

PRAISE FOR *VANISHING CHIARA*

“I absolutely love it! Gave me chills, and the last page almost made my heart stop!” —LK

“*Vanishing Chiara*, another page-turner! Following *Vanishing Mia*, you have another winner on your hands.” —JO

“What a page-turner! I so enjoy the character and relationship developments and the unpredictability of what happens next.”
—JM

“Totally gripped! What a tale! What suspense!” —MM

“Just fantastic! A fantastic next installment after *Vanishing Mia*!”
—GR

VANISHING **Chiara**

PHYLLIS McCOY HORNE

LightArc Press
Naples, Florida

LightArc Press

Vanishing Chiara

Book Two of *The Vanishing Series*

Copyright © 2026 by Phyllis Horne

LightArc Press supports copyright. Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes free speech, and creates a vibrant culture. Thank you for buying an authorized edition of this book and for complying with copyright laws by not reproducing, scanning, or distributing any part of it in any form without permission. You are supporting writers and allowing LightArc Press to continue to publish books for every reader.

All rights are reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or used in any manner without written permission of the copyright owner except for the use of quotations in a book review. For more information, contact: LightArc Press, 340 N. Ninth Street, Naples, FL 34102 or info@lightarcpress.com.

First published by LightArc Press 2026

The Vanishing Series

Book Two: *Vanishing Chiara*

ISBN 978-1-969613-02-9 (ebook)

ISBN 978-1-969613-03-6 (paperback)

Library of Congress Control Number: 2026913841

Fiction—Thriller

Fiction—Suspense

Cover design by Karen Lonesome.

Book design by Clarity Designworks.

Printed in the United States of America.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, events, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Real places, businesses, trademarks, and public locales may appear as settings or cultural references; their use is fictional and is not intended to imply sponsorship, endorsement, affiliation, or that any depicted events occurred there. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is entirely coincidental.

First Edition

SERIAL SERIES NOTE

The Vanishing Series unfolds as a single, interconnected story. Characters, stakes, and revelations evolve across the books, making it essential to read the series in order.

Vanishing Mia

Vanishing Chiara

Vanishing Koffi

Vanishing Silas

Vanishing Mia—The Reckoning

Happy bingeing!

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

CONTENTS

Preface	xi
Chapter 1	1
Chapter 2	5
Chapter 3	19
Chapter 4	47
Chapter 5	64
Chapter 6	84
Chapter 7	104
Chapter 8	126
Chapter 9	141
Chapter 10	155
Chapter 11	170
Chapter 12	183
Chapter 13	202
Chapter 14	211
Chapter 15	227
Chapter 16	242
Chapter 17	260
Chapter 18	276
Chapter 19	282
Chapter 20	290

VANISHING CHIARA

Chapter 21	305
Chapter 22	318
Topics for Discussion	329
Acknowledgments	333
Jake's South Louisiana Classics	335
About the Author.....	339
AI Statement.....	341

PREFACE

Some threats announce themselves. You see them coming, you feel them building, and even when you're not ready, you at least know they're there. Chiara's threat was already inside her life before she knew to look for it.

Most of us have experienced some version of this—the moment we learned that something we believed to be solid wasn't. A marriage. A friendship. A version of ourselves we'd constructed carefully and trusted completely. The ground doesn't shift. It just never was what we thought it was.

What we do in that moment—who we reach for, who reaches back, and whether who we trust deserves it—is what this book is about.

The people 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. Their stories ring true because what they face happens in real life. Betrayal shocks. Trauma sucks. And they must be faced; not managed, not just survived, but actually faced. Otherwise, they limit the possibility of healthy love and genuine happiness. And no one gets to the other side alone.

But most people want to help. And will, when asked.

Thanks for continuing to read *The Vanishing Series*.

“Love doesn’t just sit there, like a stone; it has to be made, like
bread, remade all the time, made new.”

—Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Lathe of Heaven*

“Art is not what you see, but what you make others see.”

—Edgar Degas

CHAPTER 1

January 15: The Big Reveal Meridian, Mississippi

Chiara Blackwell almost smiled. Every unveiling of her work, the equivalent of leaping from a perfectly good airplane, wondering if the parachute would catch the air. Fidgeting, she glanced at the phone in her hand. 5:30 p.m. Central. Nearly sunset, the statue faced southwest, its drape trembled as the mayor pulled the clasp that released it. The shroud fell. Chiara's heart raced.

And her muscles remembered: lifting, molding, and placing every single piece of heavy bronze herself, working and living with it for months. And now, in this instant, the *Art Deco Dancer* standing in this precise spot with the sun in that position on this day and at this time—the light flowing onto its surface as the veil dropped.

See it as the patrons do. A complete unknown. A surprise. Begin at the top, the dancer's elegant fingertips reaching for the heavens from a lightly muscled body, mostly nude, stretched, with a delicate arch in the narrow of her lower back and skin turned liquid gold in the midwinter honey sunset. The red drape sliding down her life-sized body to pool at her feet. She sighed a final yes as her eyes landed on the solid black marble plinth. The toes, secured with metal rods that allowed them a millimeter of space between plinth and foot, floated her just above the marble. The

whole. Did they see it? The soul of the dancer soaring above the mundane physical.

Nearly nine months of her life invested. And based on the crowd of a couple hundred people—nothing to be ashamed of in a town this size—their applause, the celebratory music, flashes from photographers’ cameras, and the rise and fall of chatter she heard around her, not one moment of time and energy was wasted.

A tradition to ensure Ricardo could share in the moment, she moved away from the crowd and, as discreetly as possible, snapped a selfie—her face in the lower corner smiling at him with the dancer filling the rest of the frame—and texted it to her husband. She didn’t know if, or when, he would receive it. Suddenly shocked, Chiara realized that she’d been so involved in her work, it had been, what . . . two weeks? Three weeks since she’d heard from him?

Someone tapped her on the arm. A woman.

“Come, Chiara. Join the party,” she said.

She didn’t think of her husband again until much later.



By 8:00 p.m., the dedication party and small talk were nearly over.

“Yes,” she said in answer to Mayor Mary Harris’ question. “You’re correct. The celebration is not my favorite. I still see things I’d like to change, but maybe that’s true for most artists.”

The mayor’s eyes were as warm as her smile.

“Chiara, it’s absolutely perfect. I can’t imagine a change that would make it any more powerful. In fact, it’s possibly the most sophisticated thing in town! And while we’d love to have you join a few of us for the after-party, looks to me like what you want more than anything right now”—she began tapping her phone’s screen—“is that comfortable bed over at the Threefoot Hotel.” The mayor

looked up for a second, for confirmation she didn't need. Her silver-streaked hair a little messy and an older aunt's concern etched in the lines around her eyes, Chiara felt it as the quiet, watchful kind she remembered from home. The Nakota elders asked with their eyes for what they didn't already know.

"It's only a few blocks, but I wouldn't want to take a chance on you getting lost in a town you're not familiar with. Your Uber will be out front in three minutes."

The mayor stepped forward to give the artist a hug but graciously accepted Chiara's offer of a handshake instead. Reserved, aloof. That's what most people thought. But in her family's tribal lineage, hugs were reserved for those with whom one did not do business. She'd worked hard to perfect a smile and handshake engaging enough to soften the push back. No sign the woman was insulted.

"Have a wonderful night's rest, my dear," the mayor said as she stepped away to answer a question from one of the council members, then looked back and added, "And a safe trip home."

"Thank you, Mayor Harris. It's been my honor to bring the dancer to you and your city."

Chiara nodded her farewell, turned, and walked from the Art Center out to the street. A gray extended-cab truck pulled up and stopped in front of her. She opened the back door and slid in. How strange the Uber was a pickup truck instead of a sedan. Maybe not so unusual here in the gig economy of a small Southern town. The driver said nothing as he pulled away. At the next stop sign, the back door opposite Chiara opened and another man got in.

Her intuition kicked into high gear. Wait a minute. Uber drivers don't pick up additional passengers along the way. Right? The driver sped up as the new passenger closed his door.

"What are—"

The passenger lunged for her.

Stunned, her body recoiled before she could think and pushed her back against the door. But he stretched further. She understood the intention in a split second of terror.

If the bronze fell wrong from the mold, the only way to salvage it was instant action. The same practice applied here. No time to scream. Chiara braced herself against the door, dug her left heel into the seat, and kicked out with her right leg. She felt a crunch through the blocky high heel of her shoe and saw blood burst from the man's nose. He cursed in a foreign language she had a nano-second to think sounded vaguely Italian or French. The brakes slammed, and she bounced against the seat in front of her. Landed in the footwell along with her attacker.

"Get her drugged, now!" the driver screamed in accented English to the man in the back seat.

The bleeding man, now half on/half off the seat, groped for her. Hands slippery with his own blood. She pulled her leg, then a foot free. Hoisted herself back up on the seat and, left hand on the door handle, pulled. Felt the door fall away behind her. As she slid toward the pavement, the truck jumped forward, the back door grazing her right foot as her back hit the pavement. She tucked her knees, rolled, and landed in a sitting position.

Panting, she stared at the screeching truck's tires spinning smoke as the vehicle shot away. Too little oxygen and too much adrenaline buzzed through her body. Her shocked brain blocked all rational thought. But she didn't groan or cry. She pulled one shoe off, then the other, and ran for her life.

CHAPTER 2

January 15: Something to Do Meridian, Mississippi

Mia Evanescence paced the floor of her temporary home, a bedroom in Roberta Broussard's old Southern Mississippi mansion. After three terrifying months on the run from her powerful and abusive husband, Aleksanteri Hasapsis, she'd spent the past several weeks in a semblance of normalcy.

The dinner party, visit with Jake Brusey, and finally meeting Boudreaux Marcellas back in December had relieved a little of the boredom of waiting. The holidays were quiet but—at Robbi's insistence—busy, filled with decorating, cooking, and another visit from Jake and Boudreaux. “The boys” she called them.

After the New Year, taking down and putting away all the decorations, Mia'd spent her days helping with chores, talking to Robbi's daughter, Louanne, and playing with Louanne's baby. Robbi gently commandeered some of Mia's time and creativity, believing her designer's eye for detail and proportion would be a huge help remodeling the house they shared, the one she'd inherited from her Aunt Mertice.

During her alone time, she had plenty to think about. She worried about what kind of so-called evidence Aleks could manufacture that would ‘prove’ she went to Croatia to scout locations she'd use to shoot a client's commercial and had died in an earthquake

there. Her whole body tightened with anxiety and anger when she thought about it, so she distracted herself. Read mysteries that involved protagonists in witness protection programs and searched the internet for anything she could find about creating new identities and successfully hiding from dangerous others.

And she waited. Waited to find out what fresh hell Aleks might invent; to learn what strategy Park Ellis, the New Orleans attorney, was dreaming up to move her case forward; and like low-level background noise of which she was barely aware, she waited for the next visit from Jake.

In other words, Mia was restless.

She wanted to leave Mississippi, but no place else made sense. Going back to Northern Virginia to the ad agency she still owned was impossible. And she would not put her adopted family—Susan Avery and her daughter, Jessica Avery Roberts, who was also Mia's best friend—at risk. Aleks had intercepted the letters she'd mailed Jessi back in October when she first landed in Delaware, Louisiana. He'd still have eyes on that location. And Ontonagon, Michigan, where she'd had a few weeks of safety and comfort while helping Louanne escape—a fact she attributed to her newfound family, the Smithtons, and their warm welcome and passionate protection of her. Another place too 'hot' to visit. She shivered remembering how close she'd come to Aleks and to being captured in Ontonagon. Within five feet, face-to-face, to be exact. And until she had some kind of confirmation that he'd given up the possibility that she'd show up there again, she could not go back.

