

PRAISE FOR *VANISHING MIA*

“This first novel is a triumph! Fast paced, tightly plotted, with plenty of moments for the characters to come to life and shine. Readers don’t know what they have coming!” —*JB*

“Had me on the edge of my seat and craving book two!” —*LK*

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VANISHING Mia

PHYLLIS McCOY HORNE

LightArc Press
Naples, Florida

LightArc Press

Vanishing Mia

Book One of *The Vanishing Series*

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First Edition

TITLES BY PHYLLIS MCCOY HORNE

The Vanishing Series (in order):

Vanishing Mia

Vanishing Chiara

Vanishing Koffi

Vanishing Silas

Vanishing Mia—The Reckoning

To all the organizations, networks, safe houses, and those who work among them—keeping open the narrow doorways through which escape becomes possible.

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PREFACE

In early 2022, I was accused of something I didn't do. The accusation had no merit, but the threat was ominous. The threatener had resources enough to create great and expensive trouble for me—trouble that would be reputation-damaging and financially devastating.

I was a mess.

One morning at about 3:00 a.m., when the voices that awfulize and catastrophize are loudest, I wondered what I would do if my reputation, finances, and life were at such great risk that I would have to 'disappear' myself to keep it all from happening. The research geek in me started digging. What I found was shocking.

In the early morning darkness, I stumbled onto a web page that looked more like an unadorned, old-style electronic bulletin board or community/discussion board. Two people seemed to be monitoring hundreds of desperate requests for help. Everyone was anonymous. The monitors would simply respond with, 'I may be able to help you' and provide a phone number to call—or, an 'I'm sorry I can't help you' response.

So many people. So desperate for help.

By the time the sun came up, I knew disappearing wasn't something I really needed to do. But a couple of days later, an idea occurred to me: What if I wrote a book based on the premise, 'I'm

a regular person with no badass capabilities or criminal connections, and I suddenly have to leave my life.’

It took a year of research and mulling it over. Fitful starts and stops. Testing and retesting theories. Then one day, with nothing else to do, I sat down and started writing.

Six weeks later, I had a 90,000-word manuscript.

What surprised me most was how the characters took over the story. I’d read about authors experiencing this phenomenon but had never imagined it. My writing had always been purpose-built—journalism, advertising, training materials. I couldn’t imagine writing without a plan or an outline, and hadn’t anticipated the “Holy moly, what’s going to happen next?” moments I experienced along the way.

This much, however, has remained foundation: The people you’ll meet in *The Vanishing Series* are not superheroes or men and women with special forces training. They’re regular people like you and me, suddenly facing the unthinkable. To make their stories ring true meant diving deep into how people really behave in crisis.

What I found confirmed what I’ve experienced throughout my life: Trauma sucks. And, if not faced, limits the possibility of healthy love and genuine happiness. I’ve also learned that most people want to help and will help when asked, if they can. Even some of those we call ‘bad.’ Of all the insights that emerged along the way, perhaps this is the most important—the thing we most need to remember when facing our own dark night.

Help. Is. Available.

Welcome to *The Vanishing Series*.

“We face up to awful things because we can’t go around them,
or forget them. What we have to get over, somehow we do.

Even the worst things.”

—E. Annie Proulx, *The Shipping News*

“Every exit is an entry somewhere else.”

—Adapted from Tom Stoppard,

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead

CHAPTER 1

October 1: In the Closet
Delareau, Louisiana

Leanne Broussard Fortier took a deep breath of stale humid air, smelled old Bayou Têche lingering in the ancient pecan wood doors of the closet. She reached out and touched them, pushed on them, and though she couldn't see in the complete absence of light, confirmed. They were locked. Still locked.

Kick it hard enough, she thought, maybe be able to bust it open. But then remembered Remy's voice, harsh with alcohol. "You think you're so smart, Leanne. But I warn you: You even think about trying to get yourself out. I see any sign of that, and you'll pay."

So, no immediate danger, and better not to create any. A pecan wood prison. For now. She shivered despite the heat.

The child in her belly kicked like a soccer player. "Hey you!" She laughed, the sound hollow in the darkness. "I'm glad you can't feel this hardwood floor, Baby—hard being the key word."

She was starving. And if she was, the baby was too. Maybe one more protein bar hidden behind the baseboard? She stood up, chastising herself for not restocking when she'd had the chance, and told the baby a story as she inched her way toward the corner. "Once upon a time, there was a woman who found out after she got married and pregnant that her husband was mean."

She stopped for a moment. *How honest should I be? Remy was the liar, so yeah. Won't follow in those footsteps.*

"Actually, first she got pregnant and then she got married."

She released another enormous sigh and continued sideways.

"The baby's daddy didn't seem to think it was mean or unfair to expect his wife to not see her friends or her family. Thought she ought to be at home. Waiting for him all the time. She thinks maybe it's not only meanness. She's heard some talk, and well, she thinks maybe the whole family's part of some Mafia thing." Her laugh came out as a hiccup, and—feeling huge and off-balance—she continued with small, careful steps, reaching out for the corner as she moved.

"Anyway, Baby, once she figured out what a mess she was in, well, of course, she was very sad." Took another step. Hated to admit it, but it was the truth. "She was just too proud to ask her family for help. And now she's scared." She swallowed hard. "Really scared."

Leanne thought back to her attempt to tell Remy she'd made a mistake. Told him she'd be a good mother and always let him see his child, but she just couldn't stay married to him.

"She tried talking to him, but he got so mad, that . . ." *Wait a minute. Who tells their little unborn baby this kind of stuff? Think Leanne!* Maybe better not describe how the first time she'd brought up divorce, Remy'd punched her. Wrenched her arms until they almost popped out of their sockets. That was the first time he locked her in the closet. Yeah, maybe keep the details to herself.

"Well, let's just say he was dead set against any idea of separating."

She shuddered at the memory of Remy's screamed response. "Get it through your head Leanne. You're the one who got yourself pregnant! You're the one who came to me to solve your problem. And now you don't like the solution?"

She'd been terrified he'd hurt the baby. He didn't, that time. But next? Who knew? Better not bring that up again.

"So anyway, sweetie, now the baby's momma is having a hard time figuring out what to do without getting herself and the baby dropped into a bayou—with something heavy tied around them both."

She found the corner and slid down the rough plaster wall until she was sitting again, felt around for the loose corner of the baseboard and the storage space she'd created a couple of months earlier.

"But don't be scared. This story isn't finished yet, my little one. The mother is determined to get away before you—I mean, her—baby is born. She asked one of her friends to help or find someone else who could. And she prayed. She figures either her friend or God can get her and the baby far enough away that they never have to be locked up in a dark closet with no food ever again."

She pulled up the board and felt around. Yes! Hoped the snack bar would be enough to last her and the baby until he came home. Whenever that would be.

She opened the package. The aroma of chocolate hit her like a Mack truck. "Guess it's pretty clear, huh? The story I just told you. It's really about us." Her mouth watered. "Yep, it's you and me, Baby."

Leanne closed her eyes. Hot tears rolled down her face. Thought about the last thing Remy had yelled at her on his way out the door. "You can stay right there for a while and think about this: If anyone leaves this marriage, it'll be me. Not you. And right now, that ain't happening."

She held off taking a bite of the bar until the tears stopped. Felt something deep in her chest bloom and become words: her own voice, in her own head, as clear as a voicemail on her phone. *I live with a man, married a man, who thinks it's okay to lock me and our unborn child in a closet.*

Used her sleeve to wipe her face. And then, got mad.

Tears gone, her hunger and anger worked together, flooding her mother-to-be body with something hormonal, chemical, and powerful. Leanne opened her eyes to the absolute blackness and took it in. She straightened her spine. Hitting her fist on the wall, she said with each strike: "This. Is. Insane."

In a voice older, surer, she spoke out loud, "Somehow, Baby, one day soon, I promise you, we'll be somewhere else. A place where we can eat when we need to, see the people we love whenever we want to, and not have to be afraid all the time."

She nibbled at the bar. Used her tongue to slide a tiny chunk around her mouth, letting it melt rather than chewing it. Making it last as long as she could. Wishing she had some water.

As she swallowed, she ran her hands over her belly, caressed its curves, and said it again. "I promise."

CHAPTER 2

October 1: The Jump *Reston, Virginia*

The well-worn, mid-century modern desk where Mia Evanescence sat working offered a stunning view from the third-floor window. Her new husband, Aleksanteri Hasapsis, had purchased the massive Northern Virginia colonial home a month before their marriage, furnishing it throughout in a luxe mix of heavy, ornate European styles with zero input from Mia. Her desk was the only item that reflected her taste.

Mia ignored the surroundings and view; remained microscopically focused on her computer screen, mousing final tweaks to an ad campaign pitch. The deafening crash of the front door slamming open and her husband's shouted rage stunned her. A jolt of terror and adrenaline sizzled through her body. She listened. Footsteps pounded across the marble foyer floor, then a boot slammed on the first step of the solid oak staircase.

He was headed toward the office.

Mia scrambled from her desk, ran to the closet, and snatched the old black backpack off the floor. Didn't have everything she'd need, but time was of the essence.

She hoisted it on, ripped open the zipper on a hanging formal gown bag, and reached for the hidden rope. Jerking it hard

to check the loop around the steel bar—praying it would bear her weight—she slipped into the rappelling harness and ran the other end through the descender.

She listened again. He was making the turn to the third floor, footsteps faster now. She dragged the long, coiled rope as she raced to the window, slammed it open, and banged out the screen with two fists. She smelled night-air humidity and her own fear.

Aleks shouted something unintelligible from just outside the office door. Mia stepped into the window frame, her back to the ground, and dropped one end of the rope out. She slotted the other through the carabiner and took stock. No helmet. No belay. And no choice.

Gritting her teeth, Mia leaned out, feet against the window frame, and pushed off. Out of practice and with bad form, she twisted. The wall met her halfway down, face to face, breasts and knees making contact first. It knocked the air out of her lungs. She looked up for one split second and saw him leaning out the window, watching, mouth agape, confused. Looked down, praying he'd stay confused for another few seconds. Sucked in a ragged breath and struggled to get her feet back against the wall.

"This is way effing harder than twelve years ago!" she hissed as her bicycling legs sought purchase. Looked up once more and read a question in the crinkled lines of his face: *Someone rappelling down the side of the house? A burglar getting away?*

She didn't waste a precious second. Feet flush with the wall again, Mia pushed off once more, dropped, and found the ground butt first. The thud rattled her teeth. She rolled over, stood, and looked up one last time. Her husband's shock and confusion had morphed into red-faced rage. He'd figured out it was her, and that she was running. He turned from the window, and she knew: He was coming for her.

She didn't bother shedding the harness. She pulled the rest of the rope out of the figure eight, dropped it, and ran for her life.

October 1: The Flight
Reston, Virginia

And kept running. His yelling faded as she put distance between herself and the house.

Mia reached the strip mall contiguous to her neighborhood, ran around back, slid between two dumpsters, and leaned up against the service door of a frozen yogurt shop. Closed her eyes and steadied her breathing. She could still hear his voice.

Strands of her long red hair had come loose and now stuck to her face. She ripped out the scrunchie and pulled the whole wavy lot back into a tight tail.

Determined not to repeat past mistakes, she tossed her phone into a dumpster and ran to the bike path. Glancing back, terrified he'd be upon her, she upped her pace. Got into a rhythm and lost herself in the sound of her feet on the asphalt.

Eight miles later, sitting on an old bench behind the Whole Foods Market, leg muscles burning, she closed her eyes and listened. Waited. Her heart and respiration rates slowed. The only sounds were those of local late-night traffic. So, safe enough to pull out the burner phone. Thirsty, hands shaking, fumbling with the thing, she chided herself for not packing a bottle of water. Figured there'd be a lot of things she'd wish she'd put in the backpack before the next few days were over. Hit the power on the burner.

She surveyed herself, bottom to top, and knew she'd been lucky. The old tennis shoes, decent socks, relatively new yoga pants, and

a well-worn workout shirt were perfect for what she'd just done. She stood, removed the rappelling harness, then stretched, and took some deep breaths. Forced herself to stay in the present and checked the phone. Fully booted. She opened a browser, logged in, backed up the phone she'd tossed, and marked it lost. That done, she downloaded Uber, created a profile with a fake name, entered a prepaid credit card number, and ordered a car.

There was a twenty-minute wait, so she made a phone call. Mia had few genuine friends and only one who was truly wealthy. Sondra Cervantes. The kind of friend who would pick up in the middle of the night. The kind of friend who had an eight-passenger jet at her disposal.

"I had a feeling it would be you," Sondra said. There was sleep in her voice, but no irritation.

"I know it's late but based on the last time he lost his mind like this, I think he'd have killed me."

"I told you to call me and I meant it," Sondra said in her signature bossy Latina lilt. "The jet has a New Orleans pickup tomorrow."

"I don't care where I go, Sondra, but it has to be off the books or flight plan; whatever you call it."

"It's my damn jet. They'll do whatever I tell them to do." She yawned, then gave Mia instructions and promised to answer any calls from an unknown number. "Now go. I will pray to San Judas Tadeo for your protection."

Mia took two Ubers: the first to a neighborhood in a Washington, DC, suburb completely disconnected from her life and work. The second dropped her at Reagan National Airport's general aviation terminal.

A crew member led her onto the tarmac. He was cool. Professional. Told her they were leaving earlier than expected and that they'd drop her off en route. Didn't say where. And asked no questions.

Neither did Mia. Just buckled herself into the soft leather seat, plugged in a headset, and closed her eyes. Wondered what she'd missed before she'd married Aleks. And sighed. she'd asked herself the same question at least a hundred times since the first time he hit her. And for the hundredth time, no answer came.

But rumination was pointless. She shook it off and focused on the cockpit chatter in the headset. Heard someone up front say "V1." Sondra and several of their closest friends had taken the jet to a concert in Chicago a couple of years back. It had been Mia's first private flight, and she'd wanted to know everything. Sondra had explained that V1 meant the plane had reached a speed that required takeoff; aborting the flight was no longer an option.

Mia smiled sadly and mumbled to herself, "No truer words ever spoken." Then she slept and relived the past few months in dreams she would not remember.

CHAPTER 3

Early August: Waking Up to the Truth *Reston, Virginia*

During their courtship and early days of their marriage, Aleks would fold Mia into his arms and say in his super-sexy Greek accent, “You are mine.” She’d thought it an expression of his love and protectiveness; never imagined he’d meant it literally. But six months after they’d exchanged vows, Mia was learning what “mine” really meant.

She’d come home, dragging her feet at the thought of another boring embassy event. It was time to draw the line; she would not attend this one with him.

“Aleks, not tonight,” she said firmly and with a regretful smile that she didn’t feel. “I’ve got meetings all day tomorrow. It’ll do me good to miss a night out, so . . .”

He took two quick steps closer and slapped her. Hard enough to hurt. Badly. A part of her split from herself; recognized it wouldn’t bruise. Mia stood stock still for a moment. Closed her eyes. Heat surged through her body, the product of an emotion she barely recognized. Pure rage. She spun away from him, ran down the stairs, grabbed her key fob, and left the house.

Hands trembling on the wheel, she drove to her office, where she had a gym bag and some extra clothes stashed. Grabbed those and checked into a hotel down the street.

She paced the hotel room floor that night, struggling to align her image of Aleks as the refined man she'd recently married with the one who'd just slapped her. Her brain was foggy and her heart still raced. She was in shock. With thoughts running a cause-and-effect analysis that she couldn't resolve, she slept little that night. The next day, he called and told her to come home. Barely registering that he commanded rather than asked, she told him she needed a day or two alone. Figured that would let him know he couldn't control her with violence.

Mia dreaded the talk about what happened when she came home two days later. But Aleks stunned her. He walked in the front door smiling and greeted her as if nothing had happened. Insisted on taking her out to dinner, talking nonstop about work and news from his family in Greece. Mia thought he was working up to an apology. But good food, excellent wine, and Aleks' charm filled the evening without one. He continued to act as if everything was normal for the next few days, so Mia eventually convinced herself that the event was a one-off, a reaction to some stressful embassy situation that she couldn't imagine. She continued to put off the talk until work, chores, and time kicked it into the back corner of her brain. Keeping the past in the past. It was a defense mechanism Mia was unaware she'd developed when she was young to survive a traumatic childhood. It followed her into adulthood as a personality trait often described by friends as 'Mia in the moment.' Focused on moving things forward, Mia considered it key to her success in business. She'd never had reason to consider whether it was a tool perhaps overused in other aspects of her life.

A few weeks later, she came home one night excited about a new client. Standing in the walk-in closet, pulling on comfortable sweats, Aleks watched her from across the room as she talked about the campaign, the commercials they'd produce, and the

amazing locations they'd selected for the shoots. Sliding an old cotton T-shirt over her head, she laughed and talked about how good it would be to spend a couple of weeks working with her favorite production crew again. Midsentence, she came out of the closet and saw her husband staring at her like she was speaking a foreign language.

"What?"

He turned abruptly and left the room. And then the house.

Mia was more confused than concerned. She wondered if it was because it would be the first time since the wedding they'd be apart for that long. The slap from a few months before didn't enter her mind. Downstairs in the kitchen, she warmed a bowl of soup while she mentally rehearsed different ways of approaching the subject when he returned. When she finished eating, she rinsed the bowl and went upstairs to her home office to send some notes about the shoot to her assistant while she waited for Aleks to return.

Mia heard the front door open. Then Aleks, footsteps fast, taking the stairs two at a time. She stood up from the desk and turned as he burst through the door. Red-faced, eyes hard, she registered fury and opened her mouth to speak. But before she could say a word, he lunged for her, grabbed the front of her T-shirt, pulled back his fist, and hit her. Hard. In the stomach.

"You have people you can send out to handle these fun trips." He released her shirt. She folded to the floor. "You need to be here where your responsibilities to me and to your marriage are. You are no longer free and easy to go wherever you like, whenever you like." He turned and left.

Writhing on the floor in pain and shock, Mia tried hard not to vomit.

September 2: Acting Skills
Reston, Virginia

Mia stayed home the next day with ‘a cold.’ Before he left for work, Aleks picked up her mobile and turned it toward her face to unlock it. Checking it later, as she’d suspected, he’d shared her location permanently with his. No way she’d change that. She sat in her home office most of the morning, still in shock, unable to think clearly. But even in the fog, she instinctively began planning for secrecy.

She took a walk later in the day, phone in her pocket. That would show Aleks that she wasn’t trying to hide any of her activities. She placed it on the kitchen counter where he’d see it when he got home, then pulled a few things out of the fridge, and began preparing a simple meal.

Later, Aleks sat at the table as if nothing were wrong. Ate without comment. Still in pain, too afraid to confront him, Mia mirrored his ‘nothing out of the ordinary’ vibe. Dinner finished, he retreated to the bedroom and changed clothes.

A few minutes later, instincts led her to the foyer, where he prepared to leave for an evening event. She slumped a little. Telegraphed passivity. He smoothed the sleeves of his tuxedo jacket and said, “It will be awkward not to have you with me tonight. It is an important event and other dignitaries will have their spouses with them. Not having you by my side will be seen as inappropriate by them, and by members of my family who will also be there. I will apologize to them all on your behalf. Explain that you wish to spare them exposure to your illness.” His eyes were cold; voice flat. She looked up at him but avoided direct eye contact.

Crystal clear now. He would never talk about what he’d done to her. He would never compromise. Mia acted in commercials before she began conceptualizing and directing them. She summoned all

her self-control to reply without revealing the fury, or the fear, that simmered just behind her lips. “Thank you, Aleks.”

For an hour, Mia paced the house as if doing chores, phone in her pocket in case he checked. Then she placed it on the desk in her office, put on a hoodie, and left through the back door of the garage. Her mind almost blank, ignoring the lingering pain in her belly, she walked to an Office Depot about a mile from the house and purchased a burner. She waited in the ladies’ room until she was alone to take pictures of her black and blue stomach. She texted them to her best friend Jessi and then called her.

September 5: A Simple Plan
Reston, Virginia

Mia didn’t know when her biological mother died. Or how. Felt sometimes like there was a hole in her soul where something was missing, but no memory of the event itself or of anyone telling her what happened. She figured it was a given that it traumatized her as a child. But in true Mia fashion, she focused on the positives; the gifts. Not much of a past to weigh her down. Figured it kept her light. Flexible. And, once she knew change was necessary, she wasted no time making it.

Her brief conversation with Jessi had brought her clarity.

“Mia, don’t you even think for one single second that this is okay!”

Standing in the Office Depot ladies’ room, numb, she’d heard the shock and horror in Jessi’s voice. And it helped. Hearing it from Jessi, she could touch some of the anger she’d tamped down; a fire she was afraid would burn out of control.

She'd stood in front of the bathroom mirror, staring at the deep purple bruising on her stomach, and knew. She had to leave. Escape, more like it. The house and the marriage. To do that, she'd need time and a safe space to make a plan.

Back in her office, she thought through a simple one:

- an Airbnb reservation in a city big enough to disappear in
- a few thousand dollars in cash
- an excellent attorney

The list of 'must-haves' was short: a burner phone so she could leave her work phone at the office and a hotel room or condo far away from Aleks where she could work. Just the thought of it and her body relaxed a little. She talked to herself as she worked at her computer. "In a few months, I'll be single. And sadder," she said as she opened a new browser window. "But safer."

She created an email address using a fake name and set up Airbnb and Uber accounts. She then linked an old Visa she'd tucked away years before as a payment method and used the same Visa to purchase an Amtrak Acela ticket to New York City. Aleks often heard her complain about how much she dreaded spending time in that noisy, crowded place. She didn't think he'd look for her there. Plus, NYC? Big. And plenty of attorneys.

CHAPTER 4

September 7: No Time at All
New York, New York

Mia woke up on the bed in her New York City Airbnb two days after she'd checked in. Mouth taped shut, hands zip-tied behind her back, and her ankles secured so tight to the bed the ties bit into her skin. Her head hurt and she felt groggy, hungover. Aleks lay beside her. Stunned that it had taken almost no time at all for him to find her; that he drugged her. She felt around inside herself. Pain! Deep, searing, and in so many places her brain raced randomly as if identifying the damage could stop it.

"Ah. Finally, you are back with us." He raised up and looked down on her. "You imagined you could run away? Hide in this enormous city and I would not be able to find you?"

She stared, eyebrows arched in question. And shock. He reached down and put his hands around her neck. Squeezed as if to choke her, just hard enough to hurt.

"You and I are one in marriage now. I have been telling you for a long time that you are mine; that you belong to me. Perhaps you did not really understand?" Empathy. Fake. Dripping with sarcasm. He got up from the bed. "Maybe you are understanding now?"

A tear rolled down the side of her face. How had she ever heard romance in that statement? She stopped struggling and listened.

He paced the room and spoke in a cold monotone, "In my family, women do not leave their marriages. Oh, they consider the possibility. Sometimes they even try. But in the end, they do not leave. You know my family is from Greece, but you do not know everything."

He cupped his chin with thumb and forefinger, a sarcastic caricature of a man in deep thought. "Perhaps you have heard? In Greek it is called '*Nonoí tis Nýchtas*'. . . Godfathers of the Night."

She tilted her head. What could that mean?

He stood still. Stared down at her. Waited for her to understand.

Then, she did. The Greek Mafia. Mia felt the blood rush from her head. Saw black spots and wondered if she would faint.

He smiled and went on.

"Your intern Savannah has an apartment near the university. But there is no security there and the parking lot lighting is bad. It would be very sad if she was waiting for a friend to pick her up for dinner and another car came speeding through the parking lot and did not see her. Well, until it was too late to stop."

Mia's eyes bulged as she writhed. Tried to scream, to sit up. Impossible.

"Oh, Mia," he chuckled, "do not worry. I will not be sending my relatives to Savannah's home. Well, assuming you see now how things must be."

He stood next to the bed, relaxed and confident. Smiled down at her again.

"But it is important that you understand the scope of my capabilities." He began pacing again. "Getting information? Finding you?" He turned his back to her, then spun back around, beaming. As if struck by a sudden thought, he added, "Finding anyone, actually. Dispatching someone who must be removed? I have many sources. And," he shrugged, "for myself, there is always diplomatic immunity."

She stopped fighting. Heat and cold ricocheted in confusion for three long, hard-earned breaths as she stared at the smile on Aleks' face. Pure satisfaction. With himself; his position over her.

The word sadistic rang in her mind. Her body heaved as if to vomit everything forgotten, forgiven, or rationalized.

But the tape. She swallowed and wouldn't let it come.

A cold clarity settled.

She refused to die. Not today.

September 7: A Cold, Hard Truth
New York, New York

Aleks stayed away for hours. She didn't know how long, but as time passed and he didn't return, Mia began to truly understand. Escape would require more than a simple plan. Much more. He was gone long enough that she slept and woke, got hungry, and thirsty. Long enough that she peed the bed.

A still life by the time he returned, Mia barely registered a sigh that was nothing more than resignation as he ripped the tape from her mouth, cut the bindings from her wrists and ankles, and sniffed the air. She moved millimeters at a time. Slowly. Stiff with pain.

He looked down at her, his face a mask of disgust and disapproval. "Oh, I see I stayed away from you a little too long."

Mia moaned.

"But I've brought you some ice. You can use it on your hurts after you clean yourself up." He waved his hand back and forth, dispersing the unpleasant odor.



The next several days back at home were some of the worst of Mia's life. Little by little the fog of shock cleared. The external injuries, cuts on her wrists and ankles, and the internal ones, healed. Her heart and soul did not.

She staggered through the motions of daily life, barely able to know or remember why she moved from one room to another. Exhaustion was absolute, but sleep, brief and fitful. She tried to imagine the future.

If she intended to live any life worth living, she'd have to leave the one she'd worked so hard to build. The life with her adopted family, the business she'd been building since the first freelance project she completed as a teenager. And what friends she had outside of work. It was a cold, hard truth. And it terrified her.

But to escape? She understood now. Escape would not be enough. She'd have to vanish. Vanish her life. Herself. Completely.

September 23: Walking and Planning
Vienna, Virginia

"You're going to need money. A lot of money." Jessica Avery Roberts was Mia's best friend and sister, since Jessi's mother Susan Avery raised them both. "And by money, I mean cash, so that you can take it with you and do what you need to do without being tracked."

Two weeks after Mia's return from New York, she and Jessi were walking on the Washington & Old Dominion Trail, phones, watches, and wallets with AirTags all left in their respective offices—Jessi's left to be on the super-safe side. It would appear to Find My as if they were both working through lunch.

It was the third time they'd walked their way through a planning session. Old-growth trees lined the paved trail along what used to be railroad tracks and at midday had few walkers or bikers. Mia and Jessi barely noticed the touches of fall color but appreciated the dense foliage; a cocoon of privacy on a ghost-train trail.

"I'm more concerned about the long term; how to sell the company, Jessi. I can't take enough cash to last more than a few months. And I have to leave enough in the bank for the company to continue running until it can be sold. But if I could set up some kind of trust to move the business into, with you as the executor, trustee, or whatever it's called, who could sell it. And the right legal language to keep the sale proceeds within the trust . . ." Mia faded into thought. They were both silent for a few minutes before she continued. "And the whole thing somehow protected from anyone else being able to see anything associated with it. Something like that would set me up for the long haul. Wherever I wind up."

"I don't know, Mia. Based on what happened in New York, you may not have a lot of time. Did you put anything in that backpack?" Jessi turned toward Mia with an ironic grin. "That was your backpack, by the way. The one you brought with you when you first came to live with us. Remember?" Mia thought back to when she first moved in with Jessi and her mom. Was it in third or fourth grade? Or even earlier? She had a hard time remembering anything from her early years.

"Not yet. I mean, sort of. And, of course I noticed it was my old, ratty pack. And yes, I've put a few things in it. My old iPad, the one without the SIM card, and some cash I had in my safe, a prepaid phone. It's on my list to get seven changes of clothes: a suit, a couple of pairs of shoes, a few preloaded credit cards, extra burner phones . . . you know, all the things we talked about before." Mia stopped on a dime and turned toward Jessi. "You didn't make a list, did you? No lists! Remember?"

"No lists, Mia. If he sends someone to the house or even to my office to look at my devices or the papers on my desk, I promise, there is absolutely nothing for him to find. This is your life we're talking about." She looked away from Mia and into the distance where a squirrel stopped midtrail and stared at them for a moment before it darted back into the underbrush. "Maybe mine too."

"Oh God, Jessi, don't say that!" Mia's chest tightened and a cold realization settled there. Once she was gone, she'd need to stay far away from Jessi and Susan for as long as it took to keep them safe. The thought of that separation stretched before her, unbearable. What if it lasted forever?

"We could have a fight, publicly? Make it convincing enough that he would believe we're on the outs?" Jessi bit her upper lip and leaned her head as she considered.

Shaking her head—not sure at all Aleks would buy it—Mia jumped ahead. "But back to the company, and the money. I have an appointment with Vikki Lobertelle next Monday to—"

"Who's Vikki and why haven't I ever heard this name?"

"I had to find an attorney in another city. Someone Aleks has never heard of. Someone who doesn't show up in our checkbook or my company's payables; someone who has the corporate savvy to—"

"Yeah, okay. I get it. I get it." Jessi pulled her right arm across her body, stretching out the tension. "Yeah, good thinking."

"I found a firm that has offices in a lot of other states and they referred me to her. Vikki's in their New Orleans office."

"Alright, but don't tell me anything else. In case Aleks, you know, comes to me for information. The less I know, the less likely it'll look like I'm hiding something." Jessi turned toward her dearest friend. "For now, let's just do the Maslow thing: Start with the basics—food, clothing, and shelter. The things you absolutely must have so you can run when you're ready."

Mia, nodding along with what Jessica was saying, added, "Yeah. The hierarchy of needs thing? Maslow should have mentioned money. I'm going to need enough to last a few months." She paused and then rushed in to continue, "And some way to get ahold of you that's not trackable. I'm thinking paper. A regular post office box, preferably one at the post office."

Jessica put her head down and started walking again. "Maybe, but how about one of those services that gets your mail and scans it for you?"

Mia took a couple of quick steps to catch up. "Yeah, but that puts it back in the online world where someone can intercept it."

"Yeah, yeah, you're right. It does." Jessica slowed her pace as she thought. "But how about rotating? I'll get a PO Box near the Whole Foods where I shop, a couple of others at one or two of those UPS-like post offices nowhere near where you or I live or work or shop?"

Mia said, "Why at UPS?"

"Because I can always take a box with me, you know, like I'm shipping something. It won't be obvious that I'm doing snail mail."

Mia exhaled a heavy sigh. "I didn't think of that. Good idea, Jessi."

Jessi stopped again. "And I'll get a fake email address too. We can set up mail and email like you're my old college buddy. Remember crazy Betty who dropped out during senior year to go live on a boat in the Bahamas or something?"

"Yeah, I do remember her," Mia smiled for the first time in days. "That girl could be anywhere by now."

"We can just play like you're her."

The two turned to walk back the way they came.

Jessi looked at Mia with profound sadness. "How about a free Zoom account or Skype or WhatsApp or something? You know, a way to video from burner phones, because I don't know if I can stand not being able to see you."

They spent the next thirty minutes of the walk back to their offices planning for a future they could barely comprehend and certainly didn't know how to navigate.

September 23: Beyond Naivete
Reston, Virginia

Mia sat in her home office, eyes darting, and unconsciously rubbing hairs that stood up on the back of her neck. She turned her monitor off and tried to dismiss the feeling that Aleks had eyes on her through the heavy ornate furnishings surrounding her.

She focused on the walk-and-talk she'd had with Jessi; hated that it felt more a jumble of ideas than an actual plan. But evolving ideas to plans left her frozen—each attempt answered by the probability that Aleks' connections and resources made it easy for him to do as he'd done before: Find her.

Fists clenched and heart pounding, Mia squeezed her eyes shut at the idea of disappearing herself. Overwhelmed by how little she knew about doing something so extreme. Tears burned behind her eyes. She felt more afraid than she'd ever been in her life.

Appalled and furious at her naivete, she stood up suddenly and spoke aloud. "Mia, girl, you just didn't know who you married. But now you do, so stop wasting time on a pity party!"

She paced the room, calculating: money, clothing, a way to access her life in Northern Virginia that Aleks couldn't touch, transportation, and, OMG, a place to go. She'd set up rappelling gear in her office closet, even as the idea that she'd use it seemed unreal. But what she didn't consider was the one thing she had the very least of—time.

CHAPTER 5

October 1: Louisiana Check-In Delareau, Louisiana

Mia's Uber dropped her off in front of an ancient building. The sign above the door read 'Bayou Têche House'—the 'T' in Têche, a cutesy fishhook graphic, like the guest was being hooked or caught by the establishment's bait instead of being invited in for a comfortable stay. Mia cringed; poor design drove her nuts.

She squinted. Was that a worm on the hook? Jeez.

She pressed the bell. Checked the burner. 2:40 a.m. local time. A sleepy young man opened the door. He barely looked at her, just turned and walked back to the front desk. Mia followed him.

"Welcome to Bayou Têche House," he said. She noticed he pronounced it 'tesh.' "Name?"

Mia gave him the name from her Airbnb reservation. While he checked her in, she scanned the brief history of the establishment hanging on the wall. The Louvelle family had built the place in the 1920s in the still-popular Victorian style. After falling on hard times after the war, Mrs. Louvelle had rallied and redefined the rooms as bedsits and taken in boarders. A couple of decades later, her son had renamed the place Baits Motel, hoping to upscale it from a boarders' house, but had caved in on the name due to pressure from the *Psycho* movie people in Hollywood. She shuddered.

“Mam?” The clerk’s flat, sleepy voice pulled her back into the present. “Your ID?”

“Sure,” she said. She had no ID that matched the name, but she patted her pockets, looked up at him with a worried half smile. “Oh no, don’t tell me . . .” She rummaged through each section of her backpack, muttering her disbelief, peppering her concern with expletives. After a minute of searching, she looked up, sighed, allowed a small tremble to coat her voice. “I must have lost it. I don’t believe this. It’s been such a rough night and I guess in all the craziness I dropped it or—I don’t know—maybe left it in a cab somewhere?”

His tiny exhale bore a hint of empathy, so Mia pressed what she hoped was an advantage.

“I already paid the first night when I made the reservation. Don’t suppose there’s any way you can just say you saw my ID?” She opened the email reservation on her phone and held it out toward him. “I can pay for the next few in cash if that helps.”

She waited a couple of beats.

“Please?” She looked at his name tag. “Please, Barton?” She folded her hands into a prayerful mudra. “I just need one thing to go right tonight.”

Maybe it wasn’t empathy. Just a guy who’d already heard every sad story that could be told. So, she went for pure self-interest. “And if you say yes, you can go back to sleep.”

Bingo. He laid a skeleton key on the counter and pushed it toward her. She bowed her head, took the key, and gushed her thanks as she hurried up the stairs.

The room was tiny and rustic. A plain wooden chair in one corner, an overhead pull-chain light, three hooks on the wall, and a bed that was little more than a cot. Expertly made, but with coarse sheets turned down over a threadbare blanket. Worn-smooth wood

floors—covered with nothing more than a rag rug next to the cot—smelled of Murphy Oil Soap. The Airbnb listing had described Bayou Têche House as a favorite among those who came to Delareau to fish, and Mia could definitely smell the truth in that ad copy.

She spread the contents of the backpack over the bed and took stock. A thousand in cash that wouldn't last long now that the funds on the Visa were half gone and the room cost three hundred a week. And Sondra's resources? She heard from people looking for money every day of her life. Mia couldn't, wouldn't, go back to that well unless she absolutely had to.

A prepaid phone, two worn shirts, one bra, socks, and her favorite beat-up All Star tennis shoes. Plus, a beanie hat, and a long-ago-generation iPad with a lightning port so that—miracle of miracles—her burner phone cable would charge it too.

No coat or jacket, but it wouldn't turn cold in South Louisiana for another month or so. And no spare pants or panties.

A fist-sized block of silver glinted at her from the bottom of the backpack. She pulled it out and looked it over. *Soooo, who are you?*

It was an ancient flip phone—a Motorola StarTAC—with its charger attached. She had no memory of ever buying it, let alone using it. Why did she still have it? Would the thing even work now? Too tired to investigate, she tossed it back in the pack. A heavy sigh morphed into a yawn.

What the hell was the matter with her? She was a CEO for heaven's sake. If she'd run her business like this, she'd have been dead broke years ago.

Wishing she'd taken Jessi's advice—worked less and prepared more—she went down the hall to the bathroom, hoping for a tub, some decent soap, and a clean towel.

No bath, but the shower offered an endless supply of hot water. She moved a big bar of brown soap over her body, wincing as she soaped her ribs, red and purple from the harness during her

three-story descent. She could live with that—a small price to pay for not landing in a broken mess on the ground.

“Out of practice, but not out of luck,” she muttered.

Wrapped in the rough towel, she stood in front of the mirror over the sink and combed her fingers through her long red hair. A glint caught her eye. The ring. It had been a negotiation she made with herself. She’d wear the wedding band but left the diamond engagement ring in the safe. That would have been worth some money. Another opportunity to prepare, like so many others, missed. She peered into the glass. Her eyes were bloodshot, emphasizing the green of her irises, a telltale sign tears were close.

But Mia Evanescence did not cry. Would not cry. She tucked the towel tighter, then pulled the ring off. “Maybe broke,” she said to her reflection, then looked down at the ring. “But at least I’m not dead.”

She stumbled back to her room and hung the two shirts and yoga pants she’d worn all night on wall hooks, threw the ring into the backpack, then scraped the other items back in on top of it. Her stomach lurched at how little she had.

Naked, she crawled in bed. Thought about calling Jessi. But if she had a burner, Mia had no number for it. Yet another essential they’d discussed but not executed. She looked at her burner. It was 3:30 a.m.; 4:30 a.m. Jessi’s time. But even the gut twisting fear she felt for Jessi, who would panic when Mia didn’t answer her phone, and to whom Aleks would soon pay a visit, wasn’t enough to keep exhaustion from claiming her.

October 2: Country Boy Specials
Delareau, Louisiana

Mia didn't know how to pronounce Delareau and decided not to ask. Didn't even want to think the name in case Aleks' resources included mind readers. She pulled on a beanie, tucked her bright-red hair up under it, and went outside in search of food. The morning light revealed more detail about the old house. Its weathered siding needed work, but the roof looked new. A sign with a smiling fish carved into it swung from the eaves: 'Rooms for Fishing People!' Mia smiled, but there was irony in it: And women running from killer husbands.

After six small-town blocks of cypress wood and red brick exteriors, a neon sign in the window of a diner flashed EAT. She pushed the door open and felt the air conditioning suck away the humidity. A server handed her a menu and nodded toward a booth. Twelve minutes later she was inhaling a Country Boy Special—steak, potatoes, eggs, and biscuits—but avoiding a bowl of something that looked like gravy. Except it was white.

She ate until she no longer felt faint from hunger, then slowed down and pulled out her burner, intending to call the attorney.

The diner door swung open and a young woman entered. Phone to her ear and a baby in her belly so big Mia wondered if it might burst out and order its own breakfast.

"I have money. Just no idea what to do," the diminutive blond hissed into the phone.

Mia snatched a glance at the pregnant woman as she headed toward a back booth. Her jeans and T-shirt were way too big.

The mother-to-be muttered several uh-huhs and tried to interrupt a couple of times. Mia saw her eyes roll as she slid into the booth and continued listening.

The server offered her a menu, but she waved it away and ordered her own Country Boy Special but asked them to hold the gravy. Mia took that as confirmation of its dubiousness and let hers remain in its bowl.

When the server was out of earshot, the pregnant woman put the phone back to her ear. "Yeah, but I didn't get any supper last night and the baby needs calories." A basket appeared in front of her, she ripped a biscuit apart, slathered on butter, and crammed it in her mouth like she hadn't eaten in days. "Okay. Go ahead," she said, and gulped from a glass of milk.

Mia picked at the rest of her steak, eyes on her plate. She eavesdropped.

"You think I don't know that?" the young woman snapped. "That I'd have slept with him, let alone married him, if I'd known all that stuff was true?" She listened long enough to devour three more biscuits, then closed her eyes in frustration. "But that's going backward. I can't go backward. I can't change any of that. What I have to change is the future. And fast. And I need help to do that."

The server slid a platter next to the biscuit basket. The young woman looked up, mouthed a thank-you, pulled the plate toward her, then tore into the steak and eggs while she listened.

Mia examined her like she did models for a shoot—pale skin, sunken cheeks, stick-thin arms, lank, dirty-blond hair in need of a good brushing. She didn't look a day over nineteen.

"Yeah?" the woman continued. "That would be *tout bon*, and . . . wait. Hang on." She dropped her fork, rolled her eyes, and took another swig of milk. "And if you know somebody who can do that, somebody his family can't touch, that'd be super helpful. Otherwise, listing things I should've done and things I should be able to do but can't is straight-up useless." She picked up the fork

and speared a bite of the meat. "I'll hit you up when I can. I gotta eat and get back before I catch hell."

She ended the call and laid the phone on the table. Then looked up.

Their eyes met, and in the single perfect second before they both looked down again, Mia saw her own deep, wretched fear reflected in another human being.

*October 2: A Talk with Vikki
Delareau, Louisiana*

Mia laid cash on the table and left the diner. She walked along the river, less paranoid that anyone would overhear her outside. When Vikki Lobertelle answered, Mia introduced herself and talked non-stop for twenty minutes. She sat down on a bench and took a deep breath.

"Okay. Let's see if I'm clear," the New Orleans attorney said. "Your husband is violently abusive. He's got family in the Greek Mafia and, because he works for the embassy, claims to have diplomatic immunity. You're worried you may need to disappear yourself, or even fake your own death, to get away from him. You own a company that you need to get the money out of and in a way that can't be traced."

Relieved that she'd gotten the salient points across, Mia said, "That's the general idea. The bottom line: The company gets sold, my friend controls the proceeds, she gets money to me when I need it, and Aleksanteri Hasapsis can never dig deep enough to figure it out. It would be a plus if he gives up looking for me. Which I'm afraid he won't do unless he thinks I'm dead."

“Wow.” No humor at all in Vikki’s quick laugh. “Let me think for a minute.”

Mia waited.

“Okay, first, you may not have to die, or even appear to die, to do this. I mean, you might have to for other reasons, but it may not figure into the business part. Give me some time to run this by Park Ellis. He’s a senior partner. Been around a long time and is kind of a mentor to me. He’s done some weird things for these crazy Cajuns over the years.”

Nodding her head yes, Mia added, “Yeah, but Vikki, understand this: The untraceable transfer of money part can wait. Well, for a little while. The absolutely critical piece is transfer of ownership—or whatever it is you must do to keep it away from Aleks. That’s gotta take place as soon as possible and without Aleks having any knowledge of the transaction. That or some other solution your Ellis guy can come up with.”

“You live in Virginia, right?”

“Yes.”

“That’s an equitable distribution state, which means divorcing couples are required to divide their marital assets and debts in a way that’s fair and equitable, taking into—”

“What?” Mia shouted. “But we’ve been married less than a year! And he hasn’t put a dime into—”

Vikki, voice slow and softer, trying to soothe, interrupted. “Yes, and that matters. Equitable, taking into consideration length of marriage. Spouse’s contribution. It’s not black and white.”

Mia, knuckling the phone, closed her eyes and tried to calm herself. “I don’t know anything about the law part. But he’s got resources I can’t even imagine, some of them probably not so legal. And with diplomatic immunity? What if he can create something that makes it look like I wanted him to take it over or get

the money . . .” She paused for a moment; Vikki waited. Finally, with resignation in her voice, Mia said, “I don’t know what all is possible. I just know he’s a real control freak. Maybe he’s so busy looking for me that the company hasn’t crossed his mind yet. Just tell your Ellis guy to think fast, okay?”

“Gotcha. And what about your employees?”

Exhaled relief. Work felt so much easier to talk about. “I doubt Aleks will go public with the fact that I’m gone. To keep things on track at work, I emailed the VP of Ops. Family emergency and will be out of touch for a week or more. Told him to handle things in my absence.”

“Okay. That should keep things relatively stable there for a few days at least. And I’m going to need information from you and some paperwork signed.”

“Email a list to the VanishingMe75@gmail address I gave you. If we can execute via DocuSign or something, I can do it from this phone or the old iPad. It’s wireless, but I don’t stay logged in very long at a time anyway, just to be on the safe side.”

“Yeah, I don’t know a lot about that kind of stuff, but I know a little about what you’re dealing with. My best friend from college . . .” Vikki then trailed off.

“Yeah,” Mia cared but didn’t ask for details, “we all know someone.”

Now she was that someone. Vikki was the first stranger she’d spoken to about this. And the sudden onslaught of embarrassment and shame nearly bent her double. She leaned on the walkway railing for a minute. Then she stood up straight, gritted her teeth, and walked the path along Bayou Têche back toward her room at the old house. But she didn’t stop there.

October 2: Hair Loss
Delareau, Louisiana

Mia walked two blocks past Bayou Têche House and went into the Chaudière Grocery. Inside she found signs in English, thankfully. Made her way to the beauty aisle, pursed her lips in grim acceptance, and considered the options before selecting what she'd need to deal with her hair. Two aisles over she grabbed a card with a generic 'missing you' message and approached the customer service desk to borrow a pen.

The woman smiled and said something in a melodic language Mia didn't understand and handed her a pen.

Back from the Bahamas. Boat was great. The guy? Not so much. Hanging for a while here with Mom. She's going downhill kinda fast and can use the help. Still hate technology and love cards. Send one sometime, okay?

Best, Betty

Concerned she wouldn't understand the clerk's heavily accented directions, she found the post office using a map on her phone. Standing in front of a woman in a blue shirt, Mia introduced herself as Betty Walker and asked for the general delivery address. The postal clerk smiled warmly and asked for an ID.

"Listen, I lost my ID before I got here, so I'm going to address this card and show it to you. And when my friend writes back and I come here to get it, will you remember me?"

A sidelong glare of confusion. Mia continued, "I mean, I probably won't have an ID when I come to pick it up either. So I'll be sure to come when you're working and, if you remember me, I hope you can just give me the letter."

The clerk stared at Mia for a moment, then raised an eyebrow and gave her a sad smile. Probably not the first time she'd been asked. She nodded once.

Mia addressed the card to Jessica, added Betty's name and the general delivery address, and took a selfie with her face and the card. She walked to the counter and handed the card to the clerk.

"Thank you." Mia turned the screen toward the clerk; showed her the photo. The clerk laughed and Mia relaxed. Figured she'd have no trouble getting Jessi's letter when it arrived.

She stepped outside and leaned against the building. Absorbing the warmth of the bricks, she closed her eyes. Jessi would know immediately when she got the card that it was from Mia.

Back in her room, it was midday and all the other guests were out. Fishing, she assumed. There wouldn't be a better time.

She stood in front of the shared bathroom mirror and looked at herself. Slowly pulled off the beanie and watched her thick red curls fall around her face and shoulders. She'd never admitted to anyone how much she loved her hair. If Mia was a brand, her hair was the logo. She'd always counseled clients not to change theirs unless the company's mission changed. And hers certainly had. She sighed.

"One of these days, I'll get you back."

She picked up a handful with her left hand, pulled it straight up into the air, and cut it off almost at the scalp. Bent over and pulled the rest of it down and continued cutting. She didn't look in the mirror when she stood up. Instead, she gathered all the hair from the floor, put it in the trash can, opened the box of black hair dye, and went to work.

An hour later, she'd dropped a bag of hair and used hair-coloring paraphernalia in the grocery store dumpster. What hair she kept was a damp, jet-black messy spike. Her hand kept reaching for what was missing; phantom hair on her shoulders that no longer

existed. She wondered whether the physical change was as dramatic as it felt inside.

But the afternoon sun warmed her—and her scalp—as she meandered back to her room. There, she took some ibuprofen, crawled under the rough blanket, and slept like the dead for the rest of the afternoon.

***October 2: A Psychic Bartender
Delaware, Louisiana***

Mia woke after dark. Too wired to go back to sleep, she took another walk. She'd always been a runner; played basketball in high school and when she got to college, replaced it with rappelling, biking, and in-line skating. Walking wasn't the strenuous exercise she preferred, but it would help work the soreness out of her rib cage and legs from the unexpected rappel-and-drop the night before. She stretched her five-foot-seven-inch frame as far up as it would go, bent over, and placed her hands flat on the floor. And groaned. Stood up, shook it off, slipped on her old All Stars, and left the old boarding house.

A half mile later, still surprised by the feel of the breeze on her scalp, she found herself downtown. Someone clearly intending to bring back the town's glory days had renovated an old two-story commercial building into a beautiful night spot. The neon signs in the windows and the noise of happy patrons drew her across the street to the front door. She examined a sign that read, 'Enola's on the Têche.' Excellent design, classic font. Nothing to make her head hurt in that one. She pulled the door open and spotted an empty barstool.

In a glance, she took in as much as her troubled mind would allow: a warm glow of natural red in the cypress wood bar and

walls. Lots of polished brass in the chandeliers and wall sconce lighting maintained a perfect balance of warm, golden 2700-Kelvin light and dusky dark to create a sense of closeness, even something close to intimacy in the vast high-ceilinged room. Perfect setting to shoot an intimate perfume or wine segment. Not a mismatched bulb in the place. Someone had taste and excellent attention to detail.

A man about Mia's age was bartending. Dark wavy hair, collared shirt, and jeans. He looked up and smiled at her. She half smiled and glanced down as she slid her still-tender butt on the barstool in front of him. Not quite making eye contact, she ordered. "Soda water with lime, please."

The bartender rolled his eyes and grinned at the less-than-exciting drink choice. But he grabbed a glass with one hand and the soda gun with the other. "Welcome to Enola's." He laid a napkin down and placed the glass on it.

"Thanks." Mia studied him for a moment. A genuine smile; one that reached his dark brown eyes. She looked around again, then back at him. "Nice place." She took a sip of her drink. "Yours?"

"Yeah. It is." He grinned as he used a bar towel to mop the counter clean. "How'd you know?"

"Your voice; you welcomed me as if I'd come into your home."

"Yeah, I know most folks in Delareau, and you are not among them. You get a special welcome."

Dell-ah-roe. Now she knew how to pronounce it.

"You also the lighting designer?"

"Yeah, I can't stand mixing . . ." The front door opened, dragging his attention away for a moment.

"Shit," he said, mostly under his breath.

"What's wrong?"

He gave her a barely perceptible shake of his head, then stepped over to the service bar, mixed two drinks for a server, grabbed a couple of lime slices, and brought them back to her.

"The couple who just came in?" He barely moved his lips and ticked his head toward the back corner table.

Mia pretended to stretch and yawn, then took in the group to her left. She didn't recognize the man, but the woman was the too-skinny mom-to-be she'd encountered in the diner.

"I saw her earlier today," Mia said. "She was . . . well . . . I don't know anything about her situation, so . . ." Maybe better to keep her mouth shut.

He looked up at her for a moment. Appraising.

"I probably shouldn't say anything, but since you sensed a situation, that's Remy Fortier. You saw his wife, Leanne."

The bartender spoke so softly, Mia strained a little to hear.

"I hate it when he brings her in here. It's painful to watch how he controls or ignores her—depends on what kind of mood he's in, I guess. Looks like she's gonna drop the kid any minute. She needs to be in a bar with him like I need a hole in my head." He stepped away to clear crumbs left behind by a couple of customers who'd finished. Then, still speaking softly as he came back to Mia, he said, "So you were at the diner this morning?"

Noticed already? She pushed her feet against the barstool's footrest to keep from running. "Huh." Mia snorted to cover her discomfort. "A psychic bartender?"

He grinned. "I'm Jake. Jake Brusey. And not psychic, only well informed. You're new in town, and you told me you'd seen Leanne. My sister Delphine—you just missed her—owns the only diner in town. According to her, Leanne had breakfast there this morning. So did someone she didn't know. Someone new in town. So, unless there are two new people in town, you and Leanne both ate breakfast at my sister's diner this morning."

“Oh, I see how it is. You and your sister have the food and drink concessions on both ends of the day locked up. And an information exchange service to boot?” It came out less funny than Mia intended, probably, she thought, because it made her nervous that others had already noticed her.

