**Here's a sample from THE MISSING ELEMENT:**

**CHAPTER 1**

To avoid security, he entered the building through a service door. Accompanying him were two, broad-shouldered men in denim jeans, navy jackets, baseball caps and leather gloves. They were hired muscle. He wasn't the type to dirty his hands with this sort of business.

The threesome climbed the back stairs to the seventh floor. After a quick check for anyone who might be present in the hall, they exited the stairwell and proceeded to her apartment. He extended his gloved hand and rapped on the brass knocker.

Inside the condo, a middle-aged woman slept. It had been a difficult day at the office. She'd left work early with a headache and was hoping a short nap would help shake it.

Awakened by the knock on her door, she glanced at her watch . . . 6:30. Who would come calling, unannounced, at this time of evening? She arose and left the bedroom. At the entrance door, she pressed her cheek against the cool wood . . . checking the peephole.

She hadn't expected to see him tonight.

Nevertheless, after a short pause, she unchained the door, unlocked the deadbolt, and turned the knob to allow him inside.

No sooner had she cracked the door, than the two thugs shouldered their way into the apartment – shoving her roughly to the hardwood. The fall left her unable to catch her breath. Moving quickly, the men jammed a terrycloth rag into her mouth, stifling her feeble attempts to scream.

She had never dreamed that her caller was capable of physical violence. Yet there he stood . . . looking down at her with satisfaction.

She gagged as the rag brushed the back of her throat.

The hirelings picked her up by the arms and dragged her farther inside the apartment. Being slight of build, and knowing the limits of her own physical abilities, she did not resist.

He secured the door and followed behind.

When they were all well inside her home, the two henchmen stood her on her feet, and released their grips. They continued to block any hope of escape.

She reached to pull the cloth from her mouth. But one of the thugs jerked her hand away, then secured the rag in place with lengths of broad, grey tape.

Now the man spoke to her. His voice was calm, but cold . . . cold in a way she had never heard any voice sound before.

He advised that she leave the rag in place and cooperate fully. He didn't intend to do her permanent harm, he said. But she must do as she was told.

She saw little choice in the matter.

He directed her to sit at the dining room table – which she did. Then he produced a pen and some linen stationery, placing them on the table in front of her. She was going to write a note.

As he watched over her shoulder, she began to write. Could she include some subtle clue in the text? She wrote slowly, pausing after every sentence to rub out a "kink" in her writing hand.

She had chosen her words with care. Would they pass his scrutiny? He was no fool, after all. Even if he approved the note as written, would anyone understand the sub-text of the message?

She could only hope.

When she had finished writing, she signed at the bottom and put down the pen. He removed the paper from the table, and with a further brief perusal, pronounced it, "just fine." The man nodded toward one of his accomplices.

The thug grasped her from behind, closing a muscular arm around her chest and shoulders. Then he clamped a chemical-soaked cloth over her rag-stuffed mouth and nose.

She recalled a momentary and futile struggle before blackness took her.

\* \* \*

When she awoke, the blackness remained. But she wasn't blind. This place was just incredibly dark.

Getting up from the cold, damp cement floor, and with her arms extended for balance, she turned in a circle. In one direction, she could barely make out a thin line of light . . . and she stumbled toward it.

**CHAPTER 2**

***Saturday, October 17th, 7:45 a.m.***

The navy blue Mazda 6 had been following at a distance of about two hundred yards ever since I made my swing past the Red Wing YMCA and onto Levee Road. This was my usual running route for a Saturday morning, and anyone with an interest would know that. I kept my eyes forward, maintaining the steady seven-minute-per-mile pace that had proven appropriate to providing a good aerobic workout for a forty-something man in my condition.

Ten years ago I would have been running five-minute miles. You do what you can.

With the river on my right, and the city to my left, my feet pounded a steady rhythm on the gravel road shoulder. I continued past the main barge dock and the Consolidated Grain terminal. These two structures marked the hub for commercial traffic on the Mississippi River at Red Wing. As I ran by, wafts of coal dust from empty barges gave way to the dusty-sweet smells of early harvest that filled the air around the terminal. Eighteen-wheelers spewed acrid blue plumes of diesel exhaust as they lined up to dump their loads of shelled field corn, adding variety to the aromatic smorgasbord.

I chanced a quick glance behind me. The Mazda was still there. But it kept its distance.

It was a beautiful morning for a run. Sugar maples and aspen were just beginning to show a bit of yellow foliage. The sun shone brightly from the southeast, its rays barely clearing the tree-covered bluffs of town, too early in the day to brighten the roofs of the stately, turn-of-the-century homes closer to the river.

At this latitude, the highest temperature the weak, October sun could encourage was a damp forty-five degrees Fahrenheit. But it was warm enough for me to wear my black jogging shorts and a red T-shirt, and cool enough for me to stay comfortable, even at this pace. It would be a shame for an intruder to interrupt my exercise routine on such a day.

A couple hundred yards farther along, I passed the boathouse village on my right. The village was a sheltered harbor where garage-like structures, made mostly of red or silver metal, floated up and down on poles sunk deep into the river bottom. The boathouses were buoyed by empty, plastic fifty-gallon drums, situated strategically beneath their floorboards. The poles, called "gin poles" by the locals, kept the houses aligned along several stretches of wooden dock. Each boathouse-lined dock extended about 250 feet from the shore into the harbor bay.

The boathouses were quaint. But I imagined the local artists who painted watercolors of the boathouse village were better able than I to appreciate its artistic character on this particular morning. Having an unknown vehicle on your tail heightens awareness of many things, but bucolic beauty isn't one of them.

Another hundred yards along, I left the roadside, continuing onto the concrete running path that led away from Levee Road and toward Baypoint Park. The right-angle turn in the direction of the park proper gave me another opportunity to surreptitiously check the status of my pursuer.

Still there. Still keeping his, or her, distance.

Baypoint Park was originally a landfill for the City of Red Wing, Minnesota. The entire area was located below the flood plain, and nearly surrounded by the waters of the Mississippi. Accordingly, it had seemed the perfect spot for a dump – it never filled up. Every ten years or so, a flood would come through and carry the landfill's contents away downstream.

That was before the world became aware that not everyone lived upstream. And people began to consider the environmental impact such activities had on the river, and on the communities down its course. When the fog of egocentrism lifted, the City removed the remains of the potentially friable dump contents, and established the spacious and lush recreational area toward which I now ran.

The jogging path through the park formed a circuit around its perimeter. Three laps of the circuit equaled two miles.

Continuing into the park and onto the lap circuit, I knew my follower would either need to remain on Levee Road, some seventy yards distant, and watch from there, or pull into the Baypoint parking lot, conceding me a closer look.

As I rounded the downstream end of the park path, I saw that the Mazda's driver had chosen to park in a spot about twenty feet from the far side of the jogging path. I guess they were going to wait for me to come to them, instead of the other way around.

Continuing along the river side of the loop, I overtook two women exercising their dogs at a more leisurely trot. I noted that the park was otherwise deserted.

Looking over my shoulder to offer the two joggers a "Good Morning," I grabbed another quick peek at my tail. The Mazda had darkly-tinted windows. I couldn't tell if it held one or more occupants.

I had three choices. I could jump into the river and swim downstream, evading my uninvited pursuer entirely. I could keep on running as I had been, waiting to see if the Mazda's occupant would take the initiative. Or I could face the situation head-on.

I elected the last option. . . . . (continued in THE MISSING ELEMENT).