attacker was about to strike with the rifle in an axe-like motion. With Tom on his back on the ground, he fired three shots into the assailant's chest, causing them to collapse lifelessly on top of him.

Regaining his footing, Tom swiftly got back on his feet and located the passage leading to the next segment of the mirror maze. Upon entering the passage, neither Melissa nor Grandma Ellise was in sight. Tom paused for a minute or two, catching his breath after that near-death encounter with the rifle-wielding assailant.

Tom caught his breath and proceeded down a lengthy narrow corridor adorned with nine mirrors—four on each side and one directly ahead. Stepping into the passage, he noticed a shaded area to the left. Positioning himself within the shadow cast by sunlight filtering through a ceiling gap, he discerned the reflections of Melissa and his grandmother on various mirror panes.

Opting for the third mirror on his left, he fired two shots, aiming at Melissa's image. As the glass

shattered on the other side of the mirror, Melissa crumpled to the ground. The revolver slipped from her grasp as blood streamed from the entry wound on her forehead and the exit wound at the back.

Approaching Melissa's lifeless body, Tom adhered to FBI protocol and rolled her onto her stomach, securing her hands behind her back with handcuffs.

Hurriedly, he rushed to his grandmother's side, retrieving a pocket knife from his pants pocket to free her from the duct tape binding her wrists. "Are you alright, Grandma? I'm so sorry you had to witness that," Tom inquired.

Speechless, she sought refuge in Tom's arms, struggling to regulate her breathing as the weight of the morning's events took hold. Resting in his embrace, she panted unevenly, holding onto Tom, unable to verbalize the ordeal she had just endured.

After holding her for a few moments, Tom texted Chief Jackson with an update: "Melissa Lester is dead. I'm with my Grandmother in the middle of the maze. Please deploy half of the SWAT team through the entrance to clear the initial section of the maze. Simultaneously, dispatch another SWAT group through the maze's exit to sweep for any remaining suspects and escort us out. My grandmother appears unharmed, but I'd like EMTs to check on her."

Chief Jackson responded with a touch of humor, "Will do, and I'll instruct my guys that if they have to shoot the man in the unmarked FBI vest, aim for the leg. He's got a grandmother to escort home." Tom found the chief's reply amusing, and he shared it with his grandmother, who joined in the laughter.

In a matter of minutes, a group of five SWAT officers emerged from the maze entrance, immediately recognizing Tom.

They holstered their weapons and confirmed over the radio, “We’ve got Agent Driscall and his grandmother. We’re heading out.” The SWAT team escorted them out of the maze through the entrance.

Outside the mirror maze building, EMS personnel awaited their arrival. Tom and his grandmother were taken to an awaiting ambulance, where they underwent medical checks. Before long, they both received a clean bill of health.

As they sat in the ambulance, relaxing, Police Chief Jackson approached. He shook Tom's hand and commended, “Well done, Tom. I'm proud of how you handled that situation.”

Just as Tom was about to respond, the coroner's team emerged with a body bag, the face visible. Tom recognized it as Melissa's.

He halted the procession and remarked aloud, “Yeah, I really wish I could've just arrested her.”

Reaching down, Tom finished zipping the body bag, then took Grandma Ellise's hand and suggested, “Let's get you, home, Grandma. We have a lot to discuss. I plan to stay in this town for a very long time, and it is the top priority.”

Guiding his grandmother from the back of the ambulance to the ground, they shared a moment of embrace. Tom draped his FBI parka around her shoulders, shielding her from the slightly cooler summer night air. Together, they walked away from the carnival—a grandmother and her hero grandson.