Jake chuffed a half laugh. “Yeah, sort of. I guess. Anyway, Del said she uh,” tilting his head toward the back corner where Leanne was sitting, “ate as if she hadn’t in a while and seemed really stressed. So, things must be . . . um . . . difficult at home right now.”

“Jake, need a couple,” a server called.

Hungry, Mia pulled a menu from a stack next to the napkin tray.

She gave the items a sideways glance and whispered a couple of pronunciations for boudin balls. “Boo-din? Bow-din?” She closed the menu, pulled a slim stack of folded cash out of her back pocket, and put it back. A wave of panic washed through her so hard and fast she nearly doubled over. *I have money enough for a few days but based on how quickly Aleks found me in New York, what if I have to make a move sooner? Before I can secure more cash!* But then she remembered something else: The pregnant woman hissing into her mobile that she had money but no one to help.

She put the menu away and watched the pregnant woman, Leanne, go into the restroom.

October 2: A Trip to the Ladies

Delareau, Louisiana

Mia grabbed a pen and a cocktail napkin from the bar, scribbled on it, and took it with her into the restroom.

The toilet was flushing as she walked in. She checked the other two stalls. Empty. Scanned the corners for cameras. None.

There were two sinks. Both pristine. She laid the napkin on the edge of one and twisted the tap on the other. Pushed the pump on an amber-colored blown glass dispenser and washed her hands. The smell of lavender drifted up; would have been soothing in different circumstances.

Leanne stepped up to the sink and reached over Mia for some soap.

Mia made room for her and said quietly, "Hi, there."

"Hey," Leanne replied just as softly as she turned on the water in her own lavatory.

"I was in the diner this morning. Couldn't help but hear that you might need a new friend."

They stared at each other's faces in the mirror. Mia saw confusion, then deer-in-the-headlights fear.

"I'm new in town. That was me this morning in the beanie hat."

Recognition dawned.

Mia gave her a beat, then said, "Anyway, I think I can help."

Leanne looked down and rinsed the soap from her hands, her movements hurried. "I don't know you."

"Nothing to be afraid of from me," Mia said, her voice soft as a falling feather. "I think we have some things in common." She dried her hands and nodded toward the napkin. "You can call me. But the sooner the better. I can't hang around here too long." Mia tossed her used paper towel in the trash and stepped toward the door. "Oh, and do me a favor. Memorize that number and flush the napkin, would ya?"



Back at the bar, Jake delivered a fresh soda water with lime to his new customer, watching as she slid tentatively back onto the barstool. Intriguing, he thought. She reached toward her back pocket as if preparing to pay and he waved his hand dismissively.

"I don't charge nameless women who are new in town, and first-time guests at Enola's, for fizzy water." He tried his warmest smile but still couldn't get her to make eye contact. But he grinned at her snappy reply.

"Well, Jake, that makes my policy of not giving my name to bartenders I just met a profitable one tonight." She took a long drink and added with something like real warmth if it hadn't been so rushed, "And I'm grateful for the kindness."

He nodded and glanced away toward the service bar. No one needed a refill at the moment. He turned around to ask her name, but she'd slipped off the barstool and turned to leave.

"I'll be around for a few days. Maybe see you again," she said without looking back.

As she slipped out the door, Jake put her glass in the dish bin and said to no one but himself, "Maybe . . ." But if his sister Delphine had still been there, he was sure she would have said he was more than just a little bit curious.

CHAPTER 6

October 3: First Contact *Delareau, Louisiana*

Mia woke abruptly. Breath ragged, heart pounding. It took a few seconds, but she recognized the rugged feel of the blanket, the hooks on the wall, and relaxed. Safe. For the moment.

She wiped the sleep from her eyes, sat up with a sore-body groan, and glanced around at her meager belongings. The backpack hanging on the hook. iPad on the chair, charging. Yoga pants hanging on the chair back, the same ones she'd arrived in. She thought she could smell them from where she lay. She got out of bed and stepped into them. Time to shop.



An hour later, Mia walked out of the Salvation Army wearing cleaner clothes, carrying a small bag, and her burner in a pants pocket. It buzzed. She slid her finger across the screen and said nothing. A couple of beats of dead silence. Then, “Hello?” A soft voice Mia immediately recognized.

“Leanne, I’m glad you called me.”

“Who are you? How do you know my name?”

"I don't want to tell you my name yet, so just call me JD, for, you know, Jane Doe. And believe me, you're safer that way. Are you someplace no one can hear you?"

"I'm alone in an office at the library. I'm using the landline."

"Excellent." She exhaled. Waited a beat. "So, you don't know me, and I don't know you. But I'm here in Delareau because I am hiding from someone who hurt me." Mia let that sink in for a moment. "Why are you at the library?"

"I don't use my cell for anything I don't want my husband to find out about. And the librarian here, she was my favorite teacher in high school. She loves me. She knows practically everything about the families around here. So she knows . . . uh . . . how it is for me. When I come here to read, she lets me sit in her office and use the phone for a little while if I need to. I'm safe, and it's private. But I can't stay very long. So why did you give me your number?"

"When I saw you in the diner yesterday, I wasn't really trying to eavesdrop, but I guess I did. Sounded like someone was maybe telling you to do the same thing I'm doing? I heard you say that you have money but don't know how to get out. I need cash and I have some experience. I mean, I've got money, but I can't get to it right now, without leaving a trail that leads right to me. Anyway, I'm thinking we can help each other."

Mia waited. Listened to the silence for two long deep breaths before the young woman spoke again. "Financing isn't a problem. My family has plenty, and I have a trust that I can draw from, well, when I can get to the bank and get it. So, what do you know about how to get away?"

"I'm here, I'm alive, and it's a lot to tell. I learned the hard way; there's no such thing as a one-and-done. The first stage is to plan carefully and—"

Leanne interrupted her. "Yeah, but listen. I need to get out of this mess before my baby is born. That's about a month from now."

“Okaaaay.” Mia drew out the word as she mentally reviewed the list of things she wished she’d done differently during the past months. She made a commitment to herself: She’d make sure this woman didn’t suffer from the same mistakes. “Are you, uh, capable—pregnancy and all—of going somewhere a few days from now, with nothing but what you can wear and carry? Can you break off contact from almost everyone in your life for a while?”

“There’s only one place I can maybe go here in town, but I’m scared because if he finds out where I am, he’ll hurt me. And the baby. And maybe other people too. But, yeah, if it’s out of town, I can go. Is there somewhere I can go? Or that we can go?”

“When can you be at the library again?”

“I can be there day after tomorrow, about this time.”

“Okay. I’ll be there. And I’ll have something for you. And in the meantime, think about what it will take to get cash; as much as you can get your hands on. Believe me, there’s no such thing as too much.”

“I’m not going to give you—”

“Don’t worry. I’m not asking you for money. Not now, and not when we meet. I don’t want any money that you don’t want to give me. I’m going to spend the next couple of days putting a plan together. After I show it to you, you can decide what it’s worth.” Could almost hear the gears turning in the young woman’s head. Couldn’t blame her one bit.

“I guess, yeah.” Her voice was shaky.

Mia said, “I know you’re scared. I am too. Because this trust thing? It works both ways.” But she admitted to herself, at nineteen or twenty years old and pregnant, how could Leanne possibly trust someone whose name she didn’t even know. Mia waited for ‘no’ or even a ‘maybe.’

Leanne was silent for another few seconds, then, “Yeah. Okay. That feels like an okay plan. But if what you come up with makes

no sense, I'm not doing it. I can't do anything that makes this mess worse."

Better. Less shaky now. "Totally understand. If you were my friend, that's exactly what I'd tell you to say."

October 5: Second Meeting
Delareau, Louisiana

When Mia walked up the steps to the library, she knew she'd done a much better job planning stage one of Leanne's vanishing than she had her own. She stepped into the cool quiet and saw her sitting, or rather fidgeting, on the edge of a chair near the library stacks. Mia started in that direction, but a familiar voice stopped her in her tracks.

"Well, hello there, AW," Jake said. "You're hitting all the hot spots in town, I see."

Holy moly and WTF. The timing could not have been worse. Maybe the guy *was* psychic.

Leanne got up and scuttled over to the shelves, leaving Mia alone with the bartender.

"AW?"

Jake grinned. "Anonymous Woman."

Ignoring the bait, she said, "So what's Delareau's most generous bartender doing in the library?"

"I stop by sometimes to say hello to my favorite high school teacher. I enjoy making her proud by checking out a book every now and then. And, of course, bringing the last one back." He held up a mystery novel. "Sometimes even on time." He turned toward the checkout desk and said, "Isn't that right, Ms. Roussel? And, by the way, may I say that you're looking as lovely as the day I graduated?"

“Ah, Jakey. I always said that charm would serve you well. But you don’t need it in here, you know. I’ll lend you all the books you care to read.” She lowered her reading glasses and glowered over them at him. “As soon as I check that one in. You are very late.”

“And I hear libraries thrive on late-return fines,” Mia said. Flirting? Was she flirting? With a bartender she’d probably never see again? *Focus Mia, focus!*

Jake laughed. “In that case, maybe they’ll name a new wing after me.”

Mia smiled and said, “Well, good to see you again, Jake. Maybe I’ll stop by again one night before I leave town. The bar that is.”

Jake took the hint. Nodded and said, “That’d be nice. Since you’re in and out so soon, your drink of choice will be on the house.”

Mia continued toward the stacks as the affectionate banter between the librarian and Jake faded into the background. She found the girl in the two hundreds section. Religion. Something Mia could probably use right about now.

“I remember you now,” Leanne said. “I was scared of you. Thought maybe you worked for my husband and were following me.”

“Leanne, other than seeing him in the bar the other night, I don’t even know who your husband is. And I assure you, I’m not working for anyone right now, except maybe you if you’re comfortable with what I’ve come up with.”

Mia pulled the old iPad out of her backpack and stepped closer to Leanne. Cringed at the thought that she’d had to call on Sondra again, so quickly. But they were both businesswomen and shared some basic values: Ask for help to make your own money before you ask for money.

“I’ve contacted a friend of mine in Montana. She’s willing to put you up for a few weeks if you can follow the guidelines I’m going to lay out.”

"If she's that good a friend, how come you're not staying at her house?"

"Because my husband met her once. Knows her. He's probably already looked for me in that direction." She propped the iPad up on a shelf. "So, take a look at this. These are what I call the rules of the run."

A combination of what she'd talked about with Jessi and wished she'd done herself, Mia had outlined the requirements: fake email address; general delivery mail only until a PO Box is set up; burner phone; wireless-only tablet; prepaid Visa cards; cash; zero social media activity; and extremely limited communication—only with those so close to you they have your absolute trust. She watched the girl curl in on herself as she stepped through the list. And completely understood.

Leanne cupped her arms around her pregnant belly. "Look, you seem like you know your stuff, but I'm scared. I didn't know it, you know, before we married? But my husband's family owns just about everything and everyone around here one way or another. Like, whatever legal papers the Fortier family's name isn't on, they own in favors. To hear him tell it, he's got eyes at the bus station, the airport, and troopers watching the interstate. I can't even go see my momma unless he's with me. Or sends one of his . . . I don't know, guys or, uh, gang members. Whatever he calls them. So seriously, like, how in the world are you gonna get me and my baby to Montana?"

Mia placed a hand on the girl's shoulder. Squeezed it just enough to impart empathy. Competence.

"Think of it this way: Your husband's a badass, scary guy. So is mine. Connected in all the wrong ways. But the only way out is through. And I'm confident enough in this plan that I've got a midwife lined up for you in Montana. So let me lay the rest of

this out and you let me know if you find any holes we need to fill. Make sense?”

Leanne chewed on her lip, then nodded. “Okay. Yeah, I can go with that.”

Mia breathed out, relieving tension that evidently had been building. “Okay. So here’s how we do it: There’s a concert in Lafayette this weekend and my friend who owns the house in Montana, Sondra, she knows Bucky—”

“Bucky Leader? My husband’s going to that show.”

“Yes, Bucky Leader. And that’s perfect. He’ll already be out of the way. Anyway, Sondra’s offered to fly Bucky and his band to Louisiana. But she’s telling him there’s a big surprise planned for her sister, who’s staying with her in Montana. The jet will drop them in Delareau and pick up Sondra’s niece—that’s you—at the same time so she can visit her mom.”

Leanne’s eyes widened. “But how am I gonna get on the plane without being seen?”

“I’m coming to that,” Mia said. “Bucky will tell anyone who asks that he flew into Delareau instead of Lafayette to spend the evening before the concert with a friend. I’ll be driving the limo his ‘friend’ sends to pick them up. You’ll be in it. I’ll slip you onto the plane while Bucky’s people are getting off it and into the limo. No one will even see you.”

“Wait. That’s crazy! You think no one’s gonna see someone as pregnant as I am?” The mother-to-be snorted.

“It’ll be nighttime. You’ll be in a dark cape or gown of some sort. And it’ll happen very, very quickly. Plus,” Mia offered Leanne a small smile, “I’ve set up a ton of photo and video shoots. Trust me, I’m good at details. And costumes. And managing chaos. I promise you. Even if someone sees a person slip out of the limo or get on that plane, no one will see you.”

Leanne nodded but didn't look convinced. Mia didn't blame her.

"Now, let that go for a sec and tell me this: Assuming you decide to trust me and this is a go, who do you most want to tell about what you're doing and why? Who's going to freak when you disappear?"

The girl answered instantly. "That's easy. When I disappear, Momma is going to think that Remy's killed me, either on purpose or accidentally. She'll totally lose it. So I have to tell her something."

***October 6: A Walk to Mom's
Delareau, Louisiana***

Disguises. Not the usual way of thinking about talent wardrobe for a shoot, but once Mia got her head around it, it was easy. Wearing clothes two sizes too big would make her look smaller and hide her athleticism. She made another visit to the Salvation Army store and picked up generic work pants in neutral colors; a couple of plaid shirts with long sleeves that she could roll up; an old beat-up pair of Redwing boots; and a bright yellow hard hat hanging from an older and bigger backpack, desert camouflage. She'd solved the hair issue and used a prepaid Visa to order colored contact lenses via Amazon. They'd be delivered to her at the motel today or tomorrow.

She gave one last look in the mirror. Ball cap covering the hair, dressed like a construction worker, she barely looked like a woman, let alone herself. She hid her smaller backpack in the big one and hoisted it on.

Food, second-hand clothes, breakfasts at the diner, prepaid rent for another few days at the motel, and Mia's cash stash was down to a few hundred dollars. An Uber was out of the question,

but before she could do anything more for herself, she needed to get this nailed down quickly. Get some cash. She laced up the old Redwings and hit the road on foot.

During the two-and-a-half-mile walk to Leanne's family home, someone stopped and asked if she wanted some work. For cash. Mia didn't make eye contact, just shook her head and kept walking. The driver moved on.

She walked up a Forrest Gump-style driveway framed by arching live oak trees dripping with Spanish moss and up three steps to the double front doors of a relatively modest plantation-style house like Mia'd only ever seen in old movies. She rang the doorbell. A stylish woman who, probably in her sixties but could pass for ten years younger, came to the door. Her silver-gray hair sparkled, but there was a sadness in her eyes. Leanne's mom. She expected Mia—a friend dropping by to pick up an old high school yearbook.

"Don't know if you remember me, Ms. B, but I'm JD." Then she mouthed, "It's about Leanne's situation."

The woman's eyes widened. She nodded quickly and said out loud, "Oh, JD! Of course I remember you, sweetie. My goodness, you're all grown up now!"

"Yes, ma'am, I guess I am. But before we go looking for those yearbooks, I'd love to take a look around back for old times' sake." Then she tapped her ear, hoping Leanne's mom would understand her concern about listening devices.

Impressive. The woman was quick. Roberta Broussard laughed and said, "Oh my, I remember how you and the other girls really enjoyed parties back there. You up for a little walk? I'd love to show you what we did with it after y'all grew up."

"Sure, Ms. B. I'm up for that." Mia let out a breath and relaxed a little, grateful that Leanne's mom understood her concern about potential surveillance. She had no idea how, where, or when Leanne's husband might be watching or listening, so she

just assumed it could be anywhere a device might reasonably be hidden.

Outside was safest. Outside kept you alive.

October 6: A Secret in the Garden

Delareau, Louisiana

“I can’t tell you anything more than that yet, Ms. B.”

Mia and Leanne’s mother were sitting under an arbor, watching Bayou Têche barely move.

“Please, call me Robbi. I am so grateful and just so glad that Leanne’s found someone who can help her and my grandbaby get out of this mess. Just tell me what I need to do.”

“You might have the hardest job. You have to play like you don’t know anything. As if you’re scared. As if Leanne has actually disappeared. I have no idea what his family will do or say, but I assume they’ll come to you.”

“Those people have never come to my house. Before, I mean. They knew better. But you’re right. Remy will come.”

“Ms. B, I mean, Robbi,” Mia said, and thought for a second. “I told Leanne I’d treat this situation just like I’m treating my own. And that’s why I’m telling you: As soon as Leanne’s gone, get some extra security around here for a few days in case they think you’d make good bait. But after they come to tell you she’s missing, you need to leave. And as far as where you tell people you’re going? Make that the most simple, believable lie that you can, and put the word out to whoever will spread it the fastest.”

“The gossips, you mean.”

Mia nodded. “And get in touch with Remy’s family. Tell them you’re afraid for your daughter and yourself. Ask if, or what, they

know and don't know; what they're doing about it. But do not file a missing persons report. If anyone asks about it, say that Remy's taking care of it. Because I don't think he will. Not at first, anyway."

"Okay. I went to school with Sheriff Allain. I'll call him in tears and beg him to tell me as soon as he knows something."

"Good. That's good. Now think carefully: What contacts do you have that Remy's family doesn't know about? Even if they're in another country. Because Robbi, if you don't leave, when they realize Leanne's not coming back, Remy or his family might try to use you to lure Leanne back home."

"Okay, I can do that." Robbi let out a small sob. "But when do I hear from Leanne? How will she find me?"

"I'll be the go-between for the two of you for a few weeks," Mia said, and pulled a couple of burner phones from her oversized pants pocket. "My number's programmed in. Use these only to reach me. And when you're in your house, your car, or using any of your other phones, your narrative is this and this only: that you're scared, confused, and desperate to hear from Leanne."

Robbi sniffed. "I see why you're saying that, but I don't think his family has reach much beyond South Louisiana."

"You may be right, but best to play it safer than you think you need to. Trust me. I learned the hard way."

"Why are you doing this, JD? You don't know us. You're not even from around here."

"The truth? I'm in the same situation. But I had to run before I was ready, and now I have access to very little money. But I do have knowledge. And certain resources. So, Leanne and I, we're helping each other."

"Thank God her father set up that trust. It's absolutely sacrosanct. That horror of a husband and his family can't touch it."

"Well," Mia paused. "They may not be able to touch the trust, but they might have sources at the bank who can give them

information. Leanne says because she's not twenty-one yet, you're allowed to withdraw from the account. You up for a visit to a branch in New Orleans?"

"Yes, I am. In fact, I can get three times as much cash there at the main branch. And I'll visit Leanne, under cover of course, at the library. You can arrange a time for us to meet there. But how much cash should I get?"

Mia nodded and thought for a moment about how to answer. "Robbi, full transparency. Leanne offered to split it fifty-fifty with me. We both need enough cash and prepaid credit cards to get by for three or four months. Can't leave ATM, banking, or other electronic footprints anywhere. She won't pay rent where she'll be, but she'll need cash to pay the midwife, buy clothing, and pay for food and supplies for her and the baby, including any delivery charges so that she doesn't go out and get caught on any cameras. I'm in a similar situation; no baby, but I have an attorney who's working on some aspects of my predicament." She watched the older woman for signs of worry or concern about the money. Was amazed to find none. "Does that help you estimate how much you should get?"

"Yes, I can work with that. I'll call the New Orleans branch this afternoon and give them some time to get the cash together."

The woman had steel. Mia could see where Leanne got it from.

They went back to the house and played out the yearbook scenario, just in case it was bugged.

As Mia stepped out the front door, Robbi said, "Be sure to check page thirty-six. There's a photo on that page you absolutely must see!"



Mia was putting everything she knew into play to make the ruse look real. She left the Broussard estate holding an old yearbook in

her hand. As she walked down the driveway back toward the main road, she made a big deal about stuffing it in the camouflage backpack. She smiled a little at how Leanne's mom had looked less sad when they'd parted ways than she had when she'd first opened the front door. Wished she could see her own mom smile like Robbi had. But her biological mom had been gone a long, long time. And since Mia had been so young, she couldn't even remember what she looked like.

Stepping onto the main highway, she turned toward the house again. Looked at the arching branches that framed the drive. Late-afternoon light washed the mossy oaks in warm sepia tones; a tender tableau that Mia stared at until it faded to a gloaming gray.

It was dark when she got back to town, and she was hungry. She stopped at a convenience store, bought a slice of heat-lamp pizza, and ate it as she walked back to her room.

There, she shed her worker's disguise in favor of an old T-shirt and Salvation Army boxer shorts she'd chosen to use as pajamas. Before she shut the light off, she picked up the yearbook. Page thirty-six had some interesting pictures alright. Instead of class photos, tucked into the page sat five Benjamin Franklins.

Mia—who hadn't cried once since she'd dropped out of the third-floor window of her home office—was so undone by the unexpected kindness, she cried herself to sleep.

CHAPTER 7

*October 7: A Limo
Delareau, Louisiana*

“Who’s Enola?” Mia was sitting at Jake’s bar, nursing a drink.

“She was my great-grandmother, my father’s grandmother. He named the place after her because she raised him.”

“But this isn’t actually on the Têche, so . . .”

“It was when it first opened.” The light in Jake’s eyes dimmed a little. “Actually, it was right on Bayou Têche most of its life. Up until about twelve years ago.”

Mia could see there was a story there, but before she could ask, Jake turned to the service bar and shifted dishes around to make room for one of the waitstaff’s dirty glasses. He stayed away, transferring them to the dishwasher. Busying himself with bartender work.

She looked at her drink. She’d spent the day planning. And a good part of the late afternoon trying to decide whether to trust Jake. She checked her phone. A habit from life before vanishing but saw the time. It was late and the ice in her drink had melted while she weighed the pros and cons. Again. She inventoried other options for a trusted contact and still came up short. So short, the number was zero. Besides, she told herself: he visited the library.

To check out books. Mysteries. And to visit his favorite teacher. Maybe those were signs. Mia shifted on her stool as she acknowledged to herself that if those behaviors didn't point toward trustworthiness, nothing would.

"Jake, when you have a minute?"

He looked her way and grinned. "Oh sure, Ms. Big Spender." He loaded the last of the dirty glasses. Turned back toward Mia. "Please let me refresh that expensive drink of yours."

Mia let go of her glass. "I need a limo."

"Oh, you want a fancy ride somewhere?" Smiled as he put ice in a fresh glass and aimed the soda gun.

"I need to rent it for a night. And," she bit her lip, "I need to drive it myself."

Jake stopped midspritz, cocked his head into a question mark position. His smile faded.

But now that she'd started, there was no going back. So she leaned in, looked him in the eye for the first time since they'd met, and whispered, "And I need to do this totally on the q.t. Like super-duper q.t. Like someone's life might be at risk q.t." Squinted a half grin, half grimace. Leaned back a little and, just above a whisper, added, "So, I uh, I thought you might know someone trustworthy. Who also owns a limo?"

He looked back down at the glass. Gunned it three-quarters full of soda. Slowly, with careful deliberation, he added a splash of cranberry juice. Squeezed in the lime. Picked a clean napkin out of the dispenser, set it on the bar in front of Mia, and placed the drink on it. Finally, he looked up.

Mia rushed in again. "Or maybe someone willing to be a go-between—"

Jake interrupted. His voice low. Intense. "Lady, I'm still calling you AW."

“Wha—”

He interrupted her. “In other words, you haven’t even told me your name. And you’re asking me to get involved in something that involves someone’s life being at risk?”

Mia opened her mouth to speak, but Jake, brown eyes dark, face tight, rolled right over her.

“I don’t know where you’re from. I don’t know why you’re here. And I’m thinking, maybe you don’t know where you actually are, down here in itty-bitty Delareau? Where you might think everything is all small town, good-intentions Mayberry or something.” His sarcasm, so unlike the warmth she’d experienced before, stunned her.

Mia shifted forward on the barstool. “But—”

“But, exactly,” he hissed. “But it’s not,” he said, real heat in his voice now. He took a breath as if to start again. “For instance, why isn’t Enola’s on the Têche on Bayou Têche?” He finally paused.

Afraid of losing her only possible connection, she softened her voice but stumbled. “I uh, I don’t know, Jake. I mean, how could—”

He interrupted again, speaking just above a whisper. “South Louisiana is nothing if not wet. All the time. Humid as hell.” He leaned over the bar onto his forearms and continued. “So can you imagine how hard it might be to burn down a 150-year-old building sitting on the bank of a bayou? A building made of handmade bricks and 200-year-old cypress that’s practically sopping wet with humidity all the time?”

“Well, I . . .”

Jake leaned in closer, face only six inches from Mia’s. “It’s so hard that you have to intend to burn it down. You have to plan it. Use the right placement of the right incendiaries. You have to want to burn it down. Really, really bad.”

“So, fire. Someone burned it down. I’m sorry. So sorry.”

He stepped back, gave her a little more space, but remained silent.

Mia tried again. "But I guess I'm not seeing how . . ."

Jake's eyes bore into her eyes. "How the original Enola's burning down is relevant to your limo request?" He added sarcastically, "AW?"

Mia winced. "You can call me JD."

He paused for only a second.

"You think that's funny? Substituting Jane Doe for Anonymous Woman." Mia closed her eyes, embarrassed.

"Sorry." She opened her eyes and looked directly into his. "I was just trying to lighten things up. But it was . . . inappropriate." Her smile was tenuous. His nonexistent.

Jake took a deep breath, stepped back from the bar, and tossed his bar towel toward the sink. "Let's go take a walk AWJD."

***October 7: A River Walk
Delareau, Louisiana***

Mia waited while Jake didn't say a word until they were on the Bayou Têche Trail. The warm, moist dark enveloped her in something akin to protection. A gothic half-moon behind them threw shadows on the footpath and the night had cooled enough to form dew on the benches and light posts along the river, which smelled of slow-moving water, fall leaves, and fresh fish.

Unconsciously feeling with her thumb to twist a ring that was no longer there, Mia kicked herself. Where the hell had her communication skills gone? What on earth had she expected? She started again, this time thinking of Jake. "So, the fire and my limo request: There's a connection. Can you help me understand?"

"The Fortiers."

A moment of confusion, then she remembered. "Leanne's husband's family?"

"Yep. The Fortiers own the limo companies around here; the commercially available ones anyway. They collect protection money from most of the businesses between Lafayette north of here and some invisible line this side of New Orleans. Another branch of the family runs New Orleans."

"Like Mafia?"

Jake nodded. "Like Mafia, but smaller. More like a local syndicate."

"And you didn't pay, so they burned down Enola's."

"My dad didn't pay. Wouldn't pay," Jake said.

Horrified, she said the only words she could think of. "I'm so sorry."

"And eventually made him pay with his life."

"Oh my God!" Mia squeezed her eyes shut for a moment against the pain in his voice.

"They killed your dad because he wouldn't pay protection money?" Shock that he'd shared something so private morphed instantly into outrage at the act itself.

"My family, the extended family, is one of the oldest in Louisiana. Generations of relationships, businesses, land purchases, sales, and swaps. Marriages, cousins, so old and with so many connections that we're all kin in some way." Jake looked at her. "We were kin enough that they wouldn't kill him, but not close enough that the Fortiers let him get away with not paying. Would have undermined their power. So they burned it."

Mia kept quiet and listened to their steps scrape softly on the concrete path. She followed his nod toward a spot on the opposite shore. Some partial pier stumps sticking up out of the water.

"He was in there that night, doing the books, when the fire started. And instead of leaving when he first smelled smoke, he stayed a while; too long. Thought it was just some papers or a trash

can burning; something he could put out himself. By the time he figured out it was more than that, he'd inhaled a lot of smoke. And heat. So much that his lungs . . ." Jake trailed off for a moment. Took a breath and continued. "He just never really recovered. My eighteenth birthday was a few months after the fire and he handed the reins to me. Helped me find another location. Started teaching me. Taught me what he could about how to run the place. And once I got my sea legs and didn't need him so much, I don't know. I think he just lost the will to keep going."

"So they didn't murder him, but they killed him." She stared at the stumps. Caught a whiff of old smoke in the wet air of the Têche.

"Close enough to truth." Jake stopped abruptly and turned to face her. "So, I'm thinking that somehow this limo is connected to Remy Fortier's wife Leanne."

The fear that she'd done something to reveal herself made her stomach flip. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "That obvious?"

"Well, probably just to me since I'm the only one who has a sister who saw the two of you at the diner at the same time. Then I saw you in my bar the same night she was here, and you went to the bathroom at the same time she did. Then I ran into the two of you at the library."

"It really is a small world here."

"I know why she spends a fair amount of time there," he said. "And you, AWJD, are clearly hiding the hell out of yourself. From something. Or someone." He didn't soften it with a smile.

Mia leaned over and put her hands on her knees. She breathed deep until her stomach settled. Figured he'd taken the first step. Had trusted first. She straightened up and looked at him.

"Mia. My name is Mia. But that's all I'm going to say for now."

"Understood." He nodded and exhaled in relief. "Mia."

They turned in unison to head back to Enola's. A slight breeze and the wet quiet along the Têche absorbed the sound so perfectly, she didn't notice when their steps synced up with each other.

October 8: Back at the Library
Delaware, Louisiana

Mia huffed a soft note of irony as she approached the Iberia Public Library the next day; the word 'public' usually implied cameras, which she'd recently decided to be allergic to. She opened the door wondering why Jake specified it. She nodded to the woman at the desk and made her way back to the stacks.

He was waiting for her. "Why here?" Mia asked.

"And hello to you too. Thanks for asking. I'm fine." Mia tilted her head and gave him a half smile, thinking she might do well to develop some deep-south manners.

"Because," he said, "Ms. Roussel is no gossip and very few people actually come in here anymore. Not that it was ever the most popular place in town, but visits went down near zero during the pandemic. Dedicated readers started using the Libby app, and—

"You and Leanne are the only regulars now?"

"Well, not the only. Just here more often than most others."

"And her husband lets her come here?"

Jake explained. "Remy has a couple of men watch her when he's not around. But I've seen them wander away when she's in the library."

"Do any of her friends come here? Meet her here? Or is she just totally isolated?"

Mia felt a tickle in her nose. Rubbed it and looked around. They were deep in the stacks, somewhere in the nine hundreds

section, History and Geography. A dry-paper-bookish smell made her sneeze.

“Bless you. Her mother used to volunteer here. I think Ms. Roussel let her keep a key to the back door. I saw her once, Roberta, in some kind of weird disguise. I doubt it was the only time.”

“Smart lady.” Mia sneezed again.

“Bless you again. Smart, yeah, but she’s also gotta be mad as hell. And scared for her daughter.” Jake leaned against the World History row. “Remy coasted through his late teens and early twenties on charm. And unless you were in the syndicate, you’d have had no idea he was part of all that back then. When he and Leanne first dated, he probably wasn’t all in. Yet. Some of us hoped that he’d do what my dad did and break the generational chain. However—”

“Don’t tell me anything more. I’m just playing like he’s as well connected and powerful as my husband. That’s the safest thing to do.”

“Ah, another nugget. A bad husband for you too?”

“Very.” Mia looked around for a box of tissues. Didn’t find one and, as she often did on set when every minute cost thousands of dollars, used the sleeve of her hoodie. “Gross, I know, but I’m not gonna go looking for a tissue.” Cleared her throat and looked at him. “So, Jake, how about that limo?”

CHAPTER 8

October 9: Four Women in a Bathroom Delareau, Louisiana

“I do not like getting you involved in this, Robbi.”

It was 10:00 a.m. on what Mia called Transfer Day. She gathered Robbi, currently dressed in a very un-Robbi-like wig, dress, and shoes, along with Ms. Roussel and Leanne in the library’s ladies’ room to nail down the plan. The room reeked of industrial-strength cleaning products. Mia sneezed and pulled some paper off a roll while Robbi spoke soothingly to her.

“Mia, I’ve been doing this for quite a while now. I use my Volvo to run errands and visit friends. But I also have an old gray Toyota truck, a 1999 model that my husband kept for the grounds people to use. It stays in my garage except for when I put on this mess of an outfit and drive it here to meet Leanne. I park in back and, looking like this? I’m invisible. I promise you. No one knows it’s me in this library at this very minute.”

“It’s a good disguise. And even though I don’t like it, it’s the best way I could think of to transfer Leanne from here to your place and get her in the limo.”

The car was already waiting at Robbi’s place. They’d decided it would be virtually unnoticeable in her driveway, given that she and her friends hired one several times a year to go to a show at the André Cailloux in New Orleans.

Ms. Roussel jumped in, eager to get her part right. "So I'm going to handle the Poetry Reading sign and just let these two ladies meet up and get in Robbi's truck?"

"Yes, but your part is critical, Ms. Roussel. You put the 'Poetry Reading 7:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m.' sign on display right after Leanne leaves here this morning with that book in her hand. That'll guarantee the men who watch her see it. Then, don't replace it with the 'Poetry Reading Canceled' sign until around eight o'clock so that they won't see it until they come back to follow her home around nine o'clock."

The librarian held both handwritten signs up for inspection. "Exactly! Got it! I feel like I'm in a thriller movie!" Ms. Roussel was beaming. She turned to Leanne and took her hands. "But seriously Leanne, I am so proud of you for doing this. You and your little one are going to kick ass and take names when you get out of this mess."

"Thanks, Ms. Roussel," Leanne was jumpy and distracted, but Mia took note: A good Southern girl does not forget her manners. She squeezed her former teacher's hands affectionately and looked her straight in the eye. "I can't thank you enough for all you've done to help me. I hope I get to come back and see you again."

"Don't you worry about that right now. Maybe I'll take a vacation one of these months soon."

"Oh my God, that would be—"

"Ladies, back to task now," Mia said in executive producer mode. "We don't have much time. Everyone got their burner? Numbers programmed in?" Affirmative nods from all three as they looked down and scrolled, double-checking their phones.

"This one will go in my drawer in case I have to ditch the first one," Ms. Roussel said. "And this one I'll power up the second I get home."

Leanne recited her part. "I leave here shortly, holding the poetry book so that anyone who happens to be around sees me. Then, I

come back here to the library at six forty-five for the seven o'clock poetry reading. When Ms. Roussel locks the door behind me, I put on my, what, costume? My disguise?" She looked at Mia, who gave her a 'yes and keep going' nod. "Then, I'll go with Mom out through the back door and lie down in the back seat of the truck."

Mia turned her attention to Robbi who walked through the next steps. "Leanne should only be visible for about ten or twenty seconds, getting from the library to the truck. And with that quick change of clothes and hunching herself over like my grandmother while I help her to the truck, even if someone sees us, our two 'old lady' disguises will make us practically invisible. It's a great plan, Mia. You're very good at this."

Mia continued nodding and added, "And you'll make sure no one is following you before you drive the two of you back to your place." She'd worked with actors enough to know that repetition helped.

"Just like I always do," Robbi said. "I thought maybe one of Remy's men was following me once. So I drove to the Catholic church and went in to worship for a while. If there was anyone on my tail, they left while I was praying." She laughed at the memory, but there was more nervousness in it than humor.

Mia looked at Leanne again. "You installed the timer on the lights in your living room?"

"The lights will turn on at seven thirty and turn off at nine," Leanne said, nodding her head yes.

Ms. Roussel said, "Those boys are going to panic when they realize the poetry reading was canceled and Leanne left the library when they weren't looking."

Mia grinned and said, "And the timer lights that go off at nine should keep them from reporting anything to Remy?"

Leanne answered. "It will look like I went to bed. And they will not want him to know that I was out of their sight for an hour and a half."

She reached out and touched Leanne's belly. "That gives us plenty of time to get you and your baby in the limo and out to the airport." Whatever it takes to keep the actors calm.

The women all looked at each other, and even Ms. Roussel's thousand-watt smile faded as the seriousness of the situation weighed heavily on them.

Mia broke the silence. "So, okay! Great. Sounds like we're all clear." She looked at Ms. Roussel and nodded at her to unlock the bathroom door. "Let's all leave here just as we planned it. I will see you tonight."

Ms. Roussel unlocked the door and went back to her post. Robbi and Leanne waited a couple of minutes and Robbi, wig on as usual, went out the back door. Leanne followed and went the other direction, carrying a new book of poetry. The sign wasn't up yet, but she thumbed through it as she sauntered out the front door and down the steps, making sure her watchers could see that she was captivated by Emily Dickinson. She dallied long enough for Ms. Roussel to put the sign up. It read, 'Poetry Reading Tonight! 7:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. All are Welcome!'

Mia sat at a carrel for another half an hour. She closed her eyes and went over every step, just like she did when she was shooting a commercial. When she felt in her bones that the scripted action was as solid as it could be, she glanced at her phone, and saw it was time to go.

Pushing the door open to leave, she smiled at Ms. Roussel and got a wink in return. When she stepped out of the building, the sun hit her like a spotlight, and she stumbled. Ah yes, a reminder: There was no such thing as a production where everything went according to plan. Something unexpected always happened.

Every. Single. Time.

***October 9: Leanne's Walk-On
Delareau, Louisiana***

Mia had staged a lot of professional shoots in the past twelve years. Some had been more complex than this one, but none as risky. She felt anxious. Nearly as tightly wound as when she dove out of her own office window. How was that only eight days ago? She tapped her fingers on the steering wheel of the limo she was driving, hoping the soothing rhythm might reduce her anxiety.

One more run to the Salvation Army yielded her own costume. A black hard-billed driver's cap, a much-too-big used tux, and black leather dress shoes. She wore a black T-shirt under the tux instead of a white dress shirt to blend in with the black of night, creating the best tonal merger possible with a half-moon in play. She crossed her fingers for clouds to roll in from the west.

Just as Mia picked up the limo from Robbi's, Leanne texted from her burner that Remy'd left for Lafayette with his buddies, clearly intending to turn their attendance at the Bucky Leader concert into a twenty-four-hour-plus party. She added that he'd bought the poetry reading story.

At dusk, Mia cruised slowly by the library. Of course, now that she knew from Jake to look for them, she easily spotted the two men Remy had tailing his wife. She glanced up into the rearview mirror. Right on time, at exactly 6:45 p.m., she watched Leanne make her way up the steps toward the library entrance. As soon as Leanne went through the doors, her watchers drove away.

Mia took another turn around the block. Confident all was clear, she headed northwest on State Road 182. She wanted to double-check her airport entry point before they made the transfer.

She'd looked it up. Delareau's airport was small but modern thanks to a chunk of recent political and financial investment, the goal of which was to expand the business and commercial sectors. So far, it was only a few private jets in and out. Other aircraft

arriving or departing at the same time Bucky and his people came in on Sondra's jet? Slim to none.

Mia took a right, drove a hundred yards up Spanish Lake Road, and pulled over near the water. There, she closed her eyes and forced herself to breathe deeply. The plan was going like clock-work. Her skin crawled and she crossed her fingers, hoping that whatever went sideways would be manageable.

The alarm on the cheap digital watch she'd gotten at the drug store beeped. 7:45 p.m. She put the limo in drive, went to the airport, and checked out the route. Done.

Now, on to Robbi's to pick up the real star of tonight's show.

And for her wish to come true.

***October 9: Nothing Here to See
Delaware, Louisiana***

Mia had verbally rehearsed with Robbi and Leanne how to stay in character while they moved Leanne from the house to the limo. She had no idea if Remy Fortier had cameras installed or other watchers hanging around. But Mia wasn't taking any chances. Sticking with her plan, she pretended Remy could do anything Aleks could do and had eyes on the house. Mia had Leanne cover her maternity wear with a stunning silk cape Robbi pulled out of her closet. It was full length, black, and lightweight; easy for Leanne to keep draped around her as she moved. She wore a wig that spilled medium length gray hair onto her shoulders and a vintage hat with a semiopaque net veil in front. A pair of Hollywood-big sunglasses completed the disguise.

Parked in front of the house, Mia watched Robbi help a stooped-over Leanne get out the front door and slowly down the steps. Professional driver Mia stepped out and came around the limo to open

the passenger door for Robbi's elderly guest. The three women all looked up at once at the headlights of another car approaching. An antique red Mercedes parked right behind the limo.

"Well, thank God something's going wrong. I feel so much better now." Mia spoke quietly and with a bit of irony. Robbi looked at her quizzically but didn't ask. Mia stayed one hundred percent in character as she hurried to take Leanne by the arm and gently helped her into the back seat.

Robbi was standing close to the limo, blocking the Mercedes driver's view of Leanne. She waved and smiled at the unwelcome visitor getting out of the car but hissed through clenched teeth for Mia to hear, "Hell's bells, it's that nosy Scarlett!"

"Scarlett?" Mia, hissed back to Robbi as she made sure her passenger got settled in. "Really?"

Speaking through smile-clenched teeth, "Yes. Her mother had a thing for Vivien Leigh and *Gone with the Wind*. And this Scarlett is just as dramatic as her movie namesake."

Scarlett stepped out of her car, already asking questions in a whiskey-voiced Southern accent. "Did I miss something Robbi? Were we supposed to go to 'Nawlins tonight?"

Her dexterity caught Mia off guard, and seconds later the woman was moving toward the passenger side of the limo, clearly intending to get a look inside. Mia turned slightly to block her view as Robbi stepped closer to Scarlett to stop her progress. Miss Scarlett, as Mia was already thinking of her, stopped short in front of the blockade. They were all so close to the door that Mia couldn't close it without hitting someone.

"No, no Scarlett." Robbi flailed a hand to shoo away the concern. "You haven't missed a thing! The driver is here to take my elderly aunt to the airport."

"Well, thank heavens!" Scarlett's smile faded a little as she tilted her head and contracted her wrinkles in playful suspicion.

"I thought all your aunts had passed Robbi. Who is this one that I don't know about?" Leaning over as she spoke, trying to look past Mia and into the limo.

Robbi stepped forward again and gently placed her hand on Scarlett's shoulder, nudging her away from the car. "Well, Scarlett, I always said you'd never lose that fabulous memory of yours. And you are right. Technically, it's my late husband's aunt." Robbi moved her hand from Scarlett's shoulder to her elbow and with gentle expertise turned her friend back toward her own car. Scarlett turned to look back, trying to resist Robbi's nudging without making it obvious she was resisting.

"Well, for heaven's sake! I remember that husband of yours, God rest his soul, had some far away relatives. But I thought I'd met all of them too! If I missed one, now is the time to introduce us!" She smiled ferociously while attempting to remove her elbow from Robbi's hand.

Mia checked her watch. Spoke in a deeper than usual voice. "Ms. Broussard, my apologies, but we're at risk of running late. And I believe your aunt has already dozed off."

"Scarlett, I promise the next time she visits I will have you over." This time, Robbi took Scarlett firmly by the elbow and pulled her into a slow walk back toward the old red Mercedes. "But right now, we've got to let the driver get her to the airport so that she doesn't miss this flight. It's the last one out of New Orleans this evening, and we don't want her stuck in a hotel there tonight with no minder." She continued escorting Scarlett to her own car. Robbi opened Scarlett's car door and gave her an Oscar-winning smile. But Scarlett continued to talk, appearing to Mia to change the subject to some other gossip that she desperately needed to share.

Mia, behind the wheel and ready to go, looked at her watch and sighed heavily. Tapping her foot. *Need your car out of my way, lady.*

A few more seconds and she rolled down her window. “Ms. Broussard, I’m sorry to interrupt your visit, but we really must be going!”

Robbi practically pushed Scarlett behind her own wheel. “It was so good of you to stop when you saw the limo, Scarlett. I’ll call you tomorrow and we’ll schedule a lunch so that we can catch up.” Scarlett had no choice but to slide behind her own wheel.

Mia closed the window and started the car. Maybe that would encourage ‘Miss Scarlett’ to get the hell out of the way. When the car didn’t move, Mia shifted into reverse, willing to back up and bump into her to get the woman moving.

“Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God . . .” Leanne quietly recited like a mantra in the back seat. “Is she leaving yet?”

“She’s backing up,” and Mia did the same. “We’re ten minutes behind, but I’ll make it up on the drive to the airport.”

October 9: Blue Light Special
Delareau, Louisiana

Mia refused to officially call a production a ‘shoot’ until a problem, preferably a critical one she could solve, cropped up. As soon as that happened—someone got sick, talent no-showed, a critical prop went missing, a light burned out, a digital cam malfunctioned—she knew the final cut would be fabulous. It was the ones that went smoothly that were hardest to get right in the end. Some kinda karma thing, she supposed.

As she thanked her lucky stars for Scarlett’s interruption, she caught blue lights flashing in the rearview mirror. She spread her fingers across the steering wheel and focused on the possibility that this additional trouble would improve the outcome even more. As

she slowed and pulled over, Leanne said, "What is it?" She'd almost forgotten that Leanne was in the back.

"A cop," Mia said. "Get on the floor as close to the back of my seat as you can so he can't see you."

"Oh my God, oh my God, oh my . . ."

"And while we definitely need the help, be quiet."

Mia rolled down the window and waited for the inevitable.

"License and registration," the cop said.

Mia looked up into a round face. Her own face, paler than she'd have liked, reflected in the cop's mirrored aviator glasses.

"Sure. I'm reaching into the glove box for the registration, okay?"

He didn't answer.

Glancing at his name tag as she handed him the registration, "Here you go, Officer um, Delacroix?" She pronounced it, 'Del-a-croy,' hoping she got it right. Waited for a second. "Did I pronounce that correctly?" He studied the registration.

"I don't know you. And where's your license?"

"No, sir, you don't," Mia said. A bead of sweat rolled down her spine. "This is one of the Fortier's limos, but the client sent me here to drive the car, sir. And I'm ashamed to say, it's just so unprofessional of me, but I forgot my license."

"Why isn't one of the Fortier's people driving?" The officer's eyebrows arched. He fumbled, dropped the registration, and bent down to get it.

"I'm doing a friend a favor. Going to the airport to pick up Bucky Leader and some of his friends. My friend arranged his flight and—"

"Bucky Leader? You're picking up Bucky Leader?" Officer Delacroix ripped off his glasses. Gone was the stern officer of the law. The man could barely hide his excitement. "At the Delareau airport?"

“Yes, sir. I ran into a little difficulty a few minutes ago and somehow got delayed, so I guess I was—”

“Don’t worry. I’ve got this.” He thrust the registration at Mia. Hurried toward his patrol car and shouted, “Follow me!”

Mia watched Delacroix in the side mirror. Leanne, laughing as she slid back in her seat, said, “You are so lucky Mia. Beau Delacroix is a fan of anyone who is even remotely a star. For him to escort you to the airport means he’ll get to meet Bucky Leader in person.” Leanne’s laughter became near hysterical. “He, he . . .” she gasped, “he’s gonna . . . I mean . . . he’s gonna be telling this story for the rest of his life!”

Mia started laughing too. Were they both losing control?

“Okay, Leanne.” Mia settled her own giggling and pulled herself together. “Time to get back into character.”

The police car pulled out. Blue lights strobed. Then they were off. Pushing eighty. This time with an escort.

October 9: Unexpected Inbound *Delareau, Louisiana*

Perfect timing. Sondra’s jet was on the ground and the steps were down when Mia arrived on the tarmac behind Delacroix. By the time she put the limo in park, the officer himself was out of his car and stationed at the foot of the stairs, greeting Bucky Leader’s people as they deplaned, like a groom at his wedding reception. Mia watched him literally bounce on the balls of his feet with excitement.

“Are you sure I need these sunglasses?” Leanne said, struggling from the limo’s back seat toward the door.

“It’s the outfit that makes you invisible, Leanne. The long gray hair hanging down the back of the cape, the dark dress and yes,

the sunglasses too. Old people with glaucoma are sensitive to light. Sunglasses and that vintage hat with the net in front of your face? Anyone who sees you sees an old lady instead of a young mother-to-be.”

“Yeah, but it’s dark now and I can’t see a thing.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll lead you as soon as Bucky and his people get a little closer to the car. There should be eight, maybe ten of them. I want you in the middle of the group, invisible in the chaos. Get ready for my signal then . . .”

“What’s happening?” Leanne squeaked. “Is the plane leaving without me?”

Then Mia heard it too. Got out of the limo and saw everyone staring up. Another jet, making its final approach.

“Hardly ever see this happen!” Delacroix shouted. “Two jets arriving at our little airport at the same time! Bucky? Hey there, Bucky! Got your limo a sheriff’s escort. Gonna make sure you get where you need to go with no problem.”

Bucky was a pro. He flashed the deputy his star-powered smile and yelled, “Aw, Deputy, I don’t hardly think we need that in little ole’ Delareau. But it’s mighty nice of you, and we ain’t gonna say no for sure!”

Mia jumped as the jet’s wheels hit the tarmac and belched a burst of smoke. “It’s just another private plane, Mia,” she hissed at herself, heart pounding at a third unexpected change in her script. “Calm the hell down, for heaven’s sake.”

She watched the second jet taxi to a stop—uncomfortably close to Sondra’s jet.

Leanne came close to the open door and whispered, “Now?”

Mia backed up and put her butt in the door, almost in Leanne’s face. She had her hands behind her back and was flapping them in a ‘wait-wait’ motion she hoped the young woman would interpret.

Delacroix looked over at Mia. “Well, get over here and help Mr. Leader with his things!”

She waited a split second, motioned for Leanne to back up one more time, then walked toward the stairs. By the time Bucky had gotten to the bottom, Delacroix was Mia's boss.

"Well, take his luggage, man!"

Mia, initially stupefied, decided it was a gift that Delacroix didn't even notice she was a woman. She picked up Bucky's gym bag and said in a deep male voice, "If you and your friends will follow me, sir." Mia led them toward the car. Delacroix stuck to Bucky like glue, almost breathing the man's CO₂.

Desperately trying to figure out how to get everyone grouped around the car and simultaneously get Leanne by the arm to get her out, she stopped short when Bucky turned around and shouted.

"Hey, who's got my guitar?"

Mia grimaced. Not a Bucky Leader fan, but even she knew about the guitar that was second only to Willie Nelson's in terms of 'beat up and essential.' Despite that, or maybe because of it, that instrument allegedly produced a tone like no other. It was half of the unique sound that made a Bucky Leader recording something only Bucky Leader could make. He'd never leave the airport without it.

Delacroix stumbled, trying to turn around as fast as Bucky did. Mia watched nine of Bucky's entourage—scattered like breadcrumbs between the last couple steps of the jet's stairs and the limo—look around as if expecting a guitar to materialize in midair.

Bucky broke into a run toward Sondra's jet, yelling, "Don't y'all let that jet take off with my . . ."

Mia's eyes flicked from Bucky's chaos toward movement at the other jet. Three men in suits dark enough to merge with the night had exited the plane and were walking like the Blues Brothers toward the Bucky Leader entourage. She recognized Aleks' careless, uneven gait instantly. Her eyes bulged out, her nails dug into her palms, and her knees started to buckle.

CHAPTER 9

October 9: The Transfer Delareau, Louisiana

“Hey, Bucky, calm down, dude! Got her right here!” Shouting, the only option over Aleks’ jet.

The last member of Bucky’s entourage emerged from under the protective flap of the luggage cart the crew was unloading. He hoisted the guitar case with the grin of someone who’d won a lottery ticket.

Mia looked away from Aleks and his two goons and over to Bucky.

“Timmy, wow, thanks! I was startin’ to lose it, you know?” Bucky said, though he was looking at Aleks as if he wanted to avoid speaking to him at all costs. “Hey, y’all, let’s get this show on the road. Got places we don’t need to be and others we wanna see. And I mean, right now.”

The undertone in his voice was unmistakable. Everyone knew Bucky’d had a run-in or two with the IRS; reason enough for the speed and precision of his turn away from the suits toward the limo. Mia saw her chance.

She backed up and said to the group, “There’s room for everyone, but only one at a time, please. Just head this way and we’ll get you all in.”

Two smaller men were at the front of the line, but Bucky appeared so worried he started pushing his way forward to get in front of them. Leanne, crouched next to the door and still waiting for word to move, watched Bucky get in the limo and turn away from her toward the far back seat. She dropped the sunglasses down her nose just enough that she could glimpse Mia through the net that covered her face. Mia leaned toward her and nodded.