But there's only so much time a person can spend on a beautiful Mississippi plantation with a new mother, her baby, and the baby's grandmother. A girl's gotta get out sometime.

She surveyed her full-body reflection. 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 cargo pants and shirts, layered with a down

vest to push back on the cold, beat-up trail boots, and a ball cap under which she tucked her jet-black spiky hair—was a look she'd grown tired of. But as they say, if it ain't broke . . .

She added the finishing touches: nonprescription dark-brown contact lenses 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 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'd purchased a few months ago while on the run with Louanne and the baby. It had a temporary Montana license plate on it, the extra one a kind used car salesperson named Marlene had given her when she purchased the vehicle. Clearly not the first time the woman had given extra help to someone in dire straits. She needed a permanent plate but shoved that thought aside the way she did saw-mill gravy on the Delareau, Louisiana, diner's Country Boy Special breakfast platter. She wouldn't think about that tonight. Tonight, she'd have something resembling fun.

January 15: Another Ladies' Room
Meridian, Mississippi

Downtown Meridian was much more urban than Mia expected.

"Lots more going on here than in quiet little Delareau," she said to herself as she parked on a side street. Strange how exposed she felt. After growing up in the Washington, DC, area, the successful escape from Aleks a few months ago landed her in Delareau. Now

living with Robbi in Meridian added to her first small-town experiences. 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 glasses up, and ambled around a downtown clearly undergoing a facelift: sidewalks 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 maneuvered herself into the center of a large group and entered the art deco-influenced building among them. Mia knew she'd be hard to pick out from the hotel's camera footage; more concerned that someone would throw her out for being underdressed.

The *maitre d'* led her to a booth along the wall; she tucked herself into the corner. An hour later, meal eaten and no reason to hang around any longer, she signaled her server.

"No, nothing else," she told him. "Just the check." She spoke loud enough for the waiter to hear but without looking up and making eye contact. Then headed for the restroom.

Mia was about to flush 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. She dried her hands, stepped back toward the stall, and tapped the door twice. "You okay in there? Need some paper or something?"

Mia heard a gasp. She looked down and saw bare feet 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! Please, leave me alone! I have nothing to do with all that!"

The door slammed forward hard, as if kicked, but bounced open, and Mia saw the woman seated on the toilet, legs pulled up, feet on the seat. *The women's restroom. Again. Last safe sanctuary in the world from jacked up testosterone?*

"Hey," Mia said. Voice neutral, soft, hands up, palms out. "You've got nothing to worry about from me." A woman about her own age stared with wide eyes. Looked as if she'd been crying. What had been an elegant outfit was dirty, wrinkled, and torn. Mia understood instantly: 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 took a breath to give herself a moment to think. Caught the tang of the woman's fear.

"Okay," she answered. "Well, whomever it is, I'm not with him. Or them. Or whatever." The woman looked around frantically searching for an exit. Mia backed up, making herself less of a threat. Hoped the woman would stand up. Maybe step out.

"I need to get out of here." She moaned and stood, but instead of coming forward, panic pushed her into the wall behind her as if she could Houdini herself through the concrete.

"Maybe I can help," Mia said. *Let her watch me. See I'm not coming after her.*

"I've got to pay my bill. 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 she was thin enough to fit through it.

"Let me get by you and I'll, uh, demonstrate."

The woman didn't move, so Mia moved forward, then stepped on the toilet seat and, to get a little more height, climbed up on the steel water pipe coming out of the wall. "This is what you'll need to do," she instructed. Window ledge even with her breasts, she held onto 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. Mia grabbed the bottom of the window frame, pushed off from the pipe she was standing on, and pulled/pushed herself up and halfway through the window. She looked down. Half the exterior wall was underground. The drop from window to ground wasn't far at all. She let herself back down, then turned toward the very frightened woman.

"You can do that, right?"

The woman nodded.

A slide show of moments from hundreds of film and video productions she'd produced and directed flickered across the screen of Mia's 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. 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, obviously impressed, gave her a thumbs-up and said, "It'll take me about five minutes to pay my bill and get my car pulled around. I'll tap on the glass when I'm outside." Mia headed for the door, then turned back and said, "My name's Mia. Mia Evanescence. What's yours?"

"Chiara." She took a deep breath, but it didn't take away the shake in her voice. "I'm Chiara Blackwell."

January 15: Passenger Pickup
Meridian, Mississippi

It was 8:30 p.m. and moonless dark except directly under the streetlights. Mia leaned against the building next to the transom window, phone to her ear as if talking to someone. She looked around one more time to see if anyone was paying attention. A woman across the street completely absorbed in a phone call. A few people in semiformal attire standing at the crosswalk fifty or sixty yards away. No one she saw appeared to be interested. Or feigning disinterest. She'd backed the SUV down the alley to block sight of the window as much as she could. The back door on the passenger side of her SUV was open. She tapped her boot on the glass.

It opened instantly, and Chiara lifted herself through the window as if levitating. She hit the ground on her hands, executed a perfect roll and crouched down as if prepared for attack. Mia's head jerked back in surprise. She'd expected a lot of awkward, grunting effort. Chiara started to stand, but Mia put a hand on her back.

"Stay low. Get into the back seat and lie down." Mia ambled toward the SUV, laughing into her cell phone to call attention to herself in case anyone glanced in their direction. Chiara squatted low and climbed into the back seat of the SUV. Phone in hand, Mia looked around. Still no lookie-loos. She walked back along the passenger side, pushed the back door shut, and got behind the wheel.

No idea if anyone was watching, Mia looked left and right, as if checking for traffic. No one was paying attention. She drove. Made random infrequent turns for ten minutes. Didn't speak. Confirmed no one was following and was about to ask her passenger what next when Chiara spoke.

"I can't go back to DC."

Stunned to hear that Chiara was from her own hometown, she waited. Could hear the fear in her voice when the woman spoke again. "My husband works for the government. I think he's in a bad situation. Maybe someone thinks they can control him or something . . . if they have me. I don't know."

"Hoh-LEE-shit!" She dragged the words out syllable by syllable and looked in the rearview mirror. Was relieved to see that Chiara was still lying low.

"He's not Greek by any chance, is he? Or working for an embassy?" Mia couldn't be involved with anyone, for any reason, who could compromise her efforts to remain hidden.

There was a pause, then a confused, "No?"

Mia said nothing, so Chiara continued more firmly, "No. He's Latin." Another pause that Mia didn't fill. "He doesn't work for an embassy. And I don't understand . . ."

"Look, I'm hiding from a dangerous man. Someone I very unfortunately married about a year ago. And I'm from DC too, so I needed to make sure."

"Oh. I see now why you asked."

There was silence for a full minute.

Mia broke it. "Weird, huh? Both of us from DC in this kinda backwoods Mississippi town?"

Chiara didn't answer. Mia thought maybe she was in shock. Not sure where else to go, she turned on the blinker to head toward Robbi's.

"Where are you taking me?"

"I have nowhere else to take you but my friend Robbi's house. It's where I'm staying. But if you have a plan, an idea, somewhere you want me to take you, just give me the word. If I can do it, I will."

"Who is Robbi?"

Mia gave Chiara the short version. “Roberta actually. She’s the mother of a young woman I just helped escape from her abusive husband. She’s got a big house, a plantation thing, a few miles from here.”

There was a pause before the woman spoke. “You do this for a living?” Chiara sounded genuinely confused.

Mia sighed. Snorted a half laugh. “Well, lately, and I guess unexpectedly, it seems like I do.”

“Are we out of the city? Is anyone following us?”

“Yes.” She turned her head from right to left, straight ahead, and looked in the mirrors. “And no.” She waited a beat, then pulled over, put the car in park, and turned toward the back seat. “As your unexpected Uber driver? I need an answer.”

Chiara sat up. She pulled at one of her earlobes, tilted her head as if trying to see into Mia. Mia looked right back at her. Hoped she wasn’t making a terrible mistake. Figured Chiara thought the same.

“I have no idea who to trust and not trust. But you found me hiding and nearly asleep on a toilet and helped. Possibly at your own risk. So”—she closed her eyes and sucked in a breath. Let it go. Opened her eyes—“Robbi’s it is.”

“Robbi’s it is,” Mia parroted as she turned back to the wheel and put the car in drive. Remembering her own recent escape, she poked around for something that would normalize the moment, de-escalate the fear. “The food’s good there, and Robbi will probably have something you can sleep in. The rest we can figure out in the morning.”

So many unknowns. She pushed them aside and just drove.

January 15: Martin's Idea
Towson, Maryland

Martin Bledsoe had been a modestly successful private investigator for over twenty years. He credited his mother to a certain extent. Among the many things she'd taught him, one of the most valuable focused on intuition. She'd drilled into him from the time he was a small child that as a Black man in this world, "You're gonna have to trust your intuition, son. Sometimes it is the only thing you can trust!" Now a grown-ass man (also his mother's words) with his own business, it served him especially well. Client budgets allowing, he'd follow leads just because they felt right. Usually with excellent results. He absolutely did not believe in coincidences. And in his opinion, the Hasapsis case was Swiss-cheese-holed with supposed coincidences.

Driving back from visiting his son at the Ivy League university the boy attended, he examined each one of those holes. Among them was something he could do to reveal the connections; something Aleks Hasapsis would pay him to do.

Martin was 99.9 percent sure that Mia Evanescence was not dead. And since Hasapsis had no body and no proof of travel to Croatia to make a case that his wife was among the dead in the earthquake, Martin did not believe a court would rule that she was.

The investigator checked his fuel gauge. It was as hungry as he was. There was a Wawa at the next exit.

Martin took the exit and gassed up but was in no mood for his usual convenience store sandwich. He'd paid at the pump and went inside to investigate other options.

"Where do you go when you want good food that's not super expensive?" he asked the young woman at the register.

“You want Anthony’s. It’s a sports bar but Italian. He won’t make fried chicken wings, but you can get a great burger and an even better pizza.” Her smile and enthusiasm convinced him.

Twenty minutes later, Martin sat at Anthony’s bar waiting for a chicken sandwich with fresh mozzarella and fries with marinara instead of ketchup. Real Italian. He sipped a lite beer and sighed.

Martin considered Hasapsis clever but not extraordinarily smart. It would take a little convincing to get the man to see something obvious that he hadn’t already seen for himself: The pregnant woman he found on the stretcher at the Bozeman airport—the same woman holding a tiny redheaded infant when she encountered him at the door at the cottage in Ontonagon, Michigan—was key to finding Mia Evanescence.

“Here ya go, sir,” the server said as he slid the plate in front of Martin.

It smelled incredible.

“Anything else I can get ya?”

“Maybe some water with lemon? I’ve got another hour or more of driving ahead of me.”

He bit into the sandwich and pondered how to bring the connection to his client’s attention without pissing him off. He drained the rest of the beer, closed his eyes, and retraced his steps from the beginning.

First. Hasapsis had informed Martin and his team that his wife might have hitched a ride on a private jet owned by a wealthy friend he’d heard her mention. It had taken Martin only a few hours to identify Sondra Cervantes’ jet as a Hawker 900XP. He couldn’t get passenger lists, but if Cervantes helped her escape, Mia Evanescence’s name wouldn’t have been on the manifest anyway. Martin took the jet’s ID number and checked historical data using one of the online flight tracker services and found the flight

stopped in Delareau, Louisiana, the night Hasapsis' wife flew the coop. But Hasapsis—resisting travel costs—insisted they focus on his wife's best friend, convinced she would reach out to Jessica Roberts. The client's money, the client's decision.

