

Store manager Gary Clark arrived at Clark's grocery store at 5am Monday morning. The doors wouldn't open to the public for another two hours, but he and his employees were preparing to begin the day. On the way to his office, he greeted the staff with smiles, calls of "Good Morning," and waves. He enjoyed his job, something he hadn't expected when he began running the place two years ago. Back then, he'd just come off a nasty divorce, gotten custody of his teen daughters Leah and Tiffany, and relocated their family from Franklin to his home town of Henry Adams. Bernadine Brown's proposal that he manage the town's new grocery store took him by surprise. He'd spent his life selling cars. He knew nothing about selling produce or canned goods, yet, he'd agreed. Learning the ins and outs of the business while raising his daughters as a single parent had been difficult. Seeing to their everyday needs of homework, chores and meals had him burning the candle at both ends.

Then life changed for the better last spring when his uncle Terence came from Oakland to visit. Quickly assessing what Gary needed, he volunteered to take on some of the household duties. The help allowed Gary to breathe again, and now for the first time in what felt like decades, he was happy. He had a good job and his girls were thriving. For some men, finding a lady to share the new-found happiness might be icing on the cake, but he was gun shy after his disastrous marriage and was content to remain single.

"Morning, Gary."

"Morning Gem."

Gemma Dahl was his assistant manager. The Chicago native was raising her grandson Wyatt, as a single parent after the death of her daughter in Afghanistan. Over the summer

she'd taken two orphaned kids into her home with an eye to adopting them as soon as the state gave her the go ahead. Everyone in town thought she was amazing and Gary was no exception. After working as a cashier for the past two years, she'd applied for the vacant position of assistant manager and hiring her was another decision he felt good about.

In his office he turned on the coffee maker. Once it was ready, he got himself a cup and sat at his desk to go over the reports left for him by the store's night manager. He also checked in with the security staff, headed up by Barrett Payne, and with no pressing issues on either front, left his desk to check the store. He and Gemma usually split the duty. They talked to the heads of the departments, inspected the specials stacked at the ends of the aisles and kept an eye out for any problems with the store's physical operation. Burned out lights, or non-working hand dryers in the restrooms were usually taken care of by maintenance, but Gary and Gemma made sure nothing had been overlooked.

The doors opened at 7 and at 7:15 he was back in his office when he received a call on his headset from security that Mrs. Beadle was on the premise. He sighed. She was one of the store's recurring problems. When she wasn't opening a bottle of wine, drinking it and stashing the empty before getting in line to check out, she was trying to return things that she'd either worn, partially eaten or had purchased elsewhere. Gary wished she'd find another store to share her eccentricities with.

"Thanks. Keep an eye on her," he replied, into his wireless mic and turned on the camera bank on his office wall. "Hey, Gem," he called.

She appeared in the doorway. "Yes?"

“Mrs. Beadle is in the store.”

She sighed and walked over to view the camera screens. Gary and Gem spotted the little old lady in her stylish gray coat and red, high top chucks, pushing her buggy down the baking aisle. As she passed the shelves of sugar and flour, the woman quickly glanced around, reached into the cart and screwed off the top of a bottle of red wine. Taking a good-sized swallow, she hastily redid the top, put the bottle back in her cart and began making her way down the aisle again.

“Why doesn’t she just buy the wine?” Gemma asked.

“Who knows? I talked to her son in DC. He says she has plenty of money. He thinks she likes the attention when she’s caught.”

“She needs a good therapist.”

“She needs something.” Gary peered at the screen more closely, and asked, “Is her bag moving, or it is just my eyes?”

Gemma stared. Mrs. Beadle had a large flower-patterned tote in the buggy’s well, and yes, it appeared to be moving. “Do we want to know what’s in it?”

“No, but,” and as he said that, a brown chihuahua stuck its pointed nose out the bag, looked around and leapt to the floor.

In Gary’s ear, the security supervisor let out a loud curse.

Gemma was already flying out the door and Gary was right behind her.

It only took a few minutes for them to get to the floor but by then, the store was in full chaos mode. Customers were jumping out of the way, some screaming, others laughing as the snapping, growling dog ran through legs and around buggies in its effort

to stay ahead of the store employees hot on its tail. Mrs. Beadle was among the chasers, screaming shrilly, “Don’t hurt him!” And “Lorenzo! Lorenzo!” Which Gary guessed to be the little terror’s name. And of course, people had their phones out filming the madness. Because the store was a good size and little dogs were not only fast but could turn on a dime, they lost Lorenzo in the produce section.

Gary turned to Barrett. “Well, now what?”

“Probably send everybody outside, so we can do a thorough search.”

Mrs. Beadle was nearby peering around, clapping her hands and shouting, “Lorenzo! Get over here!”

Gary asked, “Who names a dog, Lorenzo?”

Gemma walked up. “Someone in the store called the Health Department. I just got off the phone with them. We’re to find the dog and close the store. They have to do an inspection before we can open again.”

Gary looked at his watch. It was only 8 Am. He needed a drink.