Just as the two smaller men behind Bucky squeezed into the limo, Mia grabbed Leanne's hand and pulled her out. The others in Bucky's entourage were pushing and shoving to get themselves into the limo as quickly as Bucky had. So Mia took advantage of the chaos and placed the group between her and Aleks.

"Stay low," she said to Leanne and pulled her down a little. "Move."

They rushed toward the jet behind the friends-of-Bucky line. Mia stopped. Knelt. Yanked Leanne down with her.

"Wait."

"These sunglasses and net . . . I can't see. What's going—"

"Shh. Wait."

Mia glanced through a gap in the line of men; watched Aleks and his crew pass five feet in front of them on the other side of the jostling cowboy boots. They made a beeline for the limo door. As soon as Mia saw nothing but their backs, she pulled Leanne up.

"Go! Go! Go!" Mia hissed.

Mia and Leanne ran up the jet's stairway, and Leanne collapsed into a seat.

A crew member stepped out from the cockpit. "Our next passenger?"

"Exactly. Close this door behind me and get her in the air as soon as humanly possible." She looked at Leanne. "What's the plan?"

"Midwife's picking me up at the airport. Follow her instructions from that point forward. First two weeks, everything I get is

via delivery. No running errands, no technology. Paper books only. One burner phone message a week to you and Momma that says 'okay.' Otherwise, phones off. If emergency, I text you only."

Mia gave her a thumbs-up. "You did great. Gotta run."

She peeked out the door. Everyone's attention was on the passenger door of the limo, so she raced down the stairs. Her feet had barely hit the ground when the stairs lifted behind her.

Instant exposure. Only a few seconds to hide.

The luggage cart was a few feet away. Three seconds later she was behind its protective curtain. Flattened herself against an empty spot on the side opposite the luggage.

She exhaled anxiety for Leanne, on her way to freedom. Then took a ragged one in for herself.

The humidity in the night air made it hard to breathe, but the fear? That was suffocating.

***October 9: Luggage
Delareau, Louisiana***

Mia lifted her head just enough to see through the flaps. Aleks and his two men had their backs to the cart. The guy on Aleks' right was holding up something that looked like it might be a badge. The one on the left was motioning for everyone to get out of the limo.

"Now wait just a minute," Delacroix was saying. "I don't know who you think you're gonna find, Mr. Fed, but this here is Bucky Leader and some of his friends. They just flew in and are goin' up to Lafayette to play for most of South Louisiana tomorrow night."

A crew member grabbed the last piece of luggage; the flaps on the luggage cart twitched open a few inches. Mia pushed herself further from the flaps but continued watching.

Aleks and his two helpers ignored the deputy. As Bucky's friends exited the limo, the line they formed covered more and more space between the limo and the cart. Mia calculated that in about fifteen seconds she'd be able to slip out, sneak around the back of the cart, and stroll past the ground crew to the trunk of the car. Neither Aleks nor his men would notice a thing. She'd be nothing more than the chauffeur, closing the limo trunk and getting in the driver's door.

The 'nothing more' thought did nothing to soothe the fear in her gut.

The engines on Leanne's jet revved. Mia was about to slip out when the cart moved.

Of course. The crew had to move it out of the way and direct the jet to the taxiway.

Delacroix's voice boomed over the engine noise. "Well, I mean, if you have to see every single person's face . . ." He sounded frustrated. Helpless.

Then Bucky emerged. "Officers, good evening. What can I do for you, gentlemen?"

No Southern accent. Bucky Leader—it seemed—was quite the actor too.

The luggage cart stopped moving. Mia shifted position and watched Aleks lean over, peer into the back seat of the limo, then turn and shake his head no. The three turned away from the crowd and headed back toward their own jet.

Delacroix followed them, shouting louder to be heard over the noise. "Wait a minute, now. Just let me . . . I need to see that badge again. I'm gonna have to file a report with my superiors and . . ."

But Delacroix didn't exist for Aleks. The deputy's ineffective, whiny voice disappeared in the shrieking engine noise of Aleks' jet as the pilot powered up to prepare for a hasty departure.

She pulled apart the flaps of the cart and saw Bucky's people all staring at their jet as it lifted off.

Mia let out a deep breath. Leanne in the air.

But Aleks, standing at the top of his aircraft's stairs, pointed toward Leanne's jet, then led his two goons inside.

When Aleks' jet's engines revved up to move, the noise became excruciating. Mia made her move.

She slipped out of the back of the cart, walked around it, opening flaps as if to ensure all the luggage had been removed, then power walked to the limo as casually as her trembling legs would allow.

It took fifteen heart-stopping seconds to make it to the trunk, which she closed. Another seven to get to the driver's side door. She opened it and slid behind the wheel. Pulled her cap down and breathed rapid, shallow breaths as Bucky and his gang jostled amongst themselves to get back into the limo.

Mia closed her eyes and tried to steady her breathing, then heard Delacroix's voice behind her.

"Uh, Bucky, I'm sorry man, but I just got an emergency. I'm going to have to leave you all now." Then, in his most official voice, "Your driver will get you safely to wherever you're staying and, if anything goes wrong, I'll hear about it."

Bucky said, "Why thank you, officer. And thank you for your help."

As the back door slammed shut, Mia used the sleeve of her tux jacket to wipe away tears that streamed down her face.

CHAPTER 10

October 9: The Other Guitar Delareau, Louisiana

The image seized her—Aleks pointing toward Leanne’s jet. Mia’s stomach lurched as if she were on the downside dip of a long, deep roller coaster. “He’s following Leanne?” she whispered. Had to find out.

“Bucky?” Mia said, then realized no one could hear over the babbling and cheering in the back of the limo.

“HEY! QUIET ON THE DAMN SET!” she yelled in her director’s voice.

The noise ceased instantly. Eleven perplexed faces in her rear-view mirror stared at her with the same question: How had our chauffeur turned into a woman who yelled with such authority?

“Uh, yes ma’am?” Bucky’s Southern accent was back. Polite. As if talking to his mother.

She turned to face the group. “Bucky, you and I are both friends with the woman who owns the jet you just flew in on. She was doing you a favor in order to do me a favor. Understand?”

“Yes, ma’am?”

Lack of certainty registered. “Now, in order to help her help me, I need you to do me a favor.”

Clearly confused, the star remained silent, but his eyes invited her to continue.

“You and I are going up to the terminal. You’re going to act like you think one of your guitars ended up on the other plane. And the rest of you,” she stared at the others for a moment, “stay in the car. Got it?”

She heard ten ‘Yes, ma’ams’ and one more from Bucky still playing the good son.

Bucky said, “Uh, can I ask why?”

“No.” Mia knew how to manage talent during a script-change crisis. “There’s no time. And I need you totally focused on that guitar, Bucky. No matter how crazy it sounds or what anyone says, you are a hundred percent certain that one of those guys from the other jet picked up your other guitar case, or the ground crew confused luggage with cases. Believe with your whole heart that your precious instrument is flying away on that jet. Understand?”

Mia checked herself in the rearview. She’d shut down the frightened woman and become the badass director she knew herself to be. Checked the distance. It was a small airport. “Now get out and come with me. And no matter what, you stick to that story.”

She opened her door but looked to make sure. Bucky jumped to the back door and rolled himself out; a misbehaving teen called to the principal’s office.

Mia stepped out, slammed the door, and strode like a commander toward the terminal. Bucky came around the other side and tried to keep up.

She pulled out her phone.

October 9: Mia Makes a Call

Delareau, Louisiana

“We’ve got a problem,” Mia said, phone to her ear and Bucky still behind her. “Ms. Roussel, do you know anyone who works at the airport tower?”

“Of course I do. I taught almost every one of those boys and girls.” There was a pause. “I believe Sarah works nights there. I remember when she was getting her certification. She’d come here to the library because—”

“Ms. Roussel!”

“Sorry, dear. I can call her. What do you want me to tell her?”

Mia explained about Bucky’s missing guitar.

“Got it. Give me a couple of minutes,” Ms. Roussel said.

Mia slowed her pace to give the librarian time to make the call. When she opened the terminal door for Bucky, just like a good limo driver would do, she hissed, “Remember, you’re panicked.”

“Mr. Leader?” An attendant with an awkward smile approached them. “Can I help you?”

“My Lord, I sure do hope so.” Bucky’s Southern accent was full on. “I don’t know how in the world I’ll play my show tomorrow night without that guitar. The songs just won’t sound the same.”

The woman appeared confused. “Sir?”

A door on the far side of the lobby opened and a pixie-sized young woman with auburn curls as bouncy as her step walked through. “I just heard. I’m so sorry to hear you can’t find your guitar, Mr. Leader. And I hate that it’s under these circumstances, but can I just say that I’m a huge fan, and—”

“Me too, Mr. Leader,” the attendant chimed in. “If there’s anything I can do to help.”

Mia pulled her cap down and deepened her voice. “Maybe the ground crew saw something.”

"I'll go ask them right now!" The attendant ran outside.

Sarah looked at Bucky. "I can't take you up into the tower, but here's what I know."

Her brow furrowed as she explained: The first plane's path matched up with what had been filed: a heading that would take them to Tallahassee. But there'd been no flight plan for the second plane. Just a request to land.

Mia bowed her head. Looked at her feet. Hiding the terror.

"It was weird," Sarah continued. "We tried to find out what was going on, but all we got was some gobbledygook about a diplomat needing to get on the ground for a few minutes."

"Did you see 'em?" Bucky spoke quickly, sounding panicked. "Did you see those three guys harassing us? Maybe they were distracting us so that someone else could get my guitar."

"We were all a bit thrown off up here in the tower. So I only saw those three guys. It's pretty dark, though, so there's a chance I could've missed something."

Bucky rocked back and forth on his boots and blew out a frustrated breath. "Yeah, okay. But someone took the damn thing, and if we can, you know . . ." He turned to Mia, panicked, hands up in surrender.

Mia turned to him and in her low limo driver voice said, "Mr. Leader, you said you might call ahead if you knew where the plane was going to land."

Bucky turned back to Sarah. "Yeah, yeah, that's it. Gosh, I'm so upset I can't think straight."

"That's totally understandable, Mr. Leader. But I can't tell you where either plane is going."

I'll bet you can't! Aleks and his inexhaustible resources.

"It's weird," Sarah said. "Right before they dropped out of our control zone, the first plane flipped back and headed northwest. And when the second plane got to that same point, they headed

northwest too. Almost as if they were following the first plane. Which makes no sense at all.”

Bucky just looked at her, a wide-eyed expression letting her know the story had evolved beyond his ability to improvise. He turned to Mia.

“Maybe they’re colluding. Steal your guitar, then sell it,” Mia supplied. She turned to, but did not look at, Sarah. “Can you give Mr. Leader a flight number or an idea of who’d track that flight if it left your radar?”

“Hang on a second.” Sarah pulled out her phone and punched in numbers. “Joey, what was the flight number on the second plane that landed?” She listened, her eyebrows raised in surprise, then her eyes squinted in irritation. “Gotcha. Yeah, can’t get any weirder than that.”

She turned to Bucky and exhaled resignation. “It was a good idea. There are several public websites where anyone can track flights based on their transponder signal. But whoever’s flying that second jet does not want anyone to know where they’re going. Right after it turned northwest, the transponder went dark.”

But Mia knew. She knew exactly where it was going.

October 9: Walking and Talking
Delaware, Louisiana

Tugging down the bill of her limo driver’s hat, Mia kept up the ruse by offering to connect Bucky to someone in New Orleans who might be able to help. Bucky thanked Sarah, signed some autographs for the staff, and followed Mia back to the car.

An hour later, she watched them file out of the car at a historic B&B in Lafayette; a restored Acadian with a tin roof and a deep

front porch fancy enough to be the kind of place a limo would drop off a global country music phenomenon. Just in case.

She lingered just long enough to make sure no one was watching, then linked her burner to the limo's Bluetooth, pulled back out on the road, and called Jake. He was a good listener. Didn't question anything. Even better, didn't notice—or at least didn't comment on—the shake still in her voice. She wondered if it would ever settle.

It was one in the morning when she parked the car in a corner space in Enola's lot where the Fortiers would pick it up. She got out and stood for a moment. Stared. The neon beer signs were off, but lights on inside told her he'd waited. Just like he said he would.

She dragged herself inside. If the way he polished the glass in his hand was anything to go by, he was almost as nervous as she.

Outfit disheveled, smelling of stress sweat, and dreading the next couple of hours, she sat on a stool. Drummed her fingers on the counter. Jake placed a bottle of Perrier and a glass of ice with a wedge of lime in front of her.

She raised an eyebrow. "Perrier?"

"Figured I could at least upsell you to something classy." No surprise he didn't smile, but she felt the warmth and gentle humor in his voice.

She hadn't realized how thirsty she was until she took a sip. She drained the glass and stared at nothing, her thoughts a few thousand miles away.

Jake leaned down on the counter, eye level with her. "You've done all you can do. The ambulance that meets Leanne will provide protection. I mean, what can Aleks do when his plane lands right behind hers and he sees an EMT crew with a pregnant woman who—by the way, isn't you—get out of the jet and onto a stretcher?"

"That's the problem, Jake. I don't know. I have literally no idea what he might do. And I won't for another hour. I just have to wait it out."

Jake sighed. "Okay then. I've done everything I can here until everyone else finishes in the kitchen. So, let's take a walk."

The brackish humidity, shot through with light from a half-moon, was gothic enough to give Mia goosebumps. She slid a finger across water pearls forming on the handrails along the river walk. Her internal pendulum swung between terror about what might happen when Aleks landed and relief that her husband was flying away from her.

Moving helped a little. That Jake wasn't trying to fill the silence with chatter calmed her more.

"Poor Robbi," she said after a few moments. "This town's so small. Someone called her about a ruckus of some sort at the airport."

Just simple gossip to the caller, but Robbi had been so upset, she'd nearly driven to the airport to make sure Leanne was alright. Thank God she'd followed the protocol and texted Mia instead. Once soothed, Mia asked her to arrange the ambulance in Bozeman. Something to do. Always helpful.

She looked over at Jake. They were almost the same height.

"I thought you were taller," she said.

"That's because you're usually sitting at the bar when we talk. Looking up at me." He smiled. "And the mat on the floor behind the bar gives me an extra inch or so." When Mia didn't respond, he stood on his toes and arched his arms like Frankenstein's monster. "I like to loom over the patrons, usually in a friendly way. But the potential troublemakers? Keeps them on their toes."

She gave him a short, tight smile. Appreciated that he wanted to lighten the mood, but it wasn't working.

"I'm not sure what to do next."

He stopped walking and turned to her. "What do you mean? I thought the ambulance was going to take her for a ride. Then the midwife will take her to your friend's house."

“Yeah. I mean until I hear that all’s well.” Mia started walking again.

“Maybe focus on yourself,” Jake said after a few moments. “I know enough about Leanne’s story to know what you’ve been up to on her account. What I don’t know is why. I mean, what makes you the expert at getting her out of here when clearly you’re trying to hide yourself? How’d you even know she needed help? Or how to help?”

Mia snorted. “That’s kind of a long story.”

Jake looked at his watch. “We’ve got another forty-five minutes before Leanne’s plane touches down in Bozeman.”

Footsteps, insects, and bird calls.

“And since I’m sort of involved now, you must trust me. At least a little bit.”

An owl’s haunting call. A splash in the bayou.

Jake said, “And just in case you need any more help, I’d like to know that you trust me now.”

Hand to her chest, surprised at the tightening.

“In other words, tell me the story, Mia. I’m all ears over here.”

October 9: Revelations

Delareau, Louisiana

Back at Enola’s, Mia told him. Not all of it, but enough that he understood she didn’t come to Delareau to help Leanne. That when she left Northern Virginia, the jet crew chose Delareau because it was convenient to their original New Orleans destination, had no commercial flights, and didn’t add significant fuel cost or landing fees. Also, not a location Aleks would think of. Avoiding the horrific details of her earlier attempt to leave, she fleshed out Jake’s

understanding by describing her company, her relationship with Jessi. That she needed money to pay the attorney to move forward with the plan to sell her business. That she couldn't access any of her own funds until she could do it without exposing her location.

"And Jake, you probably know more about the Broussard family than I ever will. But when Robbi found out what was going on with me, she was so incredibly generous. She gave me the same amount of money she gave her own daughter!" Mia's voice caught. She paused. Swallowed hard and started to explain how little she could actually do without a new identity when her burner chirped a text alert.

Not okay. Might need help.

How to answer? If Aleks got his hands on Leanne's phone, it would be bad.

Ambulance? WTF? Am I going to the hospital?

Mia used talk-to-text because it was faster.

Honey, just call it intuition and trust me. I've arranged everything you need. Don't worry about anyone else or anything. Just do what the EMTs tell you to do. Get in the ambulance and go. The midwife will join you shortly.

She turned the screen to Jake. He read the messages, eyes wide, and was about to speak when a video call came through. Mia stepped sideways, out of camera range, but where she could still see. Jake answered. The images were shaky; she could hear people yelling.

“Mia! Mia! You are coming with me now. It is time to come home! What the—” She recognized Aleks’ shouting and instinctively stepped back even further. Jake turned the burner so that his was the only face that could be seen on Leanne’s end. Leanne was shouting, “Give me back my phone! What the hell? Who are you? What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

Mia mouthed, “Talk like she’s your wife but do not say her name.”

Jake responded instantly. “Honey!? Honey, are you okay? What’s going on?”

A hand closed over the camera for a moment. Then movement. Lights. Hands. The black sky. A sound like glass hitting concrete.

“Someone answer me? What’s going on there? Is my wife alright?” Impressed with the panic she heard in Jake’s voice, she stayed out of camera range. The gasps, grunts, and labored breathing of struggle continued, and then it was Aleks again. His voice was fiery with rage, his Greek accent thick and venomous.

“That is my wife on the other end of that phone! I know it is!”

Suddenly, another man’s voice—one of the paramedics perhaps—yelled, “I don’t know who the hell you are or who’s on the other end of the call, but this lady is about to have a baby. It’s her phone, and we’re getting her out of here. Give it back to her. Now!”

Watching the screen, Jake said, “Someone. Anyone. Is my wife okay?”

Mia heard the care in his voice—warm as the water in Bayou Têche—in stark contrast to Aleks’ cold, brittle shock that it wasn’t her on the call.

Jake took the high road. “Please, can you hand the phone back to her? I just need to see that she’s okay.”

Jake snapped a screen capture. A jumble of Greek words spilled out, followed by “. . . all for nothing?” in English. The images judgered again, and then Leanne was in the frame and talking.

“What the hell? Who was that and how did I get an ambu—”

“We got cut off or she hung up,” Jake said as he quickly pulled up the photo of Aleks and handed the phone to her. Seeing him on screen, her hands shook badly enough to fumble it.

She looked up at Jake. “He looks even more insane than the night I rappelled out of my third-story office window.” Jake’s eyebrows shot up. She hadn’t shared that part of the story yet. She looked back down at the screen. “But yeah, that’s him.” She responded to Leanne’s last text.

It’s okay. No worries here. Will be in touch. Next
phone protocol now.

Mia took the battery out and put it in her pocket. Then pulled a paperclip out of another pocket and removed the SIM card. She tossed the rest of the burner in a trash can. Dropped the SIM in her not-quite-empty glass. She’d dispose of the battery later.

“He’ll leave Montana now. I’m sure of it.” She took a deep breath. “So, that’s one place I know for sure he won’t be.”

“I know what you mean. He won’t be in Bozeman. So, maybe you should be. And I know how to get us there.”

Her heart kicked like a mule, and she said, “Uh, us?”

CHAPTER 11

October 10: A New Name Delareau, Louisiana

At 2:00 a.m., Enola's was deserted, dark, and silent except for the buzz and soft, amber-ish light from the neon Abita and Budweiser signs. This exact moment, usually his favorite of the day, was anything but peaceful tonight. He sat on a barstool next to Mia and continued the discussion.

"Of course I don't like it, but you're nobody right now. Or worse than nobody, you're you, and somehow, you're leaving a trail."

Her shoulders slumped. Acceptance. Finally, he thought.

"Yeah, I don't know how that's happening. And you're right—better I be somewhere else and someone other than me, right now. But I don't know anybody who can create an ID, a fake ID. Well, not one that'll actually work." Mia closed her eyes for a second, sighed heavily. "Rhetorically speaking, Jake, what the actual hell do people like me, like Leanne . . . what do we effing do?"

He felt her pain—and his own roiling stomach over the 'could I, should I' question he'd turned over and over. "I know people who can do this."

Watched her make the connection.

"Oh my God! That's a terrible idea! The Fortiers? They're your enemies. They killed your dad or at least caused him to die. That's no place to go for help."

“Actually, not the Fortiers. The branch in New Orleans I mentioned. And it’s exactly the place to go for help. The Marcellas didn’t stop them when they could. They owe me, and they know it.” He was quiet for a full minute before he slid off the stool and stepped behind the bar. “Besides, there’s no one else to ask.”

Jake reached under the counter and brought out a phone.

Eyebrows raised in doubt, Mia said, “Is that one of those phones only a few people have that can ring the president?”

He grinned. Shook his head. There was something amazing about a woman with a good sense of humor when there was so little to laugh about. “Yeah. Kinda. I’ve had it for years. Always kept it charged. Never used it.”

Until now.

***October 11: Robbi Threatens Remy
Delareau, Louisiana***

Robbi hadn’t slept a wink, not last night or the night before. She hoped someone—presumably Mia—would make contact as soon as practical if Leanne wasn’t okay. And worried that someone she didn’t want to hear from would contact her soon. Remy. Having discovered Leanne gone when he returned from the concert, he’d spend some time looking around on his own. Then he’d come to her.

All these years, avoiding engagement with the Fortiers. Too many people in her family, past and present generations, knew how ugly it could get. Her daughter’s isolation and bruises told a story Robbi dreaded hearing in words. But after everything that Mia had accomplished for Leanne, Robbi would not bow down to Remy. Yes, she was terrified that she’d make a mistake, but this was

the part she'd agreed to play. And so she'd gotten up, dressed, and prepared for confrontation. When at last the doorbell rang, she'd been ready for hours. Had a plan.

She gathered up every bit of her fear and anger.

And used it.

First, to feign surprise that it was her son-in-law. Then to pretend shock when Remy asked where Leanne was. She considered his question, breathed deeply, and when she answered, used the trembling in her voice to her advantage.

"I have no idea where Leanne is, Remy. In fact," paused; let him register her emotion, "given how closely you've controlled my access to her, I'm stunned to hear that question coming from you."

Remy stood stock still, his mouth agape.

"And for God's sake, Remy, close your mouth before a mosquito flies in."

He straightened up and used his tongue to push a wad of snuff deeper between his cheek and gum. God, she hated that habit. The anger from him she'd expected failed to materialize. Instead, he seemed hesitant. Perhaps just hoping his post-concert hangover didn't show.

"Well, she's gone. And I figured she'd come here. Or that you'd know where she is."

Robbi closed her eyes for a few seconds, then tears rolled down her face. "As I said, I have no idea where she is. But I will tell you this: Do not underestimate the resources I have at my disposal should you hurt her or my grandchild. I can and will bring them down on you and your family. Without mercy." Swallowed her fear and took advantage of Remy's shocked silence.

"The Broussards have been in this parish longer than even your great-grandfather can remember; know things about people your family does business with and would not want spoken of publicly. I mean governors, senators, business owners. People who

will do anything, and I mean anything, Remy, to ensure my family remains discreet.” She put one hand on the door frame and leaned toward her son-in-law. “I have stayed out of Leanne’s marriage at my daughter’s request. But you are the reason I don’t see or hear from her. So if you are asking me where she is, I’d suggest you stop looking and assume she’s gone somewhere you can’t reach her because she wants to be gone.”

That got him. Robbi watched his shock, his slack posture, morph into something else.

Remy looked down at his fancy boots and spat on the ground next to the front stoop. He looked up, straightened his spine, and tried hard for badass. “You might know things I don’t; have connections I don’t have yet, being . . .” a sardonic smile that aimed for insult, “. . . so much older and all. But one thing’s for sure.” The smile evaporated. “My folks do not take kindly to defections. And they sure as hell won’t accept Leanne running off with their grandchild. They don’t much like threats either.” He took off his LSU baseball cap, smoothed back his black curls, and shifted his weight. “Now, as her husband, I’m telling you: If you hear from her, you tell her to call home.” He placed the cap back on his head and walked back to his shiny black Ford F350.

Robbi stood stock still. Watched him make a three-point turn. He spun the back tires as he hit the gas; threw a little gravel her way, then he sped down the driveway toward the main road.

And Robbi knew exactly which way he’d turn when he reached it.

Straight toward New Orleans. To get some real help.

Would the man he’d see there actually do that? Would Boudreaux Marcellas help a Fortier hurt her and her family?

***October 11: Too Many People Looking for People
New Orleans, Louisiana***

Jake shook his distant relative's hand, took a seat, and described what he'd come for.

"Who is she?" the big man in the too-small office chair asked, his Cajun accent not as pronounced as it was a decade or two ago.

"Just a friend who needs to get out of town quickly. She's not from around here, Uncle Boudreaux. If it matters."

"It matters a little. Makes it easier. She running from a crime?"

"Not that I know of. Someone's stalking her, appears to have found her here. And she's gotta go. Now."

"*Tout bon.*" Boudreaux Marcellas nodded. "Here's the thing, Jake. I like you. Like to think of myself as older and wiser now. The Fortiers, extended family though they are, were too hard on your dad. You've avoided involvement. But you've never asked for anything either." Looked up with a smile that came and went so quickly Jake could have blinked and missed it. "Take a load off and give me a couple of hours. I'll get you something that'll get her on a plane in New Orleans and take her to wherever she wants to go. But no promises beyond that. In fact, while the ID won't actually self-destruct . . ." he stood up from the desk and turned toward a back door, ". . . with what I can do in a couple of hours, might be a good idea if she plays like it will. Especially if she tries to use it to go international."

Jake's phone buzzed. "Uh-huh," he said absently as he read, then texted an approving thumbs-up to his day manager. Looked up to an empty room. Noticed the buzzing of overhead fluorescent bulbs and faded yellowish walls that seemed to absorb what little light filtered in through two grimy windows. The stink of old cigarette smoke, gun oil, and unwashed jockstrap hung in the air. All

a pungent reminder of the seedy activities Jake associated with the dark side of his extended family. Couldn't stand it.

So he spent the next two hours outside. Walked to the mighty Mississippi River and back. Thought about the vacant space at Enola's he wanted to renovate; caught himself wondering what Mia would think. Knowing now that she'd owned an ad agency—was a creative person—she might have some interesting ideas about the layout and decor.

Jake told himself to stop being a jackass and focus on the financial aspects of the project. Became distracted once more by thoughts of traveling with—no, he corrected himself—traveling would have been fun. This? More like being on the run with her.

By the time he got back to Boudreaux's office, he realized he'd spent more time thinking about Mia than about his business.

He picked up the package. "Thanks, Uncle. Drinks on me next time you're in Delareau."

"*Ça va*, kid. Maybe I'll take you up on that. Now, go get your girl outta town." He took a big wheezy breath and answered the landline that started ringing on the old metal desk.

As Jake closed the door behind him, he heard Boudreaux say to his caller, "Interesting." By the time he was on the entrance ramp to I-10 west on his way back to Delareau, he was twitchy. The conversation had been easy, the transaction simple, the results quick. Maybe too easy. Too quick.



"Big day for visits from youngsters in the family," Boudreaux said to Remy Fortier.

Standing in the same spot Jake had stood only ten minutes earlier, Remy ignored the older man's comment. "Leanne's gone

missing while I was at the Bucky Leader concert in Lafayette the other night.”

Boudreaux raised his eyebrows. “Well now, your daddy is not going to like that one bit, is he?” The kid hadn’t even bothered with a greeting. Clearly hated engaging with his extended family, people who’d spent their whole life in the business. People who knew histories and personalities that this kid could only guess at.

Remy shifted his weight from one exotic cowboy boot to the other. “Yeah, uh, when he finds out. For now, momma likes it even less.”

Boudreaux let him stand there. Sweat a little bit. Finally, “So what you want me to do?”

Remy’s answer was a restrained explosion of confusion, frustration, and fear. “Find her! Find out if she took a bus or a plane or, I don’t know, an Uber or something.”

“Remy, I know that girl’s mother. And assuming the apple didn’t fall too far from the tree, she is not stupid. She knows she can be tracked.”

“Yeah, but maybe she used another name. Or is trying to get one. And no matter who she’s getting help from, that would come through your shop, right?”

Boudreaux shuffled some papers around, pondering, stretched out his stiff neck. “Only two unusual things have come my way over the past two days. First, some male secretary ordering a limo.”

Remy snorted. “Men these days. They got no pride, you know?”

Boudreaux ignored the boy’s attempt at male bonding. Flipped through some additional papers. “Says here on the paperwork that your family’s fleet was maxed out. So it rolled over to us. This secretary ordered only the car—no driver. We charged ‘em double for the increased risk, no questions asked. And . . .” Boudreaux continued to flip through his paperwork. No fan of the Fortier branch

of the family, this was all about appearing to help without actually helping. Yet.

“And the other thing?”

A smile that stopped at his mouth. “Your cousin Jakey a *passé tout à l’heure*—”

“He is not my cousin.”

“Okay, okay, Remy. Don’t get your back up.” Boudreaux chuckled. “Not-your-cousin Jake came by earlier today looking for an ID for some lady. Definitely not your Leanne though. A little older, short black hair. Not from around here.”

“She good looking?”

Pulled out his cell phone. “Some would think so, but too young to be my favorite shot of whiskey.” He scrolled, tapped the screen, and handed Remy the phone.

“A looker alright.” He handed the phone back. “But Uncle, back to Leanne?”

“You showing up here is the first I’ve heard. But I’ll put the word out. See what pops up.”

“Maybe you could put out a Preg-Alert? You know, like those silver things you see when someone’s trying to find an old fart who forgot who they are or where they’re going.”

Almost old enough to take offense, he stared at Remy. The kid had no manners, and finding no good reason to rescue the young man from his poor attempt at humor, he didn’t.

Remy got the message. He stepped backward toward the exit, said, “Well, anyway, thanks, Uncle B.”

Boudreaux’s phone rang and he answered. Remy paused and looked back. Boudreaux waved his hand dismissively. “Nothing to do with your Leanne. Just some guy who works for our compadres up in the nation’s capital. Wants to fly in for a visit day after tomorrow and . . .”

But Remy had already gone. Boudreaux finished his call, stood up, hoisted his pants, and looked down. Couldn't see his belt. Not for the first time since his wife had passed away five years earlier, he considered his girth and acknowledged that his weight was just one of several things that needed to change. He sighed. Considered how long it'd been since he'd enjoyed life. How much his work contributed to that. Then, with no pressing reason to change anything at the moment, set the philosophizing aside and accepted the inevitability of a meeting request from the boss.

Thought about the day so far: Jake, Remy, and now some guy from DC, all in search of people who might have a damn good reason for disappearing. He grabbed a set of keys from a hook next to the door, muttered to himself, "Too many people looking for people, if you ask me."

There was no money in it. But when the boss said 'meet,' he met.

***October 11: Mia Evanescence Becomes Maria Brusey
Delareau, Louisiana***

They met at the library in the history section. Again. Standing between tall metal shelves, Mia shifted her weight from foot to foot, checked the burner one more time. Shoved it in her pocket when Jake appeared at the end of the aisle, package in one hand, waving a small card with the other. Her new ID. She met him half-way. Reached for the card before he could offer it.

She read the card, shook her head, and read it again. "Seriously, Maria Brusey? Your last name?" She rolled her eyes.

A sheepish grin. "Yeah, I don't know. Maybe he thought it was funny. But think about it: This will make traveling together a little

easier. Especially if Aleks put the word out to look for a single woman.”

“Well, it’s not like we’re going to be together for long. I mean, you won’t be staying in Montana with us.” Mia leaned against a stack of dusty history books and stared at Jake as the possibility of a sneeze gathered in her nose.

He didn’t reply.

She patted herself down in search of a tissue and asked, “Are you? I mean, why would you? Stay in Montana, I mean.”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves. You might decide you want me to stay for a day or two. Or more, depending on how things develop up there.”

Mia detected a note of disappointment in his voice. He wanted to stay? In Montana? She clenched her teeth, pressed her lips tight to hold back something that felt for just an instant like relief. Or pleasure. Because more people, more complications. That was the last thing she needed.

“Wow! This is . . .” She pointed at the ID. “. . . super helpful. I appreciate everything you’re doing, the offer to come along. But,” shaking her head, “this whole thing, it’s not your problem to solve.”

Jake raised his eyebrows, waved the package, and went to tuck it into his back pocket. “I see. In that case, I’ll just hang onto the utility bill, the debit card. I mean, far be it from me to—”

“Wait. Just wait, Jake.” She placed a hand on his arm, took a deep breath, and tried not to tear up. “I’m really, really grateful. Without my best friend, I’ve had no one to talk to or plan this out with. And now I have you. It’s amazing. You, your help. It’s all amazing.”

A tiny bow of his head. Apology acknowledged. He spread the contents of the package on a carrel. She checked each item and slid her Maria Brusey driver’s license into her wallet. Trading out one ID for another.

The déjà vu came so fast it made her dizzy. As if she'd been in this exact position before. Then, like a transient breeze, the feeling passed. She looked up. Jake was looking at his mobile. He hadn't noticed. She sneezed into the crook of her elbow. Then again. And once more.

"Bless you. That's a unique sneeze. Kind of fairy hiccup-ish sort of? And do they always come in threes?"

The crooked smile reached right up to his eyes, and Mia suddenly saw beauty where she hadn't before. Not actor-model handsome. A few more wrinkles around his eyes for someone his age. Brown hair with just a little curl to it. Dark-brown eyes, deeper than the olive tones of his skin. Jaw not precisely square but a chin that was anything but weak. Average height, weight; average in almost every way. She suddenly got it: His kindness. That's what set him apart. A warmth and trustworthiness to his features; a striking contrast to Aleks' cold, chiseled beauty.

Reached in her pocket and found a tissue. Pulled her back to the present.

"Not the first time I've been told I sneeze weird. Today? Something about libraries? Especially in the nine-hundreds section? Maybe I hate history so much I'm allergic to it. Anyway, I apologize if I sounded ungrateful."

She tossed the tissue in a nearby waste can, looked up at him, and smiled. "I'll be proud to be your wife and travel with you for a few days. Maybe you're right: Be best to see how things develop before we talk about how long you stay with us in Montana."

She closed her wallet. Slipped it into a back pocket. "And because I know almost nothing about this kind of thing, can you explain to me how you got all this stuff?"

Jake glanced up through the library window. She followed his gaze. Outside, the sun was shining.

“I don’t know how my distant relatives do what they do, and that’s pretty much on purpose. But I missed lunch running this errand for you, Ms. Brusey.” He pointed out the window to a sign. “Many’s crawfish po’ boys are pretty amazing. Let’s go eat one.”

Mia had missed breakfast and lunch. But she’d seen the sign. “I thought it was manys, like a lot of something.” She shook her head to rid herself of library dust and the déjà vu moment. Maybe all she needed was some fresh air. And a crawfish po’ boy, whatever that was.

“No. It’s an old Cajun name, pronounced like ‘manny.’”

She smiled and took his arm. “Sounds great. Let’s go to Many’s, husband.”

CHAPTER 12

October 12: That Ole Black Backpack Delareau, Louisiana

Mia took turns staring at her new ID, mentally calling herself ‘Maria Brusey’ and packing the few things she’d take with her to Montana. Her old black backpack, stuffed with jeans, underwear, and a few other necessities, was almost full. The rest of her clothes were on her back: navy yoga pants with pockets for phone and wallet and a long-sleeved olive T-shirt. She’d tied a badly pilled sweater around her waist; the scuffed-up tennis shoes were right at home. No coat. That’s something she’d need when she got to Bozeman.

The large camouflage backpack and men’s clothing would go back to the Salvation Army. She’d have loved to keep the cool chauffeur’s cap, but it was exactly the kind of thing that would draw attention. And two things she absolutely didn’t need were more attention and stuff to haul around.

Mia tried to tuck an extra tee into an outer pocket as she talked to herself. “Girl,” she said aloud, “that dressing cool part of your life is over for now.” It wouldn’t fit. Something was already stuffed there. She dug down into the pocket and pulled out a tightly folded piece of pink paper. Probably some note she’d tried to pass in class way back when. She shoved it back in and stuffed the shirt into a larger zippered section at the back.

She'd found that old pack in the corner of her office closet after her horrific New York escape attempt. Couldn't remember why she'd kept it all these years. Maybe because it was the only thing from before—when her real mother was still alive—a period of which she had no memory. Occasional glimpses dissolved as soon as she tried to focus on them, like ancient newspaper clippings falling apart at a touch. The child protection people had packed her things in it when they moved her from home to home. It arrived with her when she'd eventually gone to live with Jessi and her mom and traveled with her to college, her first apartment, her first home. Then—thanks to Jessi—it'd shown up again just when she needed it. Mia had no memory of treasuring it, but every time she moved, it always came along. One of these days, she'd have to sit down with the damn thing and really go through it. Might be something more interesting than old school notes and a dead flip phone in it.

But that investigation would have to wait. She was meeting Jake at the rear entrance of the library in thirty minutes. She stuffed her burner phones in the front pocket, covered her short black hair with the ball cap, and wrote 'donate to Salvation Army' on a bag containing the disguises she'd used. Zipping up the backpack pockets, she left the room without so much as a glance back, slipping on sunglasses and wondering if she'd be any safer in Bozeman.

***October 12: Jessi and Betty
Delareau, Louisiana***

Mia had a few minutes to spare, so she sat down on the curb and reread the note she'd received from Jessi the day before. God, she missed her.

Hey, Betty! Great to hear from you. Not much time or space, if you know what I mean. Work's very demanding and my best friend's missing. Her husband is being very scary—thinks I know where she is. Stopped me on my way to work, literally screamed at me! Because we're best friends, he came to me first. Of course, I know nothing. I never was a big fan, but I didn't think he was this messed up. Been feeling like I'm being followed. My husband's so weirded out he wants me to work remotely. Sorry—lots of weird stuff.

So for now we'll have to schedule a call to catch up. You move around so much—what's your current number? My cell is still 202.407.1001.

Jessi

PS: You're still a mess, aren't you, girl?! The reseal of the envelope was a fun reminder that you change your mind about what to say as often as you change your address!

Mia closed her eyes and held the note to her chest. A burner number. Jessi was scary-smart. She pulled from her backpack one of the pre-addressed, stamped cards she'd picked up at the grocery store, placed it on the curb, and wrote:

Yeah, I get it. No worries. Mom's being moved, attorney's involved—finally getting some paperwork done and some \$\$\$ to get her business taken care of. May actually see progress soon. Stay in touch and don't let your friend's nutcase husband discombobulate you. If she's your friend, she's smart—you don't hang out with dummies! I'll bet she's already made friends who are helping her out. So, patience, yeah? When things loosen up, I'll text you from my latest

number so we can call. An in-person visit will have to wait until the stars align differently.

Big hug to ya!

Betty

She looked up. Jake was in the car, watching her with a half grin. She gathered her things, made sure she had everything, and stood up.

“You ready, *honey*?” he said with a wink.

“Oh yes, *sweetheart*,” Mia replied, matching his tone. Then with a touch of hokey Southern accent, she added, “Just drive me by one of those blue boxes on our way out of town, will ya, sweetie?”

They stopped for fuel halfway to New Orleans and Jake drove her to a mailbox. As Mia slipped the letter into the slot, the unexpectedly loud metallic clang sent a chill down her spine. She crossed her fingers but thought it weak protection against the resources Aleks might have.

“You okay?” Jake asked.

Mia nodded, forced a smile, and hoped her trust in the US Postal Service wasn’t misplaced.

October 12: Off with a Husband
New Orleans, Louisiana

While they walked from parking to departures, Mia pulled out her burner and touched a few keys. Vikki picked up right away.

“Vikki, hey. New number and only have a few minutes. Did you get the funds I sent? Any updates for me?”

“Yes, and yes. Where are you?”

“On the move. Whatchagot?”

"The old man here says this is a tough one. First, we need your original corporate documents, including—if you have one—your prenup. He's got ideas, but . . ."

"Can your firm help me 'die' as far as the world is concerned? Come back to life as a new person?"

"Well, that's part of what the old man is thinking about. But like I said, we have the retainer and just need signatures so we can work. If I send these documents to the email address you gave me, you can get to them, yes?"

"Yes. What are they?"

"Permissions, a contract; a list of what I need to get started. Do you have electronic copies that you can get to me?"

"I'll text you Jessi's information. She has access to everything you need. I copied important documents into a shared folder in the cloud a few weeks ago."

"Great. Sign the documents I'm sending and give me a couple of days to get what we need from Jessi."

"Let her know you talked to Betty. It will reassure her you spoke to me—that Aleks has no connection to you. Will you be the one calling?"

"In this case, yes. I won't assign it to an assistant."

"Great." They were almost at the entrance to the terminal. "Gotta go. And please Vikki, work this as fast as you can. I have limited funds now, but when the money's available, I can pay more."

"I know. I looked up your firm. And you. I'm so sorry you're having to do this. I'm going to help you as much as I can, as fast as I can. Before you go, you're going to have to have a new identity, and . . ."

Almost at the airport entrance. So much to do, so little time. "Already got one. More soon. Gotta go now." She ended the call. Placed the burner in her backpack.

Jake, holding the door open for her, wore olive khaki pants, a collared shirt, and casual, but really nice leather shoes. Next to him in her well-loved, second-hand clothing, she looked like a vagabond. Amazing. He didn't even seem to notice. Mia shrugged the black backpack over her shoulder. "Too bad I don't have a suitcase for you to carry, Jake. You are so polite, getting doors and all."

"Maria, I've always loved that about you—your ability to travel light."

"And I love your ability to keep everything else light—especially in desperate situations."

***October 12: First Class Almost all the Way
New Orleans, Louisiana***

"Just seemed like that's where Maria would be most comfortable," Jake said quietly as they moved slowly down the jetway among the other early boarding first-class passengers.

She kept the eye roll to herself; she'd almost never flown first class. But a little fun wouldn't hurt. "You're not wrong about that. And I appreciate how you take my needs and preferences into account when planning."

"Besides, this gets us on and off the plane faster. Less time on a plane means we get to Leanne more quickly."

Strategic thinking—even more impressive. The crawfish po'boy at Many's came with a side of Jake's insistence on covering the cost of the travel plan she'd laid out for them. Opened her mouth to object, then figured no time to buy airline tickets with cash. And no idea how much, if any, prepaid funds were on the credit card he'd gotten her. She straightened her spine, swallowed the bitter taste of dependence with the last of her sandwich, and looked up.

Her shoulders relaxed at the way he leaned forward, waiting for her agreement rather than assuming it.

As they found their seats, she kept her voice low. “True. Faster is better. But if we’re shooting for quickly, not sure why you routed us through Portland, Oregon. That’s kind of a long drive, Portland to Bozeman.”

He leaned in to let someone pass and whispered. “Because during our layover in Salt Lake City, we’re going to change flights. We’ll cancel Portland and fly to Billings. And when we get to Billings . . .”

His scent and warm breath distracted her as she lifted her bag toward the overhead bin. She stumbled and it slipped into a sideways fall. Jake caught the bag with one hand, steadying both it and her while she regained her balance and shoved it in.

She shook off mild embarrassment and closed the overhead bin. Exhaled as he gestured her toward the window seat, and said, “Wow, you’re taking this as seriously as it needs to be taken.”

“My family history is an excellent teacher.”

Seated, served, and fully briefed on the safety instructions, Mia’s walls went up. Hard to be so close to someone physically; no way to escape after the boarding door closed. An unconscious switch to control what she could, her ‘gregarious interviewer’ persona—honed over years of directing and interviewing others from behind the camera—took over. Jake was the opposite. He answered her rapid-fire questions easily and often with a wicked sense of humor. He talked easily about his great relationship with his grandparents, who’d all passed by the time he was in his early teens, and lovingly, but with genuine sadness about his mother Ella, who died of breast cancer when he was in high school. His dad’s death—so soon after his mother’s passing and the fire—his most devastating loss. When she asked about growing up in the shadow of the ‘dark side’ of his family, it was the first time he deflected.

“Come on Mi . . . Maria. Enough about me for now. Don’t I get a chance to be the interviewer?”

Mia grinned, but didn’t say yes.

“Okay, I see how it is. You’re fine asking questions but answering them, not so much.”

She blushed, not accustomed to being caught out. This isn’t Jessi, someone who understands Mia’s fear of getting close based on years of shifting around from place to place. So accustomed to keeping others at a remove, her breath caught when instead of a glib response to create distance, she decided she would try to meet him where he was, in that more open space.

“I promise, I’ll go next. But first, how did you avoid getting involved with that, um, dark side of your family?”

The flight attendant brought them two glasses of soda water with lime. When he had moved a couple of rows away, Jake leaned in to continue. She won the internal battle and didn’t back away.

“It’s a kind of Gandhi thing. So it starts when you’re young. You get asked to do little things—take a message to someone, pick up a sandwich. I’d just turn in the other direction if I saw them coming. When I couldn’t avoid them, I’d listen respectfully, then come up with excuses—too busy with 4-H and my animals or helping my dad at Enola’s.”

He took a sip of his drink. “Then, in my midteens, things got a little more serious, like asking me to deliver packages. But this was around the time my mom got sick, so I’d just say I had to take care of her. The point is, I was always respectful, and I never actually said no; just defaulted to something more important. And family comes first, right? They couldn’t fault my choices. By the time I was seventeen, they were leaving me alone. Maybe figured I didn’t have what it takes.”

“Ah, I get the Gandhi thing now; passive resistance.”

“Yeah, and when I didn’t go to them for help or advice after my dad died, something else changed. I mean, it was, I don’t know, mind blowing. I’d be around other members of the family—a funeral or a christening—and they’d speak to me with a kind of deference.”

Remembering the night she’d first asked for a limo, she could see him being intimidating. “Do cops ever come after you for information?”

Jake rolled his eyes and looked down at his interlocked hands, the only sign Mia had that her questions were beginning to make him uncomfortable. “It’s more like a ‘don’t ask don’t tell’ thing. The by-the-book ones, when they’re new? They come to see me once or twice. And then, I don’t know, maybe they complain and someone has a conversation with them. Whatever, it doesn’t happen again. Those who’ve been around a while either know the story firsthand or have enough of a connection to the family that they see how it is. If they’re investigating something and absolutely have to interview me, they interview me. When I say I don’t know—which is the truth—they don’t press.”

“But you went to the family for my ID, right?”

“Yes, a distant uncle . . . I think. Boudreaux. I’ve never asked for anything before. And while he didn’t say it out loud, I think he feels bad. About my dad, I mean. But he, or someone else, they might call it in at some point. You know, ask for something more than just free drinks at the bar.”

Horried at the thought of it, she sucked in air. This man she’d known less than two weeks had given up the very independence he’d fought so hard to keep. “I can’t even begin to understand why you’d do that for me. You barely know me.”

“Well, you did help Leanne. And I did see your enraged husband’s face on the phone.” Watched him struggle with that image.

"I can't imagine what you've been through. But if there's anything you feel comfortable telling me about him, I'd really like to know."

*October 12: Interviewing Mia
Aboard Flight to Salt Lake City, Utah*

Mia fidgeted with a napkin, adjusted her hat, shifted around in her window seat. Should have taken the aisle. How to delay her response? But look where she was, and all thanks to him. Might even feel good to talk about it.

"He's Greek," Mia said. "Aleks is short for Aleksanteri. Last name Hasapsis. I met him when my company did some communications work for the Department of State. They invited me to attend an event, a low-level one, but it also involved the Consular and Public Diplomacy offices of the Greek embassy. Honestly, I don't know exactly what he does. He dresses up, goes to a lot of official events, has lots of meetings." She paused for a moment. "That makes it sound like I didn't pay attention. But I did. I did ask questions." Mia stopped again. Remembering. "But I guess, when I think back, his answers were kind of superficial." She tried, and failed, for a grin. "Maybe that was on purpose." She looked at Jake; there was no judgment in his expression. "Anyway, I guess I didn't pay enough attention. And just a few weeks ago, I found out for sure that his family back in Greece is, um, kinda like yours."

Jake let out a soft whistle. "I don't know much about diplomatic service, but does his position come with immunity? Diplomatic immunity?"

"Exactly. And along with that kind of family . . ." She trailed off.

"You should buy lottery tickets."

"Yeah, that's a jackpot alright."

They both stopped talking. The plane was cool, the hum of the engines soothing. Mia and Jake sipped their drinks. Were quiet for a few minutes.

The pilot announced they were about to encounter a little turbulence. They adjusted their belts. Mia leaned back and closed her eyes.

When she woke, her head was on Jake's shoulder; his head leaning on hers. He was still sleeping. She felt paralyzed, wanted to move, but didn't want to either and found herself very confused about why. As she tried to sort it, she felt him stir and took the opportunity to move herself back into her own seat.

"Wow, that was weird," Jake yawned. "I never sleep on planes. Especially during turbulence. So, where were we?"

"Oh hubby, I always forget how you wake up fully energized, ready to talk," Mia said as she yawned and stretched. "Well, I was going to ask you about—"

"Oh no you don't. It's still my turn to ask some questions." He leaned closer to Mia, touched her arm gently so that she'd turn and look at him. And then, so that no one else could hear, he asked very softly, "So, a really personal question."

She clenched her jaw, stiffened, and sat forward just a bit.

"What attracted you to him?"

She closed her eyes. That most dreaded of questions. The one she'd asked herself over and over. Waited for the right words to come. They didn't, and her body lost its resolve; sagged. If she couldn't answer it for herself, how could she possibly explain it to someone else? He softened it and gave her a place to start.

"I mean, he must have presented himself as a completely different person when you met him. When you were dating."

The kindness cut deep. Not blaming her, blaming him. Her eyes watered. And as she opened her mouth to answer, the flight attendant stepped up to Jake's aisle seat.

“Okay you two lovebirds, time to put your trays away and place your seats in the upright and locked position.”

“Oh! I didn’t . . .” Mia started and looked up.

“ . . . hear the announcement . . . uh, either.” Jake finished.

They looked at each other and laughed.

“Yeah,” the flight attendant smiled. “I noticed.” He kept moving down the aisle.

“Did he say lovebirds?” Mia’s nose wrinkled.

Jake just looked at her for a moment. “Yeah. I think he did.” Grinned. “That must mean we’re deeply committed to our roles.”

“Or not, depending upon how long we’re supposed to have been married?” She raised her finger to her lips. A caricature of wondering. “Maybe we’d better argue.”

Jake winced but played along. “Oh, please Maria, not now. Not here. No arguing. At least not until we get in the rental car and you bitch about my driving.”

“It’s true—I do bitch about others’ driving.”

The plane tilted. Mia and Jake watched the Great Salt Lake—a mudflat between its waterline and the chalky salt line marking the previous level—skim beneath them until the plane lined up with the runway. The mountains in the distance reminded them that the road ahead would not be an easy, Louisiana-flat one.

October 12: A Change of Plans
Salt Lake City, Utah

Mia stared at the departures board. Immersed in options, she ignored the mass of people and noise around them.

“Southwest directly to Bozeman. It leaves in forty-five minutes from the next concourse over. We have plenty of time to make it.”

“Maybe Billings and a rental car?” Jake suggested again.

“Look, we could fly all over the country like a cell phone signal pinging from tower to tower. But if he’s got the power to find one flight, he’ll find them all. Better to get to Bozeman, where we know he’s not right now. And the sooner the better. I’ve got papers to sign and work to do for my client.” Mia looked down at her phone.

“Client?”

Under her breath, afterthought-ish. “Sorry, I mean Leanne. I’m so used to having clients.”

Jake nodded and said, “Okay then. Directly to Bozeman. But don’t we need to go to the ticket counter first?”

“Lead me to the moving walkway,” Mia was working on her phone. “I’m making the ticket changes right now.”

“You can do that on a burner?”

“Sorry, coach is all that’s available on this flight. And yes, all I need is a browser.” Tapped furiously. “And your credit card.”

“Sure honey. You make all the plans. I’ll just pay for them,” Jake said.