Knowing that people assumed correctly that regular mail was harder to track than electronic communications, Martin quietly spread the word of a reward at the USPS facility where staff sorted mail with Jessica's address. It took less than a week to intercept a handwritten letter from someone named 'Betty.' Martin brought it to Hasapsis, who agreed that a handwritten letter sent that quickly after Mia's disappearance was too much of a coincidence to ignore. Postmarked Delareau, Louisiana, it coincided closely enough with the flight information Martin had about Cervantes' jet. Hasapsis, impressed for about five seconds, became so incensed, he wanted to haul ass to Delareau that instant. Martin convinced him to slow down and plan. He resealed the letter and the postal service delivered it. Hasapsis used those days to watch for any action on Jessica's part and to arrange use of his family's jet to take them to Louisiana.

Second. A stunning development: They landed near Delareau at the tiny New Iberia airport right behind another jet where some celebrity and his crew were deplaning and getting into a limo. Martin quickly checked the ID number and identified the jet as Cervantes'.

Martin shook his head, recalling Hasapsis' certainty that his wife was about to escape in the limo on the ground. He hustled them onto the tarmac to look at every single person lined up to get into the limo, then in the limo itself. By the time they were done, the wheels on Cervantes' jet were off the tarmac, the plane reaching for the sky. Hasapsis figured his wife must be on the jet instead. They hurried back to Hasapsis' plane and took off as soon as the wake from Cervantes' jet's turbulence dissipated.

They followed the plane to Bozeman, Montana, and landed only to find a pregnant woman being carried off the plane on a stretcher. Martin could not convince Hasapsis to let him find the pregnant woman's connection. Instead, his client called upon some New Orleans crime syndicate family for ground support locating Mia back in Louisiana, where—as far as Hasapsis was concerned—she remained in hiding.

Third. Martin found properties that Mia's adopted family, the Averys, owned. The three deeds were in Jessica's mother's name, Susan Avery, and when Martin showed them to his client, Hasapsis decided to visit the properties on his own. When he didn't find her at the first two, he assumed his wife would be at the cottage in Ontonagon, Michigan. Instead, the woman from the stretcher in Bozeman, now holding a tiny redheaded infant, answered the door.

Martin smiled as he savored the marinara on a french fry and a mental image of Hasapsis: enraged, storming out of the cottage convinced that his wife was about to escape in a canoe down a nearby creek and into Lake Superior. Hasapsis described standing in a park with a view of the lakeshore where he'd watched someone fall out of a canoe and get picked up by a seaplane. Convinced, of course, it was his wife. There was no evidence, but Martin agreed that the rescue training story Hasapsis got from the seaplane pilot on his second trip to Ontonagon seemed solid. He, too, gave up the idea that it had been Mia.

Martin waved to the server for the bill and considered how to uncover how Mia and the woman who answered the door at that cottage were connected. Because that information would plug the biggest hole in this case's wedge of Swiss cheese.

Back on the road to DC, it all fell together as a proposal that would require Hasapsis to send him back to Delareau where he believed the connection was forged. He had a good idea about how to present it and the number of full-fee days it would likely take

to prove the connection. Maybe even figure out where his client's wife was hiding now.

Idea conceived, he sighed heavily, thinking about this lovely, accomplished woman hiding from Hasapsis. What he should do is quit this case right now. But even as the thought of it sparkled like freedom, something dark and sharp poked his core. A fear so solid it woke him up at night sometimes in a cold sweat. Parental obligation to educate his son.

He didn't know which of the two was intuition. But he knew absolutely that a few billable days in Delareau would bridge the gap between his son's scholarship and the actual cost of the semester. All he had to do was get Hasapsis to say yes.

CHAPTER 3

January 15: All the Daughters Meridian, Mississippi

Robbi sat in the kitchen she'd just cleaned, pleased and worried in equal measure. She'd moved a little over a month ago from Delareau into her husband's deceased aunt's old plantation house outside of Meridian, Mississippi. She was delighted to have her daughter back, and 'besotted' was the only word that described how she felt about her newborn grandson. It was a happy surprise to have Boudreaux Marcellas, her beau from forty-five years ago, her beau again. An ancient term, but beau perfectly described how Boudreaux presented himself. Gentlemanly, with a slow-woo in his requests for her time; standing close without touching her, except for a hand on the small of her back when he opened a door for her.

The worrisome part was getting used to living somewhere else. The hesitancy to get out of the house to make friends while housing her daughter safely away from Delareau and the Fortier family, whose son Remy had damaged her daughter in ways Robbi was sure would haunt Leanne for the rest of her life. And Mia. She'd come to love the girl and not just because she'd saved Robbi's daughter—now known as Louanne, she reminded herself for the one-thousandth time. Mia brought Robbi, her daughter,

her grandson, and Boudreaux all together, and she would provide Mia a safe haven for as long as the young woman needed it.

The other fun part of her life was planning and working with contractors to transform Mertice's old mansion to a new and improved version of Southern plantation glory.

But she missed her Delareau friends and longed for something that was hard to put her finger on. She wondered whether it was more people or music and art? Something more. More life in her life.

She looked at her watch, got up from the table, switched off the kitchen light, and said softly, "Come on, Mia, it's nearly 10:00 p.m. Get yourself home." And like an instant answer to a prayer, the front door opened. She startled at the sudden noise and froze seeing a woman she didn't know come through the door. Then exhaled relief when Mia followed and flipped the switch for the ancient foyer chandelier.

The three women looked at each other for a heartbeat. Then another.

"You've made a friend?" Robbi looked at Mia with concern.

"Robbi, this is Chiara Blackwell. She's—"

"Chiara Blackwell?" Eyes wide in disbelief. "The sculptor Chiara Blackwell?"

Chiara's eyes widened in surprise too, as if unaccustomed to having her name recognized. "Well, yes. Yes, I am." She gave Robbi a small, shaky smile. "But I can't believe you know my name."

"You're in town for the dedication of what I am certain is a magnificent sculpture at the Art Center, right?" Robbi's brilliant smile faded in confusion as she noticed Chiara's clothing. "But, what . . . I mean, how . . ." She turned from Chiara to Mia. Put her hands up in a question. "Mia, what's happening?"

"Robbi." Mia sighed heavily. "We have another 'gotta get away' situation here. Different from mine, different from Lee—uh—"

Louanne's. But just as serious. I was super careful getting her out of town, and honestly, we're both just exhausted. Hoping you can offer Chiara something to sleep in, and—"

"And maybe a spare toothbrush?" Chiara interrupted.

Robbi's hesitation lasted only long enough for her to remember what Mia'd done for Louanne. Then, faced with two exhausted young women, one of whom had clearly been hurt, she slipped immediately into mother mode. She stepped forward and touched Chiara's wrecked blouse then took her arm.

"Of course! Of course!" She put on a too-bright smile, covering concern with the Southern hospitality that lived and breathed at a cellular level in Roberta Broussard. As she led them upstairs, she chattered to lighten the heaviness that wafted from both women like bad perfume. "Reminds me of when my daughter's friends came over to get away from trouble at their own homes. They called my house 'The House of All the Daughters.'"

Chiara looked up at her hostess with an attempt at a smile.

Robbi led them first into her own bedroom and stopped at an ancient mahogany wardrobe. "I'm delighted to meet you, Chiara, whatever the circumstances turn out to be, and to offer you whatever you need that I can provide." She took an ancient white cotton Eileen West nightgown out of the wardrobe's bottom drawer and handed it to her new guest. "It was Aunt Mertice's. Old fashioned, but it'll get you through a night or two." Heading back into the hall, she added, "Take that one, second bedroom on the right. Everything else you need is already in the en suite bath." She touched Chiara's arm. The younger woman turned toward her.

Robbi said, "You sleep well tonight. I have the security system on. My beau, who is"—she paused to think of how to put it—"a man of some distinction in New Orleans, oversaw its installation. You can rest assured no one is getting in this house without a reign of hell coming down on them." Her smile was firm. Reassuring.

“Thank you, Robbi. I will do that,” she said as she turned to walk down the hall. Then turned back. “Well, I’ll do my best to do that.”

Robbi turned back to Mia. Put her hands and her eyebrows up by way of asking, “What the hell?”

Mia shook her head and turned to go to her own room. “Tomorrow, Robbi. All I know so far is that someone grabbed her after the dedication event and she somehow got away. She’ll tell us more in the morning.”

Robbi watched Mia’s bedroom door close and turned toward her own room, massaging a kink in her neck as if that would relieve the anxiety of a night spent not knowing.

January 16: Trust
Meridian, Mississippi

Each woman held a cup of coffee. Robbi reminded Mia and Chiara there was oatmeal with pecans and some Blackburn’s cane syrup staying warm on the antique Wedgewood gas stove. No one went for the food. With their coffee in hand, they seated themselves comfortably in what Mertice always called the drawing room. Robbi and Mia looked expectantly at Chiara. And waited.

Chiara, dressed in a pair of Mia’s sweats, pressed her lips thin in concentration. She pulled at her earlobe, sat rigidly on the old floral sofa. Robbi thought the young woman looked a lot like her daughter’s teenaged friends when they were trying to avoid something—usually their parents’ wrath—and needed an older voice to get them on the right path.

“Sweetie,” Robbi said, employing her soft Southern drawl to full effect, “while Southerners are, as a species, nosey, it goes against my good manners to get into your business. But the fact is, you’re

here in my house where, because you're under threat, your presence creates a potential threat to us." She placed a hand softly on Chiara's thigh. "Now, don't take that the wrong way. I'm glad Mia brought you here. But if you don't have anywhere else to go, you simply must tell us what's going on so we can call upon the appropriate resources on our end to make sure you're, well, all of us, are protected."

"Couldn't have said it better myself, Robbi," Mia added with less warmth but enough concern that she didn't come across cold.

Chiara bit her bottom lip, her eyebrows came together in some combination of fear and confusion. She looked down at her hands.

Robbi waited another few beats, then said, "I absolutely hate issuing ultimatums," then went to the kitchen and refilled her coffee. She wanted to give Chiara a moment to think. When she returned, Chiara was sitting up straight, arms unfolded, appearing a little more relaxed. She looked up at Robbi and started talking immediately.

"The problem is that I don't know very much, Robbi. But you're right. I'm very grateful to be here, and since I'm certainly in no position to protect us, and I don't want to put us all at risk, I should . . . I'll tell you what I do know." She took a deep breath. "First, I can't think of anyone in my world who would have reason to come after me. But my husband is an FBI agent. Ricardo Orzmondo. Latin, obviously. He speaks several Latin languages as if they were his first. He often works undercover where that's necessary. The last assignment, this one, I mean the one he's involved in right now, is somewhere in South America. He didn't say what, or exactly where, because he's not supposed to tell anyone. But his cases, well, they often have something to do with drugs."

Mia and Robbi shared an 'oh shit' look with each other. Robbi stood up. "This is way over my head, girls." She headed toward the kitchen. "I'm calling Boudreaux."



Mia took over the questioning. “So your husband is undercover, and somehow these goons tried to kidnap you last night?”