But Mia, typing in the card number, engrossed in her task, was—as usual—completely focused on the moment. And like all good wives through the ages, she didn’t hear a word he said.

CHAPTER 13

October 12: Supper Conversation Bozeman, Montana

Mia didn't know exactly how much money Sondra had, but if the magnificent stone sign was anything to go by, it was a lot.

Jake whistled and stopped at Corazón Cálido's entrance.

"A lot lot," Mia said with something akin to awe as Jake slowly turned the red Tahoe he'd rented in Bozeman into the driveway. She lowered the window to take a deep breath of Big Sky air.

"A lot lot?" She heard the grin in his voice.

"Of money. Jessi and I made it up when we were in school to describe kids who wore clothes and drove cars that seemed so far removed from our reality that their families didn't have a lot of money—they had 'a lot lot.'"

"Ah. Makes perfect sense to me." He braked the car dead center in the circular driveway. The front door eased open an inch, then flew open wide. Leanne ran down the steps as fast as her heavily pregnant body would allow and flung her arms around Mia. Mia hugged her back for a moment, then untangled herself, and placed her hands on the younger woman's shoulders.

"You're okay?"

"I'm fine. He was pretty out of control, but he didn't hurt me."

"Thank God." Mia pulled her in for a gentler hug.

"And you're here now because he's not?"

“Exactly.”

“Are we gonna have to move again?”

Mia stepped back and looked at Leanne with a sad smile. “Yup. We’re going to move again. At some point.”

“That’s too bad. Because this place is awesome.” Leanne waved them to follow her inside. “Let’s eat.”



The home’s massive commercial kitchen could have been stainless-steel cold but Sondra’s touches of color and soft, rich furnishings made it warm and inviting. There was no seafood in the quick gumbo Leanne had prepared, but the sausage, chicken, and roux-based sauce in one of Sondra’s colorful handmade soup bowls was manna to Mia’s hungry belly and heart.

“Crawfish po’ boys? And now homemade gumbo? I’m loving this South Louisiana food thing y’all got going.” Mia was trying to speak Southern and Cajun, both with a full mouth.

“Jake took you to Many’s?”

Mia swallowed before she answered. “Dat he did. Yeah boy!”

Jake and Leanne laughed.

“Your Cajun accent is coming along.” Jake sopped up some of his gumbo with a piece of baguette, then turned serious and said, “So why would we need to move? I thought we were here because he just left.”

Mia and Leanne looked at each other at the same moment, having noticed Jake’s use of ‘we.’ Mia would deal with that later.

“I’m not sure how he’s doing it, tracking me. But if he tracked me to Delareau . . . I don’t know. Based on what’s happened so far, I just need to think ahead.”

A slight tremble in her voice, Leanne said, “Would I have to go with you? I mean, I met her. The midwife. Last night. And I am absolutely comfortable with her.” Leanne picked up her spoon and

held it so tight her knuckles turned white; she put it back down in the bowl.

"I would love for you to stay in Montana until after the baby is born. When it's safe for you both to move, I'll have a plan ready."

Jake pushed his bowl aside and looked at Mia. "And what about you? Any ideas for yourself?"

"No. For now, he's not here and I'm okay with that for a few days. I've got to figure out how he's tracking me or just keep moving until I do."

Leanne stood up and started to collect the dishes.

"Oh no you don't, pretty Momma." Jake took the bowl out of Leanne's hands. "You waddle yourself right over there to that sofa and sit down. She who cooks does not clean as long as I'm around."

"Aww, Jake, that is so nice of you." Leanne handed him her glass. "You know, I think because you were so far ahead of me in school, I never got the chance to know you. You always seemed so, I don't know, kinda aloof to us younger girls."

"I don't know about aloof, but I was definitely distracted back then, what with Mom being so sick."

"Oh, yeah. That's right! That was so sad. I'm really sorry for your loss. I mean, I was back then too, even though I never said it." She eased herself down onto an enormous sofa. "But I'm so glad to have you here and to know you're helping Mia. She only knows a couple of people in Delareau, so, well, you know how hard it is to do anything back home if you don't know people."

"Yeah, I think she might appreciate me now," he said as he came back from the sink to get his own and Mia's dishes. "Well, a little bit anyway."

Mia just looked up and squinted her eyes at him.

"Husbands?" She harrumphed. "They are hard to trust."

Leanne laughed out loud. "Right?"

Jake yawned, and Mia realized how exhausted she was too. Leanne led them upstairs and showed them around as if the magnificent house were her own.

"I'll take this one," Mia said, and turned right into the first available suite.

A few minutes later, there was a tap on the door. Then Jake called out softly, "I just want it noted . . ."

"What?" Half asleep.

"From the plane. You never answered my last question."

He was right. She hadn't. But the pillows were soft, the sheets crisp, and the breeze through the window cool.

October 13: A Morning Surprise ***Bozeman, Montana***

Mia had already had her first cup of coffee and was thinking about making breakfast when Leanne appeared in the kitchen doorway. Her pajama bottoms were wet.

"Happened as I was walking down the stairs."

Mia had handled plenty of client, travel, and on-set emergencies in her time, but this?

"Your water broke? Holy shit!" She patted her pockets, then remembered only Leanne had the midwife's number. "Give me your phone."

Leanne was already holding it out to her. "I'm gonna go back upstairs and get some dry clothes on."

"Yeah, I'll call the midwife. What's her—"

"Bettecia."

Mia scrolled, found the contact, and hit *Call*. A moan from the hallway. Jake telling Leanne to relax and breathe. *Jesus*.

Twenty minutes later, Bettecia was shooin Mia and Jake out of the bedroom. "I'll shout if I need you."

Mia hoped with every cell in her body that she wouldn't. *Rapelling down three-story buildings was one thing. Delivering babies? Uh-uh.*

CHAPTER 14

October 13: Two Families Meet New Orleans, Louisiana

“How can I help you today, sir?” Boudreaux Marcellas said.

The young man had not introduced himself, so neither had Boudreaux. Anonymity aside, he’d be respectful no matter the waste of time and money this exercise was.

Because that’s the way it went in this game. Boudreaux’s uncle, Beauvais Marcellas, head of the family’s enterprises, had approved the connection and set up the meeting, and Boudreaux would do as instructed.

“I am looking for a woman,” the man said. “Tall. Athletic. Long red hair. Green eyes. I have every reason to believe that she is in this area.”

“I see. And how do you think our family can help you find her? Have the police not been helpful?”

“I do not want to involve the police. She is . . . unstable. It is important that I get to her without frightening her. To bring her home.”

“What else can you tell me that might help me know how best to,” he paused a moment, composed the right words, “deploy my resources?”

"She may believe she needs a new identity. And in my family's experience, those in search of a new identity often wind up in an office such as this, talking to someone like yourself."

Boudreaux smiled at the man and nodded. "*Ouais*, yes, that's the way it works here too."

The man spoke English with an accent. Middle Eastern or Mediterranean. He was attractive, nicely dressed. Professional. But there was something about him; something Boudreaux found arrogant. Hard. Brittle even. He recalled the photo Jake had given him. That woman looked nothing like this man's description, but she'd probably changed her appearance for the photo. Boudreaux followed his gut.

"There is one woman of interest I've been asked to find. I'm pretty sure she's not the person you're looking for but, here, take a look." Boudreaux laid his mobile on the desk and turned it toward his guest.

The man's eyes opened wide, and he jumped up, nearly flipping over the chair. "No. Not her! Not that woman."

Boudreaux remained still, wondering if it was this man—rather than the woman he sought—who was unstable.

"Why her? Why do I keep seeing this woman?" the man yelled.

Boudreaux, curious more than shocked, pointed at the screen. "You've seen this woman before? Where?"

But the man ignored him. "No one else? Are you sure? There is no other woman you have helped in the past three days?"

"I ask you again, sir. Where did you see this woman?"

The man paced back and forth in front of Boudreaux's desk, his words tumbling from his mouth. "I followed an airplane. I mean, my pilot followed it. It took off from a tiny airport somewhere in the swamps down here, not the big one in New Orleans. We went north for several hours and landed in Montana, and this woman, the one on your phone, she was on a stretcher, being brought out

of a plane. I thought it would be my wife, but it wasn't. It was her! It was this woman you just showed me." The man stopped pacing and looked straight at Boudreaux. "You are sure? There is no other woman who has come to you for a new identity?"

Again, Boudreaux listened to his gut. No way was he telling this guy anything until he had more information. "Look, my people are on me to find this woman that you saw. You help me, I'll do everything I can to help you."

The man closed his eyes for a moment. Boudreaux could sense his frustration. Sure, he wasn't from around these parts, wasn't used to asking for help. More accustomed to giving orders. The guy's clothes, shoes. He practically dripped money. And had connections too—his own 'family.' But if his accent and attitude were anything to go by, his family's offices smelled as good as his own fancy suit and leather shoes. A flash of a memory, before his wife died, hit Boudreaux like a slap. Himself, in a bespoke suit, shaking hands with someone in his own impressive office.

The guy opened his eyes and stared at Boudreaux. "I do not care about this woman or what your problem is. If you have information relevant to my wife, you must give it to me. Now. There is no negotiation here."

Boudreaux snapped back to his worn-down workplace where the musty odor was as familiar to him as his own skin. He knew his part. After all, peace among the families . . . at least until he could find out more. He stood. Borrowed a more regal stance from his past and spoke in a soothing voice. "Of course, of course. I will deploy all available resources. I ask only—and with the greatest respect—for anything you know about this woman. It would be a meaningful gift to certain members of our family."

The man seemed to relax, as if Boudreaux's words were sufficient apology. Then he nodded. "I will have my pilot send you the flight information. This I will do as a favor. From my family

to yours.” He looked at Boudreaux with flat, emotionless eyes. Reached slowly into his jacket pocket. Pulled out a photo and laid it on Boudreaux’s desk. “This is the woman I seek. So tell me. What will you do to find her?”

Boudreaux looked down at the photo. Picked it up, by all appearances studying it while he pondered the egregious abuses Jake’s family suffered that his hand might have stayed. Considered the pros and cons of sharing what he’d done for Jake. But there weren’t enough favors in the world to make up for that fire—for Jake’s father’s death.

And that fake ID was the first time Jake had ever asked for anything.

“I will bring to bear all of my resources,” Boudreaux said.

Which was the truth—as far as he could tell it. He just couldn’t say which direction those resources might be pointed. Uncle Beauvais would make the ultimate decision about how, when, who, and where.

And his uncle’s decision would depend on what Boudreaux told him.

“That is very generous,” the man said and bowed his head just a touch. “I imagine that your family’s reputation is as important to you as mine is to me. I will assume the results.”

It was subtle, but Boudreaux had been in this game long enough to recognize a threat when he heard one. “I’ll need your phone number,” he said.

“I will contact you,” the man looked at his watch, “in forty-eight hours.”

Boudreaux bit back his desire to teach the youngster some manners and nodded.

The guy turned, and without another word, left the office. Boudreaux stared at the closed door, then picked up the phone.

***October 13: Aleks Leaves New Orleans
New Orleans, Louisiana***

Aleks slid into the limo, barked an instruction to the driver to head to Louis Armstrong New Orleans International Airport, and snatched up his phone. "I promised him a flight plan," he growled into it, "and whatever information the pilot can provide about the woman on the stretcher. But wait forty-eight hours to send it. I want to see what his family will do."

From the bar, he took a bottle and poured himself a glass of ouzo. Drank it and made a second call. "Is there any new correspondence from this Betty woman?"

His chief investigator read out the latest item intercepted at the New Orleans USPS regional processing center. Aleks listened, his fury growing. Nutcase? He slammed his fist on the seat and cursed. And she had money and an attorney. How had she managed that without going to the New Orleans family for help? It made no sense. Any law-abiding attorney could only do so much—a change of name, the management of assets. But to truly disappear, his wife would need an in-depth backstory and documentation to back it up. Which was surely what she intended to do. Not that it would work, of course. It only added time and expense to his effort. With his people, his business, his family, he could find her anywhere.

He poured another ouzo; downed it in one swallow.

She was using burner phones too. Another delay; made tracking her in real time impossible. There had to be another way. Hurting Jessica Roberts was one option, but then Mia would simply stop communicating with her. Still, he would keep his men watching for another week or so; find out if she was receiving mail at other locations.

He closed his eyes. Felt the alcohol kick in. Allowed himself to feel a touch optimistic. It was stupidly easy to thwart his wife's

ridiculous attempts to evade him. Using snail mail instead of technology? Silly girl.

And yet, she was not back in their home where she should be. He had been a fool to think he had found a good American woman, despite his family's objections. Early in the courtship, she had accepted his attention and affection without question. Yes, she had asked questions but had not probed deeper when he responded with the superficial information men offered women. It had not crossed his mind that she would not expect her life to change after they were married.

And now this. She had put everything he had built in jeopardy, the independence he had worked so hard for, the acceptance he had fought for. If his family discovered what had happened, his father would deem it confirmation of Aleks' incompetence, and he would live the rest of his life relegated to a third-tier role in the family business usually reserved for distant relatives and hired help.

He had to get her back. She must be made to understand. That or she would indeed 'disappear.' For good. A husband abandoned by his wife was clearly not a real man; a widower, however, gained respect.

The limo pulled up to the airport terminal. Aleks was thinking about the Thibodaux postmark, wondering how even to pronounce such a word. Along with the ouzo, he was slow to get out of the car. When he finally stepped out, an airport security officer was telling the driver he had to move.

"Sorry, sir, there is no parking or waiting here—"

Aleks interrupted her, shouting, "Do you not see the diplomatic plates on this car, you stupid cow?"

The female security officer tilted her head in bewilderment and leaned over to look at the plate. The driver, trying to explain, said, "Sir, this is a rental, so there's no . . ." But Aleks moved quickly toward the entrance and answered a call.

“Yes.” He hissed. “Of course you will check the phone number. And this town—Theebahdux? Thybeedax? Find out however these savages down here pronounce it.”

CHAPTER 15

October 13: A First Look at the Redhead Bozeman, Montana

Mia and Jake paced back and forth along the hallway, trying to ignore the primal grunts and screams coming from Leanne's bedroom. Mia had never attended a birth, had no idea if what they were hearing was normal. She plugged her ears when it became too much. Jake kept Robbi updated, using their agreed-upon code words. The hours crept by like days.

Then Bettecia, babe in arms, opened the door. "You can come in, but just for a few minutes." She patted the baby's back, expelling the newborn's phlegm, then weighed him. "Five pounds on the dot. A little small, but he's healthy." She swaddled him and laid him on Leanne's chest.

"How are you?" Mia asked.

"I'm glad y'all were out there and not in here," Leanne said. "I feel like a couple of shrimp boats hit me. At the same time." She took a breath and added, "On opposite sides of my body." She tilted the baby sideways so that Jake and Mia could see his face. "But look at him."

Mia figured most babies' faces looked much the same—prune-ish. But not this one; not with that bright red hair. A pang of . . . something . . . hit her in the gut. Envy? That made no sense. But—

“No bath for you for a few days,” Bettencia said to the baby, and stroked his cheek. “It’ll help you stay healthy. No birth certificate either. Not until your momma’s safe.”

“He looks, uh, normal . . . healthy, I mean.” Jake grinned. “And lucky—doesn’t look at all like Remy.”

Leanne laughed sleepily. “I don’t know anyone in Remy’s family who has red hair. I’ll have to ask Momma about our side.” She looked down at the baby. “When I ever get to see her again.”

Bettencia took the child into her arms. “I’m going to put him down and warm up some food for you. All three of you need to eat. And get some sleep.” She looked at Mia and Jake. “I understand that you might have to leave soon.”

Mia stiffened.

“Don’t be frightened. This network I’m part of specializes in this kinda thing. I don’t know your name, or,” she gestured toward Jake with her elbow, “his, but if we need to get a rotation of help in and out of here for a few days, or not, I need to know.”

Mia let out a big breath. “That makes perfect sense. I’ll let you know as soon as I do.”

Jake looked at his watch. “You’re right. It’s late. So food, then sleep.”

Mia yawned, took Jake’s arm, and led them both toward the door. “I’m thinking you should maybe get back down south, just in case anything weird has developed.”

Jake matched her yawn and said, “We’ll figure it out in a few hours.”

Mia’s stomach surprised her with a sudden drop at the thought of Jake leaving Montana.

October 14: Which Blue Box?

Bozeman, Montana

Jessi tore off strips of paper and yelled out as she dropped them into the dark-brown water of the Têche. Mia called to her from a path on the opposite side of the bayou. "I can't understand what you're saying, Jessi. Why are you littering the river?"

She woke up with a start. *Shit! Shit! Shit!* Mia jumped out of bed and ran to her backpack. Pulled out the note from Jessi and read the postscript.

You're still a mess, aren't you, girl?! The reseal of the envelope was a fun reminder that you change your mind about what to say as often as you change your address!

Aleks had intercepted the mail. That's what Jessi was trying to tell her. That's how he'd tracked her to Delareau. The postmark had given her away. She pulled on jeans, ran to Jake's room, and barged through the door.

"Jake, wake up! Where did we drop that last letter in the mail? Day before yesterday on the way to the airport? Jake, wake up!"

Jake opened one eye and said, "Wherever we stopped to get gas. Gibson? Donner maybe? But mail in both places goes to Thibodaux. I'm pretty sure." A second later, both eyes shot open as he grasped what she was asking. He sat up and turned to Mia. "Wait, you think he—"

"Yeah! I didn't put it together in Jessi's reply to my first note. The one I mailed? From Delareau? The envelope had been opened and resealed before she got it." Holding her head in her hands, she wailed, "So, so, so effing stupid! I can't believe it took me this long to get it!" She paced furiously.

Jake jumped out of bed. “Then I have to get back home. Get to Boudreaux. If Aleks or one of his people tracked you to Delareau via snail mail, it will eventually lead to a chat with someone there.” As he scrambled around the floor, grabbing clothes, Mia stopped pacing and watched him bend over in his boxers.

He turned toward her, struggling, one leg at a time, into his jeans. “Hopefully, Boudreaux himself. And I have no idea what he’ll do. Or be required to do. But if Boudreaux shows the wrong person that picture we used for your ID . . .” He didn’t finish the sentence. Didn’t have to.

Jake threw the few things he’d taken out back into his suitcase, then picked up his burner phone. “Time for you and me to exchange numbers.”

Mia forgot about Jake’s butt, tapped her phone, shared her contact information with him, then racked her brain. *What the hell had she written in that note to Jessi? And how much had it compromised her?*

October 14: Waiting for Something to Do Bozeman, Montana

Leanne held the baby while Mia paced, trying to decide whether to pack. *Stay or go?* She’d driven Jake to the airport and come back with the rental car, praying he’d be able to mitigate some damage. Save her ass, in other words.

Now, back in the house with just Leanne and the newborn, she had no idea what to do next. She threw up her hands.

“When in doubt, wait. Something else will happen, and I’ll know what to do,” she mumbled, stood there a moment, then squinted at

the burner. Was this important enough to risk a tech connection? Her body answered the question when she began typing a note to Jessi saying she got the PS message and to stop the snail mail, stay with the usual routine, and await contact from Vikki.

She double-checked the address—vanishingyou75@gmail.com—then added:

Thank God for you! And for the people I've met here. I have excellent help in your absence.
Love you.

She hit *Send* and plopped down on the edge of the bed.

Leanne said, "I'm so glad you have someone too Mia. I'd never have gotten here without you, but I've been worried about who has your back. I mean, in addition to Jake."

The baby's coo was so soft that Mia almost missed it.

Leanne looked down at him. "Does that mean you're hungry?"

She stood up again, desperate for a purpose. "You have bottles? Should I go sterilize or, I don't know . . ."

Leanne giggled. "You're so funny Mia. Being on the run with bottles is seriously not gonna work. Bettencia hooked me up with nursing."

The baby squirmed, his gurgle louder now. "Maybe a good time to practice." She smiled at the little redhead. "Cuz you've got some growing to do, don't cha, little one?"

"I need to be busy, Leanne. I'm terrible at doing nothing."

Leanne lifted the tiny boy up toward her face and sniffed. "Wanna learn how to uh, change a diaper?"

Mia put her hand to her ear. "Is that the kitchen calling? How about I see what I can uh, drum up for dinner?"

CHAPTER 16

October 15: Jake Plays Dumb
New Orleans, Louisiana

Boudreaux hadn't felt this popular in years. Here was Jake once more. Back in the very same spot he'd stood only four days earlier. Only this time, he could almost taste the kid's panic.

"No, no, Jakey." Boudreaux shook his head so hard he felt his jowls shake. "Someone from Washington, DC, came around looking for his runaway wife. Looked nothing like your girl. That photo you gave me? The short spiky hair? Looks more like a 'he' if you ask me. Lot of that going around these days, you know." Boudreaux chuckled, wiped his hands over his face, and rubbed his eyes. "And hey, no judgment here! Live and let live, that's what I say. But," he placed both hands on the desk and glanced up at Jake, "here's the really weird part."

Boudreaux pretended not to notice that Jake had relaxed a little. The woman Jake was helping was almost certainly the same one the European hotshot was looking for. Which meant things could get sticky. "I showed him Leanne Fortier's photo instead. And he recognized her. *Faire drôle*, eh?"

"Remy's wife? Why did you show him a photo of Leanne?" Jake sat down and leaned back in the chair. Seemed a little too casual. Forced.

"Haven't you heard? She's missing. Looks like she's run out on Remy. He was in here the other day right after you left, wanting to know if we could throw a net out. The old man hasn't said what he'll do if we find her. But we have to look." Boudreaux followed Jake's lead and leaned back in his chair. "I mean, Remy's no prize, and I don't know the details of how he was handling his personal life. But, irrespective, she's pregnant, and her baby's part of the family, so . . . you know how it is."

Jake nodded. "Still, quite some coincidence that this guy from Washington recognized her. Small world and all that."

Boudreaux didn't believe in coincidences. First Jake, then Remy. Then that foreigner showed up out of nowhere about the same time. He let the silence drag so Jake would have to speak next.

"But the man who came to see you, how would he know Leanne?"

Boudreaux shook his head. "He doesn't know who she is. He just saw her someplace he was expecting to see his wife. Anyway, I didn't show him your lady's photo because," he shrugged, "his description didn't match. But I wanted to show him something. You know, appear to be helpful until I find out whether we're actually going to be or not. And Leanne's picture was right here on my desk." Boudreaux laughed, picked up a printout, and turned it toward Jake. "Anyway, the man, *perdu la tête*, went totally off the rails when he saw this."

"But he definitely recognized her?"

"Yeah. Said he saw her in Montana. And how the hell? I mean, our people have checked all the cameras and footage out of Baton Rouge, New Orleans, Lafayette, Houston. All the airports in North Louisiana. Hell, we even checked Jackson, Mississippi! There's no way that girl got outta here commercial. I don't know how she did it, but he saw her, so she did it."

The kid was working hard to keep his expression neutral, but Boudreaux could tell the information meant something to him.

"Leanne and Remy, they came into Enola's." Jake paused, then added, "Little over a week ago, I think. You need me to check receipts? Give you an exact date? I can do that much."

"You know if her family has any connections in Montana?"

Jake sighed and gave him a half smile. "Boudreaux, she was several years behind me in high school, so not like we'd have ever dated. Weren't even friends. I hadn't seen her for six, maybe seven years, until she started coming into Enola's with Remy." The half smile became a chuckle. "I didn't even get invited to the wedding. But if I hear anything in the bar, I'll let you know."

"You do that, Jake. People in bars do like to talk."

Boudreaux sensed something. A connection. Thought hard, in several directions, but couldn't come up with a single reason these two women should be connected, especially not through Jake.

"And Uncle, if you can keep not showing that photo I gave you to anyone, I'd consider it a huge favor. One I'd owe you more than a drink for. The people looking for her? Best I can tell, they mean her actual harm."

"I don't call the shots here, Jakey. You know that. As long as I have some flex, I'll help you out. But no long-term promises. Sometimes they don't tell me why. Sometimes, I just have to follow the orders I'm given."

Boudreaux had a hunch about the European hotshot too. The bad-feeling kind. The kind of feeling he wished he could get across to the boss. But he had to pick and choose his battles. Wasn't sure yet whether this one would require that. He stood up, indicating the meeting was ending. "That guy from DC? He really is shot in the ass with himself!" Boudreaux wheezed a laugh.

Jake took the hint and stood up too. "Oh, yeah? What makes you say that?"

“Said he’d ‘have his pilot’ send us the information about where the plane landed in Montana. Made sure I understood that he’s got his own plane. My guess? He’s gonna hold on to that information until he sees what we pony up first. Seems like the type who’d enjoy a power play.”

The color in Jake’s face drained.

Ahhh . . . there it is.

“What’s wrong, Jakey? You look a little pale.”

Jake put his hand to his mouth as if he were covering a burp. “Oh, just my stomach. Those jalapeño kolaches at LeJeunes? Had one on the way over.” He turned and opened the door. “Sometimes they come back to bite.”

“Yeah. That they do,” Boudreaux said, and added, “If you find out anything, Jake, anything at all, you come tell me. Okay?”

Jake looked back, coughed again into his fist, and nodded. Closed the door softly, respectfully, on his way out.

Boudreaux rested his forearms on his desk and sighed so deeply it surprised him. Rubbed his face and forced his thoughts to fast-forward from the past. Focus on the present. *Montana. But where?*

He’d checked. There were over a hundred airports in that damn state. The pilot’s information was key to finding Leanne. And the sooner Boudreaux got confirmation of where she’d landed, the sooner he could start tracking her.

***October 15: Time to Move
Bozeman, Montana***

“What’s up?” Bettencia’s voice on the phone sounded reassuringly in control.

The text from Jake had been brief:

Twenty-four hours . . . maybe.

“Gotta move. Can you get over here and help us get Leanne whatever she’s gonna need for a road trip?”

“Be there in twenty.”

The line went dead. No ‘but she just had a baby’ or ‘she needs more time.’ Professional. Sharp and decisive as a knife through an umbilical cord.

Mia went to Sondra’s well-organized pantry and threw anything that looked useful into cloth grocery bags she’d found hanging inside the door.

“I found this in the garage,” Leanne said, baby in one arm, a small tent in a bag in the other. “Sleeping bags too.”

“I don’t know where we’re going or what we’ll run into on the way, so good idea.”

“I say east. There’s more water,” Leanne said.

Mia’s hands moved at lightning speed. Canned chicken, tuna, beans, and boxes of precooked rice went into the bags. No way was she about to wait twenty-four hours. Whatever Jake had found out, she’d assume Aleks could move faster.

There was movement near the doorway. Leanne was back.

“How do you think someone found out I was here?”

Mia turned to her. “You think it’s about you?”

“Well, your husband thinks he knows you’re not here. So why would he come back?”

Mia stared at her, a little dumbfounded by her insight.

“I mean, right?” Leanne said, “You know, theoretically, no one knows I got on that plane. But we don’t know for sure. The airport has cameras all over, and I’m like, probably the only local woman who’s gone missing.” She shrugged and went back into the garage,

calling out, "I'll take this inflatable pool too. Could be fun—a bath with Little Red. We can heat some water for it."

Little Red. Mia grinned. Was it ever too early to create a personal brand?

Turning back to her prep, it hit her like a perfect script change: Leanne's approach? Maybe simple fun to her. But also better protection for them all? No-name motels and cash, one way to go. But now that they had a tent, they could get even farther off the grid. Be harder to find.

But, while they were on their way to . . . where exactly? Who was coming for them?

October 15: Jessi and Her Mom
Vienna, Virginia

Susan Avery huffed a stifled cry, put her hands on her hips, and stared at her daughter. "Jessi, I *cannot* believe you're just now telling me this!"

Jessi had driven to her mother's house as soon as she'd received Mia's second email.

"Mom, I can't even say I'm sorry. This is Mia's situation. I've only done as she asked. And, we hope, what's safest." She gave her mother a few beats to calm down. "You've always taught me to look for solutions instead of blame. Mia needs a place to hide. Is there anything we can do to help?"

Her mom paced up and down the galley kitchen, face flushed, concentration etched into every line of her face. "My Uncle Robert had a house on one of the Great Lakes. It's—"

"You have an Uncle Robert? How come I never heard of an Uncle Robert?"

“Well, he wasn’t really my uncle. He was my dad’s best friend. They fought in the Korean War together. He died when you were young and left this cabin to Dad.”

“Did we ever go there?”

“No. Your grandfather complained about it being too small or cold—or something—I don’t remember.” The frustration was still there, but Jessi could see it morphing into action. “But when I was helping Grandma handle things after Dad passed, I saw photos. Found out it was a lovely little cottage right on the water. Dad had a real estate company handling summer rentals and maintenance, so we left it with them. We never used it, but we occasionally had friends who did. In fact, I think I offered it to Mia’s mom, but I—”

Jessi interrupted, “Is it available? Can we suggest it?”

“Summer season’s over, so probably.” Her mom stopped pacing and turned to Jessi. “Do you know where she is? Can she get to Ontonagon, Michigan? I can’t imagine who’d think of looking for her there.”

“No, Mom, I don’t know where she is, and I don’t want to know. Unless I have to. If Aleks thinks I know something . . .” Jessi thought for a moment about how to convey her concern without frightening her mother. “I mean, so far, he seems to believe that I don’t, but, well, let’s just say I’m not sure what he’s capable of.”

Her mom’s eyes widened. She gritted her teeth. “That slimy little . . . I never did like him. Now I feel just horrible that I didn’t tell Mia about my concerns. And you’re at risk too? I can’t believe this.”

Susan Avery teared up and put her face in her hands. Jessi pulled her into a hug.

“Mom, Mia’s smart. And so are we. And I’ll bet you anything that whoever she’s working with is clever too. You always say what a great team builder she is.”

Her mom straightened, pulled a tissue from a box on the counter, wiped her face, and took a deep breath. “You’re right. In

fact, she's usually so good at reading people. Maybe that's why I didn't say anything when Mia started dating him. Anyway, that's in the past. And we can help her. I'll call the management company right now and reserve the place. Whose name should I give them?"

"Yours, Mom. And your credit card so they can stock the place with food and supplies. Most hotels and Airbnbs are touchless check-in these days, so the company won't know that someone other than you plans to use the place."

Her mom opened and rummaged through her junk drawer and pulled out a tattered address book. "But how will we get the information to Mia?"

"I have a couple of extra burner phones." She held one up. "I'll email the number for this one."

"Honey, email is so trackable. Are you sure that's a good idea?"

"Mia set up addresses that don't use our names. And we use safety protocols."

"This place is in the middle of absolutely nowhere," her mom said, sniffing. "In the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, right on Lake Superior. She'll be safe there." She sounded more hopeful than confident. There were worry lines around her eyes.

And her mom was right. Emails could be intercepted. Jessi hoped they were making this as difficult as possible. They didn't use real names or nicknames, and the messages had super-common subject lines. They used burner phones and, anyway, even Aleks' people couldn't scan the traffic pinging around every single cell tower in Northern Virginia. She opened a browser, logged into her own fake account, and composed a happy-sounding message:

To: vanishingme75@gmail.com

From: vanishingyou75@gmail.com

Subject: Mom Update

Hey there! Heard you were looking for a getaway rental and Mom's is available. It's all reserved in Mom's name. Entry is touchless so it'll be easy-peasy. Address is 2294 Floodwood River Road, Ontonagon, MI. Door code is 442500. Have fun!

She'd drive through Tysons Corner and send it on her way home. Her message, swirling among the millions in that overcrowded corporate, commercial, urban landscape, would be a pixel-sized drop in a vast digital ocean. Then, it hit her: If Aleks came back demanding a location, would she be able to lie convincingly?

CHAPTER 17

October 15: On the Road to Ontonagon East of Bozeman, Montana

Ontonagon. Ontonagon. Ontonagon. Mia turned it into a soothing mantra as she drove the Tahoe and tried not to focus on how far they had to go. She'd replied to Jessi's email with no change to the subject line.

Unexpected newborn with us. Can you arrange some supplies?

Gave her a list and hoped Jessi could make the necessary purchases. This way, she and Leanne could avoid public places for as long as possible.

Mia drummed her fingers gently on the steering wheel. They'd left Sondra's house in Bozeman midafternoon but the sun was getting low; they'd have to stop soon. She was thinking about whether sleepy little Lake Superior towns had cameras when Leanne snapped Mia out of her worries.

"Are you getting sleepy again?"

"No. Just thinking about getting to the cottage. We could do it in eighteen hours instead of twenty-two if we got on the interstate. But—"

“Yeah. No. You’re thinking straight. Getting there is more important than getting there fast.” Leanne eased the little redhead from her left arm to her right. Bettencia had gotten them everything they’d need for a week, except a car seat. So Leanne sat in the back seat and held him. “Let me look . . . probably easier to find out-of-the-way places to stay on these back roads. Something that won’t make us afraid we’re gonna get caught any minute. Like Remy and his buddies are . . .”

“Hey,” Mia said, smiling in the rearview mirror so Leanne could see. “Let’s not run a play-by-play of all the things that could go wrong. There’s enough anxiety in the car with us.” She tried the radio again; nothing but hyperactive talk. Tapped her fingers on the steering wheel for a minute or two. Then said, “You find anything yet?”

Leanne said, “I think . . . yeah. This app I downloaded, it shows a campsite just north of the next town. Lewiston. Says it has a bath-house and electricity. And I brought the extension cord and that little heater.”

“Heater? You brought a heater?”

Leanne laughed out loud. “Mia, you are so funny! We’re in Montana. Don’t you ever watch the movies? It gets super cold at night. It was on a shelf in the garage.”

Mia wondered who was helping who at this point. Looked again in the rearview mirror and asked, “Did you bring a coffee maker too?”

***October 15: Camping
Lewiston, Montana***

They pulled into Mountain Views Campground about an hour before dark. Mia looked at the sign and wondered for the hundredth

time in her professional life why so many businesses with the word ‘mountain’ in their names wound up with graphics that resembled ample female breasts. Something about amateur graphic designers and subliminal eroticism. She shook her head and parked the Tahoe.

While Leanne went to the bathhouse, Mia did a three-sixty of their surroundings. The campground was rustic but pristine. She inhaled. Smelled pine trees, the dry crisp scent of fall leaves, and cold water. She closed her eyes and listened. A fast-running stream or river in the distance. But the best thing was that fewer than half the campsites were in use; no one would be too close to them.

It took her only five minutes to erect the tent, so she went in search of supper. Rummaging in the back of the rental, she found bags of food but no pots or pans to cook with.

Leanne got back and saw the problem.

“Just a sec,” she said. She swaddled Little Red and laid him on the back seat of the car, then sorted through last-minute throw-ins.

“Oh my God! This is so cute,” Leanne squealed as she pulled out a bag with a drawstring top.

It looked to Mia like a hiker’s backpack but she had to admit it was cute. She peeked inside and found it was, in fact, a godsend: a camp cooking kit—saucepan, skillet, tin cups, plates, cutlery, and a little Coleman gas stove.

Leanne opened a pot and beamed, then held up a vacuum-packed bag and little paper sleeves of sugar and creamer. “Ooh and look at this: You can even have coffee!”

Mia grinned as she went back to tossing bags and blankets into the tent while Leanne put the cooking gear to use.

They ate. The sun went down and the temperature cooled quickly.

Settling in for the night, Leanne wrapped herself and Little Red in a blanket and nursed him. That done, she went to the bathhouse for a shower. Left the baby with Mia.

For thirty minutes, she held the child. Not once did he cry. But now and then, he looked up at her so intently that she wondered if he couldn't see right through her skin and bones; into something so deep that she couldn't even imagine what it might be.

She shivered. "Cold. It's getting cold Little Red."



Later, all three tucked in, Mia checked her phone.

Thrilled to see two bars of signal, she scrolled for a few minutes. Checked the weather app, and said, "You were right, Leanne. Low tonight is thirty-two. Freezing, but thank God, zero chance of precipitation." No response. Mia looked over and saw Leanne and the baby were both asleep.

She snuggled down. They'd put all three sleeping bags together and plugged the extension cord into the electric outlet outside the tent to use the heater. It helped, but their combined body heat did at least as much to keep them warm.

Mia woke up to unfamiliar sounds. The baby was awake. Cooing softly. She turned to look at him. He was so little it made her throat ache. Leanne heard him too and was instantly awake. As she rearranged herself to feed him, Mia watched, amazed at her economy of movement. As if she'd been a mother her whole life.

"Aren't you scared, Leanne? I mean, you don't look scared, but I don't know how in the world you could not be."

"For real?" Leanne snorted. "I'm like, scared to death. But this is so much better than being in a closet with almost nothing to eat. Or being afraid Remy will hurt me and the baby next time he

comes home drunk. Or thinking I'll never be able to go anywhere or do anything or see my momma any ole time I want. But when I start to feel scared, I just remember that I'm on my way to exactly what we need. Freedom. And it calms me right down. And Bettecia told me that when I'm calm, the little one will be calm too."

Mia closed her eyes and snuggled under the sleeping bags. "When are you going to name him?"

Leanne raised her hand, fingers crossed for good luck, and said, "I already did. But I'm not going to say it yet."

Mia didn't know much about baby-naming traditions. Or superstitions for that matter. But she knew protection when she heard it.

October 16: Herb is a Helper
Lewiston, Montana

Mia skipped the bathhouse the night before. It was too cold by the time Leanne came back to the tent. But the next morning, she couldn't take the gamey smell of herself any longer. There hadn't been time for a shower during the two nights—or was it three?—at the house in Bozeman. Black backpack in hand, she ran the forty yards between their tent and the bathhouse.

"Eeesh!" she wailed when she pushed the bathhouse door open and pulled it shut as quickly as she could. An older lady in a pink fleece top and beat-up white ski pants turned from the mirror as she came in. "Yep," she said. "It's on the edge of too late in the year to camp up here, you ask me."

Mia's teeth chattered. She nodded and made her way as quickly as she could to a shower, turned it on, and discovered that the water

was hot, the pressure was good, and someone had—bless her lucky stars—left a bar of soap in the dish.

The pink fleece lady heard her. “New to camping, sweetie?”

Mia said, “That’s a fair statement. I mean, a couple of times when I was in college, but not since then.” She undressed, stepped under the hot water, and moaned in pleasure.

The lady laughed out loud. “You certainly picked an interesting time and place to start. So listen, you can use my shampoo and hair dryer if you want.” She gathered her bottles and stepped around the corner, pushed them through the curtain to Mia. “I’ll leave the dryer on the counter, and you do the same when you’re done. I’ll come get it in half an hour or so.”

“You are a goddess among women. But if you tell me your campsite number, I’ll bring it all to you. Wouldn’t want anyone to take off with your things.”

“That’s real sweet of you. I’m in the fifth wheeler parked in number twelve. You can drop it at the door if Herb and I are out walking.”

After everything was clean, Mia stood under the hot water until guilt nagged at her for using too much. She turned it off and realized she didn’t have a towel. She pulled her T-shirt out of the bag and dried her body. After she used the fleece lady’s hair dryer on her hair, she dried the shirt and stood for a moment. Staring in the mirror, the woman looking back smiled. Mia asked, “How does hot water make me feel so much better when nothing’s changed at all?”



Two hundred yards from the campsite, Herb took out his mobile.

"Herb, can't you put that thing away while we walk? It's beautiful up here, and it's probably the last time we'll get to camp out until next summer."

"I'm being a good citizen, Cynthia. There's an Amber Alert here. I'm paying attention just in case we see something and need to say something."

"Amber? I thought they were silver. For people like us but who have less of a grip on reality than we do."

"It's not a color. Amber Alerts, it's named after a . . . oh, never mind. It's about missing people. And this one's a newborn."

"A missing newborn out here in rural Montana? At this time of year? It's below freezing some nights."

"Which is exactly why you should pay attention to such things. Those two girls who showed up last night before sunset? I'm pretty sure they had a baby in the back seat. And this morning, the skinnier one was carrying a baby in her arms, unless it's one of those itty-bitty toy dogs."

"Herb, if it's a baby, it probably belongs to one of them. Newborns are far too much work to steal and take camping."

"Well, she saw me looking at her and turned away." Herb tapped his screen and pushed it toward Cynthia. "But I got a picture."

Cynthia looked at the image. She was pleased to see that barely half of the young woman's face was visible, and the half she could see looked nothing so much as plain scared. The girl traveling with her, the one she'd lent her hair dryer to, didn't strike her as the kind to steal a baby. Worried and anxious perhaps. Definitely out of her comfort zone, but not guilty or mean. She pushed the phone back toward Herb. "I think you'd better stay out of this."

She shook her head. In thirty years of marriage, she'd never known Herb to stay out of anybody else's business if he thought he could be helpful.

*October 16: An Introduction to Walmart
East of Lewiston, Montana*

They were back on the road. Avoiding the interstate and its ubiquitous cameras, the baby asleep in Leanne's lap, Mia at the wheel.

Breaking a long stretch of road-hum semi-silence, Leanne said, "I think we need an infant seat. And a different car."

"An infant seat?" Mia had no experience with children, let alone infants, and certainly not infants in automobiles making runaway cross-country road trips.

"If a cop stops us and finds me holding my little one back here, there'll be trouble. I don't know if it's a ticket, or if they arrest you . . ."

"Oh."

Leanne waited a beat. "And we need a different car."

"I get the car seat. But why change cars?"

"So, there was a guy at the park looking at us, I mean, at me and the baby. Looking at us and then at his phone. I think he took a picture. And we were standing right by the car."

Mia palm-planted her head. "Does Remy, or would Remy, report you missing to the cops? You and the baby? I mean, he doesn't even know you've had the baby."

"I don't know." Mia sighed.

Leanne continued. "But I know social media. If that guy posts something for whatever reason, there's only six degrees of separation, you know. I once got to meet Justin Timberlake that way. My friend Brittany had a cousin whose family owned a fancy place near Big Sky? And Brittany's cousin knew the barista at the coffee shop who . . ."

“Yeah, I get it. We handled social media for our clients. So an infant seat for Little Red and a new vehicle. Well, a different one, probably not new. Time to turn on your phone and tell me where we need to go.”

Mia waited while Leanne powered up and studied her phone for a few minutes. “Okay. So there’s basically nothing; I mean, no big towns on this route until we are in the middle of North Dakota. Take your next right and go south to Billings. We need a Walmart.”

Another new experience for Mia. She’d always been a Target person.



Two hours later, they were at the checkout with two heavy coats, a baby seat for Little Red, a box of diapers, baby clothes, and a bottle/formula kit Bettencia recommended in case Leanne couldn’t make enough milk.

Mia handed over her new Visa.

“I’m sorry, ma’am,” the woman said. “It’s just not going through. Maybe you better call ’em and see if they’ve frozen the card for suspicious activity or something.”

Mia sighed. It had taken less than a day to get it. And from the dark side of Jake’s family too. What the hell had she expected? It was never going to be bulletproof.

She was about to get cash from her bag, but Leanne said, “Here ya go. I think this one’ll work.”

As soon as they were outside the store, Mia turned to Leanne.

“Don’t worry,” Leanne said. “Mom gave it to me just in case. It’s preloaded or something. There’s no name on it.”

Mia breathed out and let her body relax. Robbi had saved the day. Again.

They took the Tahoe to the Hertz lot at the nearest airport, then booked an Uber.

Renting was out of the question. She needed to buy something. With cash. Another Robbi contribution to the effort.

October 16: A Used Car and an Angel
Billings, Montana

Decades in the business, Marlene knew exactly what kind of place Standard Auto was. Nothing fancy. From behind her office window, she surveyed her lot. Sun beating down on faded asphalt and rows of third- and fourth-tier cars—the dependable kind, sure. But the spit and polish showed too.

She watched two women wander the lot without any real system, stopping here and there, circling back. Browsing, but checking prices more than model. Or color. They looked hopeful in the way people do when they're trying hard to believe the solution to a problem might be sitting right in front of them.

Marlene sighed. She'd been selling used cars long enough to trust her instincts. Watched the women get out of an Uber and unload a baby seat with what looked to be a newborn inside, along with far too much other stuff from the trunk. It took her less than ten seconds to recognize the look: people getting away from something nasty. Done browsing, she saw them decide to leave their belongings outside and come in. Marlene said a silent prayer of thanks that she'd held on to Caleb Mercer's old SUV when his son brought it in last week after his father's funeral.

She stood and motioned them into the chairs across from her. The taller, older woman spoke first. "We need the most dependable, plainest SUV on the lot."

No introduction. Or excitement. Just a fidgety mix of anxiety and desperation.

She added, "Or, I guess, a station wagon."

Marlene smiled and said, "I have a Nissan that just came in a few days ago. Eight years old, but it's a one-owner with a clean Carfax report." She leaned back in her chair. "Nothing fancy but should fit the bill if you're looking for something generic and dependable."

The young woman with the baby surprised Marlene. "How much is it?"

Marlene looked at her computer, then up at the women. "You arrived in an Uber, so, no trade-in; I assume you're paying cash. So," she squinted at the screen just to make it look as if she had to calculate something, "can you ladies scrape together eighty-five hundred?"

While they looked at each other, a silent negotiation passing between them that Marlene had seen hundreds of times, she tilted her head and looked at the girl holding the baby. Judged her to be nineteen or twenty, going on thirty-five. Comfortable holding a newborn. Poised and serious.

Marlene stood up. "Not to get in your business, but whatever's happened, you've gotta have reliable transportation, right?"

The older woman simply stared. Eyes slightly narrowed. Assessing. The one holding the baby said, "Yes, ma'am. And I can pay that."

"I'll be right back with the keys," Marlene said. "You can take it for a test drive if you want. But I can tell you: I won't put you in anything I wouldn't put my own daughter in."

The young mother smiled, said a test drive wouldn't be necessary. Marlene was pretty sure she saw tears well up in the other woman's eyes. She stared for just a moment and saw how tired and sad she was. Then nodded and went into the office to get the keys.

Marlene compared Maria Brusey's signature to the one on a brand spanking new Louisiana driver's license and handed over two sets of keys and an envelope.

"I'd like to assume you'll be using this car here in the Big Sky State. But the only ID you have is Louisiana, right?"

Marlene saw the older woman pale and gave her a smile she hoped was encouraging. "Not a problem for me. I'll register the vehicle in Louisiana based on your ID. But in case it takes a while for you and snail mail to meet up, there's an extra temporary Montana plate in that envelope. Put it on when the first one expires if you need to."

Maria Brusey relaxed and nodded. She stood to leave and returned the smile with one that tried hard to exude both happiness and gratitude.

The two women went out to load their new car.

Marlene figured that the postal service would have a hard time delivering the license plate to the address on that Louisiana ID. That was often the case when buyers paid cash. Especially women. Traveling alone. With a newborn. The extra temp would buy them a little more time.

Marlene, back at her desk after they drove away, shook her head in wonderment. She was glad she owned the dealership; that she'd held on to the Nissan for just the right customer. She silently wished them all the luck in the world. They were going to need it.



Mia, Leanne and the baby were back on US 87 with a full tank of gas—another gift from Marlene, Mia guessed, along with the ridiculously low price of the vehicle and the extra temporary plate. The first decent-sized town in North Dakota was nearly seven

hours away. There, Mia suggested they stay in a cheap no-name hotel. No more frosty nights camping unless absolutely necessary.

Leanne scrolled on her phone, found something close to a church. One room, two beds. “I’ll use your fake name and the pre-loaded card Momma gave me.”

Mia was pleased to see her acting with confidence. Maybe a benefit of all that extra oxytocin that came along with breastfeeding?

Little Red, after some quiet but insistent fussing, finally fell asleep in his car seat. Leanne confirmed directions, turned off her phone, and leaned on the window as if it were a pillow, and slept too.

Mia drove and let thoughts flow through her mind slowly, quietly. Like a bayou. Or an old favorite song playing low in the background, so comfortable and familiar that she relaxed and didn’t even notice how often those thoughts were of Jake.

CHAPTER 18

October 16: Jake Plants a Seed Delareau, Louisiana

“You keep wiping that same spot much longer and we’re gonna have to refinish it,” Kenny Wayne said. “Something on your mind, boss? They say sharing is caring.”

Jake looked at one of his favorite hires and tried to smile. Born to a Vietnamese father and a Cajun mother, Kenny Wayne was more redneck than either of his forebears. He was ‘Kenny Wayne’ to most everyone because neither the Cajuns nor the rednecks could correctly pronounce his Vietnamese last name, Huynh. Jake hired him because he was a good listener. Good listeners usually became popular barkeeps, and Kenny Wayne’s emotional sensitivity measured a notch or two above the norm.

He was also an unapologetic gossip.

The restaurant was empty, quiet except for the hum of the beer cooler and the sound of clinking dishes from the kitchen.

“Come on, Jake. You look like you lost an opportunity to bed down with the best you ever had a shot at.” Kenny Wayne laughed.

Jake, unable to think of one single thing he could do that would help Mia, or Leanne for that matter—without letting on that he knew something—threw his bar towel in the hamper. “You get that cooler cleaned out yet?”

"Yes, sir! Got it shining like the top of a brand-new water tower on a full-moon night."

A half-listening, uh-huh response, then Jake stared into the distance. Made Kenny Wayne wait almost a whole minute, then leaned against the bar. If there was nothing he could do, maybe there was something he could learn. "You see Remy and Leanne in here lately?"

"Don't think I have, boss. What's going on?"

"Just wondering. When they were in last week, looked like Leanne was about ready to drop that kid right on the barroom floor."

"Yeah, I remember." Kenny Wayne's smile faded. "I worked that night. He was having fun, but her? Not so much."

Jake opened the register and counted the change. "I noticed that too. I just wonder if Remy's gonna keep hanging out here after that happens, or . . ." he gave Kenny a sardonic smile, "maybe stay home more and become an actual father."

Having tossed out that incendiary spark, Jake knew if he got out of the way, the wildfire spread wouldn't take long.

"Register's fine, Kenny," he said and turned toward Kenny with a proper smile. "You did such a great job on the cooler, you've got the bar until I get back this evening. You okay with that?" The younger man's smile would have blown out a paparazzo's long lens.

Kenny would talk to the customers. Mention Jake's wondering about his distant cousin's fitness for fatherhood. Word would spread fast.

Jake also knew it would make its way to New Orleans. Boudreaux would learn that Jake was actually investigating.



As he'd hoped, at 11:30 p.m., Remy, with an attitude, walked through the door, leaned in toward Jake, and put both hands on the bar. "Heard you were wondering if I'll be a good father."

***October 16: Immediate Crop Yield
Delareau, Louisiana***

Remy did not sit down.

“Where in the world did you hear that?” Calm, cool, and collected. “I asked after y’all this afternoon, that’s all. Last time you and Leanne were in here, Leanne looked like she could have the baby any minute. But you know how it is. People gonna gossip.” He pulled the tap to fill a mug with Remy’s favorite beer.

Remy nodded and sat down. Jake read it as relief that there would be no need for a confrontation.

“Well, since you asked, you may as well know. She’s missing. I don’t know whether someone took her or she left.”

Jake raised his eyebrows in a believable look of surprise.

“I didn’t think she had the balls,” Remy said. “When we were dating, she was fun to be with. But after she got pregnant and we got married, I don’t know. She changed.”

Jake put a coaster down and handed Remy the beer.

Remy tipped it toward Jake, making a point. “Weird how women change.”

Jake shrugged. “Maybe pregnancy? Think that might have something to do with it?” Kept the sarcasm to himself.

Remy took a long pull from his glass and said, “Yeah. Guess that’s true. But you know the family—I mean, you’re not really in it, but you know how it is.”

Jake put a shot down next to the beer. “Yeah, family.”

Remy downed the bourbon and pounded the empty shot glass on the bar. “It pisses me off. All this ‘can’t control your family business’ I’m getting. First, she was always going to her momma’s and her friends’ houses, not cooking or cleaning or wanting to go out with me anymore. Then, when I finally got it through her head that

she had responsibilities, she'd cook a little but started spending all day at the library."

"Learning about babies maybe?"

"Don't know. Don't care. All I wanted was . . ." Remy shook his head. "I just wanted her not to be . . . I don't know . . . stirred up all the time. You know, trying to change everything, which is what she'd be like after she'd seen her friends or, God help me, her momma." Jake cringed at the high and whiny voice he used. Put down a second shot and Remy chased it with the rest of his beer. "I'm startin' to wish she'd just stay gone. But you know, Momma wants her grandbaby, so what the hell am I gonna do?"

Jake pulled another frosty mug of beer and put it down in front of Remy with another shot. "On me. Gotta do the service bar. I'll be right back."

Jake made drinks for the waitstaff and cleaned the service bar. Watched Remy's posture slump; his eyelids fall toward half-mast. Figured, another shot and his tongue would loosen like a belt with no buckle. Jake poured it and set it down in front of him.

"Man, I just wish I could go back and not get her pregnant."

"Well, maybe you could do something kinda like that."

Remy looked up. "Yeah?"

"Well, just thinking. You got any idea where she is? Who she'd be with? Some other guy maybe?"

Remy slammed his fist on the bar and jumped up, almost tipping over his barstool. "That bitch better not be with some other man. I'll fucking . . . I'll . . ."

Jake gestured for him to calm down. "Listen, if you know something, maybe I could, you know, gently probe around the customer base. Ask a little here and there. Listen a little more carefully than usual. See what I can find out for ya."

"Man, I don't know any damn thing! And I don't know what Uncle Boudreaux and his guys are doing to help. He said they'd

be checking airports, bus stations, cam footage, but who knows? Maybe she just got in a car and took back roads somewhere.” He finished the second beer and said sheepishly, “You got another one of those shots back there, bro?”

Jake smiled. A little sympathy and another shot or two would loosen Remy’s tongue even further. “Yeah, no problem.” He poured. “Here ya go.”

Remy looked around the room, then leaned in toward Jake. “Hell, truth is, Momma’s driving me crazier than Daddy is. ’Spects me to care about somebody I didn’t even really wanna marry. And a kid? I mean how’m I s’pose to know it’s even mine?”

Jake looked down for a beat, clenched his fists, then collected himself. Remembered what he was trying to accomplish. Looked up at Remy with as much empathy as he could fake and put another shot down next to the beer. “Lot to ask, for sure. But, you know, maybe just let her go?”

Remy tipped the shot glass back, slurring as he said, “Jake, sometimes you’re so—well, I hate to say it, you being nice with the shots and the beer and all—but stupid.”

“Yeah?” Jake smiled and looked to his left as if he’d heard someone call his name.

“I mean, I don’t know how you and your daddy got yourselves ‘above it all.’” He used air quotes and tilted forward, then in a hoity-toity voice said, “Y’all are just too good, I guess.” Took the last swallow of his beer, and added, “But ain’t no way the family’s gonna let her get away with that kid. No way in hell, man.”

Jake figured Remy’s level of intoxication would be high enough in another half hour that there wasn’t much more he could get out of him that would be helpful. “Hey, listen, I gotta go do something here.” He pulled the glasses off the bar and didn’t pour Remy another. “Drinks on me tonight. You get yourself home safe, okay?”

He stepped quickly over to the service bar, then turned just in time to watch Remy stumble toward the door. Chances he'd get pulled over on his way home? Zero.

Yeah, family.

***October 16: Boudreaux Gets an Update
New Orleans, Louisiana***

His seventeen-year-old nephew's face appeared on Boudreaux's phone screen. In the boy's thick, wavy brown hair, chocolate eyes, olive-brown skin, and high Creole cheekbones, Boudreaux saw for just a second his wife's sister at seventeen. Minus the boy's peach fuzz. The memory didn't soothe his irritation. In fact, since his wife died, irritation simmered just below the surface, like pain from a tiny boil that wouldn't grow but wouldn't just go away and leave him the fuck alone either.

"Zave, how many times I gotta tell you, kid? A phone call is better. I don't like this New Age video-calling shit."

Xavier laughed. "Come on, Uncle. This way you get to see me!"

General irritation notwithstanding, it was good to see his nephew. The view of his own puffy face and sagging jowls in the corner of the screen? Not so much. Little Jimmy Quinn had once shown him how to position the phone so his on-screen appearance was more flattering. But he was all fingers and thumbs; couldn't remember anyway. So, the kid got a good view of nostrils and that was that. "Whatcha got for me?"

"Been checking Montana socials for ya. Dude named Herb posted a picture I think might interest you." Seventeen-year-old version of a business voice.

"C'est ça?"

Boudreaux's phone pinged.

"Just sent it to you."

Now, how to bring up the photo while on the phone. Something else Little Jimmy had shown him. He thumbed the screen a couple of times and got it. Opened the message and touched the image.

"It's a little bit sideways . . ." Turned his phone this way and that. "What do you know about it?"

"There was an Amber Alert. I geo-ed it because those things are local. Dude posted from a campground in the middle of Montana. Texting you that info too. Anyway, this kid, the one in the pic I'm sending you? Definitely not the missing Montana baby. But you asked for anything about women and children so . . ."

"Geo-ed?"

"You know, checked the guy's location when he posted."

"Okay. So how do you know this picture isn't the Montana baby?"

"You know how to zoom in? You put—"

"Yeah, yeah, kid. I know."

"Oh, yeah? Who showed you how to do that?"

"*Petit malin*. Just tell me what I'm looking for here."

Xavier laughed. "Okay, so zoom in. You see that red hair? I checked the photo on the Amber Alert and the missing baby was like, totally bald."

Boudreaux picked up his cheap readers and put them on. Zoomed in on the baby and said, "That is some very red hair." The woman holding it? Turned half sideways, so might be Leanne. Hard to tell.

"For sure," Xavier said, a little boredom seeping into his teen-aged voice. Boudreaux thumbed back to the FaceTime screen and saw Xavier looking backward. "Yeah, yeah, almost done." Turned back to face his own screen. "Anything else I can track down for ya on this?"

“No, and keep this to yourself, Xavier. You don’t do anything or say anything to anybody unless you hear from me. You got that?”

“Sure! Not a problem, Unc. Just hit me up if you need anything else. Meanwhile, I’m . . .” Xavier pulled an imaginary zipper across his mouth and ended the call.

Boudreaux leaned back in his chair. Looked at the infant. The bright-red hair. Where would that hair have come from? Something triggered an itch at the base of his skull he wanted to scratch.

A knock on the door jolted him from his thoughts.

“Come.”

Little Jimmy entered and placed a package on Boudreaux’s desk.

“I opened it myself. It’s just a phone.”

“You—”

“Yes, sir. I called my mom.”

Boudreaux looked up at the man. “Always a good idea to check on your mom.”

Little Jimmy’s ears burned red as he backed up toward the door and left.

Boudreaux chuckled and opened the package. Just a phone. He placed it on his desk and went to work on spreadsheets, figuring it would do something. Eventually.

Two hours later, it buzzed.

A single text message with a document attached. The flight log.

The Citation CJ4 had refueled in New Orleans. Then flew to Delareau and from there to Bozeman, where it had refueled once more and flew back east to DC. A few words and partial sentences the pilot jotted down—as if he’d not expected anyone to read them—described an unexpected route change to follow another plane; the plane ahead being met by an ambulance. Then the words ‘pregnant passenger’ and the customer’s disappointment that the passenger wasn’t the person he sought.

Boudreaux scrolled to the bottom and found nothing else. No photos.

There might be a connection between the woman Jake was helping and the pregnant woman who might be Leanne on the stretcher in Bozeman. But what? How?

He tapped a finger on the landline handset as if it would deliver the insight he needed. After five minutes, he'd decided. Time to put a tail or two on Jake and see what he was doing in his spare time.

CHAPTER 19

October 17: Catching Up with Vikki

Fairview, Montana—Thirteen hours from Ontonagon, Michigan

“That’s all?” Mia said. “Just the documents from Jessi?”

“Mia, I understand how frustrated you are, but I can’t do anything until you sign those documents,” Vikki said.

And then she remembered. Idiot. She’d gotten distracted while changing the flight arrangements at the airport in Salt Lake and hadn’t checked what Vikki had sent her. She promised to do it as soon as they stopped for fuel.

“Good,” Vikki said. “In the meantime, I broke the rules. I reached out to Jessica with a link to upload documents. I read everything she sent me. You weren’t married at the time you formed the company. That much is super-clear. There’s some language missing that would have made our job easier, but I’m still researching. Once I get the paperwork back from you, I can take some more public actions.”

“Public?” Mia heard the panic in her own voice. “Won’t that—”

“Not public as in everyone can see; public as in research and requesting copies of documents that were filed with county and state organizations. We want anything and everything—especially things you may have forgotten about—that could create an opening your husband might try to exploit.”

"Please don't refer to him as 'my husband.' It makes my head hurt. Just call him Aleks."

Vikki sighed. "Sure. Aleks. We're preparing for any action he might take. This is the time for strategizing, and honestly, if there are any documents that we need to produce and backdate, this is the time to do it."

"You can backdate?"

"Mr. Ellis is pretty aggressive with this kind of stuff. I mean, just look at the date on the documents I sent you. Some of them are from way back. I've got a guy who'll take those, put them in an aged FedEx envelope, slap an old signed-for FedEx form on it, and put it in a filing cabinet. We won't scan any of it. If we need them, we'll have them to build a prewedding history. The rest are documents we need to authorize us to represent you."

"You can do that? Back dating?"

"The old man is training me in the dark arts." She laughed for a moment, then quieted. "His mother suffered abuse back in the day. He's still pissed about it."

Mia felt a sudden connection to Park Ellis. The personal motivation driving his approach brought a lump in her throat. She looked over at Leanne who continued to snore lightly. She glanced up at the rearview mirror. Little red hairs were peeking out of a blanket. Tears burned in her eyes and threatened to spill over. Park Ellis understood. She'd do better; get him and Vikki what they needed. And for Leanne and Little Red, she would not mess up.

"Okay. One other thing. We need to discuss your ID."

"Jake got me one before we left Delareau."

"Yeah, but . . ."

The exit was coming up and Mia turned on her blinker. "It got me on a plane, so what's the problem?" She read the blue Services Ahead sign to make sure. "Sorry, Vikki, gotta take this exit and get

some fuel. We're in a really remote area and I don't know when the next one will be. I'll call you back about the ID."

She pulled into the truck stop and chose a pump. Leanne went inside to change Little Red while Mia filled the tank, then parked between two eighteen wheelers to avoid being seen.

There were two bars on her phone. Documents received, signed, initialed, and returned to Vikki. Felt good. Like progress. And then, back on the road.

Twelve more hours to the cottage in Ontonagon.

A long drive with too much time to mull over the possibility, or was it probability, that Aleks would find her. Again.

October 17: One More Night on the Road
Crookston, Minnesota

Out of the mountains, the weather was milder. Still concerned about cameras in hotel parking lots, Leanne found a campsite with electricity, access to a bathhouse and, best of all, a Chinese takeout a couple of blocks away.

After they'd set up camp, Mia watched Little Red, belted into the car seat but outside with her, while Leanne showered. He gurgled, waved his tiny arms and—was that a smile?

Her phone rang, interrupting the precious moment. "Hold that thought, you," she told Little Red as she fumbled through her things for the phone.

The name flashed up as Jake. Her body buzzed with relief. But it wouldn't have surprised her in the least if Aleks had the ability to fake numbers.

She answered but didn't say anything. Held her breath.

"Mia, it's me."

"Jake." She let out a big breath. "Is everything okay?"

"I'm on open water in a fishing boat. No way can anyone hear me. So, are you all okay?"

"We're all fine. We're in—"

"Don't tell me. If someone asks, I want to be telling the truth when I say I don't know."

"Oh, yeah. Good idea." She put a hand to her chest where something bloomed. It was warm. Jake really got it. "The baby is doing great and Leanne seems to have taken an instant-momma pill. It's amazing. So what prompted the 'get out within twenty-four hours' warning? What's happening back there?"

"Yours and Leanne's paths crossed at Boudreaux's. Remy asked for his help finding Leanne. No surprise there. But Boudreaux says a man, one who sounds a lot like Aleks, showed up at his office. Asked for one-family-to-another kind of help to find his wife."

"Shit," Mia said. "Does he know?"

"If you're talking about Boudreaux, he doesn't know what I did or with whom after I picked up the ID materials his people produced for you. But me, Remy, and Aleks all showing up at his office within forty-eight hours? Yeah, he's too smart not to assume a connection, especially given how he handled the meeting with Aleks."

Mia's hands were shaking so badly the phone slipped. When she got it back up to her ear, Jake was still talking.

". . . didn't show Aleks your photo. He knows the plane went to Montana because Aleks told him, but that may or may not be a problem."

"Wait. You said Boudreaux did not show Aleks the photo of me?"

"Yeah. I mean, right. He did not. But—and I think he did this to show Aleks that he was willing to share something—instead, he showed him a photo of Leanne."

"What?"

“He said Aleks totally lost his mind when he saw that.”

Mia laughed. Nerves perhaps, because none of this was remotely funny. But she couldn’t help herself. And then Jake joined in. When they’d gotten that out of their systems, Jake continued with his update: Remy would not give up his search for Leanne, but mainly because his family would not let go of the child. “But his pride’s in the mix too,” Jake said. “Same old story.”

Mia sighed. “We’ll be at our next safe house tomorrow. Maybe I can figure out what to do next.”

They were both quiet for a minute. She couldn’t bring herself to hang up.

Jake broke the silence. “Do you know where Robbi is? She must be a mess.”

“She’s not in Delareau?”

“No, and no one seems to know where she’s gone. Gossip says visiting her late husband’s elderly aunt.”

“Can you text her for me, Jake? Let her know we’re all okay and that we’ll be in touch soon?”

“Sure. I’ll do it as soon as we hang up. Listen, you know there are families like mine pretty much everywhere. If you need any help with a new ID for Leanne and the baby, let me know.”

Mia kicked a few leaves and hoped for the right words.

“Jake, I know you have good intentions, and it’s so good of you to offer, but the connections between Remy and the family are too close to ask Boudreaux to do that; or to find someone else who can. The credit card you got me has already crashed; meaning, it will verify ID, but I can’t use it to actually pay for something. And I’m not sure if the ID you got me is usable for the long run. My attorney keeps wanting to talk to me about it. I just need a day or two in one place without an emergency. Some time to think and plan.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right. I just wish I could do something more.” The lightness in his voice she depended upon, weighed down by something heavy.

“You missing us, huh?” Mia said, hoping her teasing would bring Jake out of his funk.

“Well, it’s more like, uh, sorry. Another boat . . .” The call ended.

She looked around. Leanne was back. She lifted the baby out of the car seat. Just looking at him in her arms made Mia’s stomach drop.

Leanne rocked him. “Won’t be so dangerously cold tonight, huh, buddy?”

Mia grabbed her backpack and visited the bathhouse. Half an hour later, she slid into her sleeping bag, crossed her fingers for an uneventful night’s sleep, and one last day on the road. She should have included arrival at the cottage in that ‘uneventful’ wish.

October 18: The Cottage
Ontonagon, Michigan

Mia opened her eyes to the rough underside of a bathroom sink.
What the . . .

Leanne stood over her, waving something around in the air.

“Leanne?”

“Oh, thank heavens! Are you—”

“What is that smell?”

“It’s vinegar. It’s all I could find. You passed out, and I couldn’t wake you up.”

“Passed out?”

“Yeah. Out cold.”

Mia tried to sit up, but Leanne placed a hand on her shoulder. "Hey, just wait a minute. Not too fast. If something happens to you here, I don't know what I'd . . . I mean . . . just let me get you some water first."

Mia heard the faucet turn on and off. Leanne came back and sat down on the floor next to her and tilted the glass for her. She drank. The ice-cold water felt glorious in her throat.

"Where's Little Red?"

Leanne's eyes widened and she scrambled up. "I put him on the couch! Oh my God!"

She came back a moment later, the baby in her arms, tears streaming down her face. "I can't believe I . . . what if he had rolled off? What kind of mother am I turning out to be?" Lowered herself gently back down to the floor.

"Hey," Mia said, pushing herself up on her elbows. "Nothing bad happened. You're okay. He's okay. You're doing just fine."

"You think?" She sniffled and wiped her eyes on her shirtsleeve.

"I think babies have to be a little older than Little Red before they can roll over." She sat up. Tried to shake off the discombobulation. "And besides, at least you're not passing out for no apparent reason."

"Yeah, well, probably not for no apparent reason," Leanne said as she rocked herself and the baby back and forth.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, here we are by the bathroom door, right?"

Mia looked around. "Yeah, but—"

"Well, you said you had to pee, and when you opened the door, you sneezed, then you made a noise, a scary-sounding yell or something."

"I did?" No recollection of those moments. Couldn't even remember walking up to the cottage or opening the front door.

"Yeah. Scared the crap out of me. I thought you'd seen a mouse or a spider or, you know, someone waiting for us. What the hell freaked you out so bad, Mia?"

She looked Leanne straight in the eyes and realized that what scared her the most was that she had absolutely no idea.



Two hours later, Mia had thoroughly inspected the cottage, the bedrooms, closets, then the kitchen pantry, cabinets, and fridge. Not only was there nothing to be afraid of; Susan had the place totally stocked. There was food and baby things—at least enough for two weeks. She found cold-weather clothing for them all, soap, laundry detergent, even shampoo and conditioner.

Outside, she found a shed and opened the rickety wooden door. Found a couple of old bikes, both with flat tires, and a canoe. Not sure what use they'd be, she wandered back to the cottage and sat down on the porch to think. She hung her head between her knees, overcome by a mixture of gratitude for all that Jessi and Susan had done in such a short period of time, regret that it had to be done, and longing for Jessi. For Susan. For how good her life was before she'd married Aleks. It all washed over her. And the swirl of emotions made sense.

But passing out? Sure, she'd been under a lot of stress, but fainting on her way to the bathroom? That was just, well, odd. She thought back to their arrival. Remembered turning off the main highway and into the driveway, getting out of the truck, and . . .

She'd had one of those *déjà vu* moments. Something had seemed, familiar. She'd stopped, breathed, felt relief that the drive was done; that she needed to go to the bathroom. After that, nothing. Even though she must have stepped onto the porch, found the email with the code, and opened the door.

Thinking over it now, she'd felt a little weird as soon as they drove into Ontonagon. They'd come in from the west, driven over the Ontonagon River bridge, and ventured into town a mile or so north of a grocery store, just to see where things were. There'd

been several moments of familiarity, but those only split seconds long. And out of nowhere, a sudden longing for her mom. Not Susan Avery. Her real mom. The one she didn't know. The one she couldn't even picture in her mind. The only person who could, if she were alive, tell her about her life. She threw up her hands. *Why are you wasting time thinking about all that?*

Must be the exhaustion of running? Hiding? Mia shook her head and went into the house to get things sorted.



But in bed that night, it all came circling back—like a script concept that just wouldn't gel. Exhausted, she gave up. Maybe if she quit trying so hard, something would fall into place. In the meantime, maybe they'd be okay here for a few weeks. No visits to town required. Few, if any, cameras in a town this small. Which meant there was no excuse for not dealing with the ID issue; not just for her, but for Leanne.

She pulled the phone out of her pocket, intending to send a text to Vikki, but as she thought about what to say, the phone slipped silently from her hands and her eyelids fell shut.

CHAPTER 20

October 17: Xavier Goes Fishing Delareau, Louisiana

Xavier walked taller, straighter, on his way to execute the new assignment. Leveled up. Yeah, that's what this was. Adrenaline, pride, and fear—a rush he'd experienced in the toughest online games he played. But this was IRL. He must have really impressed the old man with how he'd handled the social media search in Montana. Now, homework finished, sun setting soon, it was time for the night mission assigned to him by his uncle: tail his distant, sort-of-famous-in-the-family cousin, Jake. He had two cars and a scooter at his disposal and, well, he'd figure it out, right?

But it looks like he's gonna have to figure it out sooner than he thought, like right now, because Jake was making a beeline for the marina. Would his mission be over before it even started? But, no. His older brother's twenty-four-foot, center-console fishing boat was docked in the same marina. He was pretty sure Alcee left the keys in it, because, for sure no one was gonna mess with a boat owned by his family.

He worked his way around the back of the marina, ditched the scooter, and hopped on board. Keys located, he stood still for a moment. He'd driven every kind of vehicle imaginable in online games, but a real boat in real water? A whole new vibe. Instrument

panel showed a lot of things but maybe just turn the key and see what happens. No doubt, Alcee wouldn't like it. He babied that boat more than he fished in it. But this was important. This was 'family business.'

And the dark was his friend, right? Jake would never see him. He turned the key. Jumped when it caught. Felt the rumble of the engine in his chest move down to his balls and send chills up his back. But how hard could it be? Bayou Têche ran slow. This wasn't the Gulf of Mexico for eff's sake. And he was a good enough swimmer if things went to crap. He looked out over the bow, lights from town reflected on the black water, then back at his hands on the wheel. Shaking a little bit. But that happened in online games too. Xavier recognized the fear, then cleared his throat and put his shoulders back. He would not disappoint Uncle Boudreaux.

He walked cleat to cleat, releasing the lines as he went. Done with that, he exhaled and looked around. Made sure he hadn't missed anything, then stepped back to the control station, and tapped the throttle just enough to inch the boat out of the slip. Watched Jake put some distance between his boat and the marina, then pushed the throttle forward just enough to gain some forward motion. Joystick is a joystick, yeah? An urge to giggle, like on the precipice of unlocking a new level. He gave it a little more gas. *Piece o' cake.*

A few minutes later, completely dark, Xavier watched Jake's lights stop moving. Heard an anchor hit the water. Oh yeah . . . anchors. But better not leave the helm and go looking. The water was so still, he figured he'd be okay. Xavier powered down and floated, watching Jake's green and red navigation lights.

Five minutes watching nothing happen in the dark, Xavier pulled out his phone and got lost on social media. As if matching its captain's thumbing scroll, the boat drifted.

“Hey there!” Jake shouted, and a brilliant spotlight danced around the center console until it landed right in his face.

Xavier threw his hands up and shouted, “Dude, you’re blinding me!”

***October 17: Jake Educates the Young
Delareau, Louisiana***

“You okay? What happened? Motor quit working?”

It was one of Boudreaux’s nephews, but Jake had forgotten the kid’s name.

The boy’s face flushed. “I uh . . . I don’t know . . . I think I flooded the engine. Was giving it a few minutes and just texting some friends while I waited.”

“Well, you almost waited long enough to run into my boat. Your running lights are off, so I didn’t see you until you were almost on me.”

“Running lights?” The kid tapped his phone light and looked around the helm.

“Yeah. If I hadn’t seen the light from your phone, one of us might have had a punctured hull,” Jake said.

Watched him get down on his knees, apparently searching for the running lights and decided to help him out. “If that’s Alcee’s boat, the switch should be right there.” He hit the dashboard with his spotlight, then turned it off.

The boy stood up, angled his phone light to look at the console. Jake heard a click and the lights went on. He turned toward Jake again. “Uh, thanks.”

“What’s your name?” Jake asked in his best bartender-friendly voice.

The kid hesitated, then said, "It's Xavier. But listen, don't tell anyone about this, okay? I'm just out on a dare and my brother will kill me if he finds out."

"Oh, yeah?" Jake maneuvered his boat alongside Alcee's Cape Horn. "You sure Boudreaux didn't send you? You're about the right age."

Xavier's eyes bugged out. "The right age for what?"

"What are you, sixteen? Seventeen?"

"Seventeen. Be eighteen in four months. But I don't see . . ."

"Depends a little bit on how smart you are, and what's going on in the world. That's about the age the family starts asking us to do more exciting favors. Jobs for them."

Xavier's mouth hung open slightly, but Jake wasn't sure if it was because of what he'd just said or because he was throwing a line around one of the port-side cleats, tying the two boats together. Tying up to Alcee's boat without permission. Not recommended, but angst for Mia and Leanne outweighed the Fortier-threat factor.

"I went through it too," Jake continued. "The first favors are usually kinda fun; hard to say no to." Jake waited to see how Xavier would respond.

Xavier shifted his weight from one foot to the other a couple of times, then said, "So that happened to you too?"

"Oh, yeah."

Another beat of silence, then the kid said, "So how come you don't work with the family?"

Jake turned both palms up. "I guess my dad just showed me how to be independent. Taught me how much better it felt to make my own decisions. And money. Run my own life, ya know?"

"Yeah, well," Xavier balled his hands into fists, "I love Uncle B and my whole family."

"Oh, I get that. We have that in common. And I don't do anything to hurt them. Wouldn't hurt a family member for the world."

That he also wouldn't join them remained unspoken.

Jake walked over to starboard, put his hands on the gunwale, and looked Xavier in the eyes. "You and I are both part of the same family, right, Xavier?"

"Sure, but you don't . . . I mean you're . . ."

"Yeah, I know. I roll a little differently. But here's the thing: I'm not up to anything sinister that would hurt the family. So I'd consider it a tremendous favor, family member to family member, if you'd tell me why you're following me. What's Boudreaux fishing for?"

Xavier pocketed his phone, fidgeted between the helm and the captain's chair, ran his hand through his hair, and finally shrugged in defeat. "Man, I don't know. It was my shift to follow you. No clue why; I'm just supposed to report where you go and what you do."

"And what would you say I did tonight?"

"You went for a boat ride."

"That's right. That's all I did. I left the bar just after sunset and went for a boat ride. Things at work are chaotic right now, and sometimes it just clears my head to get out on the water."

"I get that, man! I do. That's what being on a computer does for me." He grinned at his distant cousin. "I can report that."

"A computer. You're good at that stuff, huh?"

Xavier lifted his chin and shrugged. "Yeah, I'm damn good with a computer." He shrugged again and looked around. "Definitely better than with a boat."

"Boudreaux ask you to check out anything else lately? Anything on the computer?"

"He knows how good I am. So, yeah. Some social media stuff."

"What kind of stuff?"

The boy cocked his head and looked at Jake suspiciously.

Jake said, "You know, I own Enola's, and hearing what everyone talks about there, that's like IRL social media. In fact, Boudreaux

asked me to keep an ear to the ground about something too.” Jake smiled at the boy encouragingly. “Just wondering if he’s got us working on the same thing. Maybe sent you to follow me to make sure I’m doing what he asked.”

Xavier visibly relaxed and said, “This was something he was looking for in Montana. I don’t think you’d hear much about Montana in a bar around here.”

Jake’s stomach clenched, but his face remained impassive. “Montana? Wow, he must think you’re really good.”

“Well, not trying to flex or anything, but I’m pretty awesome.” His smile widened. “And I found something.”

His chest tightened. Forced a convincing smile. “You’re kidding. What’d you find?”

The boy puffed out his chest. “He asked me to look for pics of pregnant ladies or chicks with newborns, and I found one. It was kinda fuzzy, and the woman was turned to the side, but I realized that the kid in the pic wasn’t the one from the Amber Alert.”

“Xavier, seriously, that’s amazing! How’d you do that?”

“No biggie! Thing some people don’t know? Amber Alerts are pretty local. That had to be a Montana thing. So I kinda expected to see something similar in the local social I was looking at. But when I compared the Amber Alert photo to this photo I found that some guy in Montana posted on social? The missing kid was bald. The other one? That baby had bright-red hair. So, no match. And anyway, Uncle Boudreaux didn’t seem so interested. But he must have thought I did okay because he asked me to tail you.”

Jake took a deep breath. “Yeah, well, now you can tell him how boring I am to follow, huh?”

“Nah, I don’t have to tell him anything like that. I’ll just say you ditched work and went out boating. ’Cause I don’t wanna let him know I talked to you. That could get me into some hot water. No disrespect.”

Jake forced a chuckled. “None taken. In fact, that’s probably a good idea. Maybe he just wanted to make sure I was keeping my ear to the ground like I promised. I mean, I don’t exactly have a history of doing favors for the family.” He reached over and removed the line from the cleat on Xavier’s boat. “I don’t know how you’re fixed for money, Xavier, but if you need a job, and you’re willing to do good work, Enola’s pays pretty good.”

“Really?” He almost jumped up in excitement, then looked more pensive. “You think my family would let me work for you?”

“Don’t know for sure. But I don’t think anyone in the family has anything against hard work for decent pay.” Jake pushed off the other boat. “See if the engine will start now.”

Xavier turned the key and the boat started. Jake did the same, then pushed the throttle forward. He waved to the boy as he motored back toward the marina. Wondered if Xavier had ever put a boat in a slip before; laughed out loud when he thought about how that would go. And what Alcee would do to his brother when he saw the results. But it was a pretty safe bet his own name wouldn’t come up.

He looked ahead toward the lights of the marina and slowed the engine when he was in sight of the no wake zone. Nodded to himself that it might be a good idea to visit Boudreaux again; see how the redheaded child revelation landed. Because no way he wasn’t interested. Maybe time to make a little wake of his own.

October 18: Jake Sets a Hook
New Orleans, Louisiana

Boudreaux was finishing up another of what he called ‘excruciating video calls’ with his nephew.

"Clearing his head? Going to work, going home, and clearing his head? That's what you got for me?"

"Sorry, Uncle B, that's all there's to say. I thought he was up to something when he went out on his boat. But he didn't do anything. Not even fish." Xavier waited a moment, then asked, "Did any of the other guys see something?"

"That's none of your business, Xavier. You got to learn when it's not okay to ask a question, for God's sake."

After ending the call, Boudreaux leaned back in his chair, mulling over Xavier's report. 'Clear his head' wasn't a phrase his nephew would use. Someone else had said those words. But who? One of the other security men, or Jake himself?



"You did fine. Just fine. I gotta go now," Boudreaux was saying. Jake stood outside Boudreaux's office door, listening. The timing of his own fishing expedition couldn't have been better. He could hear both sides of what sounded like a FaceTime call. Boudreaux wasn't wearing a headset. As the conversation wrapped up, Jake waited a few beats, knocked gently, opened the door, and stepped in, wearing what he hoped was a disarming grin.

"I think you might have been talking about me," Jake said, settling into the old cracked Naugahyde chair across from Boudreaux.

Boudreaux's eyebrows shot up. "What? Why would I be talking about you, Jakey?"

Jake smiled. Mentally crossed his fingers that the 'make a little wake' plan he came up with last night would work. "Other than pretending I don't know I'm being followed, I'm here to find out how else I can help."

Boudreaux's expression hardened, then he seemed to deflate slightly. He put his mobile face down on the desk. "If you know where Leanne is, you can tell me. If you know where that woman

you conned me into doing an ID for is currently located, you can tell me that too.”

Jake met Boudreaux’s gaze steadily. “Boudreaux, I swear to you, I don’t know where either of them is but, “he leaned forward, “if you can tell me how they’re connected, maybe I can ask some questions. Enola’s is still a bar, and people still talk.”

Boudreaux shook his head, blowing out a frustrated breath. “Remy doesn’t seem as troubled as his mom and dad are. In fact, his dad is up my ass with a microscope, wondering if I’m pulling out every stop to find Leanne. As I’m sure you’re aware, no one in that family is gonna let a Fortier baby out in the world to become someone who might come back to bite the family in the ass one of these days.”

Jake watched as Boudreaux’s face reddened in direct proportion to his growing frustration. The older man stood abruptly, grabbed a photo off his desk, and shoved it toward Jake. “And this girl you helped? I don’t know who she is, but if there is any chance that she is her, and you know where she is, you’d better tell me. This fucking Greek is driving my old man nuts. And that means he’s driving me nuts.”

Jake studied the photo. A woman with long red hair and bright green eyes stared back at him. His heart raced, but he bit the inside of his cheek. Kept his face neutral.

Boudreaux paced a couple of steps, then turned back. “About Leanne? I lost her after Bozeman. I’ve done all I can do. But this one?” He snatched the photo of Mia from Jake and shook it. “She is invisible to me. I got no pictures of her in Delareau, in New Orleans, in Lafayette, or anywhere else in Louisiana. But something tells me she’s her—your her. And I’m really concerned that she’s mixed up with Leanne.”

Jake watched as Boudreaux sank heavily into his chair, rubbing his face with his hands. The man looked exhausted.

“I know what you think about this side of the family, Jake, but

I don't like to see anyone, especially girls, women, and especially women who are pregnant, get hurt. Hell, to tell you the truth, if they've gotten mixed up with each other, based on who wants to find 'em, I don't know which of those two is more at risk."

Jake weighed his next words. "Boudreaux, I promise you. I don't know where either of them is. But I'll ask around. Discreetly." He reached for the photo of Mia. "But maybe there's something else you can do to help."

Boudreaux's eyes narrowed. "I'm supposed to help you?"

Jake sat utterly still, heart in his throat. When he finally spoke, it was slowly and with great care. "Maybe help us all." He watched Boudreaux's face twist in confusion. "Our family, as I understand it, we have limits. There are some things we just don't do. I use 'our' and 'we' because even if I'm not involved in the day-to-day, I don't talk down to anyone in my family. Blood is blood. And if there's anything about the family worth bragging about, I'm proud that we've got boundaries on the business side of things."

Jake caught Boudreaux's slight nod. The flicker of surprise in his eyes.

"So, we—the family, I mean—we don't involve ourselves in . . ." Jake paused, emphasizing his next words, "in unsavory bottom-feeding activities that don't offer good business returns." He waited a beat and added, "Do we?"

Boudreaux's gaze flickered from surprise to curiosity. "No. No, Jake, we don't."

"We've always held ourselves just a little bit above the other families. We let our so-called competitors make all the money there is to be made in what you might call low-level activities. Thinking of it from a business perspective, I don't see any reason why anyone would want to change that. And if the big boss isn't seeing that right now, maybe you could be," Jake paused and held both hands up in an 'I-don't-know' gesture, "a kind of gatekeeper?"

Maybe you confront it with him directly or indirectly; you know, withhold just enough information in one place, share a misdirection in another?" He moved his hand, the one holding the photo of Mia, a small, offhand gesture to underscore the next point. "You know, just enough to keep the family out of some other family's very ugly and most definitely unprofitable business."

Jake held eye contact with Boudreaux for what seemed an age. Hoped the man couldn't hear his heart pounding in his chest.

Boudreaux remained quiet. Leaned back in his chair, steepled fingers in front of his mouth until he put them down, and Jake saw a curious half smile. "You know, Jakey, I'm thinking the reason no one's ever pressured you to come into the business is because they're afraid."

Jake's eyebrows shot up in surprise.

"Afraid you're so smart that in no time flat, you'd push someone else out and be running the joint."

Jake took a steady breath. So unexpected he almost laughed. Coughed to cover it and stood up to go. "Well . . . okay, then. Something to think about." He turned to leave but paused and turned back. "If you need me, call me. Or better yet, come to Enola's for a drink. On the house, of course. Any time you want." He smiled, nodded slightly, then turned and left the office.

As Jake drove home, he felt the tension coiled in his body, but he couldn't figure out whether the source was Mia and Leanne's fragile situation or his growing involvement with his extended family. Either way, he knew he was in deeper than he'd ever intended to be and recognized the tension for what it was: pure, cold fear.

CHAPTER 21

October 20: A Splash of Cold Water Ontonagon, Michigan

Rubbing a towel over her wet hair, Mia took a moment to appreciate the ordinariness of the past few days. She and Leanne had both taken long, hot showers, eaten good food, and talked about unimportant stuff. Their phones were on. Mia learned there was almost no risk of being tracked when connected to the cottage's wireless as long as their cellular service was off, and they'd both felt less isolated. Vikki had managed to get the draft name change paperwork done for Leanne. And this morning, Mia watched the new mother give Little Red his first bath.

"Bettecia told me to leave all of this stuff—this waxy after-bir-thy stuff. To leave it on him. That it'd be good for him. I thought yuck, you know." Leanne laughed, one hand under his head and the other squeezing some of the mild liquid soap on his tummy. "But turned out okay because bathing him would've been really hard when we were on the road. Right? And look at him now. He looks good. Like, pink and healthy."

Mia agreed. In the few days they'd been in Ontonagon, the baby had grown before her eyes. Leanne's breasts weren't sore anymore and she could nurse him without discomfort. And Little

Red was taking more milk when she fed him. He wasn't sleeping through the night, so neither were they. But they took turns taking naps.

Leanne insisted on doing everything baby-oriented herself. Mia didn't consider herself anything more than a 'basics only' cook, but she did the cooking, the dishes, laundry, and some simple house-keeping. And she'd begun working out; a few pushups and planks, and today she'd taken the canoe out of the shed and paddled down the Floodwood River to Lake Superior. Which didn't turn out quite as planned.

Shivering as she jogged into the house, she spoke through chattering teeth, "Don't bother trying to swim in Lake Superior, Leanne."

"Mia, you didn't! That water's straight-up cold."

"It's a lake, and it's early fall. I figured it'd still be warm." She pulled a throw off the sofa and wrapped herself in it. "It isn't."

Leanne laughed even harder. "You didn't spend as much time at the library as I did. When I was scared to read about having babies, Ms. Roussel made me read about all kinds of other stuff. I think Great Lakes water only gets up to like sixty-eight degrees in the summer. So right now, it's probably like sixty? Sixty-two-ish, maybe?"

"Well, there were a few people in the water down at the beach, so I thought it must be okay."

"Those were probably people from Canada."

"Oh." Mia stepped over to Leanne and put her finger under the baby's chin. "Well, at least I can entertain your momma with my ignorance."

Leanne and Little Red followed Mia toward her room.

"There's a wet suit in the closet in my room. You should probably use it next time."

“No. No next time. No way. It’s too cold!”

“And your phone chirped while you were gone. I didn’t look.”

“I’ll check it after I get some dry clothes on and warmed up.”

October 20: A New Name

Ontonagon, Michigan

“Vikki’s got the paperwork done,” Mia said to Leanne as she laid the phone back down on the coffee table. “It’s on my phone when you’re ready to sign it.”

“I still don’t know how a name change is supposed to help hide me from Remy and his family,” Leanne said. “If they find me, can’t they still force me back to Louisiana?”

“I think they can only force you to do something if they use guns,” Mia said, and went into the kitchen to prepare dinner. “Besides, based on what I heard from Jake, it’s not you they want. It’s the baby. Changing your name and working with your mom to establish financial stability for the new you, are the first steps. And Vikki said that it’s a good time to name the baby too.”

“Yeah, figured that’d be part of it. But I need a social security number, don’t I? Not just a new name. How does that part work?”

“I’m not the lawyer, Leanne, so I don’t know. Let’s just keep doing what Vikki tells us to do for now.” She placed thawed chicken in the sink and grabbed a Ziplock of prepped veggies.

“What a deal, huh? A box of vegetables every week?” Leanne said.

“Jessi and her mom are amazing people. I think they’re working with the property management company to do this . . .” Mia’s phone chirped again. “Can you get that? I’m wrist-deep in chicken.”

Leanne picked up the phone and squealed. “It’s a text from Momma!”

“Read it.”

Aunt Mertice passed away. And now that the funeral is over, I simply refuse to work on this estate of hers before I see my daughter and grandbaby.



Mia lay in bed that night and looked at the map. Robbi would arrive on the twenty-fourth, but that’s all she knew. If she had access to a single-engine private plane, she could fly into the local airport. If she was going commercial, the closest option would be Houghton County Memorial, otherwise it would be Duluth or Minneapolis-Saint Paul international airports.

Bottom line? Mia’s talent for planning wasn’t required; all Robbi needed from her was a local meeting place.

It had to be something with plenty of cars and people. Easier to blend in with the locals. She sent back a text with just two words: Pat’s IGA.

She snapped off the light. Since she’d be leaving the cottage’s wireless to meet up with Robbi and would need to turn her cell service back on, Mia wondered if she should learn more about how people with money and skills, especially men like Aleks, tracked digital footprints.

She slept soundly, ignorant of a threat far more tangible than ephemeral digital signals.

CHAPTER 22

*October 21: Debriefing
Washington, DC*

“No other mail? How can that be?” Aleks hissed. “Did you let her see you?” He looked around the booth. “Any of you?”

They were in Washington, DC, at the Old Ebbitt Grill on 15th Street NW. Aleks had booked a table for four—himself, Martin Bledsoe, the chief investigator he’d hired to find Mia, and Bledsoe’s two assistant investigators.

He considered the historic restaurant ‘appropriate.’ Its oak and brass decor lent it a certain gravitas that failed to register in newer establishments. The clientele: other powerful people. People like him. And Aleks swore he could still detect a hint of the expensive cigars once enjoyed by formidable men as they’d determined who’d have a seat at the table and who had no future at all.

“Sir,” Bledsoe said, “our surveillance has been extremely careful. I’m certain the Roberts woman saw no one from my team.”

The other men nodded their agreement. Aleks looked down at the table. Smoothed his pant legs. Attempted to calm himself. He did not want to attract attention or appear out of control.

He looked back up at Bledsoe and spoke through gritted teeth. “Please. Explain.”



“They addressed the first letter to Jessica Avery. Used her maiden name instead of Roberts,” Bledsoe said. “But if they have any savvy at all, they’ll use that name and address only once or twice. We’ll continue to monitor for another week or two.”

Best not to mention the difficulty his assistant had experienced when opening the first letter to scan it, or that it had been a bit of a mess by the time it went back into the USPS system.

“So what exactly has Mia’s best friend been doing?” Aleks asked, tone suggesting the investigative team had been eating donuts instead of doing their jobs.

The server appeared with a tray. He worked quickly and made no eye contact. “Gentlemen, please signal if you need anything. If I don’t see you, someone will alert me.” He disappeared as quickly as he’d arrived.

Bledsoe sank half his Arnold Palmer and continued, “She’s been living a normal life, days very much the same, sir. Going to work, caring for her family, visiting her mother, shopping for food. The only unusual behavior recently is a visit to the UPS store. She came out with a shipping box. We bribed a staff member and learned that she’d purchased the box to ship a gift and wanted to save money by using a standard size. She did not rent a PO Box there.”

His client’s eye roll was expected. “Surely she could have mailed a letter?”

“She could have.” Kept his voice level, ignoring his client’s condescension. “She may have carried something in her purse or even a small card in her hand—something we wouldn’t be able to see from a distance. But no one in the facility saw her drop anything in outgoing mail. We also had them check the bins. If she mailed something, she didn’t use her name in the return address.

It's another common technique in the early stages of hiding, but as I've mentioned before—"

"Yes, yes. You keep urging patience, but this is an urgent matter. It's been . . ." Aleks checked his watch, "almost three weeks. And the letter that came through the New Orleans processing center led us on a goose chase. An expensive one on my family's private jet."

About half of Bledsoe's clients were white, wealthy, entitled, and impatient. As a Black professional, he had grown accustomed to 'extra' scrutiny, unspoken expectations, and condescension. Sometimes he pushed back, but not this time. At the moment, he needed this client. Well, the man's money, anyway. He swallowed his irritation and continued.

"I understand the urgency. But patience allows us to take advantage of targets once they become sloppy. People who know little about how to hide make unexpected choices in the beginning. But as time goes by, they get comfortable. Become a bit more predictable."

"We could begin electronic surveillance," his assistant said.

Aleks shook his head. "Not yet. My wife has no access to her friends, her credit cards, her phone, not even her business. We will continue to use less—uh, the methods we have discussed. What else do you have for me? Surely something, given what you are being paid."

Another client expecting extraordinary results without funding more sophisticated methods. But Bledsoe kept the irritation to himself. "Yes, we do. Using the list you provided, we searched public records and located property owned by your wife's family and friends. Which, as you know, is how we found Sondra Cervantes' jet. We dug deep: hotels, second homes, investment and vacation properties. All very common hiding places. And we found this."

He placed a manila envelope on the table.

*October 21: Travel Planning
Washington, DC*

Aleks waited until he was back in his office to open the envelope.

Inside was an impressive list of properties owned by Mia's friends and their families.

Hiring Bledsoe was an unwelcome cost. Yes, he had money. Was wealthy compared to some. But not as wealthy as his family. He would be one day, of course, when his father died. Still, the investigator had been a necessity. Aleks had quickly realized that he did not know all the ways Mia might evade him. The first time, it had worked perfectly; Bledsoe had located her in an Airbnb in New York. The second, landing at the small town airport, Aleks had been sure this was the end. But things had turned out differently than expected. So he had gone to the decrepit office in New Orleans and spoken to the fat man. Had assigned him to monitor activities in Louisiana and promised him flight information. That man had come up with nothing of use.

Aleks had hoped for more from Bledsoe. But when the investigator reported no additional mail interceptions, no sightings on publicly available camera feeds, and no hits on social media, he had been at his wits' end. Now, it seemed, his investment was paying off. Bledsoe had asked for a list of people close to Mia. At the time, Aleks had not been sure why, but had assumed they would get information from some of them. Perhaps using methods he would prefer not to know about.

Now, reviewing Bledsoe's list, he realized he had underestimated Mia, thought she'd prefer to work alone. When he had gone to Jessica's house the day after his wife's disappearance and she had

told him that Mia would never disclose her whereabouts, Aleks had believed her. But there in front of him were the addresses of three properties owned by the Averys. And, of course, Mia would have access to them—she was family, albeit adopted.

Each one would need checking out. The question was: Who should do it?

Paying Bledsoe's team from his own pocketbook would be uncomfortable. Perhaps it was time to tell his parents the truth. They still didn't know that Mia had left him. But the thought of disclosing this information made his balls tighten. No, he decided. Better to stay with the current story, that his wife was on a scouting trip and that he had taken the family jet to visit her. But he would need to be careful; his parents noticed the expense and his mother discreetly encouraged him to fly commercial next time.

He would do the job himself. He called a travel agent unknown to his family, told her he was considering the purchase of property in Savannah, Ogunquit, and Ontonagon, and gave her his requirements. First-class cabins, private cars, five-star hotels.

"There are four-star resorts in Savannah and a couple of high-end ones in Ogunquit," the woman said. "But . . ." Aleks gritted his teeth at the tik-tik-tik of the woman's nails on her keyboard, "Ontonagon is super remote. And the towns and cities nearby aren't . . . well, you'll probably want to stay in Minneapolis-Saint Paul."

"Yes, yes, that's fine. Just book them, allowing a full day in each location and as reasonable a flight time as you can manage on travel days. And as quickly as you can," he said, then hung up.

Next, he drafted a proposal for an assignment that would take him out of the office for several days.

His boss at the embassy would approve. He always did. Aleks was a Hasapsis.

CHAPTER 23

October 23: Robbi's Flight Meridian, Mississippi

Hiding out at the ancient mansion in Mississippi carved a hole in Roberta Broussard's heart so big, even the sad state in which she found Mertice Bevins—her husband's elderly aunt with whom she'd enjoyed a fabulous relationship—couldn't fill it. Mertice had been a high-functioning woman whose coping skills had hidden her Alzheimer's diagnosis for so long that by the time Robbi'd known there was anything wrong, the late stages came quickly. With no children or grandchildren, home health staff cared for Mertice.

So yes. Sad. But the safest place to go when she left the Biloxi hotel where she'd landed right after Leanne's flight from Delareau. The first days dragged by, filled with nothing but wandering the grounds, worrying about Leanne, or sitting with Mertice, talking to her with no idea if the dear woman even heard. Robbi's attempts to distract herself were dismal failures; her sleep sporadic and restless, and the dark circles under her eyes impossible to mask even with her most expensive concealer.

She made the required calls back to friends in Delareau and New Orleans from her mobile, fearful she could be tracked. Robbi didn't know if 'tracked' meant just data or her actual words. But

it was no effort at all to follow Mia's instructions once a call was made. She cried with genuine worry over her daughter and grandchild on every call. All Jake had told her was that Leanne and the baby were fine in a brief message on the seventeenth. But the baby came nearly a month early by her math, compounding her concerns. Then she got a text in their fewest-words-possible style:

When ready, Ontonagon.

A search on the old computer in Mertice's library revealed Ontonagon to be a tiny speck right on Lake Superior's shore in the middle of absolutely nowhere. But 'ready' didn't mean when she felt ready. If it did, she'd already be out the door. It meant a minimum of two weeks at Mertice's with no signs of being watched. Mia must have her reasons; Robbi just couldn't fathom them. So the tears shed during calls home continued to come easily in her unrelenting state of high anxiety.

One week into her stay, as if she knew Robbi had come to see her off, Mertice passed away. The low-key, quickly arranged funeral occupied Robbi through the second of her minimum two weeks. She then spent a long day finalizing her plan to get from Mississippi to Michigan undetected. Mertice's closet yielded a wig and clothing Robbi felt would pass the Mia test for ensuring Robbi's anonymity during transit. Finally, it was go-time!

Robbi drove one of Mertice's old cars to Jackson, reaching the airport two hours before the final flight out. Using a prepaid Visa, she bought an economy-class ticket. No apparent tails, but heeding Mia's advice in case the Fortiers were watching, she'd donned the wig and dingy gray polyester track suit. No one flagged the difference between her disguise and ID photo. Thank God for that 'old women are invisible' thing. Through security and at the gate, she

tapped her foot in time with her inner worry, then boarded without incident.

Arriving in Minneapolis around 9:00 p.m., Robbi cabbed it to the Cambria Hotel. In her room by ten, she yanked off the wig and track suit, massaged her scalp in relief. After a long hot shower, she sank into bed, grabbing what restless sleep she could.

***October 24: Robbi Hitches a Ride
Minneapolis-Saint Paul Airport***

Awake early, Robbi drank the terrible hotel in-room coffee and booked a 6:00 a.m. Lyft to general aviation, where private flights were available. She'd charter a small plane to Ontonagon instead of driving five and a half hours. She couldn't wait that long to see her daughter and what she prayed was a healthy grandson.

This time her disguise was simpler: jeans, black Sketchers with fake laces, a long-sleeved black T-shirt, and a down vest. She'd pulled on a black New York Yankees ball cap and let her short ponytail hang out the back. It was too early for the big sunglasses, but—with or without them—she was certain she'd lost all resemblance to the refined and well-dressed Roberta Broussard people in South Louisiana knew. A small world. You never know who you're gonna run into.

Thirty minutes later, she stood at the terminal counter. An earnest young man with Latin-dark good looks and a smile that said 'Minnesota nice' was trying to be helpful. But Robbi's optimism that she'd be able to do this was fading fast. She looked at his name tag.

"Santiago, it's hard to believe that if I'm willing to spend a few thousand dollars, there's literally no one who can take me

to Ontonagon today. I have a newborn grandson to see! You're looking at a desperate grandmother here!" She smiled an anxious grimace.

"I'm so sorry, ma'am. There are several events in the northern part of the state this time of year, before it gets too cold, yeah? So all of the private aircraft are booked." Looking as helpless as Robbi felt, Santiago turned his attention back to his monitor and mumbled, "Let me look at—" A woman emerged from the office behind him and interrupted the young man, speaking to Robbi as she approached the counter.

"Are you the adventurous type?" Steel-gray hair, sharp blue eyes, a crooked smile, and something in the way she stood that read muscular. Early fifties, attractive.

Robbi checked the woman's name tag and answered instantly. "Brenda, I'm trying to go see my grandbaby for the first time. So if you've got a way for me to get to Ontonagon without driving all day, I'll channel Lara Croft to get there!"

Brenda laughed. "My brother Benjamin and I are flying to Ontonagon in his floatplane today. Visiting our mom for a long weekend of talking and fishing."

"Does that mean you're going to land on water?"

"Yep. That's exactly what it means. It's small; a three-seater. But if you're up for it, the extra seat's yours." She beamed a thousand-watt smile full of challenge at Robbi.

Robbi beamed right back at her. "Brenda, I grew up flying in a crop duster with my older brother. I don't need to be Lara Croft to get excited about a water landing! You just tell me where to be when and how much cash to contribute. You've got yourself a passenger."

"We'll leave here at noon; should be in Ontonagon around two-thirty-ish. You've got a few hours to kill, so," she waved Robbi to

come behind the counter and follow, “you can wait back here in the staff lounge. It’s much more comfortable than the lobby.”

***October 24: Aleks
Minneapolis-Saint Paul Airport***

Just as Robbi was getting settled in general aviation’s employee lounge to await her seaplane flight, Aleks’ driver picked him up at the front door of the same Cambria Hotel Robbi’d left an hour earlier. In a foul mood, depressed that he did not find Mia in either of the first two locations, he’d saved the least convenient, Ontonagon, for last. The Cambria was as pedestrian as the other accommodations he’d had on this trip. None were the Four Seasons level of luxe he considered his due.

“Where to, sir?”

“We are going to, as you Americans say, a dot on the map called Ontonagon. I have appointments there this afternoon. How long will it take us?”

“Your travel agent only gave me the town’s name. Do you have a specific address?”

Aleks air dropped a pin to the driver. It took a moment to get the directions up.

“With no stops, or traffic problems, five-and-a-half hours, Mr. Hasapsis. So around 2:30 p.m.”