Chiara tilted her head. “Probably. I can’t know for sure, but kidnap, not kill? My gut says yes. I haven’t spoken to Ricardo in several weeks. It’s hard, but I knew it was his job when I married him, you know? I never let myself think much about risk. I mean, he’s the good guy. He’s smart. He’s got the guns and lots of other people helping, right? And I certainly never considered the possibility of being at risk myself.”

Mia read pure discomfort in the woman’s preternaturally still posture.

“Anyway, the case he’s on could be about drugs, but I have no way of knowing for sure, or even whether he’s still in South America or on his way home, alive, dead, or . . .” She trailed off, rubbed her face with both of her hands. “And the only actual evidence I have that these men have something to do with his case is that they looked kind of—I don’t know—Latin maybe?” She stood up to pace. “They spoke accented English, and something else that sounded . . . I was so stunned and distracted, I just don’t know.”

Watching her pace, Mia considered the possibilities. “Looking maybe Latin, but that accent? Not Spanish. Something else.” Drugs. South America. She’d been there once, couldn’t remember where. She grabbed her phone, tapped the browser open. Portuguese—where did they speak Portuguese? “Brazil,” she said after a few seconds. “Yeah. Brazil.”

Waited a beat to see what else Chiara had to offer.

Finally, she said, “But I just can’t think of any reason why anyone would kidnap me. I mean, what could these people want or think they can do with me?” Chiara closed her eyes and stood still for a moment. “Though, I guess, maybe, if they want me for some

reason”—she looked at Mia, hope in her eyes—“that means he’s still alive.”

“His bosses at the FBI—they didn’t call you? Give you a heads-up to like, go somewhere? Get the hell out of dodge? We’re coming to get you before they do?”

“I’ve heard from no one. And that’s why I’m so afraid. I knew he was deep because I haven’t heard from him in weeks, maybe a month. But I’ve been so absorbed with my own work, I lose—lost—track.” Chiara sagged a little and gave Mia half an ironic smile. “Maybe on purpose, huh? Trying not to be afraid?”

Mia asked, “So you kicked one of these guys in the face. You have some kind of training?”

“I started martial arts training when I was a teenager. And took dance classes for a while. The sculptures I create, everything about them and the work I do to create them requires heavy lifting. I want to do as much of it as I can myself. Strength training along with aerobics and some yoga for flexibility. And still, when I have time, the martial arts stuff. Nothing formal. Not enough time or interest to get involved in competitions, tests, belts, that kind of thing. But in addition to the strength and fitness, it’s good focus training.”

“Okay. It’s making a little more sense now how you came out of that window so, I don’t know, fluidly? For sure you made it look effortless.”

Chiara smiled at Mia. For the first time since the two met, almost a full smile.

Robbi stuck her head around the corner of the kitchen. “Boudreaux’ll be here this afternoon around three o’clock. He’s bringing a new supply of burner phones.”

Mia stood. “Let’s get some of that oatmeal, Chiara. And if you’re up for it, we can go for a short run before lunch.” They got up and headed toward the kitchen.

"I like that idea, girls. You two need to keep up your strength and endurance in case you"—she pointed at Mia and gave her a teasing smile—"have to row Lake Superior again, or you, Chiara?" She paused to think for just a second. "Well, to do whatever it is you're going to have to do. Because if people who run drugs are involved, you're absolutely going to have to do something."

January 16: A Run, a Walk, a Talk
Meridian, Mississippi

Mia wasn't used to running with others. When she thought back on her athletic history, she couldn't remember when she'd started or why. All she knew was that when she ran, her mind would get into a rhythm; the sound of her feet on pavement, beat-driven music turned up to eleven that drowned out everything else. Running with Chiara didn't work that way. She figured it out five minutes in: Talking and running were diametrically opposed to each other. She'd have to wait until they were done to get any more information.

But her brain was in high gear, turning and shifting with questions she didn't know the answers to. Not only about resolving her own situation, but helping someone get away from kidnappers who might work for some kind of drug-related criminal organization? She had 'nada.' Eventually, running worked its magic, leaving only the rhythmic slap of their shoes as the women fell in and out of step with each other. Thirty minutes later, Chiara slowed, her shoes skidding in the gravel.

"Okay," Chiara said. Between gasps of breath, she added, "I don't run . . . as much as . . . you do. So . . . that's it for me!" She paced in a circle, waiting for her breath to return to normal.

Mia did the same, her breath normalizing quickly. She decided she could gain a little trust if she went first. She leaned over to stretch, dropped her head, and began.

“That husband of about a year ago I mentioned last night? Name’s Aleksanteri Hasapsis. Though, since I didn’t figure it out before I married him, perhaps I’m the ‘sap’ in Hasapsis.” She stood up, stretched one arm, then the other. Could smell her own sweat. Sharp but without the bright harsh tinge of fear she’d become accustomed to. Focusing on someone else helped.

“Right after we married, he started trying to control me—my time, my professional activities. Wanted me at his side. All the time. When using words didn’t pan out so well for him, it got worse. He hit me. And then I found out he’s not just a man from Greece who works at the embassy. He’s the son of some big kahuna in the Greek Mafia.” Afraid to look at Chiara and see how stupid she might look in the woman’s eyes, she paced and stretched. “And that job at the embassy?” She reached down to touch the toes of her running shoes. “He’s in a position where he enjoys diplomatic immunity.”

“Wow!” Chiara stopped pacing. “I, uh, I have to apologize.”

“Why?”

“I assumed when you told me last night that he was dangerous, he couldn’t be as dangerous as the men who are after me. But I think I might be wrong about that.” The feel of Chiara’s hand squeezing her shoulder. “I apologize.”

A small smile and shake of her head. All she could manage for a moment. “Yeah, uh. Thanks. But really, none required. Because I don’t think either of us knows who’s most dangerous.” She turned back toward Robbi’s house and started walking.

Chiara followed.

Mia took a deep breath. *May as well get it all out there.* “The last time I tried to get away, he found me at an Airbnb in New York

City. I'd rented it using a fake email address and an old credit card I hadn't used in years. Didn't think he knew about it. And, who knows, maybe he didn't. Maybe someone else found me for him. I haven't sorted that one out yet. Anyway . . ."

Gritted her teeth. *Just tell it.* "He found me. Fast . . . and it was, uh, really bad. He knocked me out. Drugged me. Put duct tape over my mouth. Tied me up and . . ." She hadn't told anyone all that Aleks did to her. Couldn't. The words, balls of prickly wool in her throat. Phantom pains like a thousand tiny hammers beating at her from inside out in every place he violated. She just couldn't.

Mia cleared her throat. "Anyway, when he was done, he left me alone like that for what I think was more than twenty-four hours, duct tape and all. No water. No food. I peed the bed before he finally came back. A few days after I got home and was in decent enough shape to get out of the house, my best friend Jessica and I worked on a plan to disappear me. But he came in one night a couple of weeks later, way before I got my shit together. He was—I don't know—drunk? Or out-of-control enraged about something. I'm not sure." She paused and finally looked at Chiara directly. "I had to get out. Right then."

"God, Mia. What did you . . . I mean, how?" Chiara asked.

"Well, I hadn't prepared much, but I was scared enough after New York that I'd set up an emergency rappelling kit in my closet. Had the rope hooked over—"

"You rappelled? From your home?"

"I spent a lot of time up on the third floor in my office. He never came in there."

She glanced at Chiara's face. Surprised to find wide-eyed admiration. "Mia, I mean—"

"Oh, that. Yeah, lucky me, huh? I used to do it for fun. Anyway, I had the rope secured on the hanging bar that I hoped wouldn't pull out of the wall. Hooked up the harness to the rope, had a backpack

that I'd started packing . . ." She trailed off. Looked down at her feet for a moment. "Anyway, when I heard him raging up the stairs that night, I grabbed the pack, buckled in, knocked the screen out of the window, and rappelled three stories down to the ground. Landed on my butt; not the most graceful landing ever."

Gravel crunched. Chiara stopped dead in her tracks. Mia stopped and looked at her. Chiara was smiling and shaking her head. A gentle huff of a chuckle grew to full-on laughter.

Mia decided to take the moment and lighten things up. "Oh, I see how it is. Miss 'I'm so graceful crawling out a bathroom window' laughs at me for rappelling and landing on my butt? I'll have you know I used to teach rappelling. And I don't usually land on my ass."

Chiara laughed even harder. Waved away the protest. "No! No! I'm not laughing at you! I'm laughing at us! You rappelling out of a window. Me crawling out of a public bathroom window." She leaned over, propped her arms against her thighs, and continued to laugh. "This is just not something, I mean, these are not things I ever dreamed would happen to me. And I certainly never dreamed I'd be having a conversation with another woman about it."

Mia chuckled. Watched Chiara's laughter fade; her smile slowly melt into something sad.

"What in the world, Mia? What in the world do people like us do?"

As she stood there staring at Chiara's tears, Mia struggled. Hugging wasn't usually her first instinct. But she stepped forward and pulled Chiara toward her. Her tears went from silent to sobbing to a whole-body ugly cry. Despite her discomfort, Mia kept holding her.

When the tears and trembling subsided, Chiara pulled back. "Thank you, Mia. I, uh, I didn't know that was going to happen. I'm not usually a crier."

“Believe me, I understand.” Needed a good cry herself. It would come. One of these days.

She took Chiara’s elbow and pulled her forward to continue the walk back to Robbi’s. “As they say in those cheesy commercials, ‘But wait! There’s more!’” Got a light chuckle. Better than nothing.

“Thanks to an überwealthy contact of mine, wealthy enough that she has her own jet, I hitched a ride to a little spot in South Louisiana called Delareau. That’s where Robbi and Louanne used to live. I had almost no money, but I met Louanne”—Mia paused and looked over at Chiara—“well, actually, she was Leanne at the time.” A squint of confusion on Chiara’s face. “Yeah, I’ll get to that later. Anyway, because I could get her out of Delareau and she had access to money, we helped each other. I got her moved to Bozeman, Montana. My friend supplied the same plane and the house. But just as it was taking off from Delareau, Aleks showed up. He’d found out I was in Delareau by intercepting a letter.” Mia answered Chiara’s gasp of shock with a hands up ‘who knew?’ “Yeah, paper. Thought it was safer, but not so much.” She took a breath and shook it off. “Anyway, his plane landed at the Delareau airport right after my friend’s plane landed to pick up Louanne. I can fill in the details later, but bottom line, Aleks thought I was on the plane that Louanne was on, got back in his plane, and followed it to Bozeman.”

“Hey, girls!” Robbi was sitting on the front porch, a crocheted throw held tight against the chill, waiting for them. “I’ve got some lunch in here.”

They picked up their pace toward the house. “You wouldn’t believe how pissed he was when he landed in Bozeman and found a pregnant woman—who was not me—being taken off on a stretcher.” Mia started laughing. It turned into a deep belly laugh at the unexpected joy of having outwitted Aleks. They stepped up on the porch.

Chiara spoke before Mia could stop laughing.

“Robbi, I am so grateful for you, and Mia, and this house. And any food that you have available. I. Am. Starving!”

January 16: Relationships
Meridian, Mississippi

Robbi hated the danger Chiara was in; the danger Mia was still in. She pressed her palm against her chest, as if she could slow her traitorous heart. But it wasn't enough. Boudreaux Marcellas would arrive in a few hours, and she couldn't stop the flutter of anticipation. Four months ago, she'd told her friends she couldn't imagine dating again. Widowed for more than five years, she'd settled into a life with other widows and single women. Walks, Rummikub, and various poker games, because she hated Bridge and Mahjong. She joined the garden club and made trips to New Orleans to browse art galleries, shop, and see the symphony. She enjoyed all that, but what she truly loved was the cool clubs down in the Quarter. She was especially partial to The Spotted Cat and its mix of sophisticated jazz and earthy blues. It reminded her of her life. Unwilling to live a life associated with the famous New Orleans crime syndicate family, she'd turned down marriage to a young man she loved. Instead, she married one who was more like the symphony. She loved her husband, but she'd never completely gotten over Boudreaux, a man who was definitely a 'spotted cat.'