“We will have no stops.” He turned his attention to his iPad and let the driver do his job.

*October 24: Flat as a Flitter
Ontonagon, Michigan*

Mia pulled everything out of the shed and into the light so she could see what she was doing. Mostly, she struggled with the hand pump and a bicycle tire.

"Where are you meeting Momma?" Leanne, no babe in her arms, asked.

"At the grocery store. I texted only 'Pat's IGA,' so nothing should stand out if anyone's flagging anonymous messages."

Mia was pumping as she talked, but the tire didn't seem to get any less flat. "Little Red sleeping?"

"Uh-huh. You know, he's almost two weeks old. Can you believe that?"

"Really?" Mia stopped pumping and looked at Leanne, mentally calculating the days.

She saw pride and relief, but also that Leanne had gained a little weight. In fact, the new mother looked about ten times healthier than when they'd first met. Leanne bounced on her toes, grinning from ear to ear even as her fists clenched. "I wish I'd thought to put cake mix on the grocery list they picked up on Friday. We could have had a birthday cake."

"Well, it just so happens I'm going to be at a grocery store today."

Leanne did a little jig of joy. "That will be so much fun! Oh, and don't forget the—"

"I know. The icing." She went back to pumping.

"And a candle, or a box of little candles! And I'll make it. You don't have to worry about that. I'm sure there's a cake pan of some kind somewhere in that jumble of stuff in the bottom drawer by the stove."

Mia stopped pumping again. She looked down at the tire.

“Flat as a flitter,” Leanne said.

“What’s a flitter?”

“I don’t know,” Leanne said, pulling out her phone. “It’s something my grandma used to say. Something super flat from the olden days maybe? But we’re in luck. Looks like we have a couple of Uber drivers in the area.”

“I don’t like it, Leanne.”

“I know. But if we’re gonna keep the SUV out of sight for now, I think it’s the only game in town.”

Leanne tapped her phone. “Your pickup is at two-fifteen, so you’ll be on time at the grocery to meet Momma.”

Mia leaned the decrepit bike against the side of the shed. Decided she was grateful—wouldn’t have to pedal the rusty thing to town. She looked at the canoe. *Next time, no swimming, okay?* A warning, as if the canoe was to blame for Mia’s recent introduction to Lake Superior’s frigid water.

The canoe remained ominously silent in response.

CHAPTER 24

October 24: Robbi in a Floatplane Over Lake Superior, Michigan

Robbi looked at her watch for what felt like the two hundredth time. Maybe forty-five minutes from Ontonagon. She looked out of the window; still couldn't see anything but dark, green forest. She heard Brenda and her brother chattering in her headset. They were all wearing one. The engine was loud. It was the only way they could communicate during the flight from Minneapolis.

She'd spent her time in the staff lounge as productively as she could. She'd verified the location of Pat's and learned there were a few Uber drivers in the area to take her there. Checked her watch again, rolled her eyes, then closed them, and willed herself to settle.

When she opened her eyes again, she saw a glimmer of blue in the distance.

"Brenda," Robbi jumped in when there was a break in the conversational action. "Where are we going to land?"

"On the water, like I told you!" Brenda and her brother Benjamin both laughed. "Just kidding. I know what you mean. We'll pull up at the beach. I figured we'd all disembark there, and we'll drop you at the cottage where your grandbaby is. Or wherever you need to go." She turned from the front seat to look at Robbi in the back. "If that's okay with you?"

“Oh my heavens, you all are being too kind to me!” She summoned her courage and texted ‘cottage’ to Mia’s phone. She closed her eyes to hold back tears. Brokenhearted that she hadn’t been there during Leanne’s labor, she swallowed hard and focused on the fact that she was about to spend a day or two with Leanne and the baby. And she’d brought some information with her—something she hoped would be useful in getting Leanne’s new ID sorted; if it didn’t upset Leanne too much to find out about it. But she’d cross that bridge when she came to it.

She looked out ahead of the plane and couldn’t believe how beautiful Lake Superior was. Maybe it was that song by Gordon Lightfoot, “The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald,” but she’d always thought of it as being a dark, cold gray.

“It looks like the Caribbean!” Robbi shouted into her headset mic. Benjamin laughed. “We get that a lot.” He added, “Starting the descent. If anyone feels queasy, let me know and I’ll take it a little slower.”

Robbi said, “Imitate my brother the crop duster, Benjamin.”

Brenda turned around again and said, “Remember girl, you asked for it!”

The plane banked hard to the left and almost nosedived toward the water.

For a few seconds, Robbi forgot everything except the exquisite feeling of free falling she remembered from her childhood.

***October 24: Aleks in Ontonagon
Ontonagon, Michigan***

Aleks looked at his phone again. Ten minutes from the cottage. He wanted a men’s room but was reluctant to delay. Certain he

would find Mia when he arrived at this address, he was too close. And ready. He had zip ties if he needed them. And a hypodermic. They would never be able to fly commercial this way, but he had confirmed the availability of the family jet to pick him up. It was always on standby and had no flight plan for the evening. His wife was coming home with him tonight.

He looked down at his clothing. Exquisite, as always. A gray Charvet dress shirt with black lightweight wool dress pants and a pair of handmade Italian shoes. He thought about the year and a half he had dated Mia, then married her, and wondered again what it was she wanted that he could not give her. He was wealthy, attractive, and he had purchased a beautiful house in an exclusive neighborhood for her to turn into their home. He shook his head, exasperated that there was anything more she could want. Then, just as quickly, remembered—she was an American woman, not Greek. She was independent and stubborn, like those women who fight their husbands in the movies. She would be made to see. Her life was not a fictitious Hollywood movie but a lifelong commitment to be by his side. In time, as women in his family had for generations, she would become a true wife.

“Sir, we’re about five minutes out. Thought you’d want to know.”

“Yes . . .” He started to say the driver’s name but realized he’d never asked it. “You will wait as instructed while I take care of business in the house.”

“Yes, sir. If I may, there’s a service station just up ahead. If you want me to wait at the house, I’ll need to take just a moment and use the facilities there.”

Aleks weighed the possibility that they’d need to go directly back to Minneapolis and get on the jet against the possibility that the driver would see Mia resist him.

“We will both use the facilities so that when I pick up my additional passenger, we can head straight back to Minneapolis.”

“Sounds good, sir.”

October 24: Leanne Sounds the Alarm
Ontonagon, Michigan

From the porch where she was nursing Little Red, Leanne looked up at the sound of a car, expecting to see the Uber driver arriving early. But when the big black SUV turned into the driveway, she shouted, “Mia. Incoming! Incoming!” She pulled the baby away from her breast. He cried as she rearranged her blouse and watched the Tahoe pull to a stop. She did not recognize the driver when he got out, walked quickly to the passenger side back door, and opened it. But Leanne instantly recognized the man who stepped out of the back seat. It was the man who’d taken her phone from her in Bozeman. Mia’s husband. She turned, raced into the house, closed the door behind her, and nearly ran into Mia.

“What’s going—”

“Mia, it’s Aleks,” she hissed.

Mia’s heart nearly stopped. “What? How the—”

“Just go! I’ll stall him but you’ve got to go!” Baby in one arm, she pushed Mia forward with the other. They ran to the back of the bedroom; Mia threw open the window. Leanne shoved her out. Closed and locked it.

She heard his footsteps on the porch and ran back to the front door. Instead of hearing a knock, she watched the doorknob turn. She grabbed it with her free hand to hold him back and shouted, “Just a second!”

The baby was still hungry and fussing to be fed. But there was nothing else to be done—Aleks pushed open the door.

October 24: A Frustrating Déjà Vu
Ontonagon, Michigan

Later, Leanne would say she wished she'd taken a picture of Aleks' face when he saw her.

His face twisted in confusion, and after a few seconds he whispered, "You? Again? Who are you?" *How to delay him.*

"Wait a minute. I know you. You're the crazy man from back in Bozeman. You snatched my own phone right out of my hand. Are you stalking me?"

His expression hardened. "I cannot imagine how you are here. And I do not care. Where is Mia? Where is my wife?"

"What the hell are you talking about?" Leanne said.

Aleks shoved her shoulder; she stumbled backward, and he stormed past her into the house.

Leanne reeled back but caught herself as Little Red's fuss turned into a wail. She pulled her phone from her back pocket and hissed, "Get out. Now. Or I'm calling the police."

Aleks swung around and knocked the phone from her hand. "You are harboring my wife here. You have to be. This is where she is, I know it."

"Mister, I have no idea what you're talking about." She bent and picked up the phone, prayed Mia was in the canoe and already moving downriver. "There's no one here but me and my baby."

"We will see about that." He ran up the stairs, and Leanne listened as he shoved furniture around.

“There’s nothing up there but baby stuff,” she called out. She checked her phone. Another minute had passed. *That’s right, dude. Keep searching.* Her heart skipped when Aleks came thundering down the stairs and went into the downstairs bedroom, where he found an unmade bed, a pile of clothes in the corner, and a few items of clothing hanging on hooks. He came back into the foyer and checked the bathroom, then muttered, “Wait a minute. Wait just a minute.” He stepped back into the bedroom.

Leanne followed. Aleks walked over to the window, unlocked it, and pushed it up. Behind the house was a shed. On the far side of that, the river. *Please, Mia, please be in the canoe.* He turned back from the window and toward the door. Stopped and pulled out his phone. He pointed it at Leanne and Little Red.

She threw her hand up. “Wait, you can’t do that!”

He took the photo, then pushed past her, and ran out the front door to the waiting SUV. Seconds later, the driver executed a three-point turn and sped toward the road, spewing gravel back toward her.

***October 24: Up a Creek
Ontonagon, Michigan***

Mia’s feet barely touched the ground before she broke into a dead run for the shed. She dragged the canoe twenty yards to the bank of the Floodwood River, pushed it halfway into the water, and jumped in. The paddle was exactly where she’d left it. She used it to shove herself away from the bank into the river’s current.

She paddled hard until the house was no longer in sight and she was surrounded by trees. There was nothing here. Which

was fitting because that's pretty much what she had—nothing. Except . . . She laughed out loud. A panicky, high-pitched sound of relief. There, in the little cubby under the bow, was a wet suit. Leanne must have tossed it in.

Mia recognized a gift when she saw one. Assuming she might have to hide until darkness came, she banked the canoe on a sandbar, stripped down, and began struggling into the suit.

In the distance, she vaguely registered the sound of a bee. That quickly became a swarm. She hurried to zip the wet suit as the buzz became a roar right above her. She recognized the noise for what it really was. *Jesus, he's hunting me from the air too?*

CHAPTER 25

October 24: An Aerial View Over Lake Superior, Michigan

Benjamin leveled out a few hundred feet from the surface of the lake. There were cottages on the shore and a few people on a beach further south.

“Would you look at that?” he said. “Someone’s in a big hurry.”

He pointed down to where a large black SUV was speeding south on the winding two-lane road. He banked the plane in the other direction. Close to the shore, thirty or forty yards up a small river, Robbi spotted a woman, half naked, pulling on what looked like a wet suit.

Brenda said, “I hope that’s neoprene. It’s been a warmer-than-usual fall up here, but the water’s still damn cold.”

Robbi’s phone vibrated in her lap. Read the text. It was from Leanne:

Mia’s husband found us. She’s in canoe. He has pic of me and baby. What next? Watch out for black Escalade.

“Either of you get the model of that car?” Robbi yelled into her mic.

“Not sure,” Brenda said. “Something big. A Suburban, maybe a Tahoe or an Escalade.”

Robbi peered down toward the ground. “Can you loop around and get me close to the water? I need to get a look at that woman.”

Benjamin pushed the throttle forward and banked right. “Sure, but what’s going on?”

“I think whoever is in that SUV is after the woman in the canoe. She’s my daughter’s friend; her life could be at risk.”

Benjamin reduced their altitude again.

“Oh my God! It is her,” Robbi said. “It’s Mia.”

Benjamin pulled the plane back up and banked south. When they leveled out again, the black SUV was visible on the beach. Two men stood in front of it. One was gesticulating, yelling at the other.

The plane turned back out over the water and banked right again. A powerboat full of laughing people sped toward the beach. And nearby in its wake, a flipped-over canoe.

But no Mia.

***October 24: Aleks Storms a Beach
Ontonagon, Michigan***

Aleks screamed at the driver in Greek—for no other reason than there was no one else to scream at.

“I’m sorry sir! I’m so sorry but I don’t understand what you’re saying!” The driver, struggling to maintain professionalism, waved his hands placatingly.

Aleks paced furiously back and forth. Stopped and looked north, toward where he’d estimated the stream he’d seen behind the cottage would empty into Lake Superior. The canoe emerged

from behind the trees; little more than a dark green speck with a body in black trying to keep the canoe steady in the rough water. He pulled his phone out and started taking photos.

Heard laughter and glanced at several people standing in the water. *Why are they staring? Idiots. Ignore them. Why does everything look smaller in a phone camera?*

“Do you have binoculars?” Aleks yelled as he stormed back toward the passenger side of the car. He leaned in and pulled the glove box open. Swore in Greek. No binoculars. Looked up and down the beach, turned, and looked back behind him. There was a rental shack fifty yards from him. He ran toward it, the fine leather of his Italian shoe soles sliding on the sand covering the asphalt. When he reached it, he pounded on the door. One of the waders yelled, “No good. Closed for the season.”

He hurried back toward the water, stopping short of the lapping waves, and looked north to check on the canoe’s progress. A buzzing caught his ear. He looked up. A small plane was circling. It appeared to Aleks as if it would land, and he wondered for a couple of seconds where that might be, then shifted his attention again back to the canoe. The paddler, he thought, then corrected himself, Mia, was turning away from the beach where he stood. That’s when he saw the powerboat, several people standing, shouting, laughing—looking very much to Aleks like a drunken party—speeding straight toward the canoe.

“By Zeus!” he shrieked as he watched the boat veer to port and wobble, the captain clearly trying to gain control to avoid the canoe or running aground. Then he watched the powerboat’s wake flip the canoe. When he saw the person he believed was his wife surface, he yelled to the driver, “Can you see the person by the canoe? What do you see? I cannot tell. Is it a man or a woman?”

The driver looked at Aleks then squinted, tilting his head in confusion. “Sir? You want to know if I can see the person in the water?”

“Yes, yes! You idiot! Is it a man or a woman?”

The driver turned to look south toward the canoe, then back to Aleks. “No disrespect, sir, but that person in the water is at least a mile away. Much too far for me to make out any details. What I can say is that, man or woman, that water is frigid! If they don’t get out of the water soon, they may go down for good.”

“The hair. Can you at least see the hair?” Aleks paced furiously back and forth at the water’s edge, taking photo after photo.

“Hair? All I see is black, except for a little white dot that might be a face.” And then both men looked up toward the sound of the little plane that had been circling the area. The two stared as the plane lined up and reduced speed, clearly about to land on the water, pointing itself directly toward the canoe.

Eyes wide, fists clenched, Aleks watched in disbelief. Was someone else helping his wife?

October 24: Mia in the Drink
Ontonagon, Michigan

Mia fought with the water. The past few weeks had stripped her of several pounds and drained her strength. The rough waves of Lake Superior and the strong current of the river threatened to get the better of her.

The buzz of the plane’s engine grew louder. If Aleks had someone in the sky watching her, her escape was over. She didn’t notice the other sound—a powerboat coming right at her.

The canoe tipped left. Mia focused on the paddle, holding it straight to keep from flipping. She steadied herself, then checked right.

A powerboat was streaking toward her.

In what felt like slow motion, Mia watched the captain's mouth open in surprise. He jerked the wheel left. She threw up her arms as if to keep the boat from hitting her; felt a whoosh of air on her palms and face as it skimmed past, missing her by inches.

She sucked in a breath as a wall of water from the boat's wake slammed into her broadside.

She flipped.

Lake Superior hit her like an icy jackhammer, and she was instantly underwater, holding her breath, the little canoe's hull bobbing above. She kicked hard. Surfaced. Dragged air into her lungs and looked up at something buzzing.

The plane: It came straight toward her. *First the cottage and now he had goons in a plane?* Adrenaline hit; Mia forgot the cold. Forgot everything. She instantly turned and swam desperately toward the shore, hoping she could reach it and run.

October 24: Water Landing and Rescue Ontonagon, Michigan

Robbi's heart raged like a caged animal. The two men in the SUV were driving back toward the cottage, and Mia was swimming away from the canoe. Away from the plane.

"Oh my God, she thinks we're working for her husband."

Brenda spoke into her mobile phone. Talking to someone named James. Telling him about the flipped canoe, the SUV speeding toward the cottage where Leanne and Mia had been staying, the danger they were in. "Headed north on M-64. Yeah, okay."

Brenda ended the call and looked over at Robbi. Gave her a thumbs-up.

They were almost on the water now.

Robbi held her breath.

***October 24: On the Float
Ontonagon, Michigan***

“Are you absolutely sure you want to do this?” Brenda said as Robbi unsnapped her seatbelt.

They skimmed across the bumpy surface of the lake toward the abandoned canoe. Robbi looked out the window at the large pontoons on Ben’s Super Cruiser. “I’ve got to get out there where she can see me. Otherwise, she’ll just keep swimming away from us.”

Benjamin cut the engine and let the plane glide toward Mia, who was fighting the waves.

Robbi took a deep breath. Stepped out of the plane’s door. She grabbed the wing strut and inched down onto the pontoon. “Mia! It’s me! Robbi! Come this way!”

Mia continued to swim away from the plane.

“Give her a toot, Benjamin!” Brenda shouted.

A horn blared.

Mia stopped, turned, and looked toward the sound of the horn.

Robbi waved. “Mia! We’re coming for you!”

Mia stared at her, bug-eyed. Then turned, dug her arms into the water, and swam to meet the plane. When it was close enough, Benjamin stepped out of the cockpit and reached down to offer a hand. She took it and struggled against the waves onto the pontoon.

As if this was just another day of talking and fishing, Benjamin said to them all, “We were lucky. Water’s reasonably flat today.”

Robbi laughed at his understated joke; didn't notice the tears streaming down her own face until Brenda handed her a tissue.

***October 24: Meet at the Beach
Ontonagon, Michigan***

Standing on the front porch, Leanne watched the Escalade speed away, thumbed a longer-than-recommended text to her mom with a heads-up about the SUV, then looked up toward the hum of an airplane she couldn't see.

That man, Mia's husband, had taken a picture of her and the baby. What that meant, she didn't know. All she knew was that when Mia returned—and Mia would return, she had to—they would have to leave.

She flew upstairs, laid Little Red on the bed, and began packing. It barely took her a full minute. She ran downstairs to the other bedroom and threw Mia's things into the black backpack the woman carried around like a totem.

Leanne jumped when she heard the car horn, ran to the front window, and looked out. She'd completely forgotten about the Uber she'd scheduled for Mia. Her phone dinged. A reply from her mother's burner:

Ontonagon Lake Superior Public Beach

She threw open the door and shouted to the driver, "Be out with our bags in five! I'm a new momma, and I'm finally going to get to see my momma!"

The Uber driver shouted back at Leanne, "Just had a baby myself. Bring more food and diapers than you think you need!"

But Leanne was already on her way upstairs to get the baby. She had no idea whether Aleks would come back to the cottage. But if he did, he'd find the place empty.

CHAPTER 26

October 24: From Beach to Safe House Ontonagon, Michigan

Mia, lying exhausted on a pontoon, roused just in time to see Robbi lock her daughter in a super-tight hug that might never have ended if the Uber driver hadn't brought Little Red around to meet his grandmother. She slid off the plane and slogged through the icy, knee-deep water. Her wet suit helped, but her teeth chattered with cold, fear, and adrenaline. She almost cried when her feet found dry sand.

The woman who'd been in the plane with Robbi introduced herself as Brenda and her pilot brother as Benjamin. "Our mom has a home right around the corner," she said, and pointed up the street. "We have plenty of room for you all tonight. It's enormous, warm, beautiful, and—best of all—secluded. There's no way the bad guys will find you there."

Mia stiffened. "What happened to . . ." A wall went up. Brenda knew something, but how much?

"The black SUV?" A younger woman leaned on Brenda's shoulder. "I'm Lila, Brenda's daughter. My friend James? He's a sheriff's deputy. He put the driver of that SUV in jail for driving fifty miles an hour over the speed limit." She giggled. "And since the passenger gave him some trouble, James locked him up too."

Mia tried smiling, but she was so damn cold. She rubbed her hands over her shoulders, but it made no difference. Her whole body felt like it was enveloped in cold, clammy syrup. “The passenger’s a diplomat. He won’t stay there long.”

Lila shrugged and draped a blanket around Mia’s shoulders. “James will make things difficult for them for as long as he can.” She nodded toward Little Red. “That kid’s got some red hair, doesn’t he?”

“Yeah, that’s what we’re calling him until Leanne officially names him. He’s Little Red,” Mia said, managing a quick smile.

And that was enough, Mia decided. For now.

***October 24: Superior Solitude and a Hot Bath
Ontonagon, Michigan***

Leanne, lying on a deeply comfortable sofa, opened her eyes. Still couldn’t believe it. Her momma was right there in front of her, no disguise required. And Little Red was asleep on her chest, like they were the most normal family in the world.

Claire Smithton’s home felt like a refuge. The house was even bigger than her family’s Southern plantation in Delareau. And Brenda had been right. It was beautiful. The red cedar building fit perfectly amid the trees surrounding it, the wood radiating a soft, rich perfume.

They were well hidden. Protected.

The decor was mountain comfortable: deep-cushioned sofas and chairs upholstered in a buttery dark-brown leather; simple rugs scattered over the hardwood floors; a fire in the massive hearth; a matte-black grand piano in one corner; and live plants on a bookcase in the other.

She sighed. A pity. They'd have to leave at some point. Probably sooner rather than later.

She handed Little Red to her mother and went to the kitchen. Smiled at Claire. "Ma'am, I don't know y'all, but I haven't felt this safe since before I was pregnant. I just want to thank you for letting us be here."

"You haven't felt safe?" Benjamin said. "I thought those men were after Mia. That's her name, isn't—"

"I'm glad you feel safe, sweetie," Claire interrupted. "You and that beautiful baby! And Benjamin, we'll hear all about it after supper tonight. You finish slicing those potatoes so I can get them in the oven." She looked back up at Leanne. "My scalloped potatoes are famous around here."

Mia appeared in the doorway.

"Ah, she lives!" Claire said.

October 24: After Supper
Ontonagon, Michigan

Two hours and a long story with several sidebars later, Mia's heavy eyes popped open when Claire slapped her thighs and said, "My God, we haven't had anything like this happen around here for, oh, thirty, maybe thirty-five years." She looked over at Benjamin. "You were just a little thing then."

"Here at your house?" Robbi asked, yawning.

"No. It was a house, I think south of town." Claire tilted her head, thinking. "Something went wrong but I don't remember any details. Or why I brought it up." She laughed lightly and took a sip of her cognac.

Everyone else was quiet. Mia figured they were still absorbing the full weight of the threat their guests were under. Could see that Robbi and Leanne were as exhausted as she was; probably needed a bed more than anything else.

“Wait a minute now.” James, the deputy who’d waylaid Aleks and his driver, had joined them after dinner. He’d been so quiet, Mia had almost forgotten he was there. “You’re telling me that the two guys I pulled over are chasing you,” he pointed to Mia, “but keep finding you?” He nodded toward Leanne.

Leanne grinned at the deputy. “Right? It’s really kind of funny. Not the chasing, of course. I just mean his face. The first time, when the medics had me on the stretcher at the Bozeman airport and he was so sure I was going to be Mia, he just looked . . . I don’t know, like he wanted to hurt me for not being Mia. And then today? He totally lost his mind when he saw me.”

“Well, yeah,” James wasn’t smiling. “It could be funny if it weren’t so serious, but what I’m wondering is—”

Leanne interrupted. “Oh, I forgot to mention he took my picture. And I can’t figure out why he did that.”

Mia felt a chill run through her. She knew exactly why.

James looked at both women and began again, “What I’m wondering is the same thing. Does he have any way to know that the two of you are together?”

Mia took this one. “I can’t imagine how he could. But especially since it’s happened twice, he can’t possibly think it’s a coincidence.” She patted the side pockets of her sweats. “I’ll let Jake know. Maybe he can shed some light.” Not feeling a phone in either pocket she started to stand up.

James was concerned. “Maybe you should just call him. Now, if you can. Ms. Claire, you still have a landline here, right?”

“I do. Old-fashioned, I know. And mostly seems to ring with calls I don’t want. But not old-fashioned enough to be tied to a

copper line. It uses the internet so, in case the power goes out or we go out on the lake too far to get a signal, I also have a satellite phone.”

James smiled. “Then let’s go with the sat phone. It’ll be almost impossible to track.”

Mia saw an opportunity to learn something. “I thought cell phones used satellites to communicate.”

“Yeah, but mobile phones use cellular signals, so that signal goes to a cell phone tower first. In rare instances, the cell signal may eventually go to a satellite, but a sat phone doesn’t use the tower. It goes straight to the satellite. So, unless either of your husbands have people with some extremely expensive equipment, chances of them intercepting a sat phone signal is virtually zero.”

Mia took the handset from Claire. “I can reach him on his burner. No one knows he has it except those of us in the,” she made air quotes, “Leanne and Little Red network.”

Everyone looked at the baby who’d awakened and was lying back against Robbi’s chest, facing the crowd.

Leanne said, “It looks like he’s watching and listening. Like he totally knows what’s going on.” Everyone laughed. “Though, of course, I hope not. I hope all of this is way over when he gets old enough to remember stuff.”

Mia stepped out into the cold night air on Claire’s wraparound porch. Her heart raced as she dialed the number. Could he do anything to delay what would happen with that photo of Leanne?



He answered, but didn’t say a word.

“Jake, it’s me. I’m on a satellite phone.”

“Mia!” he almost shouted. “Mia, are you okay? Leanne? The baby? Did Robbi get to you guys yet?”

“Robbi’s here and everyone’s fine. But not for Aleks’ lack of trying.”

Jake said, “Tell me everything.”

She did. Then Jake caught Mia up. Over the moon that they’d run into good people who were helpful, she started to tell Jake about the Smithtons, but he quickly reminded her not to tell him where they were or give him any names.

“Oh. That’s right. Sorry.” She shook her head, wishing that she could tell him. But got back on task. “So, the photo of Leanne and Little Red?”

“Aleks will send that photo to Boudreaux,” Jake said. “Probably already has.”

Mia added, “And will probably tell him where he took it, right?”

“He’s trying to strong-arm Boudreaux, so he might withhold the location. And, I can’t be sure yet, but I hope—based on what I said to him about bottom-feeding business practices that don’t make money—Boudreaux might resist doing anything about it, even if he knows.”

Mia thought about that for only a moment. “Good to know. But playing it safe, until you know for sure, let’s assume Aleks will give him all the information, and Boudreaux’s blood will be thicker than water.” Mia hated the thought, but they’d have to move again. And soon.

Jake sighed. “Yeah. That’s safest,” then added, “I can buy a sat phone myself, if that’ll help.”

“Based on what I learned tonight, unless you think someone suspects you’re involved, I don’t think it’s necessary.” Mia yawned. “Jake, taking an unexpected swim in Lake Superior is exhausting. I’ll call you again—”

Jake cut her off. “Okay, but wait. Before we hang up, you’ll want to know this. I’ve been working the ‘let her go’ angle from this end.

And it's not Remy who wants Leanne or the baby. It's his family. And they want the baby way more than they want Leanne."

"So Remy doesn't want either of them, and the family only wants the child." She thought for a moment. "I'll let them know. You South Louisiana people do things a little differently, so who knows what kind of idea that might spark."



Claire cornered the deputy in the foyer by the front door and asked him if he'd mind checking on the cottage Leanne and Mia had been staying in. "You'd be doing them a favor and the town a public service, James. All things considered."

James nodded. "I can install a camera on the front door too. If there's any activity, it'll send an alert to my mobile, if you can get the owner's permission."

"Leave it with me." Claire touched his arm. "And James, Leanne gave me keys to their vehicle. Can you get someone to bring it here? I have an empty bay in the garage."

"Yep. Can do." James smiled and gave Claire a brief salute as he turned back toward his patrol car.



Before they went to bed, Mia stopped Leanne and Robbi in the upstairs hall. She told them what Jake learned about the family wanting the baby.

"I'm not sure what that means to you two, if anything. But if Remy doesn't really want to be married to you, Leanne, maybe that opens up a new avenue or something." She had an idea of her own but wondered if they'd have the same one if she gave it a little time.

Robbi looked away; something in the distance that Mia couldn't see.

Leanne shifted the baby to her other arm and opened the door to her guest room. "I'll think about it, Mia." She yawned loudly as she closed the door behind her.

Robbi turned to Mia and smiled. "I might have something we can use. We'll talk about it in the morning. Right now, you get some sleep!"

"You too Robbi." She laughed and yawned sleepily. "And thanks again for the water rescue."

***October 24–25: Pixilated
Reston, Virginia***

The next evening, Aleks' thoughts roiled, anger seethed. That incompetent driver had gotten them both pulled over for speeding, and despite explaining about his wife falling into the water, the idiotic small-town police officer remained unmoved. It had taken an hour in the tiny jail cell for the officer to get, whatever, sorted out.

"You, sir, can do whatever you want to do; stay in town, leave town. I've got no argument with you. But I am required by law to put your driver in jail until he can make bail."

Aleks left the driver to sort out his own problems and called another car service. He finally reached Minneapolis-St. Paul airport after midnight, which meant another wasted night in a sub-standard hotel, then an early flight home to be back at work as promised.

He then suffered through a relentless workday and arrived home exhausted, famished, and still without Mia.

And now this. No matter what digital tricks the Photoshop editor he hired tried with those images, the face of the person who had tipped out of the canoe remained stubbornly hidden. She was useless!

He showered then arranged tomorrow's clothes on the dressing rack in his closet. Pleased with the image the outfit would convey, he glanced at the stack of printouts on the closet's center island. Selected one for closer study in bed, but still the image refused to yield its secrets. Aleks pushed it to what had once been Mia's side, then turned over, and switched off the light.



He opened his eyes the next morning to sunlight hitting the infuriating photo printout lying next to him; still there, still mocking him. He crumpled it, hurled it across the room, then grabbed his phone, and tapped out an email:

Find and purchase whatever tools you need. You will enhance that photo until I can see the face! It is what I have paid you to do.

Soon, Mia would have nowhere to hide.

CHAPTER 27

*October 25: Family History
Ontonagon, Michigan*

Mia found Claire in the kitchen when she came downstairs the next morning.

“There’s the coffee and fixings, Mia.” Claire nodded toward the coffee maker as she carefully spaced frozen biscuits on a nonstick pan. “Help yourself.”

Mia poured a cup and took a sip. “Oh my God. We’ve been making do with stale, canned preground something or other. You just ground those beans a few minutes ago, didn’t you?”

“I am not ashamed to admit how spoiled I am.” Claire slid the pan into the oven and went to the fridge. She took out an eighteen-count container of eggs and set it on the counter.

She turned to ask Mia how they took their eggs, but stopped when Leanne walked in, baby fussing and wiggling in her arms.

“This boy really loves his momma’s milk!” She sat down at the kitchen table, threw a small blanket over her shoulder, and began nursing. “Mia, can I have a cup?”

As she poured Leanne’s coffee, Mia said, “Your mom told me last night after you went to bed that she may have an idea.”

“My momma has never been short of ideas.” Leanne laughed. “I wish I’d listened to more of them.” She took the coffee cup in her free hand and drank.

Robbi's voice entered the kitchen just ahead of her. "I wished you had too, until I met this little one yesterday." Poured a cup of coffee as she spoke. "If you'd listened to me, this little redhead wouldn't be in our lives. But he's here now, and I'm in love with my grandson. And grateful for whatever circumstances delivered him to us." She took a sip of the coffee, widened her eyes as she looked up at Claire. "Wow!"

"Yeah," said Mia. "It's a-maz-ing!"

Robbi turned back to Leanne. "That doesn't mean I'm glad for what you went through, my love."

"I know, Momma."

"So, we're going to dwell on the future."

Leanne nodded. "Exactly. And yeah, I got the paperwork that Mia's lawyer sent over to change my name and get his name recorded. I just, with everything that happened, I totally spaced and didn't sign it yesterday."

"Well, that might be a good thing. Because before you sign anything, I need to tell you a story."

"You do?"

"Yes. It's about your father."

***October 25: Another Baby Momma
Ontonagon, Michigan***

"Daddy had a baby momma?"

Robbi blurted, "Well, we certainly didn't call it that back then."

They were sitting in the family room. Robbi, flustered and blushing, saw her daughter bug-eyed; maybe not in the bad way she'd expected. She watched Mia shift her gaze back and forth between them, trying to gauge the temperature between her and her daughter.

Robbi escaped to the kitchen for more coffee and to give them a minute to process. She'd returned to find her daughter on the verge of a belly laugh.

"Daddy was wilding?" Leanne grinned, stifling giggles as she patted Little Red on the back. He was on the verge of sleep.

Mia too tried to contain her laughter. "It might not be as funny to your mom, even though it's been a few years."

Huffing at their efforts, Robbi put a note of warning in her response. "The tale's not quite finished. And the ending is very sad. The baby died in a car crash when she was a little over a year old." She let that settle for a moment.

Mia and Leanne both sobered, then Mia spoke, "Robbi, that is sad. I don't know what to say."

"Yes. And, well, I'm flustered because I have to say something I think might seem, I don't know, insensitive. But the truth is, I did some research and found out that one way to get a new identity is to find a usable birth certificate—one belonging to someone who'd have been the same age of the person who wants to disappear." Seeing confusion on her daughter's face, she added, "Usable meaning the birth certificate is for someone who died."

"I came across that too, Robbi," Mia said. "Ideally, it's someone who'd been assigned a social security number and had a work history. The best scenario is when a person dies overseas in an accident that involved a lot of other people. Preferably where the bodies weren't recovered."

"That's horrible," Leanne whispered and closed her eyes.

"Horrible for the person who died, but good for the person who needs to disappear," Mia said. "It makes opening bank accounts, getting credit cards, applying for jobs—everything I can't do yet—totally doable. What makes it even easier? I read that vital records officers in most states don't link birth and death certificates. So the possibility of being found out is minuscule."

"That's good to know," Robbi said and looked meaningfully at her daughter, "if you decide to take this route, Leanne."

"But you said the little girl died. No work history or anything, so . . ."

"That's right, sweetie. But here's the thing: You're so young, you don't really need a work history just yet. You just need a new name and social. And I have the birth certificate and social security card right here with me."

"If we give this to Vikki," Mia said, barely able to hide her excitement, "she can complete the new identity, and you can begin getting your documents. And you can name Little Red for good too!"

"And," Robbi said, "Louanne Mirelle Broussard has a trust."

"She does? I mean, did? Wait, she has our last name?"

Robbi nodded. "Your dad came to me when this all happened, confessed what he'd done, and apologized for it. He was terribly ashamed. And as far as I know, never did anything like it again. But he is, was, an honorable man. He was not about to let the woman or the baby do without, so he put his name on the birth certificate. He also established a trust and put a small amount of money in it. When he died, the estate attorney and I found out that he'd never dissolved that trust, even though the child had died. The money he'd put in had grown into a fairly decent sum. The baby's mother died the year after your dad did, and I've just not done anything about it; figured I'd tell you about it one of these days and then we'd decide whether to keep the money or donate it."

"You're going to give it to me? I mean, that's nice, but I don't need it."

Robbi leaned forward and put her cup on the coffee table. "If you decide to take this route, you will become the recipient, and it'll be yours to do with as you see fit. Our attorney will help you figure it out."

Then Robbi explained how the Broussards and the Guidrys had been working together since the late 1800s—the Broussards in various Louisiana-based businesses and the Guidrys in every aspect of law. Trust ran deep. Which is why Robbi had easily transferred responsibility for her legal matters to Matt Guidry after his daddy died. And why she would go to him with the matter of the trust, the inheritance, and the titles and deeds to the property in Mississippi.

Mia jumped up. “This is brilliant, Robbi! All we need to do is—”

“I won’t be able to live in Delareau anymore, will I?” Leanne’s voice was flat, and she looked like she might cry. Her sadness silenced them.

Robbi stood and stepped over to her daughter and draped an arm around her. “I just don’t see how that would ever work, my darling girl.”

Leanne accepted the hug and watched her mother go back upstairs.



Watching Leanne to see how she was taking it, Mia decided reinforcement would be best. “No, Leanne. You won’t be able to live in Delareau,” she said. “Maybe I should have said that out loud back when we were still there; before you got on the plane. I guess I thought it was obvious. And I’m sorry about that.” She looked up at the ceiling, loathing how much she sucked at dealing with feelings. “I don’t think you’d have changed your mind about leaving, though. Would you?”

Leanne looked back at Mia with a sad half smile. “No. I wouldn’t have. I had to leave. For me and for my baby boy.” She pulled the sleeping baby tight to her chest.

Mia saw the perfect opening. “And that brings us to the much bigger problem of Little Red. Jake spoke to Remy, who says your mother-in-law is about as willing to give up a grandchild as Robbi would be. Says his father is pushing Boudreaux hard to find you. Not because they want you, Leanne. But, no surprise, I guess the Fortiers are not going to let one of their own go.” She paused. “I’ve been thinking about that, and I have an idea.”

October 25: The Red Hair Thing
Ontonagon, Michigan

Mia took Leanne for a walk, just the two of them. Deputy James had confirmed that Aleks had left town so Mia wasn’t worried. But to quell Robbi’s concern about them being seen, she promised they’d stay on trails and not walk toward town.

When they were among the trees, Mia said, “I don’t want to embarrass you or hurt your feelings, but I have to ask.”

Leanne’s face had not a single line of worry on it. “Ask what? What are you so nervous about?”

She took a deep breath and steadied her fidgeting hands. “Is there any chance at all that Little Red isn’t Remy’s son?”

Her smile disappeared. Leanne looked down at the trail as they walked. It was several uncomfortable minutes before she spoke.

“Mia, I don’t know what your husband’s like, but that question makes me think about hooking up with Remy. And I hate thinking about that.” Her sigh was deep. And sad. “I hate thinking about how messed up he was. Always accusing me of wanting to be with some other guy, and when I first told him I was pregnant, he even accused me of lying. Didn’t believe it was his kid. But I didn’t lie. I mean, like, don’t get me wrong. Back then, even before I hooked up

with Remy, I was pretty out of control. Smoked a little, then vaped in my late teens.” She smiled at a memory only a few years old.

But after Daddy died . . .” She took a few steps, shaking her head, “I like, totally lost it. I was just plain mean to Momma, as if it was her fault.” She looked up at Mia. “Moved on to flower, you know, weed.”

She sighed and looked up into the trees. Was quiet for a while. “I’d snatch Daddy’s car and drive like crazy. Go over to some friend’s place and not even answer my phone. Wouldn’t tell her where I was for days at a time. I almost flunked out of school. But mostly, I just didn’t know what to do with myself. Momma was so sad, I could hardly stand to look at her. I guess that’s how, I mean, the next thing I knew, I was hanging out with Remy.”

Leaning on years of interview experience, Mia simply listened.

“But sex? With like, a bunch of different people? I just couldn’t do it. I was all weird about my body and kinda messed up in my head about whether Daddy was, you know, watching from up there.” She pointed at the sky. “But Remy’d been hitting on me for a while, and I got wasted at a party one night and, well, you know. I didn’t think you could get knocked up the first time. But guess I won the freaking baby lottery or something.”

“Yeah. I guess you did.” Mia’s voice was soft and supportive.

Leanne shook off the memories and smiled. “So, long version of, nah, there’s no way the baby’s not Remy’s.”

Mia embraced the quiet for a moment, then decided some quid pro quo might ease her transition to the idea she wanted to present. “I had a hard time, too. My mom died when I was pretty young. I don’t really know the story. Have no idea who my dad is or what happened to him. Talk about screwed up. But the biggest problem I have is no memories.”

“Like, none?”

“Snippets here and there, but when someone asks me about the past and I try to remember, it’s just . . . I don’t know how to describe it. It’s just a blank. I focused on school, then work. Dated a couple of guys for a few months, but nothing serious. I think that’s one reason I was so swept off my feet by Aleks. He didn’t leave anything up to me. He blew in like a hurricane.” She laughed at the memory. “Always exciting plans—dinner, shows, a couple of trips. It all just happened.” She took a few beats. Thinking. What to leave in and what to leave out.

“And the next thing I knew, I was meeting his family.” She shook her head as she realized how little control she’d exerted over her own life. “In between, the business was growing; I kept working like a maniac and—it seemed so sudden—I was standing at the altar in a wedding gown I wasn’t sure I’d actually chosen myself, saying ‘I do’ because I didn’t know how to stop that train and get off.”

“Did you think that’s how it was supposed to be? I mean, I kind of thought it was. You know, like in the movies?”

Mia shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe. I just didn’t question it. Which is weird, because in every other area of my life, I question everything.”

She stopped and suggested they turn around before they got to the riverbank where they’d be more exposed. Again, she let a few minutes’ silence do its job; crossed her fingers that she’d chosen the right moment.

“Well, I figured that was the case, that Little Red had to be Remy’s son. But I had to ask.” She waited a beat. “It’s kinda too bad. Because, you know, the red hair thing? Might have made it a lot easier to get his family off your back.”

Watched the gears turn for a minute.

“Yeah, I guess . . .”

Then, as casually as she could, Mia said, "Not that you couldn't just, you know, say he's not the father."

They kept walking, navigating tree roots and rocks.

Just as Mia began to wonder if she'd have to be more direct, Leanne giggled. Then snorted a sharp laugh. Which quickly became real laughter; soft at first, then louder until she laughed so hard, she had to lean over and put her hands on her knees until she could control herself.

Not exactly what she'd expected. "You gotta let me in on this," Mia said, confused. "What's so effing funny, Leanne?"

"I keep telling you, Mia. You! You are so funny. And so brilliant." Leanne pulled Mia into a hug. "I'm just imagining, you know . . . the looks on their faces when they see a picture of Little Red. And they find out he isn't Remy's. That he married me for nothing!"

What a relief! "You aren't worried about your reputation?" Mia asked.

Leanne let her go and stepped back. "My baby looks nothing like Remy's side of the family. Or mine. That red hair has to be the product of some really ancient DNA deep down in my eggs."

"Or some branch of the Fortier family that got disavowed," Mia said.

"Right? I mean, think about it. If I'd stayed with Remy, he would have asked me who that baby belonged to every time he got drunk. And people would have talked. So hell yeah, let's do it. It's not like I'm ever gonna live in Delareau again, anyway. And that makes me sad because I'll miss a couple of my friends. And I don't know how I'm gonna see Momma very often."

Mia put a hand on her shoulder. "I'll bet your momma already has an idea or two about that. But let's get back to the house. You need a story, a believable one, with dates and places where you, uh, well, you know. Maybe you and your friends, a night in New

Orleans where there could have conceivably been a one- or two-night stand?" Mia put her arm around Leanne's shoulder. "Pun intended."

Leanne looked at Mia with a question crinkled in her face.

"Conceivably? Get it?"

"Oh, Mia!" Leanne stopped walking and grabbed Mia into bear hug. "You really are funny."

While Leanne basked in the idea that might just set her free, Mia's situation reasserted itself for consideration. In a few days, a week at the most, she wouldn't have Leanne to focus on anymore. Who knew what Vikki and her 'ole man' boss were dreaming up. But maybe the earth was trembling somewhere. Buildings crumbling; people dying. A woman her age . . . She shivered with self-loathing at the thought.

Putting the house in sight and trails behind them, Mia turned her attention to a brighter future for Leanne.

CHAPTER 28

October 26: No Proof Positive
New Orleans, Louisiana

The hotshot shook his head. Turned out the man was Greek, though Boudreaux didn't much care where he came from; he was still an asshole.

"But there must be a connection," the Greek said. "This cannot be a coincidence."

Two days ago, the man had sent him a picture of Leanne and the baby. For two days, Boudreaux thought about what to do with it. No one else in the family had seen it yet. And in Boudreaux's considered opinion, that was exactly the way it should remain. He wondered if he'd be able to keep it that way.

"Sir," he said, "I'm grateful for the information you provided about our missing family member. And I truly regret that there's nothing I can provide in return. But I can't give you what doesn't exist."

"But you must admit there is something," the Greek said. "Somehow your woman and mine have become entangled, and . . ."

Boudreaux put up his hand. "All due respect to you and your family, but I don't assume that. The world is a strange place, my friend. And this woman," he held up the printout of a figure with long, dark-red curly hair and green eyes, "doesn't appear anywhere based on information that you've provided or that we've gathered.

My people have canvassed as far west as Houston and east to the panhandle of Florida and as far north as Arkansas and Oklahoma. My nephew is a social media genius, and he provided me with one image of what I now know is our missing family member and her baby. But I only know that because of this.” Boudreaux laid the two photos of Leanne and the baby side by side and pointed to the bright-red shock of hair on the baby in both photographs. “But even he’s found nothing about your woman. We checked for connections with Bozeman, but no one around here has any. Not there, and, by the way, not in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan either.”

The Greek looked doubtful, tried to interrupt again.

Once more, Boudreaux raised his hand. “That’s not to say that no one in South Louisiana owns property in either of those places, but no one with any connection to our family does. As for those of us in my direct line, *ça nous prend plus chaud*.” Boudreaux chuckled. “We’re too thin-blooded for the cold climates.”

The Greek slapped his palm on Boudreaux’s desk and stood up. “But this woman,” he shook the printout of Leanne and Little Red at Boudreaux, “this woman was on my wife’s friend’s jet.”

“I understand that. But we viewed every second of the airport footage. That jet delivered a country music star. Bucky Leader. As I mentioned on the phone, the recording showed the limo driver shuffle a woman—as it turns out, the one I’m looking for—onto that plane. Then he got back in the limo for a few minutes, then out again. He went with Leader into the main terminal to sort out some business about a missing guitar—we got that from the airport staff—then he drove Bucky Leader and his band to Lafayette. We tracked it all. We interviewed the deputy who met the limo driver and everyone at the airport. The woman in this photo . . .” Boudreaux put his finger on the Greek’s printout of the redhead, “was nowhere to be seen. There’s nothing I can tell you because there’s literally nothing to tell.”

The Greek stood, hissed out a sigh and said, "I assume we can trust you and your family to continue surveillance." It was a statement, not a question.

"One thing, sir." Boudreaux stood, rested his hands on his desk and leaned forward. "The photos you mentioned, have you had any luck at all with those?"

"The photo is being enhanced and I hope to have that by the time I return to Washington. We cannot see the people, but the artist is working to clarify the identification number on the sea-plane. With that, I will find the pilot who picked her up." He turned toward the door to leave.

"That must be encouraging for you," Boudreaux said as the Greek opened the door. "Please send any additional information you get if you think it'll help us help you."

The Greek slammed the door on his way out.

Boudreaux had worked with photo imaging experts too. If someone had been working on it for several days, it was unlikely to reveal anything new. And if he was lucky, he'd never hear from the asshole again.

He blew out a frustrated breath and tapped his foot while he thought.

Time for a drink at Enola's.

***October 26: A Refreshing Drink at Enola's
Delareau, Louisiana***

"No alcohol today, Uncle B?" Jake offered his best young nephew smile as he slid the half 'n' half tea across the counter. "I'm kind of impressed."

"Don't be. I have a glass of wine now and then, but not when I'm working." Boudreaux removed the straw and drank half the glass in a few swallows. "Did your girl ever have long red hair?"

Jake laughed. "Boudreaux, I made it a point not to ask too many questions. The only version of that girl I ever saw was the one in the photo I gave you. And as far as I know, she's long gone."

"Well, just for the record, I didn't take it upstairs." He looked down at the glass. Took a sip, then looked back up at Jake. "I decided you were right."

"Oh, yeah?"

"I sold a bunch of lies to the Greek asshole this morning. Told him we'd canvassed Texas to Florida and found nothing that matched his wife's photo. But we didn't. I thought about what you said; the profit margins. Figured the money'd be better spent elsewhere."

Boudreaux hadn't looked at him when he spoke. Jake wondered what else he'd come there to say.

"We don't own the businesses; they own us."

"Exactly, Jakey. Finding missing people who are none of our business? Not our circus, not our monkeys." He balled up the photo of Mia and tossed it into the tall trash bin behind the bar.

"Nice shot."

Boudreaux took another long pull of tea and nodded toward the trash. "I think she's your girl, and I think she's hooked up with Leanne somehow. But if that's the case, you'll tell me if and when you need to."

Jake mopped the bar and nodded.

"But the Leanne-Remy situation?" Boudreaux shook his head. "That one we're gonna have to deal with. I liked your input on the previous matter so much I've decided to get your take on this one." He pulled a photo from his jacket pocket and laid it on the bar.

It was Leanne and Little Red. She was turning her head and reaching toward the camera as if to stop the photographer. The baby's face looked fussy and sunlight caused the boy's red hair to glow.

"That hair just keeps getting redder and redder, doesn't it?" Jake said, remaining committed to neutral responses.

Boudreaux looked up. "Sure does. I haven't shown this or the one Xavier got from Montana to Remy. Or his folks. Or anyone else for that matter. I don't know who'd get the worst of it—the baby or the girl. There's no telling what the Fortiers will do when they see this." He shook his head and slipped the picture back in his jacket. "So here's what I think. Let me know if you agree. If I had any way to get a message to Leanne, I'd encourage her to get creative. Real creative. And to give me—not Remy—a call."

Jake mopped the sweat from Boudreaux's glass off the counter; laid a fresh napkin down. Boudreaux nodded his thanks.

"I can do a little research on this," Jake said. "No promises, but I might know someone who knows someone close to Leanne's mother. It's almost unimaginable that she's hidden away, with no contact whatsoever, while her only daughter and grandson are on the run."

"Yeah, Remy seems to believe it. His momma's got her phone tagged and, so far, the only calls going in and out are to friends back here with boring reports of a ninety-three-year-old woman with Alzheimer's who died last week and worry about her daughter." He picked up his drink. Looked off into the distance and said almost to himself, "But no way is the Roberta Broussard I know going to lie down and let her daughter and first grandchild disappear from Delareau and not know what the hell's happening." *Wait a minute: Boudreaux knows Leanne's mother well enough to make a statement like that?* Jake looked down at the bar and smiled but didn't ask.

“You know, Boudreaux, the more I get to know you, the more you remind me of my dad.”

Boudreaux’s head jerked up. “*Maudit!* You keep that shit to yourself if you know what’s good for you.”

Jake dropped the bar towel and put both hands up in surrender. “Sorry. No worries.” He paused a few seconds, smiled at Boudreaux and said softly, “But it is a compliment, you know.”

Boudreaux stayed another twenty minutes. Talked about LSU football, then tried to pay the bill with money Jake refused to take.

“Very refreshing, just as you promised it would be.” He stood and laid a twenty on the table. “For the waitstaff,” he said.

Jake pulled the crumpled photo of Mia out of the trash bin and stuck it in his pocket. Checked his watch. Couldn’t wait to call the sat phone and talk to her.

CHAPTER 29

October 26: Creative Writing
Ontonagon, Michigan

Leanne's eyes sparkled and her hands shook as she handed the letter to Mia.

"Here's what I've come up with. Just tell me what you think and what I should change."

Mia took the letter. Leanne stood behind her, looking over her shoulder while she read.

Remy, I am not sorry that I left. You are a very hard person to live with because you are not interested in me being happy at all! But in a way, I guess it's my fault. I should never have lied to you in the first place. I just didn't want people to think I was a bad person. As you can maybe see by the photo I put in this letter, the baby, it's a boy, he is not your son. I was really tired of you trying to control every move I made, and that's the biggest reason I left. But I was also afraid, knowing what I did and who I did it with, that this might happen.

It is not a very good excuse, but when we were dating, I was still kind of messed up because of Daddy dying. I went to New Orleans one weekend by myself and got a little

drunk and met this really gorgeous man who, by the way, had very red hair. And, well, you can see what happened.

You don't have to do anything except leave me alone. I am not coming back to Delareau. I am taking care of everything, including an annulment. The attorney will send you some paperwork. You can tell your parents or anyone else anything you want to because the lawyer says no one but me and you will see the papers . . . something about making sure it's sealed.

I don't care what you say. You can act like I died or you can tell them I lied to you to get you to marry me, and you got an annulment. Whatever. All I care about is that I don't get treated bad anymore, and that I can have a decent life with my little boy. I don't want any money or anything from you or your family except for y'all to leave me and the baby alone. I'm making it easy for you all by disappearing. You did not treat me nice, Remy, and I am glad to be away from you. I think you should be just as glad not to have to stay married to me or to raise a child that is not yours.

I don't love you Remy or even like you anymore. But I hope you leave me alone, move on, and have a good life.

Mia looked up. "Wow, Leanne! This is amazing. A genuine work of art."

Leanne exhaled dramatically and plopped down in the oversized chair across from Mia. "Thank God! I was worried that I said some things, you know, wrong. Like how he treated me bad."

Mia reached out and put a hand on Leanne's knee. "Was it hard to tell a lie that makes you look bad? I mean, you know he's going to get drunk or mad and spit out some of this stuff. Word will get around."

“Yeah, he’ll definitely tell his parents about the baby not being his. And probably tell them that he’s the one getting the annulment. Make himself look like the one in control. And for sure he’ll get drunk and talk trash about me.”

“That must feel really shitty.”

Leanne looked up at Mia with a smirk. “Weird, but now that I’ve written it, I don’t care about all that. I have a couple of real friends there. They know my heart. And they know how bad Remy was treating me. Everybody else? They just don’t seem important, you know?”

Mia smiled at her. “Seems like having a baby has made you a wise woman.”

“There you go again, Mia, being funny!” Leanne giggled. “I think you have to be a lot older than I am to get wise. But, you know, the truth in that letter outweighs the lie by a long shot. All I want is to be away from those people and have a good life with my little boy.”

“And the way we’re going to handle it? I think it’s going to work out exactly that way.”

Leanne set off to feed Little Red, and Mia considered next steps. Send the letter to Jake, who’d get it to Boudreaux? But when she ran it by Robbi, Grandma had a different idea.

October 26: A Phone Call
Ontonagon, Michigan

Robbi wasn’t uncomfortable with her history, even the parts her daughter didn’t know about. If Leanne had been surprised to learn that her father had a ‘baby momma,’ how shocked might she be to learn that before she’d married Robert Marcel Broussard, Robbi

and Boudreaux Marcellas were ‘a thing?’ She didn’t know what Boudreaux’d done when Remy went to him for help, but the Marcellas weren’t big Fortier fans, and so far, no one had grabbed Leanne.

The way they’d parted company all those years ago, Boudreaux would probably be glad to hear from her. She’d only ever asked one thing of him back then—to let her go because she couldn’t marry into his family. And he’d done that with as much grace as a young man could muster. She figured—all things between their two families taken into consideration—she could ask him for one more favor.

She had a new burner. It was time to use it.

October 26: A Voice from the Past
New Orleans, Louisiana

Boudreaux looked at the display on his old landline. Didn’t recognize the number. Probably spam, but he’d kept this phone since the old days for a reason.

“Yeah?” He growled.

“Boudreaux?”

The voice tore through him like a live wire. Straightened his spine and sat him up in his chair like a forty-years-younger man. Tried to speak, but found words stuck in his throat.

“Boudreaux, are you there?”

He swallowed hard and found his voice. “Roberta? Is that you?”

“I am so glad you answered my call.”

He almost lost his breath at the warmth he heard in her voice. Felt twenty years old again. And a Southern gentleman to the core.

“When I spoke to Jake, I wondered, well, hoped I’d hear from you. Just hearing your voice brings back one of the most memorable

periods of my life. And I'm sure you know that. But I suspect you're calling because of the . . . troubles."

"Boudreaux, you're as insightful and direct as ever. As I told you a long time ago, those are two of your most endearing qualities. But before we discuss the difficulties, I want to tell you something I've given a great deal of thought to."

"Is there something more pressing that I can help with, Roberta?"

"No." She laughed lightly. "No, nothing more pressing than this mess we're dealing with. It's . . ." She cleared her throat. "I hope you won't think me too forward, but I've thought about you often over the years; all the good times we had together. I don't regret my decision back then, but, well, it's been long enough since my husband and your wife passed that it probably wouldn't be improper if we were to have coffee or maybe even a drink together. Sometime in the near future. When all this mess is over with."

After she'd turned down his proposal of marriage because of what Boudreaux called 'family business obligations,' he'd written off any possibility of friendship with Roberta Broussard. And now, here she was, opening the door to something he'd never dreamed he would have again.

"And before you say anything," she continued, "I mean it—no matter what you tell me today, Boudreaux—hearing from Jake that you were available to help is a gift. But if it turns out that you can't do what I'm going to ask, I know you've already helped us. And I'd still really like to see you."

Boudreaux laughed. "If we were on that FaceTime thing my nephew insists on using, I think you'd see how surprised I am. But *ça c'est bon*, Roberta. I am smiling."

"I'd say your smiles are more often an expression of ironic acceptance," she said.

He chuckled. "Yeah, I guess you're right about that. But maybe not this time."

"Not least because you understand the self-interest that drives most people better than anyone I've ever known." She paused; Boudreaux heard her take a deep breath. "Speaking of which, I think you're exactly the right person to help my daughter and grandson."

"So, it's a boy, is it?"

"Yes. And that child's bright-red hair gives us the opportunity we need to get this horrible situation with the Fortiers sorted out." She took another breath. "I don't know any redheaded Fortiers. And if there are any in mine or Charles' family, they are so far back we don't have any photographs to prove it."

"Roberta, I believe I understand where you're going with this but please, continue."

"Oh, Boudreaux, I knew you'd get it. And you probably know how badly Remy Fortier treated my daughter, especially when he was drinking. He even accused her of indiscreet behavior. Questioned whether the child she was carrying was his."

Boudreaux said, "Yes, I heard Remy wasn't the best of husbands. And if that baby had been born here, knowing the Fortiers as I do, things would not have gone well for Leanne. Maybe not for the baby either."

There was another pause, then Roberta said, "Sounds like we might be thinking along the same lines. I hope you can help us exploit that."

She laughed nervously, so Boudreaux chuckled with her.

"Boudreaux, I'm so frightened. I don't believe Remy's in love with my daughter. And when he hears from Leanne that this child isn't his, he's going to be furious. There's just no telling what he might do. But you're in a powerful position. You can help him understand a good deal when it's presented—for him and everyone else. And so, I was wondering, if you were with him when he found out, maybe even deliver the letter yourself . . . well, I can't imagine anyone more qualified. You're smart. You know how to

manage hotheads. There's simply no one more capable of getting us all the outcome we need than you, Boudreaux."

Boudreaux's heart swelled so quickly he had to stand up. "Roberta, I'm honored that you think so highly of me. Hearing this from you, it's like a cool drink of water on a scorched August afternoon." It took him a moment to swallow a lump in his throat; to take hold of a heart racing with an emotion that almost took his breath away. Voice softer, he said, "Of course I'll handle Remy for you and Leanne, *mon cher*."

He asked Robbi to text him a photo of the letter and to send a paper copy as soon as she could manage it.

He hung up the phone. For the first time since he'd buried his wife five years ago, Boudreaux Marcellas felt something like his old self—energized; with something to look forward to. No idea what the boss would say about his decision to handle this delicate family matter. But instead of wondering what would happen if he was found out, he looked around his office, then down at himself. *Enough already!*

October 26: Boundaries
Ontonagon, Michigan

"What do you mean you called Boudreaux? You know him? How?" Astonishing, these complex relationship histories in a tiny little place like Delareau, Louisiana.

Leanne laughed out loud. "Momma, don't tell me you went wilding when you were young too."

Robbi blushed. "Leanne, for heaven's sake, I had a life before I married your father." She closed her eyes. "You may not be able to imagine it, but back then I was young and, well, not reckless,

but certainly curious. And Boudreaux was funny and smart, that combination of French and Cajun . . . like poetry. And, well, very good-looking. So yes, we dated, but his family's business? That wasn't going to work."

Leanne turned to Mia. "Wanna bet he asked Momma to marry him?" And then to her mother. "He asked you, didn't he?" Leanne put the baby down next to Mia on one of Claire's sofas and danced around, making fun of her parents like a teenager.

"Leanne, we're trying to accomplish something here. Get serious or I'll send you to your room like the sixteen-year-old you're imitating and take care of this baby the rest of the day myself!"

Leanne plopped down next to Robbi on the other sofa and leaned on her. "Oh Momma, I'm just trying to have a little fun. It's been forever since I've been able to tease you and laugh like this."

Mia watched mother and daughter with an intensity born of absence; not that Susan hadn't been affectionate. But she wasn't her mother. She imagined it was different. Felt different.

She saw in Robbi a mixture of sad affection for what her daughter had been through. Yes, some irritation too, but it seemed more embarrassment than frustration with Leanne's teasing. "I know, honey. But we need to make some decisions here. So if you're done with your silliness, we can . . ."

Leanne threw her arm around her mother's shoulder and hugged her. "But I know he asked you, didn't he?" Robbi blushed even pinker.

Mia jumped in to save Leanne from being sent to her room. "So, Robbi, you think this is better than having Jake do it?"

"I do. Seems like Boudreaux connects Jake with you, even if he doesn't know your name. And I'm not sure it's a good idea to strengthen any connection between Jake and us. Just to be on the safe side, in case Aleks approaches him again and pressures the Marcellas family in some way we can't anticipate."

Mia nodded, grateful for Robbi's protection.

"Jake could make something up," Robbi said, "but believe me, Boudreaux's no dummy. He can smell a lie a mile away. And should he learn that Jake's been withholding information . . ."

Mia looked at Leanne. It was her future they were talking about after all.

Leanne shrugged acceptance. "Momma knows way better than I do about this kinda stuff."

"Okay," Mia said. "I'll let Jake know what's happening. Did Boudreaux make any reference to me?"

Robbi shook her head. "You didn't come up in our conversation at all." She picked up the letter Leanne had written and went in search of their hostess, shouting, "Claire? Where does one send a FedEx in this town, and can I borrow your car?"

Another script change. Mia picked up the sat phone to make sure Jake was in the loop.

CHAPTER 30

October 26: Fuzzy Pixels
Washington, DC

The Photoshop editor was shouting at him. “There’s nothing more I can do! I’ve used every piece of software in existence. It comes down to light, distance, and the quality of your phone’s camera.”

“You cannot tell me that . . .” Aleks forced out between gritted teeth.

“I can’t erase three-quarters of a mile between you and the canoe. And from a cell phone camera? You’d need a 35-millimeter camera with a 600-millimeter lens to see whether the body in the water is a man or a woman or what color hair or eyes that person has, plus—”

“What about the people in the cockpit?” Aleks interrupted.

“It’s late October. The sunlight from the south is shining directly on the side of the plane. So that wing is blocking the light into the cockpit. There’s nothing I can do about that either.” She took a deep breath. “I’ve attached an invoice for my time and the additional software. I have to go now.” She hung up, leaving Aleks fuming.

He dropped into the chair behind his desk in the embassy. Studied the enhanced photo on his iPad. Zooming in on the person in the water only turned the image into a mush of black and gray pixels. He zoomed out again. There had to be something.

Desperate now, Aleks forwarded the photo to his chief investigator with a text:

I am sending you this photo, taken near the Ontonagon, Michigan property you identified. I believe it is my wife in the water. Do what you can with it and call me when you have information.

October 27: Red Hairings
New Orleans, Louisiana

Boudreaux opened the sealed FedEx envelope and read the letter again. Just as he finished, there was a knock on his door. Bang. On time!

“Come.”

Remy stepped into the office, then stopped, looked around seemingly confused, and sniffed the air.

“What?” Boudreaux asked. “You didn’t know the place could clean up nice?”

“I . . . no, I didn’t. I’ve never seen it look like this before. Or smell this good.”

“Yeah, well, don’t make a big deal. I was just tired of the mess. Anyway, get over here and sit down. I’ve got something important to show you.” *Did kids these days always plop into chairs?*

Boudreaux held up a photograph. “This is Leanne’s baby.”

Remy stared at it. “That’s Leanne? She had the baby?”

Boudreaux watched Remy’s face go from indifference to enraged shock as understanding slowly took hold.

“But it’s got . . . I mean, what the . . .”

Remy exploded out of the chair. Snatched the photo from Boudreaux's hand, his face flushing purplish red.

"What the actual fuck, Uncle? I mean, how the . . ."

Boudreaux held up a sheet of paper. "This is a letter from Leanne to you. It came in a sealed envelope. The person I negotiated with to get this didn't read it. No one else has read it except me." He cleared his throat. "Remy, look at me."

The kid's face was a mask of confusion and rage. Took three breaths for Boudreaux to know he had his attention.

"I read it, and I believe it." Boudreaux stood up and came around the desk. Took Remy's arm, pulled him back into his chair, and sat down in the one next to it. "This is not an easy thing for a man to read, that's for sure. But you're going to read it. And you're not leaving this office until you and I figure out what you're going to do—and what you're not going to do—based on what it says."

Remy's flush evaporated. Pale as the belly of a perch.

"You understand me? We're gonna sit right here while you read it, absorb it, and calm down. Then we'll talk."

Boudreaux handed Remy the letter.

Interminable, the next two hours. Reading, pacing, screaming, calming down, then pacing and yelling, until finally, he was certain Remy understood: The only way to win was to show his parents the photo, tell them the child wasn't his, and advise them that he'd demanded an annulment.

"And I mean 'advise,' Remy. You're a grown man. You tell them you're handling the legal things yourself. With my help."

Remy, obviously exhausted, just nodded.

Yeah, with his help. Because that might keep Remy's parents' noses out of it.

October 27: What's in a Number?***Washington, DC***

Sitting on the edge of the chair behind his desk, Aleks scrolled impatiently through the usual embassy administrative communication. It could wait. More important? A response from Bledsoe.

The investigator hadn't been able to make the people in the photo any more identifiable than the Photoshop editor had. But there was one piece of information that he had been able to extract. The aircraft's ID was fuzzy, but his team had provided a list of six possible letter and number combinations. Plus, there were two companies that flew floatplanes into Ontonagon and several private seaplanes owned by individuals in the surrounding counties. With Aleks' authorization, Bledsoe would check the FAA Aircraft Registry and, if necessary, travel to Michigan and locate the owner.

Worth the money? No additional mail between Mia and Jessica. No word from the New Orleans family. No recent credit, debit, or ATM card hits, and no cell phone activity. Aleks hated the thought that he would have to ask his family for help. Now, a flash of hope that he wouldn't have to.

A two-word reply: Authorization granted.

October 27: What's in a Name?***Ontonagon, Michigan***

"So I'm going to be Louanne now?"

"That's right," Vikki said. Leanne and Mia, not worried that Remy's family would intercept calls to Mia's attorney, used Claire's landline speakerphone.

Vikki continued, "I got almost everything from your mom's attorney. The name on the copy of the birth certificate is Louanne Mirelle Broussard. And that's going to be you—as soon as everything is signed. But believe me, having done this for a few folks now, I know from experience. It'll be a lot easier for you, getting to keep your own last name. And you're young enough that the most important 'history' you're going to need is just being created."

Leanne looked puzzled. "Why do I have to be someone else if the marriage to Remy is being annulled?"

Mia turned to Leanne and answered, "Because life is long and things change. People change. If Remy or anyone in his family gets any ideas about you or the baby . . ."

Leanne paled. "Like what?"

"Like he grows up and gets famous. Or uber rich. And suddenly, someone wants a DNA test." Mia frowned. "Or I don't know, all kinds of reasons that we can't even imagine right now."

Leanne nodded. "Yeah, based on what's happened so far, I guess there's a lot I can't imagine." She switched gears. "What about my school records?"

Mia looked at the speakerphone and waited for Vikki, who said, "Let's just leave it at 'Mr. Ellis knows a guy,' shall we?"

Mia looked at Leanne, surprised and a little worried. But Leanne shrugged her shoulders, nodded her head, and gave a thumbs-up.

"So, Leanne, if you're okay with what we've talked about so far, just tell your mom to tell her attorney to release Louanne's original birth certificate and social security card to me. And tell me, where are you and your mom going next? And, if you know yet, when?"

"Momma says we'll go where my Great-Aunt Mertice lives, or lived, in Mississippi. That house went to her nephew, my dad who died, and now it's hers, Momma's. So we're going to go there first. Pretty much nobody in Delareau even knows about Aunt Mertice

or the house. We'll have a place to get settled with the baby while you sort out all the paperwork."

"We're preparing the annulment papers. Someone will let me know when to send them on, right?"

Mia said, "Yep, and I know what you're gonna say next: What about the baby's name, right?"

Vikki laughed. "Leanne, or—may as well get used to it—Louanne, you are taking longer to name a baby than anyone I've ever known. What's the holdup?"

"I guess I'm just being really careful. If he isn't, you know, officially named on paper, then as far as the system is concerned, he doesn't actually exist. And I don't want any piece of paper that would lead to him until I'm a thousand percent sure that Remy and his family are," Leanne threw her hands up, "like, Michael-Jackson-out-of-my-life or Taylor-Swift-never-ever-ever-getting-back-together level gone!"

Mia and Vikki were both quiet for a few seconds, processing.

Mia turned to Leanne. "You're a Michael Jackson fan?"

While Vikki said at the same time, "Well, that's pretty darn clear Lee-uh, Louanne."

Leanne laughed out loud, and Vikki continued.

"I need to know who the plaintiff is, who is requesting the annulment. And whenever you're ready, we'll get a legal birth certificate from Montana or Mississippi—whatever state you like—for your boy, using your new identity as his mother."

Mia felt the conversation was about to end and jumped in. "It'll go down better if it looks like Remy is in the driver's seat on the annulment." She looked at Leanne and got a wide-eyed nod of approval. "Robbi has lined up Boudreaux Marcellas to handle getting the letter and the rest of the paperwork in front of Remy for signature."

"Robbi knows Marcellas?"

Leanne started laughing. "Yeah, they were a thing. A couple. When they were really young, you know, before they married other people."

"Well, that certainly explains that."

"And," Mia said quickly so that Vikki wouldn't hang up, "You're doing an amazing job, Vikki. But now that we've got Leanne's stuff sorted, I also need to know what's going on with my situation."

"Park, Mr. Ellis, is still strategizing. We received the signed documents, and we're taking care of setting up the history I told you about. Give me a few days and I'll have more information."

Mia dropped her head in frustration as they said their good-byes and hung up the phone.

"Wow. That was a kick!" Leanne grinned at Mia.

"Which part?"

"Talking on that big honking beige phone that sits on a desk and plugs into the wall! I didn't know those old-timey things had speakers in them." She turned and walked out of Claire's office, singing 'Louanne' to the tune of Sting's "Roxanne."

Mia just shook her head at the rebound ability of the truly young. Then wondered if maybe this, too, was something in the breast milk.

CHAPTER 31

*October 28: M-Eye-Double-S-Eye
Ontonagon, Michigan*

Mia walked into the bedroom as Leanne softly chanted what sounded like a football cheer to Little Red, popping tiny kisses on his eyes in time with the rhythm. “M-eye, double-s-eye, double-s-eye, double-p-eye—Mississippi!” The baby made cooing noises that, at least to Mia, seemed to indicate he was enjoying the game.

“Where’d you hear that little ditty?”

“When I was little, my daddy would sing it when we went across the Mississippi River bridge to visit Aunt Mertice. It always made me laugh.”

“You and your mom are leaving today, right?” Mia felt her shoulders slump. A wave of sadness rolled over her.

“Yep. Brenda drove in last night; offered to take us to the Minneapolis airport today. She’s got work there and—”

“And I’m not taking any chances,” Robbi said, entering the room. “I talked to Boudreaux. He said Remy’s angry and relieved at the same time. And most important? Under no illusions that the only action he will take is to tell his parents that the child is not his and that he’s instructed an attorney to initiate an annulment. But—”

“But?” Mia and Leanne said at the same time.

"I've chartered a private jet to Jackson, and we'll take the car I left there back to Aunt Mertice's place. The paperwork's going to take some time, and I don't trust that boy any further than I could throw his truck. Even the few people who know she existed don't know her last name or where her house is. So that's where we're going to go. And probably where we'll stay." She looked at Leanne. "Do you need any help packing?"

"Momma, I don't have anything more than what's in these two bags. As soon as I get the extra milk from the fridge, Little Red and me are ready."

"Well, why don't you do that? I want to talk to Mia for just a minute. I'll bring the bags down with me."

"Okay. Mia, you're coming down too, aren't you? To say goodbye?"

Mia said, "Wouldn't miss it."

Leanne held Little Red up, put her hand behind the baby's head, moved it gently back and forth a little, and said in a baby voice, "We'll miss you, Miss Mia." Mia and Robbi laughed as she turned and took the baby downstairs.

As soon as they were alone, Robbi said, "I was hoping this would be a done deal before we left, but everything an attorney does takes at least three times longer than I think it will."

"Yeah, based on how my stuff's going, I'd have to agree." She smiled at Robbi. "So what do you need?"

"Leanne," she shook her head. "Gosh, it's hard to call my daughter by another name. Louanne and I talked about it, and we're changing the trust her father set up for the little one that died. You're going to be the beneficiary."

Mia's jaw dropped. She backed up and sat down on the bed. "But you already paid me, Robbi. You don't—"

"Mia," she snapped with motherly affection, "perhaps your mother died before she had the chance to teach you that the only

appropriate response to a gift is ‘thank you.’” Then her expression softened. “The last thing we want is for you to lack the funds you need to remain safe while you get your own situation sorted out.”

Mia was suddenly overcome. Robbi stood and opened her arms. Mia stepped into them.

“It’s not enough to make you rich,” Robbi said, “and it’ll take another week or two to get the bugs worked out. But you have some cash to tide you over until then, right?”

“Oh my gosh, yes!” She wiped her eyes with her sleeve. “You’ve been so generous. I don’t know what—”

Robbi interjected. “Nothing more needs to be said or done. My daughter is free. I have a grandson.” She put her hands on Mia’s shoulders. “All I need now is some help with these bags.”

October 28: Departures
Ontonagon, Michigan

Mia felt Claire lean against her, both waving at Brenda’s Suburban as it snaked down the driveway.

“You need to stay here for a few more days,” Claire said as she turned to go back into the house.

“Oh yeah?” asked Mia. Surprised at the suggestion and relief she felt hearing it. She followed Claire into the kitchen.

“Absolutely!” Claire went to the dishwasher and began unloading. “We’ve got James on the lookout for any unusual traffic or visitors and, so far, your awful Aleks has not returned. But there’s no reason for you to go back to the cottage when you can stay here.”

“That makes sense, Claire.” Mia felt a ‘squiggle in her middle,’ one of those sensations that always reminded her of Susan Avery’s

favorite sayings from their ‘tween’ years. “And it’s a very generous offer.” Still, something nagged at her.

“Mia, you have been wearing the same few things, plus my old sweats, for too long!” Claire was staring at her, hands on her hips. “If you’re as sick of wearing them as I am of seeing them, we’re going shopping.”

Mia’s heart skipped a beat, but she started to protest. Claire pulled her mobile out of her pocket and tapped it before she could speak. Leaned back against the kitchen counter and tapped in a number while Mia wondered where in the world they’d shop in Ontonagon.

“Benjamin, Mia and I need to go shopping. I know it’s short notice, but . . .” She listened for a moment. “That would be just wonderful. You are a good son, Benny.” Claire pulled the phone away from her ear, looked at Mia, and rolled her eyes at the shouts they could both hear coming from the phone’s speaker. When he’d begun to run out of steam, Claire gingerly put her mouth near the phone. “I know, I know. I’m sorry, Ben-ja-min! Grown man. Yep. Got it.”

Mia laughed. Claire confirmed he’d pick them up in an hour. They both went upstairs to get dressed.

October 28: Exhaustion and Options
Ontonagon, Michigan

Mia fell into bed that night. Shopping had always exhausted her, but she couldn’t help but smile at the bags, boxes, and two new suitcases full to bursting. They hadn’t shopped in Ontonagon. Benjamin had flown them to Minneapolis, and they’d taken an Uber

to the mall. Claire had insisted on paying for everything until Mia had grabbed the check for dinner, left cash to cover it, and added a generous tip.

The whole excursion had been exciting and fun. But as she got ready for bed, Mia ticked off people, places, and things just like she would for a production: looking for things undone or something amiss; anything she'd failed to sort out.

While at the Smithsonian house, she'd used only Claire's landline, the sat phone, and her burner. She'd visited no ATMs and taken no trips to town. During today's shopping trip, she'd kept the baseball cap pulled low over a pair of Hollywood-big sunglasses Claire had provided. Kept her face away from cameras and disguised her gait.

But . . .

She tossed and turned over something she couldn't put her finger on until she fell into a restless slumber.



She opened her eyes the next morning, read 7:00 a.m. on the digital clock, and smiled. She knew her next move: She'd go back to the last place Aleks would expect her. Aware that Jake flitted in and out of her thoughts, it hadn't occurred to her that she missed him.

In the shower, she washed her hair and decided to drive. It would give her time to think. She hadn't driven the gray SUV since arriving in Ontonagon. There were cameras even on the local state highways. But Mia figured it had been out of circulation long enough that it would be safe to drive to Louisiana.

Over coffee, Claire's intuition picked up on Mia's decisive demeanor.

"So, you know what you're going to do next?"

"Yes."

"Maybe not saying where you're going is a good policy to keep following, even with us?" She sipped her coffee and added, "But you look tired, Mia. Beat up even. Like you could use some rest. You are safe here for the time being, and maybe a few extra days of R&R would do you good. You could use the time, and the satellite phone, to catch up with friends? Your attorneys?"

Mia felt something in her body relax at the very idea of being cared for by Claire for another few days. Susan Avery had been wonderful to Mia. Kind, funny, and caring. But more friend-mother; advisor-mother sometimes. Not overly maternal. The loss of her biological mother left a hole in her soul that Claire's natural, maternal fussing soothed.

"Claire, it makes me feel a little needy to say it, but it sounds so good to just stay here with you for a bit. I can help cook, and . . ."

Claire quickly nixed the idea. "You can always jump in and clean up, Mia, but cooking is my joy."

Mia smiled at what Claire didn't say about her own meager attempts at cooking. "You got it. And I have no idea what it is, but something is nagging at me. Maybe a more relaxed couple of days will help me figure it out. And Jessi will definitely be glad to hear from me. I think the sat phone is a safe way to reach her burner."

"You use that phone as much as you need to, Mia."

Mia stood and picked up their coffee cups. "As soon as I get these dishes done, I'll go upstairs and call her."

CHAPTER 32

October 29: Bledsoe Investigates Washington, DC

The job hadn't been great from the start, but it was getting worse. Bledsoe didn't like arrogant men, especially those entitled and wealthy enough to hunt down women who likely didn't want to be found.

Initially, Hasapsis had been stingy with the details of why he was looking for this beautiful and apparently intelligent young woman. But eventually, as all clients did, he'd slipped up, and Bledsoe had understood that the woman was Hasapsis' wife.

He'd learned a lot about Mia Evanescence in the time since—information Hasapsis hadn't shared with him. But he was an investigator after all. She was an orphan. She was athletic. She was an up-and-coming business owner in the DC area. She'd been married to Hasapsis for less than a year.

And she was running.

After less than twelve months of marriage, she was running from her husband. Made him think that maybe she had good reasons. Perhaps Hasapsis hadn't referred to the woman as his wife up-front because he was humiliated that she'd left him.

He'd seen what humiliation led to when mixed with wealth and entitlement. The whole package made him uneasy.

Bledsoe sighed, closed his laptop, folded away his tray table, and adjusted his seat. He'd do the job whether he liked it or not. It was his job to investigate, not to judge.

Tracking down the owner of the seaplane—or floatplane, they looked the same to him—had been a welcome extra. He'd be thorough, take as much time as needed. After all, the next installment for his son's upcoming semester at the 'very expensive university' was due.

And there was a bonus if he found the woman. One big enough to cover tuition for an entire semester.

He closed his eyes and crossed his fingers as he prayed for a safe landing in Minneapolis. And that when he found this woman, she'd not come to harm.



An Uber took him to the private air terminal. He had no qualms about spending the client's money to make his job a little easier, especially when the client was as difficult to work with as Aleksanteri Hasapsis.

He smiled at the young man at the counter. Glanced at his name tag.

"Santiago, good afternoon." Friendly, but not too friendly.

Unlike Santiago, who was effusively happy. "Hello there! How can I help you?"

Bledsoe pulled two items out of his pocket: a photograph of Mia Evanescence and a bifold wallet with a badge-style ID. He offered both simultaneously while saying, "I'm desperately trying to find this woman."

The young man would likely do what most people did when presented with words, a badge, and a photo of a beautiful woman. Ninety percent of his attention would go to the pretty girl, eight

percent would actually be listening to the words, and the remaining two percent would be taken up with barely a glance at the badge.

Santiago didn't let him down.

Bledsoe put the badge away, pulled out another photo, and laid it down on the counter. "We think she might be the person in the water in front of this plane."

"Wow! What happened to her? Why are you looking for her?" Santiago continued staring at the photos.

"I'm sorry, Santiago, but I'm not at liberty to say. I realize it's impossible to see the person in the water properly, but I thought you might help me find the owner of the plane that's about to pick her up."

"Oh, man." Santiago looked up. "I might be able to help if you had an exact identification number . . ." He moved the photo around, trying different angles, "but I can't work with this. Sorry."

"That's why I'm here in person, Santiago. None of the numbers we tried showed up in the FAA Aircraft Registry. I'm hoping someone will recognize the plane."

"Oh! Well, you just missed the person who might be able to help you with that. My boss, Brenda Smithton, knows all the owners of seaplanes and floatplanes in these parts. I mean, there are literally hundreds in Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota—more in Michigan because they have fewer restrictions. But her brother owns one." Santiago snapped his fingers. "In fact, Brenda and her brother gave a ride to a lady a few weeks ago, but she was much older than this woman."

"Is Brenda working today?"

"No. She's off for the next four days. And," Santiago paused, then leaned forward and whispered, "I'm not supposed to give out employee information. But if you leave me your name and number, I can ask her to get in touch with you."

Bledsoe figured the seaplane owner community was probably small and well connected. That someone was looking for this

particular plane was a story he could do without being passed around.

He smiled. Shook his head. A quick trip to Green Bay, then maybe over to Mackinaw City. Show the photo around. It was getting cold, but it wasn't bitter yet. He'd get decent hotel rooms and hit a few good restaurants. A little R&R interspersed with some in-person research would pass the time nicely.

"When is she back?"



Santiago couldn't wait. When Brenda didn't answer her phone, he left a message. "Hey boss! You won't believe this: A detective, uh," he looked at the card, "guy named Bledsoe, just came into the office looking for a missing woman. He showed me a photo of a floatplane landing in the water about to pick up somebody. Might be the woman he's looking for." Santiago laughed. "The photo of the woman he's looking for? Gorgeous, probably too old for me, but really pretty. Green eyes and red curly hair. Anyway, the plane's ID numbers were unreadable, so I couldn't help but told him you might be able to. Said he'd come back on Monday when you're here." He took a breath. "So, call me if you need more info. Otherwise, enjoy your long weekend!"

***October 29: Aleks Investigates
Reston, Virginia***

By Friday afternoon Aleks could barely sit still. His parents back in town, insisting that he and Mia come to dinner. His excuses about her workload and travel were wearing thin. It was almost as if his

mother knew something was wrong. Not that a wife with a job, owning a company no less, wasn't already wrong enough.

Bledsoe hadn't had time to deliver anything yet, but he was focusing on airports. So Aleks slipped on his coat and called the travel agent.

"I need to go back to that little town in Minnesota or Michigan."

"Ontonagon? That's Michigan, and . . ."

"Whatever! Make the arrangements. I need to leave right away."

By the time they were done, his flight was booked and the car reserved.

This time, he'd drive himself from the airport.

This time, he would not lose control of the situation.

And if he didn't find something at the cottage, he would ask around town. A plane rescuing a person from the water? Now that was a story—one the locals would be talking about.

Aleks would find someone and make that someone tell it to him.

October 30: James Investigates Ontonagon, Michigan

James' phone pinged. It had been five days since he'd installed the camera at the cottage. Now someone was at the front door. Hairs stood up on the back of his neck, just along the ridge of his skull. He gulped the rest of his coffee and slid the cup over toward the barista. Julie owned the coffee shop, but she was as well known for her powerful network as she was for her barista creations.

"Listen, Julie. If anyone comes in here asking questions about Benjamin getting that woman out of the water last week, just play dumb. Okay?"

"Sure. But you've gotta take me out to dinner sometime soon and tell me why. Deal?"

James smiled. The good kind of extortion. "You betcha. And put the word out, you know?"

She laughed, screwed the portafilter back into the espresso machine, and pulled her mobile out of her back pocket. "You're in charge of public safety. Consider it done."

By the time he'd opened the door to head out, she was already tapping her phone.



The cottage doors and windows were secure. No way in. So Aleks climbed back in the rental car and considered his options. The place looked deserted; was surrounded by trees and not another home in sight. But in a place like this you never knew who was watching. Bashing a window to break in might draw unwelcome attention.

But the decision was made for him when a patrol car pulled up behind him, and the officer he'd encountered during his previous visit got out, ambled over to Aleks, and tapped on the window.

Aleks lowered it.

The deputy pushed his aviator sunglasses up and smiled. "Driving yourself this time?"

Aleks wasn't in the mood for any good-ole-boy chatter. "What can I do for you, Officer?"

"It's not what you can do for me. It's what you can do for the owners of this house. According to them, this cottage is off the market for the time being. So, be best if you just leave."

"I am interested in renting it, and—"

"Sir, all due respect, but I don't think so. I don't know what you're up to or who you're looking for, but you are trespassing on this property. And even though you have diplomatic immunity,

and I'm a small-town deputy who doesn't know much about that fancy Washington, DC stuff, I can and will put you in my lockup until I can verify everything. Since it's Saturday, that could take a couple of days. So . . ." The officer pulled his sunglasses back down. "I expect that, after I back up my patrol car, you'll do the same with your vehicle. Then I'll follow you out onto the main road. After that, you're a free man. As long as you don't come back here."

He watched in the rearview mirror as the deputy got back into his car, backed up into a corner, and waited with his phone to his ear. The question was, who was on the other line? Mia's so-called mother Susan? Her friend Jessica Roberts? Maybe even Mia?

He would never have this problem in Greece! But nothing to be gained from being locked up by this imbecile, so Aleks started the engine. He'd go into town, find a place to stay for a couple of days, visit the local bars and restaurants, and ask around.

***October 30: A Sweet Plane
Ontonagon, Michigan***

Claire was on the phone with her daughter Brenda, who told her about Bledsoe showing up at the terminal, when James called.

"Hang on, Brenda, just hang on a sec. James is calling me." She switched to the incoming line. "James?"

"Yep, Hasapsis is back. Showed up at the cottage. I don't think he'll go back there, but he's heading toward town. I'm guessing he'll put up at Meg's B&B and start asking questions around town."

Claire groaned. She'd just convinced Mia to stick around to relax and figure out her next move. That poor woman needed a break. "Alright, hang on, I was on the phone with Brenda. You two

need to talk.” She merged the call and Brenda filled James in on the investigator showing Mia’s photo around.

“Julie is blasting out to her network around town that mum’s the word to any strangers about the water rescue. If I get another chance to talk to Hasapsis, which—assuming he’s still here tomorrow—I will. I’ll suggest it was probably just a training exercise.”

“Great,” Brenda said. “But if that investigator shows a picture of Benjamin’s plane to almost anyone in the three-state network, they’ll recognize it, even if they can’t read the numbers.”

“Shit! You’re right about that, Brenda. That plane is so sweet, half the pilots in the area want it, and almost everyone knows it belongs to Benjamin,” James said.

Claire chimed in again. “I need to let Mia know what’s happened. You two call each other and see if you can come up with anything else we should do.” She hung up the phone and started up the stairs to find Mia.

But Mia wasn’t upstairs.

Claire went weak in the knees when she pulled a yellow sticky note off the door.

Rested/bored. Taking my SUV out to charge the battery and get some gas. Be back soon.

CHAPTER 33

October 30: A Nice Leisurely Drive Ontonagon, Michigan

The engine was only a little sluggish, but the inside of the car smelled humid and musty. Mia put the windows down. It was chilly, but the sun was shining and she was wearing a clean, new sweater—a beautiful burnt orange. A color that had always looked great with her red hair. Not that she had much hair anymore, and what was left was black and hidden by the Yankees ball cap. She'd need to touch up the roots soon too.

The burner in the cupholder showed directions to one of the two gas stations in Ontonagon. Mia headed south when she reached the main road. She'd pass the cottage in a couple of miles; south of that was a park with a beach. Probably the one where Aleks parked the day Benjamin had fished her out of the water.

She put the memory out of her mind. She was just a normal person taking a drive on a late fall afternoon.

A black SUV blasted by in the other direction. After a split-second's thought of Aleks, who'd left town days ago, she grinned. Hurry all you want buddy, she thought. Because, for once, she wasn't.

October 30: Julie at the Coffee Shop
Ontonagon, Michigan

The gray SUV he passed was almost invisible. Consumed with concern about what accommodations he'd find in this little shithole town, he took no notice of the driver.

A few minutes later, he pulled into town and stopped at a light. He looked around for a place to start. The ice cream shop, decorated for Halloween, sported a long line of parents and kids. He looked at his watch. A coffee shop would make more sense. And later, a pub.



"What can I get ya?" Julie said to the stranger. The man was well turned out, unusually so for this neck of the woods.

"No coffee. I am looking for someone, a woman." He held up a photograph. "Have you seen her? She may have changed her hair."

Julie pretended to study the image, then shook her head. "Nope, sorry. And I'm sure I'd have noticed someone as attractive as she is. You sure you don't want a coffee?" She pointed up at the handwritten menu on the wall.

"As I said, no coffee. But a question: Did you hear anything about a seaplane rescue a few days ago?"

Julie laughed heartily. "Rescue? Now that would be something. Lots of folks use sea- and floatplanes around here. And as the only coffee shop in town, we're certainly information central. But I haven't heard a thing. Who got rescued?"

The man looked irritated and shoved the printout in front of her face. "I believe it may have been this woman. She is my wife, and I am very, very worried about her."

Julie pretended concern but understood instantly why James was putting out the word to keep quiet. If she'd had to be rescued out of Lake Superior, her husband or boyfriend, if she had one of those, would have been her first call.

"Oh my. Well, I'm so sorry, I can't help you." A ping alerted her to someone at the drive-thru window just as the doorbell jingled. A woman walked in, Julie's regular afternoon ristretto doppio lover. She looked back at the man with as much concern as she could muster; gave him a half-hopeful smile. "Hope everything turns out alright."

She pressed a button and spoke to the drive-thru customer. "I see you there. Be with you in a sec."

***October 30: A Quick Stop for Coffee
Ontonagon, Michigan***

Claire's coffee was amazing, but Mia hadn't had an espresso drink in what seemed like years. If there was a drive-thru, she could pick one up and take it to the park. So she made a U-turn.

The black SUV that had blown past her a few minutes earlier sat in front of the coffee shop. *Huh. Last thing that driver needs is more caffeine.*

She pulled around the back and stopped in front of the speaker. A woman's voice came through: "I see you there! Be with you in a sec."

Mia fiddled with the radio while she waited. Then she heard another car pulling into the drive-thru behind her. She checked the side mirror and read 'Tahoe' on the side as it edged around the corner of the building.

“What can I getcha?” the voice said through the speaker.

“I haven’t had anything other than plain coffee in weeks! Give me something fancy, but no flavorings. You choose.”

She felt the throb of the Tahoe’s engine as it pulled up behind her.

“You’ve got it. Pull around to the window.”

Out of recent habit, Mia checked her side and rearview mirrors and squinted. The glare from the sun had turned the SUV’s windshield into a mirror, obscuring the driver. Still, she white-knuckled the steering wheel.

A Tahoe. Isn’t that what Aleks had been driving? Or maybe another big SUV? She shook her head, trying to dispel the thought, but her hand tightened on the gear shift as she prepared to pull forward.

October 30: A Real Emergency
Ontonagon, Michigan

Claire’s hands shook as she called James back and told him about Mia taking the SUV out for a drive. “She’s gone, and it’s all my fault. I told her to relax for a few days, but who knew—”

“Gotta go,” he said, and hung up.

James’ abrupt end to the call only served to frighten her more. Had something already happened to Mia? She called Brenda. “I should have told her to get away from here. What if . . .”

“Mom, you haven’t done anything wrong and nothing bad has happened yet, so just calm down.”

“I can’t help it. This whole thing reminds me of that time I mentioned the other night, when someone hurt that poor woman.

If anything bad happens to Mia because I stuck my nose in her business instead of letting her leave when she wanted to, I don't know what I'll do."

"Listen. You can help the most if you settle yourself down and be ready in case she comes back and needs to hide."

"I guess."

"Wait a sec. You remember that place in the barn? Where Benjamin and I used to play?"

"Yes, where you and Benny used to hide from me. What a good idea! I'll go check it out right now."

She hoped to God she wouldn't have to push Mia into that tiny hidey-hole. But if she did, she could at least make sure the light had a working battery and she'd gotten rid of the spiders.

CHAPTER 34

*October 30: Rearview Mirror
Ontonagon, Michigan*

Mia pressed the accelerator, but the car didn't budge. The Tahoe behind her blasted its horn, and she jumped. Discombobulated, it took another few seconds to realize she'd put the car in neutral. Just as she was about to shift into drive, the horn blew again, this time twice.

Mia took a deep breath, looked around, and realized the Tahoe wanted to pass her, but didn't have room. She shifted into drive and accelerated slowly around the building toward the pickup window. As soon as she'd made the turn and there was room, the Tahoe swerved recklessly around her. It burned rubber as it exited onto Main Street.

Gave her the willies. She pulled up to the window. "Your drink'll be ready in just a minute," the server said, giving the squealing tires the evil eye. She looked back at Mia and said, "Sorry about that. We're in a weird lot and the drive-thru lane is the only way out."

Mia said, "Yeah, that guy just blew by me a few minutes ago. Looked to me like more caffeine was the last thing he needed. What'd you serve him?"

The woman shrugged. "Nothing. All he wanted was information. That'll be five-fifty."

Mia handed the woman a ten dollar bill. “Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. Looking for someone.” She disappeared, then returned a few seconds later and handed Mia her change. Without looking at Mia, she turned toward her prep counter, still talking.

“I had to make one for a regular, so you get the best of the best: a ristretto doppio!” Passing it through the window with one hand, the woman kept her eyes on the cup—as if it were filled with liquid gold—and with the other, added a magician’s flourish.

Mia tugged her cap down and took it without making eye contact. Her heart pounded, and her vision blurred for a moment. She took a sip of the coffee, trying to shake off the fear. Decided not to ask further questions. It would only draw attention to the situation. She wondered if Aleks had come back to Ontonagon. But really? Every impatient driver looking for information in the world couldn’t be Aleks.

She placed her ristretto in the empty cupholder and pulled onto the highway, turning south. She wouldn’t let fear take away her few minutes of normalcy or a chance to make the call she’d been longing to make.

October 30: A Risky Call
Ontonagon, Michigan

The ristretto was everything Mia had hoped for. Dark, rich, and delicious enough to make her want another. Of course. Leaning against the back of her SUV under the raised lift gate, she took in the view of Lake Superior’s sparkling blue water. As the late afternoon sun warmed one side of her body, another déjà vu moment hit her. Why did this keep happening? Maybe it was because everything in

her real life seemed like a dream she could barely remember. She hung her head, sensed the tears welling. Felt the losses.

And then told herself to get a grip. She was here. Right now. No looking back and whining. This is what she had to work with. So, work with it.

Even though Aleks wasn't in that black Tahoe, she knew that going back to Claire's would be safest. But first, there was a voice she wanted to hear. It meant casting protocol aside, but the need to hear it was too great. She tapped her phone.

"O-M-G! You're FaceTiming me?" Jessi screeched. "Are you out of your mind?" She burst into tears. "Wait, never mind that. I am so relieved to see you. Where are you? Wait, not where are you. How are you? What's happening?"

"I'm fine," Mia said and grinned at her friend. "Just tell me what's going on at your end. I need to hear your voice, Jessi."

"Wow!" Jessica reached across her desk and grabbed a tissue. Wiped her face. "Okay. Okay. Where should I start?"

"What's going on at work?"

"Okay, I went to see your operations guy. Told him there was a family emergency and that you'd be gone for a couple of months. And by 'gone,' I made sure he understood that meant completely off-grid and unreachable. I delivered a letter, from you, of course. It basically said you trusted him to keep the work on track, receivables coming in, paychecks flowing, blah-blah-blah. And told him not to worry. Then someone came into the office and needed his input right away, so I left. He's called me twice asking about you, but I turned it around and asked him if everything was going well. He said it was."

"I knew he could do it, that he'd keep things on track."

"Yeah, I'm sure rumors are flying, but don't worry about that right now. I also heard from your new lawyer, Vikki. She hasn't told

me to do anything yet, but I've given her everything she asked for. So, I hope they're making progress."

Mia nodded to her friend. "So frustrating. I'm super scared that Aleks is going to try and take control of all that. I wish they'd hurry."

"Remember my buddy, Jason?" Jessi said. "The one who works for the State Department?"

Mia tried to pull the guy up from her extensive database of Jessi's 'buddies,' and failed.

"I asked him to keep an ear to the ground for anything unusual going on with the Greek embassy. Governmental, personal . . ."

"Are you sure that's safe?"

"He doesn't know you, Mia. I'll bet you couldn't even put a face to the name, could you?"

Mia smiled. "You know me too well, girl."

"Yeah, well, as of yesterday, it's all business as usual over there. I think that means Aleks is acting like everything's fine."

"Makes sense," Mia said. "He's super sensitive about what people think about anything he does, especially his parents."

They just looked at each other for a moment, then Mia said, "He came here. About a week ago. He saw Leanne, but I managed to—"

"What?" Jessi's face blanched.

"Yeah. Maybe he checked your family's property records. I got away, but it shook me up. A few minutes ago, a black Tahoe blasted by me. I thought maybe he'd come back."

"Then why the hell are you on this phone?"

"Well, it makes no sense. Why come back? He found nothing, except Leanne and the baby."

Jessi let out a big breath. "Yeah, a lotta black Tahoes in the world. Maybe nothing to worry about. So, speaking of Leanne, what's the scoop?"

“She and her baby are safe. They’re with her mom. And now I can focus on me.” A thickening in her belly. The discomfort forced her to stand up and pace. “The legal stuff’s holding me up, but I’m in a beautiful home with the nicest people in the world. They even took me shopping.” She tilted the phone down so Jessi could see her sweater.

“That’s gorgeous. It’ll be extra gorgeous when you get your hair . . .” Then she changed tack and said, “Listen, this is going to work out. You’ll come home, go back to work, grow your hair out, and everything will be just fine.”

“From your lips to God’s ears, Jessi.” She flipped the phone’s camera view so Jessi could take in the lake.

“That is so beautiful. Mom and I will have to get up there next summer.”

Mia flipped the camera back to herself. Blew kisses and told Jessi she loved her and missed her.

And then she was alone again, with nothing but the quiet lap of the lake and a setting sun. Too bad she wasn’t on a photo shoot. She’d have gotten some beauties.

The car started like a champ. “Thank you, Marlene.” Understood more now than she had back at the used car lot. Not a saleswoman—an angel!

And maybe another espresso wasn’t such a bad idea. As long as there wasn’t a black Tahoe in the parking lot.

October 30: Coffee Klatch
Ontonagon, Michigan

The parking lot was empty, so Mia went inside. A little bell dinged as she opened the door.

The woman who'd served her earlier was flipping chairs up onto the tables. She looked up and said, "Oh, darn it! Don't cha know, I forgot to lock the door. I'm so sorry but we're closed."

Mia flipped the dead bolt. "No problem. Truth is the last thing I need is another coffee at this hour."

"Oh hey. I remember you. Drive-thru ristretto doppio. But you just locked up for me, and you're on this side of the door." She stopped stacking, and said, "Why'd you do that?"

"That guy in the black Tahoe—you said he was looking for someone."

The woman nodded.

"What'd he look like?"

"Dark skin, dark hair and eyes, about six feet tall. Maybe Middle Eastern or Southern European. But honestly? The standout feature was his rudeness."

Fight or flight liquefied her bones and narrowed her vision. She slumped into a chair; put her head between her knees.

Julie put down the chair she was holding and rushed over to Mia. "Hey, you okay?" She touched Mia on the shoulder and a second later, understood. "Oh boy. You've got something to do with the story James is going to tell me tonight, don't you."

"The deputy? James? You know him?"

"I grew up here, so I know everybody. He told me earlier today to play dumb if a stranger came in asking about a woman rescued by plane on the lake a week ago."

Mia raised her head.

"He also told me to blast that out to all the locals, so . . . Wait, you know her? This woman he's looking for?"

"You could say that," Mia said, removing her baseball cap and sunglasses.

"Holy shit!" The woman gasped and stared. Then said, "Wow. Great job on the hair."

“Thanks,” Mia said, and pulled lightly at the spiky nest. “I gotta touch up the roots, though. It grows fast.”

Neither of them knew what to say for a moment. Finally, the woman put her hands on her hips. “I’m Julie,” she said.

“I’m Mia. And maybe you’d better call James?”



It was sunset. Claire was sitting on the front porch in the rocker under a blanket when the Nissan pulled into the drive. She squinted; it wasn’t Mia at the wheel.

The car came to a halt, and even though it was dark, Claire recognized tall, gangly Julie from the coffee shop when the driver’s side door opened. Then the back door opened and Mia emerged.

“You girls!” Claire stood up and shouted. “Get up here right now! I have never been so glad to see someone!” When they came up the steps, Claire grabbed Mia in a fierce hug and looked at Julie. “I understand from James that you have been misleading people today. And, it appears, with excellent results.”

Julie laughed. “Yes, ma’am! Lying by omission and damn proud of it!”

Mia pulled back from Claire. “And that’s not all. James told us they’re executing some kind of plan and gathering here later tonight.”

CHAPTER 35

*October 30: Gathering at the Pub
Ontonagon, Michigan*

Aleks had spent some time thinking about how to handle his inquiry. He figured if he spent some money, tongues would loosen.

“A menu,” he said, then read the bartender’s shirt and added, “Jim.”

The bartender motioned with an upward twist of his chin. “Right up there.”

Aleks looked up over the bottles of booze to a wide, rectangular, beat-up blackboard. He read the choices: Walleye, hamburger, grilled chicken sandwich. Fries or chips were the only sides. He raised his eyebrows at the bartender as if to ask, ‘anything else?’

“People around here come in for a pint and some company. They mostly eat at home,” Jim explained.

Aleks attempted a smile. “I see. Well then, instead of ordering food, I will admit that I am here on a mission.” He assumed that Jim’s flat, indifferent expression was a ploy to get him to spend money. So he looked up again. An extensive list of bottled and tap beers. Only two wines were listed: red and white. Aleks hated beer but thought it better to appear appreciative of the local offerings. “I will have the pilsner.”

The bartender leaned over and pulled a frosted mug out of the freezer, slid it under the beer tap, and pulled a pilsner with a perfect head. As he placed the mug on a napkin, Aleks pulled a piece of paper out of his jacket pocket and held it up for the bartender to see.

"I am looking for the pilot, or owner, of this plane. He rescued someone, and I must find out who."

Jim looked at the photo, then toward a server shouting at him from the end of the bar. "Just a minute," he shouted back on his way to the service end of the bar. Aleks watched with growing irritation as the man took the order and made four drinks. Smelled the old grease, flat beer of the place and took his hands off the sticky bar. Tried to wipe them.

Jim walked back to him. "I think I know that plane." He took the picture from Aleks and studied it. Pulled a pair of cheap readers out of his shirt pocket and looked closely. "Yeah, I know that plane. That's Benjamin Smithton's plane."

Aleks was so surprised, he almost slid off the stool. The bartender didn't try to hide his laughter at Aleks' near tumble. He looked at the photo again. "But I don't think that was a rescue. Uh, hang on." He went to the service bar again.

"Wait!" Hit the bar with a clenched hand. No respect! He took a swallow of the pilsner and almost gagged. Picked up the napkin and wiped the foam from his upper lip; stared at the bartender making drinks. Aleks stood up, paced around his barstool, and ignored his beer. Finally, the man came back.