Like a long-ago favorite song, memories arose and she'd pause, heart fluttering, and smile with cautious optimism about the future. When her daughter walked in on one of those private smiles, Robbi'd taken more than a little teasing. Daughters! They knew one so well.

Robbi finished cleaning the kitchen after lunch and hoped the reason she'd called Boudreaux could be dealt with quickly enough that they could leave 'the young people' to themselves for a while to take a glass of wine out to the sunroom. Maybe plan an actual date. Maybe even to her favorite club.



On the drive from New Orleans to Meridian, Boudreaux Marcellas thought about how quickly his life had changed since Mia Evanescence dropped into Delareau. Her plan to vanish Roberta's daughter brought a woman he'd loved since his late teen years back into his life. When she'd asked, Boudreaux had gladly taken on the job of presenting a lie to Roberta's no-good son-in-law, Remy Fortier. It was easy. Louanne's letter—along with a photo of a child with bright-red hair—could be explained only one way: The child was not Remy's. Boudreaux's gravitas in counseling Remy led to an annulment. The entire Fortier family put the 'nasty episode' behind them faster than alligators snatch careless frogs. And Boudreaux got another shot at life.

Boudreaux's wife's death had hit him hard. In the five years since she passed, he'd let himself go. Got chubby. And depressed. Started dressing accordingly. He missed his wife, and work that had been at least interesting became day-to-day, dead-ass boring. His historically refined demeanor and style of communication had devolved into a kind of gruff mobster schtick that kept everyone at a distance. Hearing from Roberta that she needed him—and wanted to see him—raised his testosterone level and his interest in life. He gutted and renovated his smelly, depressing office and regretted not one cent of the cost. Transforming his body cost time more than money. He went to the gym, lost weight, gained muscle and, ditching the barber shop he'd used for years, switched to an

upscale establishment to get his hair cut. The old-style barber he'd been loyal to didn't go in for, as he put it, that 'metrosexual shit.' But Boudreaux observed that trimming eyebrows and nose hair was par for the course among the more polished men with whom he'd hung out most of his life. Those changes to his office and his body? Nothing more than simple, good grooming.

He'd understood the transformation was obvious by the look on Jake's face when he arrived to pick him up. Boudreaux'd gotten in the vehicle and mentally crossed his fingers that—after getting the lay of the land with Mia's new 'client' as she called them—there'd be time to sit with Roberta on the ancient sun porch. Maybe right next to her on the rattan settee this time.



During the three-hour drive, Jake extracted what little information Boudreaux had about the woman Mia rescued from the Threefoot Hotel in Meridian. Then passed the time talking about Enola's on the Têche, the bar Jake had inherited from his dad, and about the friends, acquaintances, and family members they had in common. Always an interesting exploration, though Jake had never taken the time to investigate exactly where he fit in that branch of the family tree.

Jake pulled into a pea gravel guest parking area in front of the old Southern home. Robbi stepped out the front door onto the gallery porch as they got out. She greeted them both with a warm hello and encouragement to come in out of the chilly winter air. And then, exuding her best Southern charm and a smile that suggested the mischievous, she focused her attention on Boudreaux.

Jake looked past Robbi, eager to see Mia without appearing too eager.

January 16: Phones and Money
Meridian, Mississippi

Mia made introductions as they all found seats in the sitting room, then listened carefully, jumped in when she needed to as she, Robbi, and Chiara brought Boudreaux and Jake up to speed.

Chiara sighed heavily and said, “Can’t I just hide out somewhere with a burner phone?”

Boudreaux didn’t smile as he disabused her of that notion.

“It’s like this, Chiara: People think burner phones can’t be tracked. But that’s not true. They’re harder to track than the phone registered to you, but they can still be tracked.” He thought for a couple of beats and went on. “As far as who might be after you, there are a few small cartels and two very large, wealthy, sophisticated ones in Brazil that we know of. I suspect the FBI isn’t fishing for the little guys. Let’s assume your husband was undercover at one of the big organizations. They employ the most advanced tools, so to use a burner phone safely, there are some things you need to know.”

Mia looked over at Jake and raised her eyebrows. Losing weight, dressing nicer, and bringing his office up to date were clearly not the only improvements Boudreaux’d been making. Jake mouthed ‘his nephew Xavier’ with a shrug of a question mark. She read it as Jake’s guess as to the source of Boudreaux’s evolution from Luddite to telecom pro. Mia glanced at Robbi and saw admiration but not surprise. Interesting.

Chiara was talking directly to Boudreaux. “It sounds like you can help me understand that. But I don’t have a phone, any phone. Not only am I going to need some money, but I have to reschedule events and commitments on my calendar. And—”

Mia interrupted her, “And not get kidnapped?”

Chiara sighed, “Yes. That’s priority one. But rescheduling so my reputation doesn’t go down the drain and wanting to pay Mia

means I'll need money. Enough for that and whatever else I need to do. I've assumed I could use a burner phone to open an account somewhere and transfer some money. But where in the world do I get one without going back into town?"

Jake got up and walked out of the room, returning a moment later with a cardboard box. Mia wasn't surprised to see him pull six burner phones out and lay them on the coffee table while Boudreaux continued.

"Risky on two points: Opening a new account means you have to have some ID. I got it right that you've got nothing? You left everything in your purse and luggage that was in the car they drove away in?"

"The truck, yes. I borrowed Mia's phone last night and wiped my phone, hopefully before they could break into it."

"Good. That's good. But creates a delay." He turned to Robbi. "Do you have an account where she can stash some money for a while?"

Robbi thought for a few seconds and smiled. "I do. There's an account from one of Robert's endeavors." She looked around at the young people in the room. "That's my husband who passed five years ago." She turned back to Boudreaux. "One of the businesses he had for many years. My name isn't on that account to disburse funds. Our attorney is the signatory. But I can let him know there'll be some money transferred in and give Chiara the wiring instructions."

"And then we can move most of it offshore for her. That is, of course"—he looked at Chiara—"if it's okay with you?"

Chiara's expression went from surprise to confusion to fear. "Boudreaux, I, uh . . ." She paused to think for a moment and Mia jumped in.

"Chiara, everyone in this room is responsible for the fact that I'm alive at this moment. Robbi and Boudreaux have enough

money between them to buy most of Louisiana and Mississippi combined. They don't need yours."

Chiara looked at Boudreaux and Robbi. Straightened her back a little. "You are very kind to make this offer. With the instructions from you, Robbi, I'll get the money wired. But I don't know anything about offshore accounts."

Boudreaux smiled ironically. "That's not a bad thing, *mon cher*. Best you don't in fact, in case someone wants to pressure you into providing information that you'd rather they not have." Boudreaux stood up and started to pace the room. "Back to the lesson in burner phones. Mia, you can help her create an email address under a fake name, yeah?" As Mia nodded, he continued, "With those elements in place, you can use a burner to transfer money. But preferably somewhere not near here. Y'all take a drive over to Alabama, maybe even Atlanta if you have time, and use the burner to get the money wired into Robbi's account. After that, two things: Use a browser to access the fake email address and confirm the transfer."

He looked over at Mia. "Little Jimmy Quinn who runs our IT isn't ready to switch us over to eSIMs yet. You'll have to pull the physical SIM card out and use another burner after that."

Mia looked at Chiara. "We go through a lot of burner phones, so we don't preload them with much money."

Boudreaux continued, "Sophisticated people with the right software can geotrack where you're calling from, so I purchase a lot of burner phones and a lot of SIM cards. We get them where no ID is required, and we pay cash. We don't turn any of them on at the point of purchase, and as Mia said, we only prepay a small amount of money." Boudreaux shrugged. "In my world, just a normal cost of doing business."

Mia nodded at Chiara, confirming and glad to have Boudreaux in their corner. He was quiet for a moment. Eyes on Chiara. She had no idea what was next.

Boudreaux ran his hand over his face as if smoothing a beard he hadn't grown, then leaned toward Chiara. "Not an easy question to ask, *cher*, but it must be asked." His pause was long enough that Mia felt something move in her chest.

"Is there any possibility . . . anything you can think of that has made you uncomfortable with your husband in the past few—"

Chiara's gasp stopped him. She stood so suddenly the energy in the room shifted. Boudreaux stood too, but slowly, as if he might break something if he moved too fast. He slowly raised his arms as though he thought Chiara might lash out at him just for asking the question. But Chiara didn't move. The two held each other's eyes and remained silent for one breath. Then two. And three. Then, she didn't smile, but her stiff posture softened. Boudreaux waited.

"Okay. I understand. You're a businessman and to do all the things we're talking about, providing me with the help you're offering, you had to ask." She turned away from Boudreaux as if she needed to think about what to say. Then turned back. "The simple answer is no. I have no doubts about Ricardo. In any way. About his work. About his love for me. Our marriage. Our home. None."

Boudreaux nodded, but Chiara kept talking, resignation morphing into angst. "I am the one who is that wrapped up in her work that she could forget. I forgot about him." She covered her face with her hands, but she didn't sob. "I couldn't tell you whether it's been two or three weeks or even a month since I spoke to my husband. If he doesn't come home, I'll have to live with that for the rest of my life. And if they kill me but he survives . . . it breaks my heart that he might think I never thought of him while he could have been in danger."

Mia watched Chiara step over to the sofa and collapse into it; heavy with the fear she'd just acknowledged.

Mia saw something in Chiara she couldn't remember ever seeing before. Couldn't name. Love, yes. And fear. But the raw grief

revealed something more elemental, more powerful than what Mia had ever thought of as love. Susan had never married, and when Jessi fell for her husband, Mia'd been too deep in her work to notice. The range of emotions moving across Chiara's face and through her body struck her as the animated version of something she'd always thought was static.

After Boudreaux gave the room a moment to breathe, he said, "That's good, Chiara. Very good. Thank you for understanding my need to ask."

Jake's voice—calm, clear, and on-task—pulled Mia back into the moment. "Boudreaux, can you get Chiara a decent enough ID, like the one you got for Mia, that will work for driving or flying?"

They talked and planned for another hour. Things began to feel fairly settled. Boudreaux looped back to the offshore account for Chiara. "And yes, Chiara, you will have access to your money. After we get your ID done, we'll have what we need to get the account set up for access by you. The new you, that is."

Robbi stood up.

"It's after five o'clock, people! For the rest of the evening let's play like we have a life outside all this very necessary, but mentally and emotionally exhausting, scheming and planning." She turned to Boudreaux with a mischievous smile. "You, sir?"

"Yes, ma'am?" Boudreaux stood up immediately.

"You are with me. We're going to leave these young people to their own devices. I have the makings of a couple of very dry martinis in the kitchen and two comfortable chairs in the sunroom where, even though it's dark, we will sit and enjoy them."

Boudreaux's smile lit up the room. He stepped over, took Robbi by the elbow, and the two of them headed for the kitchen.

Mia looked at Chiara and Jake, both as surprised at the abrupt change as she was. And just as Jake was about to speak, Louanne called out to them as she made her way down the stairs.

“Hey, y’all! I heard the meeting breaking up. Chiara, I haven’t had a chance to talk to you at all since you got here. Momma’s got something in the fridge we can take upstairs and maybe have a little, you know, sleepover kinda thing? With little Haggy? I have some stories I can tell you.”

Relieved to hear a plan and excited by the young woman’s enthusiasm, Chiara said, “That sounds great! I have a feeling your stories will be exciting, and educational. But fair warning, I don’t know much about babies except that they’re way more fragile than what I work with every day. Don’t expect me to be a good ‘auntie’ right out of the gate.”

“He’ll be awake in a little bit. Let’s get the food! I have a kitchenette upstairs where we can heat it up.” She led Chiara into the kitchen.

Mia turned to Jake and, with an urgency that surprised him, said, “Please take me to town, Jake.”

“Sure. I’d be delighted,” he said with a gentlemanly slight bow. “It’s a plus for me that those soda water drinks you order make you a cheap date.”

“True. But when we eat, I’m getting the most expensive thing on the menu,” she said, turning toward the front door.

Jake saw that she had no intention of changing clothes. He asked, “You look like a sulky teen. Don’t forget your ID because you might get carded.”

She turned back and grinned. “Smooth, Jake. Very smooth.”

Jake opened the door. “I try not to disappoint,” he said as he motioned, ‘you first.’

January 16: The Evening's Festivities
Meridian, Mississippi

As they drove to town, the thought of cameras landed like a client's last-minute script change: unnecessary and full of potential issues.

"Wait! I have a better idea."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Let's go back to the house, get some leftovers and a bottle of wine, and have a tailgate party."

Astonished, Jake didn't put on the brakes right away.

"What? You don't like tailgate parties?" Mia, the smile in her voice coming through, poked him in the ribs when she said it.

"Ow! No, that's not . . . I mean, yes, I like tailgate parties. But why the change?"

Mia looked down at herself, her sloppy clothes, and beat-up boots. She felt nothing like the reasonably attractive woman she'd felt like for most of her life. And sighed.

"Jake, I'm dressed for a tailgate party, but not a nice restaurant." She also thought maybe she'd answer some questions he'd asked when they were back in Montana. "Come on, it's a nice night to take a look at the lake."

Jake slowed and made a U-turn back toward the house.

"Wait . . . did you say leftovers and wine? You're going to drink wine?"

The question stopped her for a moment. *It's Jake; not Aleks. And no life-changing decisions on the line.* She smiled at him.

Chiara upstairs with Louanne and the baby, Robbi and Boudreaux on the sun porch, Mia and Jake had the kitchen to themselves. Mia found fried chicken and some coleslaw in the fridge. Jake opened cabinet doors until he found the wine. He selected a bottle, grabbed a roll of paper towels and a corkscrew, and they left the house with no one the wiser.

Twenty minutes later, Jake drove them over Okatibbee Dam Road, which held back enough of Okatibbee Creek to create a reservoir. The moon laid bright light on the nearly still water.

Parked at the marina, facing the moonlit lake, Mia opened the liftgate and Jake opened the wine. Mia rummaged around for glasses. In a perfect maître d's posture, Jake prepared to pour and Mia held her empty hands up with a grin.

"Oh no!" Jake slumped, but Mia grinned and took the bottle from his hand. She put it to her mouth and took a swallow. Passed the bottle back to a somewhat stunned Jake.

"Surprising enough to see you drink something other than soda water. But you're slugging from the bottle like a pro!" He grinned and did the same. As he drank, Mia stepped away from the vehicle and headed toward the shore. Jake followed. She walked slowly, staring at a perfect moon on placid water, like a cool white paper cutout on a jet-black background. She took a deep breath and felt her body relax. The idea of answering the difficult questions Jake asked her when they were back in Montana flew from her mind along with her anxiety.

"I'm glad you wanted to get out of the house," Jake said. "And that we both had warm enough jackets to do this." Mia turned and stopped to let him catch up. His arms were full.

"A blanket too?"

"Yeah, well, I keep one in the back during the winter. Just in case." He saw her 'just in case what?' eyebrow-raised question and added, "That's just in case there's an ice storm."

"You have ice storms in Delareau?"

"Once every couple of years. And with basically no winter highway equipment, I've been stuck on I-10 once or twice for a few hours. After the first time, when I almost ran out of gas, I started to toss one into the truck in December, praying I won't need it."

They reached the shore and stood staring for a few moments. Then Jake laid out the blanket and sat down. Mia joined him. He handed her the bottle and she took a sip.

They were both quiet. But after a while, Mia's producer habit of interviewing asserted itself.

"How come you don't have a girlfriend?"

Jake snorted softly. "Oh no you don't. You played interviewer a couple of months ago when we flew to Montana. You already know way more about me than I do about you." She could hear the smile in his voice but knew he was serious.

She sighed. "Yeah, you're right." She tipped the bottle up and took a long pull. "And that's fair." She pulled her sleeve across her mouth and handed him the bottle. "Ask away."

Jake looked at her for a moment. "Where did you grow up?"

"With Jessica—Jessi—and her mom Susan in northern Virginia, right outside Washington, DC." She stopped and wondered what to say next. Jake waited a few beats. Just as he opened his mouth to say something, Mia added, "Mostly there. Before there, I don't know."

"You don't know your parents? Where you were born?"

"No." Shaking her head. "No, I don't." She took the bottle from his hand and took a sip. "But I want to know. I keep thinking, one of these days, I might find out. But all I know is . . ." Mia paused. A tightening in her chest and sinuses; one she knew led to a sneeze. "Uh, is that my mother died, my father disappeared—either before or after she died—and eventually, I wound up with Fairfax County Child Protective services." She rubbed her nose, took a couple of short jerky breaths, and sneezed.

"Bless you. And that's a particularly unique sneeze you have."

Again, without a handy tissue. She sneezed again but went on.

"I remember something about a note. Whoever found me and eventually got me to the Avery's found a note."

Mia Evanesence. Fairfax County, Virginia. Susan Avery.

"I was lucky that Susan was willing and able to take me in. No family, no money, no history. Just a needy little three- or four-year-old she'd met on a playground a year before."

Jake was silent for a full minute before he spoke.

"Wow. I can see why this is a story you, uh . . . I don't know, may not want to think about, let alone talk about. Especially with someone you barely know."

Mia was nodding her head. She felt the wine warm her belly. Slow her racing thoughts. "I remember so little about it all. I'm sure Susan told me something about it when I was young. I remember her saying that she didn't remember my mother's name and only made the connection thanks to a newspaper clipping the authorities provided."

Jake shifted slightly sideways to face her. "How did you open your own business?"

Mia brightened a bit. "Now that's a story I know all the details about!"

Jake and Mia both laughed.

"I started playing around with designs and using a digital video camera when I was a teenager. Guess I did pretty good work because by the time I started college, I got jobs that paid a little money. I had a scholarship but hadn't chosen a major yet. The money and good reviews for the freelance work settled the 'what am I going to do when I grow up' question and decided my major. After graduation I just kept going. And getting more clients. After a couple of years, I had more work than I could handle and found a temp agency with qualified freelancers I could hire as needed. And . . . well . . ."

"It grew from there?"

"Yep. Back in October when I had to leave, I'd begun thinking of hiring a CEO. Too much admin and noncreative work pulling

me away from the part I loved.” She watched Jake take a drink from the bottle and sighed. “Things have been quieter since I got to Mississippi, so I’ve had time to really miss it.”

He handed the bottle back to Mia. She held it up to the moon and realized they’d drunk about three-quarters of it.

While she measured, Jake surprised her. “Don’t want to get out of my lane here, but how does this thing with Chiara play into your own situation? I mean, seems like you might be putting yourself out there where there’s an increased camera risk? Maybe other risks too?”

She stood. “I want some chicken.” Wondered how many times too much wine played a role in missing or overlooking signs about Aleks’ true nature. “And I want it before I get drunk. Getting drunk is not something I enjoy.”

Jake stood too. He picked up the blanket and they headed back to his Suburban and the food.

“And what do you mean my sneeze is unique?” She punched him lightly.



Upstairs at Robbi’s, Mia felt the wine, the warmth. A tug of longing. She followed Jake to the room he’d slept in the last few times he and Boudreaux visited. Stopped at the door and took his arm. Pulled him toward her for a hug.

Her body reacted before her mind could. Stiffened. Pulled back. The longing still there, but her muscles wouldn’t obey it. She dropped her hand.

“Thank you, Jake. For taking me out of the house and for settling for cold chicken on a blanket instead of a nice restaurant.” Something passed across his face.

“And for caring enough to ask about me and my safety. I uh, I didn’t answer you and I apologize for that. Maybe it just hit too close.”

He waited, cocked his head to the side with a smirk that read, ‘and?’ But didn’t say it out loud.

“Okay,” dragging the word out like a teenager being forced to confess. “According to my attorney, Aleks is busy with legal maneuvering. I’m fairly invisible here in Meridian, unlike I was in Delareau where, you know, he tracked my friend’s plane; or in Ontonagon where he found the cottage Jessi’s mom owns.” She stopped. *Enough. Just can’t talk about the money part with him. Too raw. Embarrassing.*

Jake’s disappointment, or maybe concern, dissolved into a smile that was soft, warm, and genuine.

“Okay. You are very welcome. One of these days, we’ll go out and you won’t have to worry about how you’re dressed. Or about cameras, facial recognition software, about being recognized.”

She imagined being in that hug she’d thought she wanted. Feeling his breath in her hair, his arms around her. How warm it would be. Then looked at him and could feel the want he had, even in his stillness.

“And thank you for answering my question.”

No big deal made about it, thank God. She smiled and said, “Sorry it took me so long. But one of these days, when the attorneys have done their magic, when Aleks finally gives up and understands I’m never coming back, the only cameras I’ll worry about are those we’ll use in a shoot.”

Jake smiled back at her. There was hope in it, but he stepped into his room and turned back toward her.

“I’ll look forward to that too, Mia.”

She read concern in the faint lines around his eyes, but what more could she do? At the moment, nothing. She nodded once and headed to her own room.

On her way, she noticed the door shut to Boudreaux's room and wondered. And grinned.

CHAPTER 4

January 17: Prep for a Road Trip Meridian, Mississippi

By 7:00 a.m., the boys had gone back to Louisiana, the girls were in the kitchen, and Mia couldn't help but feel warm and squishy inside when Robbi went into 'Mom mode' as she and Chiara prepared for the trip to Atlanta. Mia felt a little like she did when she was a teen, getting life lessons from her adopted mom, Susan.

"Growing up in rural Louisiana, I've found that small-town law enforcement has little enough to do that temporary plates from somewhere as far away as Montana will draw attention. Possibly even questions. Since you'll only be on the interstate part of the time and on state roads in small towns the rest, best you take my Escalade instead of your vehicle, Mia," Robbi said.

"I like the heated seats too." Mia smiled at Chiara as she said it, working hard to keep things light, knowing Chiara was traumatized by her attempted kidnapping two nights ago. "It's Deep South winter, which is way better than winter back in the DC area. And way warmer than the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. But chilly enough to enjoy a hot bottom." Chiara's smile developed into a confused half wince/half grin. Mia explained, "I'll tell you about Ontonagon on the way to Atlanta. But first, you need a 'new look'" —using air quotes—"in case whoever is looking for you has access to the many, many cameras we'll pass along the way."