His eyes bored into the bartender's. "What do you mean it was not a rescue? Do you not see the person in the water?" Aleks pointed toward the figure in the water and drew a line from the figure to the nose of the plane.

“Yeah. Probably not a rescue. Smithton teaches.” The bartender looked up at someone standing behind Aleks. In the twenty minutes since Aleks arrived, the place had become standing room only.

The man behind Aleks said, “Hey Jim! Gimme three Rainbows and two Waterfalls!”

Jim shouted, “You got it!” He turned his back on Aleks to get the beers, and Aleks turned around to see who’d interrupted him. He had to look up. The man behind him was about six feet six inches tall. Aleks thought better of saying anything.

When Jim got back, he asked, “You don’t like the pilsner? I can get ya something else.”

Aleks looked at the bartender and felt something prickly; like when his father toyed with him as if he was too dense to understand something that was easily understood by everyone else. His frustration showed when he asked, “You said the man, this Smithton, he—”

“Yeah, Smithton. He’s a pilot who teaches other pilots how to fly floatplanes.”

“But what about this person?” Aleks pointed to the spot in the picture again.

“Well, I’m no expert, you know. But if that’s a person, and not a dummy, it’s probably someone in a wet suit, or maybe a dry suit, acting like a victim so Smithton can teach the pilot how to pick ’em up.”

Jim took another order from a customer who shoved in on Aleks’ right, bumping him. Aleks hated being touched by strangers. Still standing, he moved slightly to the left and another customer immediately stepped in and took his vacated stool. She picked up the pilsner and looked at Aleks. “Happy Halloween! This yours?”

Aleks ignored the woman. Body-to-body crowded now. The crowd had gathered so fast. And loud. Some customers wore cheap Halloween costumes. Aleks rolled his eyes, then turned his

attention back to the bar, wondered if the bartender was taking his concern seriously. Was he lying? Some people lied just because they could; sometimes to be unhelpful or because it made them feel powerful. He would go directly to the source and get the truth.

"Sir!" He shouted at Jim. "Sir, one more thing!" Aleks got his wallet out of his pocket and extracted a \$50 bill. He palmed it so the bartender could see the denomination and reached his hand over the bar as if to shake.

"I will take this man Smithton's number." Then pulled his hand back, showing he'd release the money when he got the number.

The bartender looked up and laughed. "I could take your money, but it'd only piss you off!"

Heat raced up his neck. A bartender laughing at him? "Why? What are you talking about?"

Jim laughed even harder. "Smithton's standing right behind you."

***October 30: Crowdsourcing
Ontonagon, Michigan***

Aleks turned around and saw the tall man, Benjamin Smithton. He was paying no attention to the bartender or to Aleks. He was telling a story to his friends. The music ratcheted up a few notches, and Aleks struggled to hear what he was saying. Just as Aleks was about to interrupt, the group erupted into raucous laughter. Aleks pushed through the bodies between himself and the big man until he was standing just behind him.

"You still in town?" a voice said into Aleks' right ear. He turned, recognizing the speaker immediately. It was the deputy who'd stopped him and arrested his driver; the one who'd forced him to leave the cottage.

"I am not breaking any laws. And even if I were, as you know from our first exchange, I enjoy diplomatic immunity."

The deputy laughed. "Oh, come on now. Relax. I'm off duty! Just here for a little enjoyment, that's all." He looked back toward Benjamin, who continued his story.

Aleks looked at Benjamin too. Since he had missed the first part of the story, nothing made sense. He shook his head in frustration and stepped into the center of Smithton's audience, determined to get his attention. Then his pocket buzzed. He pulled his phone out and saw it was Bledsoe. He retreated from the group, then the bar. Got back into the Tahoe where he could take the call and actually hear the sound of his own voice.

"I have results," Bledsoe said. "Two different sources have told me that the plane belongs to a Benjamin Smithton."

"I already know that," Aleks replied, unable to resist rubbing his discovery into his paid investigator's face. "I am in Ontonagon right now, in its only pub. And two minutes ago, I was standing right next to the man."

"Are you able to speak to him directly, sir?" Bledsoe asked.

"The man is currently drinking his fair share of the pub's IPA and entertaining a group that includes the deputy who arrested my driver on the previous trip. Did you obtain any information about him training or teaching other pilots?"

"No, sir. No one mentioned it. But I didn't—"

"I knew it," Aleks hissed. "That bartender is a liar."

"Sir?"

"Never mind. Do you have any other information that might be useful?"

"Yes, I do. Smithton's family owns property in Ontonagon, but I've not yet located the address or addresses. Might be in some kind of family trust under a different last name. But I'll run it to ground and get it for you."

“Excellent,” Aleks said. “Get it to me as soon as possible.”

Finally, something that gave him a glimmer of hope. He would confront the pilot in private. He started the Tahoe with a smile on his face.

When he reached Meg’s B&B, he went into the house and walked up the stairs to the bedroom that was his for the evening, trying not to cringe at the ghastly decorative copper plates and thunderbirds. This whole town was nothing but kitsch.

October 30: The After Party
Ontonagon, Michigan

Pub closed, Mia sat with everyone who’d gathered at Claire’s house. Jim had everyone in stitches. “And then I said, ‘if I take your money, you’re gonna be pissed off.’” Jim was an excellent storyteller. He had everyone in the palm of his hand; waited a beat for full effect. “He says to me, ‘Why would I be angry?’ And I said, ‘well, because he’s standing right behind you!’”

Lila, Brenda, Claire, and Julie howled. Benjamin and James were slapping their thighs and trying not to snort the apple cider Claire had served them out of their noses. Mia smiled, tried to get into the group’s ‘boy, we really pulled one over on the bad guy’ spirit. But if Aleks felt he was being played, he’d be even angrier. Be even less likely to give up the chase. Perhaps more vengeful in his payback. She hoped very much that—if he’d noticed at all—he’d write it off as local-yokel stuff.

When the laughter died down, Mia jumped in.

“I can’t tell you how in awe I am of this effort to protect me. You all are just incredible, such talented actors. If I ever get back to my actual job shooting videos and commercials, I may have to come

up here for a production.” Laughter kicked up again. They gave her thumbs-ups and hooted a couple of ‘bring it ons!’ “But on a more serious note,” she waited for them to settle down a bit. “Before we shut this celebration down for the night, I want you to know something else. Besides Aleks’ diplomatic immunity, his family is . . .” Mia thought about how to say it. “Mafia. Or whatever they call the Greek version of that.” Laughter and commentary faded to dead silence. When no one seemed to know how to respond, James took the lead.

“Well, no one sitting in this room has those kinds of connections up here.” He looked around at everyone but Mia. “I mean, unless you all have been holding out on me for the past thirty or forty years.” Some nervous laughter and every head shaking no. He looked back at Mia. “I’ve only ever heard rumors about any organized crime this far north.” He stood up. “But as the only actual law enforcement person in the room, I suggest,” James looked again at everyone except Mia, “you all tune it down from this point forward. I can be a hard-ass with him if I need to.” He looked over at Claire. “Like if he comes up here to your property and you ask him to leave and he doesn’t or,” he switched his gaze to Benjamin, “he tries to put the hurt on you. Like, if he didn’t buy the pilot training story we cooked up. You know, stuff like that.”

He looked back at Mia. “Do you have a plan, Mia?”

“Yes. I’m leaving, heading back to . . . well, I won’t say where in case anyone asks. I was planning to leave in the morning.”

James looked worried. “Well, I checked with Meg. He only booked one night at her B&B. How about you hole up here and wait until we know he’s gone? I think we can confirm when his flight out of MSP leaves; still working on that one. But we’d all feel a lot better about you being on the road when he won’t be.”

Everything in Mia wanted to sprint upstairs, get her stuff, and hit the road. Now. But these people cared; they were doing

everything they could for her. Claire's house was so comfortable and being honest with herself—she didn't know whether it was physical, mental, or emotional—she was exhausted.

"Okay. I'll do that." She sighed heavily and looked over at Claire. "Does anyone know whether he has any reason to come here? To your house? I mean, I took the Montana plate off the truck in case he, or someone working for him, comes snooping around. He knew Leanne and I were in Montana before here, so I thought that'd be helpful."

James held up a fist to bump with Mia. "Good move! I hadn't thought of that."

Lila chimed in, "Well, if he gets the idea that he can check with Smithtons, we're all over the place here. I've got my place. Mom and Uncle Benjamin each have theirs. We've got Dad's side of the family and my Smithton cousins too. He'll be busy for a while."

Benjamin stood up. "Speaking of homes, I hear a bed calling my name. He comes to me, that's as far as he'll get. Lila, would you text all the cousins and let 'em know to send anyone who comes asking directly to me? That way, I can corroborate Jim's teaching story and, hopefully, that'll be the end of it."

Lila nodded enthusiastically, while Claire added, "And if worse comes to worst and he finds his way up here, we'll tuck you into the kids' old hidey-hole in the barn. I put fresh batteries in the light, got rid of the spiderwebs, and even put some water and a nice blanket in there." She looked at Mia. *Hidey-hole*? Her back arched involuntarily. A shiver like tiny ants crawling across her shoulders spread down her back.

"Oh, don't worry!" Claire put an arm on her shoulder. "I got it ready, so we won't need it. You know, like taking an umbrella with you when you go out so that it doesn't rain." Everyone murmured their agreement as they stood and made their way to the door.

Mia thought, as she said her goodbyes and thank-yous, that what Claire said was true enough. Except sometimes when you take the umbrella, it rains anyway.



It didn't happen often, but Mia dreamed that night. She was in a room with wood-paneled walls. Outside, there were people banging on the door, trying to get in. And inside, a man was hitting someone. A woman was screaming. Mia was herself, but tiny. So tiny she was hiding under something close to the floor. She thought the people outside were trying to get in and help the woman who was screaming. But she wasn't sure. She only knew that there was nothing she could do. She was too tiny to do anything at all, as tiny as the little bugs she saw on the floor next to her.

She looked at one of them. "Are you as scared as I am?"

She woke up, remembering only bits of the dream, but knew it had been a nightmare. Her T-shirt was soaking wet with sweat.

CHAPTER 36

October 31: Addresses Ontonagon, Michigan

At nine o'clock on Sunday morning, Aleks opened the email from Bledsoe. Five addresses in and around Ontonagon and the Minneapolis area. One for the pilot Benjamin Smithton; the others likely relatives. The largest property was held in a trust under a different name. Unless he heard otherwise, Bledsoe wrote, he would fly back to DC that afternoon.

Aleks would have to be at the airport in Minneapolis no later than five or he would miss his flight. And any further absences from work would have consequences. There was a significant meeting on Monday and an event honoring the attendees that evening.

And once more his wife would not be on his arm. Yet another embarrassment. He pounded his fist on the antique writing table, then stood up, and looked at the addresses. She was here in one of these homes in Ontonagon. He glanced at his watch. In three hours he must leave town. How best to use them?

He thought about his own family, the properties they owned back in Greece, who owned what, and how he might use that knowledge here. The least expensive property was probably owned by a younger family member with less experience and more idealism. And, therefore, the person most likely to tell him where Mia was.

Packed and dressed for travel, Aleks checked out of the B&B, then loaded the Tahoe. Address plugged in, he glanced at the navigation: ETA 10:45 a.m. Time was short, but the local addresses were not far from each other. Today he would find her, take her from whoever was shielding her, and bring her home.

October 31: Hope for the Folly of Youth
Ontonagon, Michigan

Lila looked through the peephole at the person who'd knocked on the door. It was a man, and his features matched the description she'd been given. Mia's ex, the one she was running from. Aleks.

She took a deep breath. Looked down at herself. Dressed in her version of Sunday morning best: T-shirt and boxers. Crossed her fingers that she'd do a good job. Left the door chain in place and opened it a couple of inches.

"If you're selling something, I'm not buying," she said.

The guy tried, and mostly failed, to smile. "I am not selling anything. I am looking for someone. My wife. I believe she fell into the water last week and someone rescued her. But she may not remember who she is. Your last name is Smithton?"

Lila's instructions had been to play dumb and eat up as much time with questions as she could without raising suspicion. So, she said, "How do you know that?"

"My research has informed me that a seaplane owned by a man named Smithton picked her up from the water."

"Well, I don't own a seaplane. But I have three cousins, a grandfather, a brother, and a couple of other more distant relatives who own them. Well, floatplanes actually. They're different kinds of planes, you know. But anyway, wassup?"

Aleks held up the picture. "Last night, I showed the bartender in the pub this photo. This plane is owned by Benjamin Smithton. This is perhaps your husband?"

Lila laughed. "No. No way am I married to that Smithton." She looked at the picture closely. "Where's the woman you're talking about?"

The man closed his eyes, clearly trying to tamp down frustration. Good. Taking up time he didn't have to spare. He opened them again, held the picture up, and pointed to a dark smudgy figure in the water.

"So, yeah," Lila said, "that's my Uncle Ben's plane. And I can't tell for sure . . . that thing you're pointing to could be a person, but it could also be, like, a dummy of some kind, tied to what looks like that canoe over there." Lila looked up and smiled. "Or, he has a couple of buddies who help him out sometimes. He might have been pretending to rescue someone cuz sometimes he—"

"Yes, yes," the guy said, and rolled his eyes. "This is what the bartender also said. He teaches how to rescue. But I was there. I took this photo. I am almost sure it was my wife. And I am anxious for her. I fear someone is holding her against her will, or that she hit her head and is confused."

"That sounds scary, but folks around here holding someone against their will? Not so likely." Lila looked at her mobile phone. "That's my boyfriend calling. Wish I could help but, gotta go." She giggled like a teenager as she closed the door. "Hey there, babe. How much longer before you get here?" She made sure her voice was loud enough for Aleks to hear as she simultaneously texted the group.

October 31: Out of Time
Ontonagon, Michigan

Aleks raised his fist to bang on the door, furious at this young woman's dismissal, but checked his watch. It was almost eleven; he was cutting it close if he was to catch his five o'clock flight. Instead, he tapped another Smithton's address into his map app and got back in the Tahoe.

Twenty-five minutes later, wishing he'd started earlier, the front door opened just wide enough that Aleks could see inside the house. Then the man opening it smiled as if he were seeing an old friend for the first time in years and said, "Hi there. Didn't I see you in the pub last night?"

Smithton's open smile and friendliness took Aleks by surprise. He was immediately mistrustful. "Yes. I wanted to speak with you, but you were entertaining a group of friends, and I thought it best to approach you in a more private manner." Aleks did his best to smile back.

The pilot stuck his hand out. "Benjamin Smithton."

Aleks accepted the gesture. "I am Aleksanteri Hasapsis, and—"

"You want some coffee? I got up late this morning and just made a pot." Smithton opened the door wider, and with a quick hand gesture, invited Aleks to come in.

"No. I am under a severe time constraint. I need only some information."

Smithton ambled into his kitchen, and said, "Well, I'll see what I can do to help you. But I'd better have a cup myself. Wake up enough to understand what you need." He pulled a cup from the cupboard, filled it, and leaned against the kitchen counter. "So, what can I do ya for?"

The colloquialism confused Aleks for a moment, but he ignored it, and pulled the photo from his jacket pocket. It looked worse for wear. He handed it to the man.

"This is your plane? You were flying it?"

Smithton squinted, then rambled around the kitchen, then moved on to other rooms, muttering about cheap reader glasses. While he did, Aleks opened the dishwasher. It was packed with dirty dishes, but there was nothing that indicated a woman's presence in the house.

Smithton returned with his glasses on and looked at the photo. "Oh, yeah, that's me. Let's see, that was a week and a half ago." He looked up and handed the printout back. "Training exercise for the copilot. I was demonstrating how to land on water for a rescue."

Aleks studied the man. He was relaxed. Comfortable.

"I'm a certified flight instructor," Smithton said. "I teach other pilots. And around here, that means knowing how to land on water. You interested in a lesson?"

Aleks gritted his teeth but held his tongue.

"Whoa . . . I, uh, I guess not. So, what is it about the photo?"

"I am searching for my wife. I believe this is her," Aleks said, and pointed to the blurry figure in the water. "That is, I believed it was her." He looked up at Smithton. The man seemed genuinely shocked.

Smithton shook his head. "Man, I am so sorry to bust your hopes. Your wife? Holy moly, that's gotta be . . ." He searched for the right word for a moment, then said, "But see, that's my buddy Robert in the water." Smithton turned the paper sideways and placed a finger on the blur that Aleks had been sure was Mia. "See that little thing right there? He's wearing a baseball cap. And the water's super-cold now, so he's in a wet suit."

Smithton handed the printout back to Aleks. "Truth be told, he was probably cussing up a storm because we were a little behind schedule. He was supposed to tip himself out of the canoe when my pontoons hit the water. But the waves were rough, and a power-boater—too busy partying to watch where he was going—made a

huge wake that tipped Robert out way too soon. Boy, was he pissed! I had to buy him extra beer after that one.”

Aleks remained silent. The man’s story was plausible, detailed. It made sense.

Which meant he’d been wrong about this being Mia after all.

Smithton continued, “Yeah, not the sharpest tool in the kit. But he helps me out for beers . . . we’ve been friends since elementary school, so, you know . . . but I’m sorry, man. That sucks for you, huh?” A beat passed and then he said, “Not to rush you, but I’ve got a date for lunch.” He put his hand on Aleks’ shoulder and steered him out of the kitchen. “Think of it like this: It could be good news. Wherever she is, at least she isn’t recovering from an icy fall into Lake Superior.”

Aleks shrugged the man’s hand off his shoulder and slogged toward the Tahoe. He’d been so close. His rage fizzled into angry resignation as he looked at his watch. Out of luck and out of time.

CHAPTER 37

October 31: Misplaced Period Ontonagon, Michigan

Mia woke up to find blood on her underwear. Periods were frequently on the list of things not worth remembering. Geez, she could organize a photo shoot and plan a vanishing act for an abused woman and her baby but forget to stock up on tampons? She wadded up some tissue. It would do for now.

She met Claire in the kitchen. Amid explaining what she needed, their phones pinged at the same time. Mia read the text:

Looks like he bought it. He's on a 6 pm flight so he's gotta haul ass back to MSP. Any of you spot him doing anything other than leaving town, give a shout.

As they high-fived each other, Claire said, "Mia, go get those ridiculous sunglasses and the hat. You're coming with me to the store."

"Are you sure? I mean, he's not out of town yet."

"Exactly! We've got to get you taken care of, and I'm not leaving you here by yourself, just in case he decides making that flight isn't the most important thing he needs to do right now."

Mia looked doubtful. “The Bronco’s a mess; the pet partition is probably still up between the front and back seats from the last time Lila borrowed it. But dog hair or not, get a move on, girly.”

Mia shrugged her shoulders and smiled. Getting out of the house for a few minutes would do her good and keep her from thinking about that hidey-hole.

They pulled out of the driveway at 11:50 a.m.



In the parking lot at Pat’s, Mia waited, comfortable in the vintage Bronco despite the dog smell, while Claire ran into the store. Then, in her peripheral vision, movement on her right. A black vehicle pulled into the space next to her door. She read the word ‘Tahoe.’

Mia’s body spasmed with shock, sending her phone into the footwell. Her heart nearly stopped but she had the presence of mind to bend down, reach for the phone, and head down, to wait. She heard the Tahoe’s door open and felt in her bones Aleks’ shoes hitting the parking lot pavement. When his footsteps faded, she sat up and watched his back as he walked quickly into the grocery.

Buzzing with fear, she turned to climb into the back seat where the windows were darker and she’d be completely hidden, only to confront the pet partition. She grabbed and rattled it in frustration. Then remembered Benjamin’s instruction to let them all know if Aleks showed up. She took a minute to text the group.

He’s at the grocery.

Another minute went by before a response came from Lila.

What?!

Mia, too frozen to move, replied:

Claire didn't want to leave me alone at the house. He just parked the Tahoe by her Bronco.

Waiting for a response, Mia saw on her phone's clock that fear had skewed perception. In what felt like thirty seconds, four minutes had passed since Aleks went into the store. Any second, he'd walk right toward her. See her through the front windshield. She closed her eyes, clenched her fists. She had to move. She couldn't move.

Breath shallow, heart pounding, eyes on the floor. She forced two long deep breaths. Now. She grabbed the door handle, opened the door and, eyes on the ground, stepped out. Then, panic. A sneeze coming on. She turned, put her back to the storefront, and raced to close the front passenger door. Eyes still on the asphalt, she took two quick steps and reached for the back door handle.

Twisting back toward the store as she opened it, there was Aleks. Five feet in front of her, looking down at his key fob; struggling to open a bottle of water. She jerked the back door open. He looked up.

She'd put a key into an electrical socket when she was a child. The sudden kick of cold fear that raced through her body in a nanosecond was exactly that: A split second of involuntary pain racing along every nerve, every ganglion; every muscle seizing; not to mention a metallic taste in her mouth. She jumped.

Her heart, an angry animal struggling to burst from its cage, certain he'd seen her, she slammed and locked the door. Threw herself flat on the seat. And sneezed violently. *No! No! No! Not now!*

Teased ever since elementary school about her long, drawn-out sneezes, she silently prayed that because they were also weirdly soft, they'd be drowned out by Aleks' fists banging on the glass. He

wouldn't hear her. Maybe. She sneezed again; wondered if the glass would break. But wasn't automobile glass supposed to be unbreakable? She couldn't remember. And then, except for Aleks' yelling and banging, and her own internal screaming, she couldn't think at all. She put her fingers in her ears, rolled down from the seat into the footwell, and prayed.

"Wait! Wait, I just need to . . ." His voice was muffled but his fists, loud against the window. Could he break it? Then break her?

CHAPTER 38

*October 31: Rumors
Delaware, Louisiana*

“Remy was in here last night,” Jake said in greeting.

“Oh, yeah?” Boudreaux had enjoyed Enola’s during his last visit and figured he’d stop by again and see how things were playing out. “I was hoping you’d say that.”

Jake laughed as he placed a napkin and a drink in front of him. Boudreaux picked it up and sipped it gratefully.

“Nothing like a good sparkling water with some citrus on a hot Halloween night.” Boudreaux sat the glass down and asked, “So, what’s the word?”

Jake stepped back from the bar and gave Boudreaux a long look. “Something’s changed about you, Uncle B.” Boudreaux felt himself blushing and picked up his drink to hide it. Shrugged his shoulders.

“I went shopping, so, dressing a little better these days.”

“Yeah, but, no. It’s not that. Or, not just that. Looks like you’ve dropped a few pounds. And you got a different haircut too.” Jake cocked his head and grinned. “Okay, give it up. Who is she?”

Boudreaux fidgeted on his barstool, looked around to see who else was within earshot.

“Jake, we’re getting to know each other, but good fences make good neighbors. You hear what I’m saying?”

Jake held his hands up in the air. "Okay, okay. No need to get worked up."

Boudreaux winced at Jake's disarming smile, slick as a fillet knife.

"You know, it's just, usually, when we—you know, us guys—lose weight, get a new haircut, dress nicer, stuff like that, it's because there's a . . ."

Boudreaux stared at Jake. Remained absolutely silent.

Jake laughed. "Alright, I hear you. But hey, take the compliment, man. It's a good look for ya." He leaned over and put his hands on the bar, got close enough to speak, almost in a whisper. "Word is that Leanne cheated on Remy, and the kid isn't his. I actually heard him say that he's divorcing her, then corrected himself and say, more than divorcing, that his attorney is, Remy's words, 'making it as if the marriage never even happened.'"

Boudreaux relaxed. "Ah, that's good. That's exactly what he's supposed to say." Boudreaux took another sip of his drink, then handed the glass to Jake to top it off. "Any other talk I ought to know about?"

Jake added soda water and speared a fresh lime. Dropped it into the glass and leaned in against the bar as he handed it back. "Yeah. The ladies' group that comes in here the first Friday of every month. I don't know, the hat group or something like that. They all wear hats, and every time it's a different theme . . ."

"Remy's mom part of that?"

"Usually. Not this time, but her best friend is and she was there. They have a cocktail before they order lunch, then a cocktail with their lunch. When I brought the second round, they were whisper-talking, ignoring me like, I'm just the 'manservant,' you know?" Jake used air quotes and laughed.

Boudreaux chuckled and nodded knowingly.

Jake continued, "I heard Miss Janet, that's Remy's mom's friend, say, 'his wife ran off for a night in New Orleans right before they

got engaged. Apparently, that's where she became impregnated.' Of course, she whispered the 'became impregnated' part, and the rest of the ladies all gasped. But then Miss Janet took out her phone and passed it around. So, as I passed out the drinks, I got a look."

"I see. And do I know what was in the photo Miss Janet shared with the ladies?"

"I'm sure you do. It was a closeup of a baby boy, only a few weeks old. One with very red hair."

Boudreaux leaned back from the bar and smiled at him. Satisfaction, yeah. But also tremendous respect. Felt odd. Like tasting a dish he'd loved when he was young and hadn't had in a long, long time. Ah, that was it: respect from someone not on his payroll.

Jake continued, "I'm so glad you were the one to deal with Remy on this. I don't think anyone else could have had the, uh," he paused a few seconds, searching for the right words, "the same impact."

"Well now, coming from you Jake, I'll take that as high praise." Boudreaux nodded at Jake's slight bow of thanks. Might be a good idea to get a little closer. You never know. "Got something else to share with you, *cher*."

Jake took his bar towel out of his back pocket and started wiping down the counter. Leaned into it. Toward him.

"There's a situation that's, uh, developing. Resolving itself. If things go as planned, I'll be visiting a dear friend of mine in Mississippi in a week or two. You need to come with me."

Boudreaux watched his distant relative's mouth drop open and his hand stop wiping the bar. If he'd had a feather in his hand, he could have knocked the boy over.

"I'll be in touch when I have a date." Boudreaux got up and threw a twenty on the bar, turned, and left without another word.

*October 31: Changes**New Orleans, Louisiana*

Boudreaux's driver dropped him at his office. When he opened the door, he checked out the workmen's progress. They were nearly done with phase two. Phase one had been a deep cleaning he'd ordered as soon as he'd gotten off the phone with Roberta. But that hadn't been enough; Boudreaux had upsold himself to a complete redo; was pretty sure the crew had worked all day and night to get it done. The new floor and ceiling were both complete, drywall was up and floated. He'd picked the paint and noted two five-gallon containers in the corner ready to be applied.

"Looking good boys!" Boudreaux didn't exactly smile, but he conferred upon them a kind of verbal benediction that was worth more to them than the money they were earning.

"Uncle, I like the color you chose." Xavier turned and wiped his hands on his jeans. "The boss says I can come in on Saturday and help with the painting. If you're okay with it."

"As long as your grades are where they should be and Jake can spare you."

"Yeah, yeah, grades are fine. And I already checked with him. He says I should make a painter's money because it's more than he pays."

Boudreaux gave them all a thumbs-up and walked over to the corner of the room where plastic was protecting a new computer and his gym bag. He grabbed the bag and left them to their work. He had a newfound belief in second chances, and when he got to Mississippi, he wanted the best shot possible at having one with the woman who got away forty-something years ago.

CHAPTER 39

October 31: The Blue Lights Ontonagon, Michigan

Blue lights, a police siren, and squealing tires drowned out everything as Aleks tried to get the attention of the person who'd scampered into the back seat of the Bronco. Pounding the glass, then trying to see through the tint, he turned slowly to watch the police car brake to a halt in front of the grocery. The deputy with whom he was all too familiar got out, started toward the grocery entrance, then looked around, saw Aleks, and hurried in his direction.

James was close enough to call out to him. "You need some help there, Hasapsis?"

Aleks turned toward James, who stopped an arm's length away and sighed. "No. No, I do not. I . . ." He shook his head.

"You know the person who owns this car? Have some business with them? I mean, I'm just asking because you're pounding on the glass and kind of yelling. But I don't see anyone in there. Just want to make sure there's no problem."

"No, deputy." Aleks checked his watch again. He couldn't miss that flight. "No problem. I thought it was someone who might have information about my wife. But . . ."

"Yeah?" James glanced in the windows. "There's, uh, someone in there?"

Aleks closed his eyes and cursed under his breath. "Yes! Of course someone is in there, but he won't answer me! What is wrong with you people in this town? Can you see if you can get him to open the door and talk to me?"

The deputy exhaled, an expression Aleks hadn't seen before. Perhaps reluctant to give up a secret he had no choice but to share?

"Look, you might be trying to talk to someone who can't talk to you. I know the owner of this vehicle, and there's a family member who is," shook his head, sad story, "well, not someone who could help you. Might even be afraid of you."

The man looked sincere, but . . .

"Yeah. Afraid. Has difficulty answering questions, you know. Questions from anyone. You, uh, catching my drift?"

Aleks felt unmoored. It made no sense, but something about the man he caught only a glimpse of. So familiar. And what he'd heard. A gasp? Meaningless babble? Or no, it couldn't have been sneezing. His wife sneezed at the oddest times . . .

He looked back at the deputy. "But I saw a person in this vehicle. A person wearing a ball cap like the one Smithton said the person in the canoe wore. I just . . . why is he hiding from me? He must know something!"

The deputy turned back toward his blue lights, then to Aleks. Patience exhausted. "So, you're not getting it. Okay, look. I got nothing against you, Hasapsis. Well, other than wearing that diplomatic immunity like a superpower shield you think entitles you to things others can't have. I've got something more important to do in the store. And if you'll just get in your car and go, I can do that instead of standing here making sure you don't do something that injures one of our more fragile folks."

Aleks looked James in the eye. Considered banging on the window again. But decided the deputy would probably arrest him. And he could not miss that flight.

"I have a plane to catch," Aleks spat through clenched teeth. He turned, got into the Tahoe, and drove slowly until he reached the edge of the parking lot. As he turned onto the main highway, he floored it. Threw them some gravel to remember him by.



Mia, trembling, tears streaming down her face, remained tucked down low. When all was quiet, she inched up slowly. Got her eyes just above the door where she could see through the window and watched the SUV lay rubber. She jumped and stifled a scream when the driver's door opened.

Mia collapsed on the back seat. Fear, like a block of ice in her throat. She couldn't speak.

"Mia, they had exactly the ones you asked for! Today must be your lucky day!" Claire slid behind the wheel and shut the door. Then said, "And what's James doing here?"

Mia wiped the tears from her face and started laughing.

"Yes, Claire! Today is definitely my lucky day!" She pulled herself up to a sitting position, rolled down the window just enough to nod at James. He replied with a snappy half salute.

Claire turned to look back at her. "And what're you doing in the back seat? You'll be covered with dog hair!"

CHAPTER 40

Late November: Not Over Yet Meridian, Mississippi

Weeks passed, slow, long, and drawn out. Mia had expected it to be over by now. Aleks would've given up—maybe *had* given up. Now this? She must have been shouting.

“Mia, calm down please. This is not how things are going to go. It's just a ploy on his part that will slow things down!” Vikki's voice, clearly going for ‘soothing,’ wasn't working.

“I'm dead? You're telling me I'm dead, when it's not my idea to be dead? And you want me to calm down?”

“You're not dead yet. But he's trying to build a case for the possibility that you might be so he can stop all actions related to selling your business or allowing access to your money.”

“I don't understand! I looked it up. You have to disappear for like seven years or something before someone can have you declared ‘presumed dead’ in Virginia. And I owned that business for years before we married. He should have no claim to it whatsoever!”

“He's had someone produce some fake documents, and it's going to take some time, Mia. That's all, just time.”

“Fake documents? Fake documents of what?”

“That you took a trip to Europe; scouting around for a place to film something, a concept you had for a new client. But when you

didn't come home when you were supposed to, he looked in your desk and found notes indicating you'd planned to go to Croatia and see the beaches there."

"Croatia?" Vexed. Perplexed. Furious.

"Yeah, you probably haven't been keeping up with the news much, but . . ."

"Yeah, no," Mia laughed sardonically. "I've been a little distracted."

"Right. There was a 5.7-magnitude earthquake there a few weeks ago. Collapsed some old buildings. There are bodies that can't be identified, and he's proposing that you are one of the victims. Clearly, you're not. So, like I said, it's just going to take some time."

"But there's no evidence that I went to Croatia."

"He didn't need evidence, not yet. He'll have to produce some eventually, but this gives him a few weeks delay. Oh Mia, I am so sorry to have to be the one to tell you this."

Mia tried to sound calm. "So bottom line, we haven't figured out whether I need to fake my own death, but he's trying to beat us to the punch in a way that keeps anyone from doing anything about my assets, selling the business, anything at all, until it's all sorted out?"

"That's about the size of it, yeah."

Both women were quiet as Mia paced the upstairs hall in the old house Robbi inherited from her late husband's aunt. She'd even named it after her: 'Mertice's Retreat.' Apt, Mia thought. Certainly felt like she was retreating instead of moving forward.

Mia finished the conversation no less frustrated, but without any more shouting, and with hope that Vikki and her boss Park Ellis were going to take care of her. Meanwhile, she needed to set it aside. Nothing to be done about it yet anyway. Maybe take a deep breath and figure out how to enjoy the time she had with her new family. She put the phone on the charger and went downstairs to have lunch with them.

They were planning for a visit from someone, but Robbi wouldn't say who it was. Menus were being planned, significant shopping lists created, including a kind of catfish that was blue? And Robbi had been asking around for a couple who might consider living on property and working to restore the home to its former magnificence, maybe even help with household chores.

Mia opened the fridge and pulled out a miniature can of sparkling water.

Robbi came into the kitchen right behind her, saying, "I have good reason to believe that what I pay that law firm is directly funding somebody's eighty-foot yacht on the Gulf of Mexico!" She opened the fridge but then shut it almost as quickly. "Mia, I believe that you and I can go do this grocery shopping ourselves and leave Lee, uh, Louanne, and the baby here by themselves. Our guests are arriving in a few days, and we've got some prep work to do."

"Okay, sure. Glad to go. I'll just grab my hat and sunglasses and put on that boob-squishing bra so that I can pass for a boy on any camera."

Running up the stairs, glad she wasn't as well-endowed as Robbi, it was as if the woman had read her mind when she called out, "Be thankful that's not painful for you!"

Early December: Catfish and Surprises
Meridian, Mississippi

Those days passed peacefully. Mia helped Robbi when asked, ate well, and ran as many miles as her body could stand. She also continued her minimal communication with Jessi and Jake; the occasional 'A-OK' from her to them. Jessi was staying as far away from Aleks as she could. Her State Department contact wasn't hearing

much through the grapevine since Aleks' announcement a week and a half ago that his spouse was missing and that he and his parents were investigating and praying for her safe return. Based on her recent conversation with Vikki, Mia would remain in limbo for a while.

She stood at the mirror, fighting the urge to ruminate. To figure out something, anything, that she could do. Came up with nothing.

Robbi said they were having company in a little while. Wouldn't say who. Said it was safe to be herself—no disguise required—and suggested a touch of mascara might match up her hair and lashes. Mia assumed attorneys. She pulled a tube out of the drawer and applied it. *There you are, Mia. No red hair yet, but you don't have to wear the colored contacts today, so I can almost see the real you in that mirror.*

Her smile held no joy, but she spiked her hair into some semblance of a style, then forced an actual smile, and went downstairs. She'd heard the doorbell ring and would do her best to be a reasonably cheerful human being.

She was standing halfway down the stairs, watching Robbi welcome a tall, bulky man standing in the door. Not fat. A little padding but powerfully built. Early December temps were in the forties, so he was removing a beautiful lightweight cashmere coat and scarf. The pale lavender shirt was collared and his black slacks crisply creased. Flat-front—no camouflaging pleats. Mia thought him very attractive and probably about the age her dad would be. If he were alive.

And behind him, another man, face hidden by an enormous bunch of flowers and a plastic grocery bag hanging from his arm. Mia realized exactly who it was when Robbi took the flowers.

She ran down the steps. "Jake!" She yelled and grabbed him into a hug. "Robbi, I can't believe you didn't let me know Jake was coming!" Jake was laughing and hugging her back. Mia stepped back

as if to pull away, but Jake didn't let her. She relaxed for a moment, then pulled back decisively. *When would it ever be okay again?* She shook it off and smiled. Softened the hesitancy. She hoped.

She turned to Robbi who was beaming and introducing her to Boudreaux. Mia extended her hand to shake his.

He took it and bowed. "It is a genuine pleasure to finally meet you, Miss Mia."

Surprising how refined the criminal sounded.

"The photo Jake shared with me several weeks ago was certainly evidence that you are an attractive woman. But meeting you in person, I see it was a less-than-accurate representation of your *vrai beauté!*"

"Boudreaux, you have not changed one bit in forty years." Robbi hit him playfully on the arm.

"And you, my dear, haven't either. A feast for the eyes." Boudreaux didn't exactly smile, but there was a playful note in his voice. It didn't take a psychic to get that he meant every word he said.

Mia raised her eyebrows at the sparkle in Robbi's eyes. Maybe even brighter than the one she had for her grandson.

Jake looked up toward the stairs and said, "And here's the star of today's show, for sure. The redheaded boy who's the talk of the town back home."

Smiling and cooing, the baby waved two fists up and down as if frustrated he didn't have words to speak. Louanne looked at Jake and realized he wouldn't know yet. "Jake, Boudreaux, I want y'all to say hello to Robert Hagan Broussard." She put her face into the baby's stomach and blew strawberries until he laughed. "I named him Robert, partly after Daddy—obviously. But also after Momma too. And Hagan is Irish for 'fiery one.' He's already showing us a personality that matches his hair."

She shimmered with pride and new mother happiness.



They dined in Mertice's Magnolia Room. Plates filled and tea poured, Mia was surprised when Louanne tackled the elephant in the room.

"Jake, I'm sure that, like you said, Little Red and I are the talk of the town, and not, like, in a good way." But no downturned mouth or sadness. She radiated joy. "Who knew I would ever be grateful for people talking bad about me?" She laughed as she looked around the table.

Mia saw nothing but pleasure in every direction she looked.

Eyes on Boudreaux, Robbi said, "Well, daughter, a surprise does people good sometimes."

Boudreaux's voice was low and warm. "Indeed it does Roberta. *Ça fait, oui.*"

Mia looked at Jake, and they both turned to Louanne.

She leaned toward them and whispered, "Momma's wildin'. Again."

CHAPTER 41

January 15: Something to Do Meridian, Mississippi

The dinner party, visit with Jake, and getting to know Boudreaux back in December had relieved a little of the boredom of waiting. The holidays were quiet but at Robbi's insistence, filled with decorating, cooking, and another visit from 'the boys.'

Then after the New Year, taking down and putting away all the decorations. Mia'd spent her days helping with chores, playing with the baby, talking to Louanne, using her creativity—as Robbi called it—to make remodeling suggestions, and reading mysteries that involved protagonists in witness protection programs. She searched the internet for anything she could find about creating new identities and successfully hiding oneself. But even with all this, plus waiting to find out what fresh hell Aleks might invent, and to learn what strategy Vikki and Park Ellis were dreaming up, Mia was restless.

She wanted to leave Mississippi, but no place else made sense. The letters she'd exchanged with Jessica from Delareau back in October meant Aleks probably had eyes there. Ontonagon, where she'd had a few weeks of relative safety and comfort—a fact she attributed to the Smithtons' warm welcome and passionate protection of her—was also too 'hot.' She shivered when she thought

how close she'd come to Aleks finding her there. But there's only so much time a person can spend on a beautiful Mississippi plantation compound with a new mother, her baby, and the baby's grandmother. A girl had to get out sometimes. She could stand it no longer.

She surveyed her body in the full-length mirror. Stress and plenty of time to run left her skinnier than she'd ever been in her life. The sloppy hiker look, perfected with selections from her second-hand store wardrobe of roomy hiking pants and shirts, layered with a down vest to combat the cold, beat-up hiking boots, and a ball cap under which she tucked her jet-black spikey hair. It was a look she'd grown tired of. But as they say, if it's not broke . . .

She added the finishing touches: nonprescription, dark-brown-colored contacts to hide her brilliant green eyes and a pair of glasses (also nonprescription) with the biggest, roundest frames she'd been able to find. Tonight, she was going to town, would eat in a restaurant, hear some fresh voices, and walk around Meridian, a town she'd never visited before and the only one within reasonable driving distance of Robbi's home. A cure, she hoped, for a very specific form of claustrophobia. One born of hiding and feeling trapped.

She left a note for Robbi and Louanne, snuck out the back door, and drove herself to town in the sturdy gray Nissan SUV. She replaced the front license plate with the temporary Montana plate Marlene had given her. She didn't know yet what to do about getting a permanent plate. But she wouldn't think about that tonight. Tonight, she'd decided, she'd have something resembling fun.



Downtown Meridian was more urban and lively than she expected. *Lots more going on here than in quiet little Delareau.* She

parked on a side street. The sun was setting and it was chilly. But the down vest she wore kept her warm enough to stay outside and look around for a while. Mia tugged the ball cap down a little further, pushed her eyeglasses up, and ambled around a downtown clearly in the midst of a facelift: sidewalks being refurbished, old buildings coming back to life, lots of people visiting retail establishments. A guitar, bass, and fiddle trio played on the main street sidewalk. The music drew her toward a particularly beautiful building. A street-level sign read Threefoot Hotel.

Who could resist a name like that? She casually maneuvered herself into the center of a large group and entered the art deco-influenced building. Mia knew she'd be hard to pick out from the hotel's camera footage. Her bigger concern was hoping no one would throw her out for being underdressed.

The maître d' led her to a booth along the wall and she tucked herself into the corner. An hour later, meal eaten, and no reason she could come up with to hang around any longer, Mia signaled her server.

"No, nothing else," she told him. "Just the check." She spoke loudly enough to be heard, but without looking up, and making eye contact. It would take a minute, so she went to the restroom.

She was finishing up in one of the four stalls when she heard a whimper. Cocked her head to listen. Silence. She flushed and waited. There it was again. This time a little louder. More like a soft cry. And from the stall next to her.

She bent over and looked. No feet.

Shaking her head, she left her stall for the sink. Little whimpers continued, so she dried her hands and knocked very softly on the stall door. "You okay in there? Need some paper or something?"

Mia heard a gasp. She looked down and saw feet, bare, tentatively touch the floor then pull up as if they'd touched something hot.

She stood and pushed gently on the door. It wasn't locked.

"Don't! Just leave me alone! I have nothing to do with all that!" The door slammed forward hard, as if kicked, but bounced open. Mia saw a woman seated on the toilet, legs pulled up, feet on the seat. She closed her eyes and had a flash of memory: handing Leanne the note with her phone number. *Were women's restrooms the only safe place left in the world?*

"Hey," Mia said. Voice neutral, hands up, palms out. "You got nothing to worry about from me." A woman about her own age stared wide-eyed. Looked as if she'd been crying. What had been an elegant outfit was dirty, wrinkled, and torn. Dried blood on the concrete floor. This woman had been hurt.

"Oh," she said, then put her bare feet on the floor and stood up. She stared at Mia, and eventually opened her mouth to say something, then closed it. Then, "I'm sorry. There's someone . . ."

She didn't finish the sentence. Mia could smell the woman's fear.

"Okay," she answered. Thought for a second and said, "Well, whomever it is, I'm not with him. Or them. Or whatever." The woman looked around, frantic, searching for an exit. Mia backed up, making herself less of a threat. Hoped she would come out.

"I need to get out of here!" She moaned, but instead of coming forward, she pushed into the wall behind her as if she could Houdini herself through the concrete wall. The woman was near panic.

"So maybe I can help." Mia thought for just a second. "I've gotta pay my tab first. But then I can get my car and pull up near that window." She pointed above the woman's stall. The woman looked up. It was a wide, short rectangle, but Mia guessed that the woman was thin enough to fit through it.

"Let me show you." Mia moved forward, then stepped on the toilet seat, and to get a little more height, climbed up on the stainless-steel water pipe coming out of the wall. "This is what you need

to do.” Window ledge even with her breasts, she held on to the top of the stall with one hand and flipped the single handle that unlocked the window with the other. Concerned it might have been painted shut, she pushed on the pane. It glided open as if oiled. Small miracles.

Mia grabbed the bottom of the window frame, pushed off from the pipe she’d been standing on, and wrenched herself up and half-way through the window. She looked down. Half the exterior wall buried, the drop from window to ground wasn’t very far. She let herself down, then turned toward the very frightened woman.

“You can do that, right?”

The woman nodded.

A slide show of moments from the hundreds of film and video productions she’d produced and directed flickered across the screen of her mind. The poor results of actors who claimed they could climb, dance, hold yoga poses, and a hundred other specialty movements, when they should have said, ‘no.’ She said, “Show me.”

The timid struggle Mia expected didn’t happen. Instead, she saw tremendous strength and grace like a Cirque du Soleil performer. Halfway out the window, the woman looked down at Mia and nodded, then let herself smoothly back down to the floor.

Mia, wide-eyed and impressed, gave her a thumbs-up and said, “It’ll take me about five minutes to leave money on the table and get my car pulled around. I’ll tap on the glass when I’m outside.”

She headed for the door, then stopped and turned. “My name’s Mia. Mia Evanescence. What’s yours?”

“Chiara.” The woman’s voice, steadier now. “I’m Chiara Blackwell.”

Thank you for reading *Vanishing Mia*.

The Vanishing Series continues with
Vanishing Chiara



thevanishingseries.com

TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. **Mia's MO is often described as 'Mia in the moment,' compartmentalizing the past and moving forward.** How did this survival mechanism both serve and fail her throughout the story? Have you ever caught yourself using a coping strategy that helped in one situation but created problems in another?
2. **After Aleks finds Mia in the New York Airbnb, he tells her about his family's connections to the Greek Mafia.** How does this scene reframe everything that came before it in their relationship? Discuss how predators like Aleks use charm, then isolation, then revelation of power to maintain control.
3. **The author chooses not to describe the specifics of what Aleks did to Mia in the New York Airbnb.** How did this narrative choice affect your reading experience? What did the absence of graphic detail communicate about Mia's trauma and the author's approach to depicting violence?
4. **When Mia offers to help Leanne escape her abusive marriage, she transforms from someone being helped into someone who helps others.** How does taking on Leanne's

situation shift Mia's understanding of her own? What does this suggest about how we heal from trauma?

5. **Jake Brusey has spent his adult life deliberately keeping himself separate from his family's criminal enterprises.** Yet when Mia needs protection, he finds himself pulled into the very world he's avoided. What aspects of Jake's character—his emotional makeup, his values, his instincts—make him simultaneously drawn to Mia and willing to compromise everything he's built to protect her? Have you ever taken a passive approach like his 'Gandhi' method to deal with a challenge?
6. **Mia has no memories of her mother's death or her early childhood, only 'snippets here and there.'** How does this absence shape who Mia is at the start of the novel? What clues does the author plant about Mia's past throughout the story, and what questions are you left with as the book ends?
7. **The Smithton family in Ontonagon orchestrates an elaborate performance to convince Aleks that Mia is not hiding with them.** What does their willingness to participate in this deception reveal about community and protection? Have you ever been part of a community that rallied around someone in need?
8. **Claire Smithton becomes a maternal figure for Mia, filling a void left by her biological mother's death.** What do you think draws Mia to certain protectors throughout the book? How does the novel portray the different forms 'family' can take?

9. **Boudreaux Marcellas undergoes his own transformation, from a worn-down crime boss to someone who helps women escape violence.** What do you make of his character? Can someone with a criminal past become a true protector, or will those worlds inevitably collide?
10. **The novel ends with Mia having escaped immediate danger but still facing an uncertain future.** *Vanishing Mia* is the first in a five-book series that follows Mia's yearlong journey to resolve her situation with Aleks. Knowing this will take the entire series to resolve, what are your predictions for what Mia will need to do—or become—to survive?

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ROBERTA'S FRIED CATFISH

Blue Catfish • Buttermilk-Soak • Cornmeal-Only Crust

This recipe calls for fresh blue catfish (blue-cat) for its fresher taste, a classic buttermilk soak, and a cornmeal-only breading that makes the thin, crisp, heavily seasoned crust traditional in South Louisiana and throughout the Delta.

CATFISH & MARINADE

Ingredients

- 2 pounds blue catfish fillets (or the freshest catfish you can find), cut into serving pieces
- 2 cups whole buttermilk
- 1/4 cup Louisiana hot sauce (Crystal or Tabasco work well)
- 1 tablespoon Creole or Cajun seasoning

Instructions

1. In a large bowl, whisk together the buttermilk, hot sauce, and Creole/Cajun seasoning.
2. Pat the catfish dry with paper towels.
3. Add the catfish to the buttermilk mixture, making sure all pieces are submerged and coated.
4. Cover and refrigerate for at least 1 hour (up to 4). The buttermilk tenderizes the fish and helps the cornmeal stick.

CRISPY CORNMEAL BREADING

Ingredients

- 2 cups finely ground yellow cornmeal
(fine grind is important)
- 1/2 cup all-purpose or Wondra flour
- 2 tablespoons Creole or Cajun seasoning
- 1 teaspoon garlic powder
- 1 teaspoon onion powder
- 1/2 teaspoon cayenne pepper (optional)
- 1 teaspoon black pepper

Instructions

1. In a wide bowl or shallow pan, whisk together the cornmeal, flour, and all the seasonings.
2. Set up a dredging station: catfish in buttermilk → breading mixture → wire rack.

FRYING THE CATFISH

Instructions

1. Heat peanut or canola oil in a heavy pot, Dutch oven, or deep fryer to about 350°F. You want 2 to 3 inches of oil.
2. Remove each piece of catfish from the buttermilk and let the excess drip off. Do not pat dry.
3. Dredge each piece generously in the cornmeal mixture, pressing lightly so the coating adheres. Shake off any loose cornmeal.
4. Let the breaded fish rest on a wire rack for 5–10 minutes so the crust sets.
5. Fry in batches, carefully lowering a few pieces at a time into the hot oil. Do not overcrowd the pot.

6. Fry until golden brown and crisp, about 3–5 minutes per side depending on thickness. Fish is done when it floats and flakes easily with a fork (about 145°F internal temperature).
7. Transfer to a wire rack over paper towels to drain. Immediately sprinkle with a pinch of kosher salt or a little more Cajun seasoning while hot.

Serve with lemon wedges, coleslaw, and the traditional Creole Remoulade below.

SPICY NEW ORLEANS REMOULADE

Skip the ketchup and go with this classic Creole sauce with a tangy kick from mustard and horseradish. Perfect with fried catfish.

Ingredients

- 1 cup mayonnaise (Duke's or Blue Plate are excellent)
- 2 tablespoons Creole mustard (or whole-grain spicy mustard)
- 1 tablespoon prepared horseradish
- 1 tablespoon fresh lemon juice
- 2 teaspoons Worcestershire sauce
- 1 teaspoon Louisiana hot sauce
- 1 teaspoon smoked paprika
- 1 garlic clove, finely minced
- 2 tablespoons finely minced celery
- 1 tablespoon chopped fresh parsley
- 1/2 teaspoon Creole/Cajun seasoning
- 1/4 teaspoon cayenne pepper (optional)

Instructions

1. Combine all ingredients in a medium bowl.
2. Whisk until completely smooth and evenly colored (a rusty-pink hue).
3. Taste and adjust seasoning, heat, or acidity to your preference.
4. Cover and refrigerate for at least 1 hour (4 hours or overnight is ideal).
5. Serve chilled with hot fried catfish.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Phyllis McCoy Horne brings award-winning careers in broadcast journalism and advertising—including nearly three decades running a communications firm serving high-profile clients such as the FBI—to *The Vanishing Series*.

In her professional and personal lives, she has learned how fragile ordinary lives can be; how people shaped by trauma, without power or protection, draw on their own courage, resources, and found family to survive. *Vanishing Mia* launches a five-book thriller series about ordinary women and men on the run from deadly situations.

Her background spans journalism, high-stakes communications, and advocacy work connected to domestic-violence survivors, lending the series its grounded tension, moral complexity, and refusal to offer easy outs.

Phyllis lives and writes wherever there's strong coffee and reliable internet, often working from her motor home while conducting location research, working with team members, interviewing experts, visiting libraries, independent bookstores, and big brand bookstores when we can get the store managers' attention.

AI STATEMENT

I work with people and technologies, including software powered by code, algorithmic sophistication, and generative systems, to research, fact-check, analyze, and offer editorial suggestions and corrections to the work.

But from beginning to end, every word on every page is mine and mine alone.

Well, okay—except for when a human editor overrules me.