“You wish you were going with the girls, don’t you, Haggy?” Louanne, sitting at the kitchen table with her three-month-old son, blew a raspberry on the baby’s bare belly. He rewarded his momma with a gurgled laugh.

“Darlin,” Robbi said, looking sadly at her daughter, “it breaks his grandmamma’s heart to hear his beautiful name turned into Haggy.”

Mia watched the exchange with a smile and some sadness. She adored the French sounding ‘grand- mah-mah’ pronunciation that Robbi insisted they use. Said it made her feel like a dignified grandmother. Mia wondered what her own mother would have liked but quickly slipped that question into the mental black box that contained other biological mother questions.

Louanne just laughed. “When the time comes, we’ll call him whatever he prefers. But for now, I just can’t call my little guy Robert Hagan. It’s too grown up or stodgy or something.”

Mia and Chiara stood to leave the three generations.

“What are you going to do to me, Mia?”

“Chiara, that glossy black hair of yours is getting cut, bleached, and turned pink. Then, you can borrow some of my sloppy hiker clothes. If you come up with a better look down the road, we’ll go for it. But to get this show on the road, we’ll work with what we’ve got.”

“How did you get bleach and pink hair dye?” she asked Mia.

Louanne was laughing at her son but answered Chiara from the kitchen. “I exercised my creativity yesterday when I went into town to get diapers.”

“I’m not really a pink hair kind of girl.” Chiara’s expression, that of someone forced to taste something she didn’t much like the smell of.

“Excellent!” Mia slipped instantly into producer/director mode, working on character development and wardrobe. “Since that’s the goal—you not looking or being like you—we applaud Louanne’s

creativity.” She clapped a ‘let’s get going’ rhythm as she started up the stairs. Chiara dragged her feet but followed.

Mia cut Chiara’s hair, then left her to do the bleach and color. Two hours later, packed and ready to go, Mia said, “You don’t look anything like that classy chick I found in the bathroom a few nights ago!” Chiara, clearly uncomfortable with her new self, kept touching stray hairs and tugging at her clothes as they hauled their packs out to Robbi’s Escalade.

“I know I should be grateful, but I am really glad it’s chilly and okay to wear a hat over all of this . . . pinkness.”

“Stop whining. You’re lucky your eyes are just plain ole brown.” Mia rubbed her eyes, irritated by the colored contacts hiding the vivid green of her own. “These things drive me nuts sometimes.”

“Small mercies,” Chiara replied.

Mia closed the rear door on their luggage and eyed her ‘tal-ent’ carefully. Spiky pink hair peeking out from under a droopy bucket beanie, used hiking clothes two sizes too big, an extra pair of beat-up boots from Mia’s disguise wardrobe, plus an old barn coat from Mertice’s mudroom. Mia judged her well disguised and camera ready; confident they’d travel anonymously.

She steered the Escalade south toward Meridian. They mapped out a combo of back roads and interstate for the five-hour drive to Atlanta with high hopes it would be uneventful.

And it was.

Until it wasn’t.

***January 17: The Art Deco Dancer
Meridian, Mississippi***

In downtown Meridian, Mia and Chiara stood about forty yards from the *Art Deco Dancer*. Mia was the one who’d suggested they

stop. They had to go through town to pick up lunch. “I’ll get a look at your work,” Mia said, adding, “we can pick up something good to eat from the restaurant across the street.” It had been three days since the failed kidnapping attempt, and they’d agreed it was unlikely the two men who’d tried to grab Chiara would still be in Meridian.

“Actually, this is good for me too. I get to see if the midday light this time of year has the dramatic effect I’d hoped it would,” Chiara said.

They parked behind the Threefoot Hotel about two blocks from the statue and walked. When they turned the corner, they found two busloads of school kids dressed in colorful parkas and winter wear scattered in the amphitheater around the sculpture like bits of colorful candy. The two women stood at the highest point and looked down, their view unobstructed. They slouched as they stared, as if entranced by how the winter sunlight turned the finish on the body of the statue to something resembling glowing liquid gold.

“Wow,” Mia said quietly, almost reverently, her mouth open a bit. After a few moments, still staring at the sculpture, she said, “You did that? This is what you do? I can’t even imagine . . .” she trailed off, at a loss for words.

Mia could hear the satisfaction in Chiara’s voice. “It worked. I’m so pleased to see the gold finish emulating liquid.” She turned to Mia. “And next summer, when the light is directly overhead, the gold won’t be this dramatic. But the red in the wrap she’s lifting toward the sky as the rest drops to the ground, that will be more powerful. I gave her something for the light to play with in each season. It’s the signature of my work.”

Mia couldn’t take her eyes off the *Dancer*. She wondered how Chiara, if she had to disappear for a long time—or for good—would continue to be an artist. And that kicked her right back to

the present. She looked around, checking for Aleks or a couple of kidnappers. Nothing. She turned quickly and headed across the street. Chiara pulled her eyes away and followed.

"They should have our lunch ready. You good?" She looked over at the artist.

"I'm good," Chiara said. Quiet and a little sad. Mia thought she must be wondering the same thing about her future as an artist. Then she stood a little taller; Mia heard a hint of steel in her voice. "Yeah, I'm good. Let's get the food and get out of here."

***January 17: Jorge and Arturo
Meridian, Mississippi***

The bandage on Arturo's nose was newer and cleaner than the original, but he still had to tolerate Jorge's unmerciful teasing. "And you still sound like you are wearing a clothespin on your nose!" Some shredded lettuce fell into Jorge's lap as he laughed and stuffed the remainder of a hamburger in his mouth.

Arturo ignored him and took a bite of his own lunch. The bosses back in Brazil found an unused return ticket to Washington, DC, and ordered them to blend in and wait for Ricardo Orzmondo's wife to return. They remained in Meridian.

"*Os chefes realmente acreditam—*"

"Arturo, as I have told you, we will speak only English while here. We are blending in. You will remember not to speak Portuguese from this point forward."

Jorge's laughter could turn to a threat quicker than a switchblade snapped open in a back alley.

"Sorry. I am sorry, Jorge. I will not forget again."

"I only wondered if, or why, the bosses believe she is still here. Or that she will come back?" Kept to himself that no way did he think a woman smart enough to get away and hide from him and Jorge for three days and wipe her phone as quickly as she did would come anywhere near the place they had tried and failed to kidnap her.

Jorge remained silent.

Arturo thought about the phone she had left behind. It was a disappointment. There was no music or social media they could enjoy and no credit cards they could track. He had spent several disappointing minutes tapping around in search of naked photos. Arturo assumed everyone took naked selfies. He was barely nineteen years old and much more comfortable with naked photos of women than he was with the real thing. He wondered sometimes if he would live long enough to experience a woman's body.

Finally, Jorge spoke. "She will come back. She is an artist, and she left her purse in the car. And her luggage. She surely reported the event and will want to know if the police have found anything."

Arturo heard the confidence in his partner's voice, a result he assumed of the ten years Jorge had worked for the cartel, which was nine-and-a-half years longer than Arturo. Since it was a job he had to do—was forced to do—he longed for confidence.

Positioned to observe everyone driving or walking around the woman's statue, the Art Center, and the hotel she had been headed toward when they grabbed her, Arturo knew their bosses had assigned another man to watch the main police station a few blocks away.

"What if she went home another way?"

Jorge was quiet for a moment.

"We cannot know everything, Arturo. We are responsible for what we are assigned. But if this effort is like others I have worked on, others are watching her home. She is being tracked," he said as

he crumpled his lunch bag and used napkins, "if she is driving or on a train or a boat. Our job is to wait here. In case she has done the same." He tossed his hamburger wrapper into a nearby can.

"What if she is disguised, Jorge?"

It did not escape Arturo's notice that Jorge was becoming tired of his questions.

"I watched her from the side mirror. After she broke your nose and fell out of the back door, she hit the pavement and rolled like a professional. And when she ran? It was like watching a trained athlete. I have never seen a frightened woman move that gracefully. She even had the foresight to take off her heels. Even if disguised, I will recognize this woman's movements."

Arturo, finished with his own lunch, shot his ball of paper like a basketball toward the can. And missed. "Someone should have told us she had training. I would have handled it differently." He picked up the trash and tossed it in the can.

"Of course you would have." Irony as unmistakable as his Portuguese accent. "You would have never let that beautiful leg put a heel in your nose, would you?" Arturo shuddered at the meanness in Jorge's laugh.



An hour later, they had moved from one side of the park to the other and set up a game of dominoes on a table designed for playing checkers. Jorge changed their location and activity to minimize suspicion. He looked over Arturo's shoulder at the statue and watched two busloads of school children scatter themselves around the circle surrounding it. Some listened to the teacher talk about the statue, others poked, jabbed, and pushed each other or whispered in another's ear. Jorge noticed two dowdily dressed

people standing apart from the children. They stood out, dressed like young people out West. He had seen people like this when he was monitoring one of the boss' marijuana operations in Colorado. Men or women? He could not tell this far away, especially under the caps and coats, but his *intuição* told him something was 'off' about the pair. So he watched.

"Your turn, Jorge." Arturo faced the other direction and watched a block of downtown where the business crowd went in and out during the day.

"A moment, Arturo." He watched the two as they ambled around the kids at the statue for a couple of minutes and then turned as if to leave. He got up from the table.

"Do not call attention. Just get up as if we are going to get a cup of coffee."

Arturo stood up and stretched then turned to look at Jorge's view. He asked, "Those two sloppy kids in the distance?"

"Exactly. Sloppy grunge types? They do not fit, do they? And the taller of the two? Walks with the grace of a woman, not a teen. Let's follow for a bit and see where they land."

*January 17: A Kindness at Love's
Woodstock, Alabama*

"Aleks and his goons followed the plane that Louanne was on to Bozeman." Mia drove the speed limit on I-20 as she continued to fill Chiara in. "Louanne told me that when he was leaning over her on the stretcher, he was spitting in her face he was so angry."

Chiara held Mia's phone, looking at the screen capture Jake had snapped of Aleks. "He looks insane in this picture."

Just hearing Chiara say that made her wonder how she'd missed the signs. There had to have been signs, some clue about the man he truly was. "Yeah, well . . . when I wasn't on the stretcher, he expected to see me on the other end of that FaceTime call," Mia said.

"I got from Louanne that you and Jake went to Bozeman after that. That she had the baby, then Jake left, and you two went to Michigan. Why there?"

"My best friend, Jessi. Her grandfather owned a cottage there. Jessi's mom, Susan, who raised me, inherited it, and no one was using it that late in the season. It wasn't something I knew about, so I couldn't imagine that Aleks could. But somehow, he found it."

"Hmmm . . ." Chiara mused for a minute. "Real estate records, maybe? A search of some sort using Jessica's family names?"

Mia leaned her head forward and tapped her head on the steering wheel in disgust. "But Jessi's married. Her last name isn't the same as her mother's." Mia hissed out a breath. "I don't really know . . ."

"Louanne didn't get to finish the story. Did he find you there?"

"Almost. He thought I was there and came back a second time. But a lot of other people helped, and . . ." Mia looked down and noticed she was almost out of gas. "Oops. Time to fill up the tank."

"Signs say there are a couple of truck stops at the next exit."

Mia wasn't aware of the muddy gray Ford extended-cab truck that followed them at a distance. As they turned left into Love's Travel Stop, so did the truck.



Just as the gas pump stopped, Mia looked up to see Chiara, finished with her business inside the store, walking toward her. Fast. She was terribly pale.

"What?" She slid the pump handle into its slot.

"We've gotta go." Chiara's voice was quiet and urgent. She gave a slight nod back toward the store entrance just as a man wearing jeans and a plaid shirt came out. He was looking down toward his boots a little more studiously than Mia thought normal. She got behind the wheel as Chiara, hurrying, slammed the passenger-side door.

"That guy looks like the one who was driving the car when they grabbed me."

Getting back on the interstate, a bad idea. Hide in plain sight, best option now. She drove away from the pump and veered toward the scores of 18-wheelers parked behind the building.

"Grab your pack and get mine too. We're about to ditch Robbi's car." Mia knew the man saw her turn toward the trucker parking. She checked her rearview mirror. No one behind them yet, so she turned left between two trucks, then right again to get behind the row of them. She continued moving up the line of trucks until she found two halves of a double-wide mobile home parked side by side, the drivers each getting out of their rigs. The two halves together were wide enough to hide behind. Mia pulled in and shut off the engine.

"I've got everything but the cooler."

"Okay. I'm taking the key in case we can get back in. If we can't, Robbi can get someone to retrieve her car. Let's go."

Chiara followed Mia, carrying most of their gear. Mia peered around one-half of a double-wide to see a gray truck with the man Chiara identified behind the wheel. He drove slowly as he and the man beside him peered between the rigs.

She took her backpack and gestured to Chiara the direction they'd move. "That way, then under the trucks." Getting low would make them less noticeable. Each wearing a backpack, Chiara with a cross-body bag hanging from her stomach, they crawled under

one of the mobile home halves. As they watched the wheels of the truck pass, they scooted the opposite direction under the next rig, and then the next and, checking they were still in the clear, the next. Mia looked out and didn't see the truck. Breathing hard from the strain, she put a hand on Chiara's arm to wait. She sat up and leaned up against the tractor's back set of dually tires.

Both women froze when they heard two men speaking in rapid-fire bursts—the rhythm and cadence familiar yet distinct with nasal vowels and hushed consonants that Mia couldn't quite place. The voices came closer. Mia raised her eyebrows at Chiara who nodded yes. She recognized the voices. They remained utterly still, staring at the space they could see between the bottom of the trailer and the ground.

A beautiful set of dark-brown cowboy boots with hand-tooled red phoenix stitching appeared. Mia and Chiara held their breath, heard the door lock snick, and watched one boot step up, then back down onto the asphalt again.

"What you guys up to?" It was a woman's voice. Whiskey-rough. Firm. Demanding.

"Nothing, *senhora*. We are looking for . . ." one of the men started and paused. The other finished for him, and Mia heard a smile in his voice.

"Our friends are playing a joke, I think. We came out of the store and could not find them. Perhaps, we thought, they have come back here to play a hide and seek with us."

Silence.

"Yeah? Well, this area is supposed to be for truckers only. But I just saw somebody else drive a regular vehicle up that direction. Maybe y'all get back in your truck and head that way, you'll run into them. It's on your way back toward the highway."

Mia listened as they spoke to each other in their native language for a moment. Then one said, “Thank you, senhora. We will do that.”

The fancy boots stayed where they were. Mia and Chiara did too. It was a solid two minutes before the boots moved and they heard the whiskey voice again.

“They drove south. You girls get out from under my rig on the passenger side. I’ll get in and unlock the door.”

January 17: Hitching with Marilyn
Woodstock, Alabama

She was already behind the wheel when Mia climbed in.

“Both of you, get in the back.” The driver pointed her thumb behind her as she started the engine.

Mia took the bags Chiara handed her and did as she’d been told. Chiara followed as quickly as Mia could get herself and the bags out of the way.

“How did you—” Mia started to ask.

“I always look under my rig when I’m walking up to it. I saw you two crawling from the one next to mine when I was thirty yards back. Then saw those guys park their truck and head toward you.” The engine started. Mia thought it quieter than she expected. She dropped the bags and looked around, shocked to find herself in a tiny apartment with a kitchenette and bench seats around a tiny table. Chiara joined her, and they both sat. Mia faced the front of the rig. She noticed the bed over the driver and passenger seats.

“Why do you always look under your rig?” Chiara asked, staring wide-eyed at the little apartment.

"In a minute. I'm about to pull out, so make sure you're sitting down somewhere. Those assholes parked up near the exit. I'm keeping my eye on them, and on the road."

"We're good," Chiara said and looked at Mia with her eyebrows and hands raised in question. Mia answered her with a 'Well, what else could we do?' kind of gesture.

"My name is Merrilyn. That's M-e-r-r, not mare like a horse. Or the state." Merrilyn shifted the behemoth and said, "I hope I'm not going to regret helping y'all."

Mia opened her mouth, but Chiara beat her to it. "Merrilyn, it's nice to meet you. I'm Chiara, and this is Mia. Thank you so much for helping us. Speaking only for myself, you may have saved my life."

Merrilyn turned left onto the service road, then left again to get on the interstate headed east before she spoke again.

"Well, saving your life does not necessarily bode well for me now, does it? I mean, if they find out I took ya. But they aren't following." She checked her rearview cam. "Not yet anyway. They were driving back toward the trucker parking when I saw them last." She cleared her throat and grabbed a bottle of water from the console. "They gonna find a vehicle you were driving? Or did you hitch yourselves this far?"

Mia spoke up. "They'll find our friend Robbi's Escalade. And thank you." Pulling her phone out of her pocket, she continued, "They'll find it, but they won't be able to do anything with it. And I'm texting someone who'll get it back to her."

Chiara jumped in, "Are you by any chance on your way to Atlanta, Merrilyn?"

"In fact, I am. I was hoping to go around Atlanta on my way to hit 95 South toward a delivery in Florence, South Carolina."

"Mia, we just need to be close to the city, right? Make our SIMs . . . or, whatever signal it is, a little harder to find?"

“Yeah. Just close enough to be in the middle of heavy population.” Mia was texting Jake.

“Y’all from Colorado? You don’t sound like it, but you look like a couple of stoners. Is this about drugs?”

Mia looked up from her phone. “Jake says he’ll get Boudreaux to send someone to Robbi’s to get the other set of keys and get the Escalade. There’s a LoJack on it, and Robbi’s got the app. She can tell them exactly where it is.”

“We’re not stoners,” Chiara answered. “Just dressed like them to avoid being recognized. But I don’t think you’re in any danger. Especially if you don’t see them following us.”

Merrilyn looked at her side mirrors and rearview cam again. “Nope, not a sign of them. One of my favorite truck stops is just east of Atlanta. I’ll let you out there. If someone’s coming to get you, it’s the RaceTrac on State Highway 6. Or you can go across the road to the Walmart Supercenter if you want to hide out among a bunch of people. We’ll be there in about three hours.”

January 17: The South Americans Go East Woodstock, Alabama

“She took them, Arturo.” Jorge’s voice was flat. Certain. “I can feel it.”

The two men walked the tarmac behind the truck stop and looked between every 18-wheeler in the parking lot before they finally found the Escalade the women had been traveling in parked behind two sections of a double-wide. Jorge said there was no reason for them to break into the vehicle or try to steal it. They could not use it, and they might leave fingerprints.

“I do not know, Jorge. I think maybe they are in the ladies’ room? Or in someone’s truck.” Arturo removed his baseball cap

and scratched his head. “I mean, why would they leave a perfectly good Cadillac Escalade at a truck stop? That makes no sense. And hitching rides is dangerous for women.” Arturo thought of his sister who was always talking about getting out of the little village where they lived, even if she had to hitch a ride. Her mother warned her of the many terrible things that happen to women who hitch rides and, so far, she had stayed home.

Arturo felt Jorge’s stare. It was a look that said the younger man was an idiot. Arturo got it. It is not as if going with the two of them would be safe.

Jorge shook his head in disgust. “Let’s go.”

The two men got back in their truck and Arturo navigated them to I-20 East. Jorge checked his watch. It had been twenty minutes since the woman trucker had left the lot. He figured they had thirty-five or forty miles to make up before they would see the back of her rig. Arturo pushed the speedometer up near ninety.

***January 17: A Beautiful Rig
Bessemer, Alabama***

“Wow! Merrilyn, you ride in luxury!” Mia said, as she took the passenger seat up front. Scanned her like prospective talent, and the contrast was striking. Petite and woodsy in a flannel shirt and well-worn North Face vest, wearing no makeup. Not even lipstick. Dark-brown hair, short with tight, messy curls and shot through with enough gray to make it interesting; the most feminine thing about her was her thick, perfectly curled eyelashes framing world-weary brown eyes. A close-up of the resilience and raw authenticity in those eyes used in the right campaign would pierce the hardest of hearts.

Chiara took a pillow from the little booth and made a more comfortable seat on the floor between the two.

"I put my money into the living space. That's why the outside is kinda plain."

Chiara said, "I didn't get to look at the outside. And, honestly, I wouldn't know plain from fancy when it comes to 18-wheelers."

"Well, fancy means bright colors with swoops and swirls and shit that calls attention. I don't go for that. Mine is plain ole tan. Doesn't show dirt, so I don't have to wash it as often. And as a woman driving alone, I find drawing less attention to myself much safer."

Merrilyn's fancy cowboy boots, perhaps the only thing about her that would draw the eye, were meticulously cared for. Mia stared at them as the truck driver shifted, took her foot off the accelerator, and let the cruise control take over.

"Makes sense," Mia said and turned to check the massive side mirror. "We're delighted to not stand out." She turned back toward Merrilyn. "By the way, what kind of truck were they driving? Those two guys?"

"Gray. I didn't catch the make, but it did not look new. Four-door. Extended cab. Was kind of dirty and, I don't know, beat-up looking, but I don't know if it was actually beat up or just unkempt. I'm kinda particular about how well kept a vehicle ought to be."

Mia looked in the side mirror again. No gray truck. But based on how Aleks kept finding her, and if these cartel guys had the same kind of resources he did or maybe even better, she figured they were back there.

"Chiara, let's have Merrilyn drop us at the Walmart. You'll handle the transaction you need to make; I'll call Jake and have him rent us a car. After we pick out some new outfits, I'll schedule an Uber to get us to the rental car place . . ." she trailed off, obviously thinking.

"What?" Chiara knew there was more.

“I haven’t been to very many Walmarts. I was wondering if we could buy wigs there.”

Merrilyn started laughing. “I don’t know about wigs. But speaking of not calling attention to yourselves, if you want to blend into this part of the country, what you need is a different look. Maybe jeans and a cowboy hat or at least a ball cap that says Alabama or Georgia.”

Mia looked in the mirror again. There was a tiny gray spec in the distance. “Can you unload us at the back of the Walmart like, you know, cargo?”

CHAPTER 5

*January 17: Pickup Man
Atlanta, Georgia*

Jake answered Mia's call.

"Got your message, but I didn't set up a rental car. I flew to Atlanta to get you."

Mia's jaw dropped. She and Chiara sat in a booth in the Mexican restaurant next door to the Walmart. Still nervous, probably bobble-heading too much, they were hungry, and decided one margarita couldn't hurt; just two girls hanging out. And looking nothing like they had at the truck stop a few hours ago.

Mia's hair was still black and the brown contacts hid her green eyes. But Walmart didn't have wigs. They'd recolored Chiara's hair a platinum blonde, which took longer because it required two rounds of bleaching to get the pink out along with some creative explaining to a couple of staff—one from security—who'd dropped into the ladies' room to see what was going on.

Mia used her best Southern accent. "We're surprisin' our men in a couple 'a hours. Don't worry. We'll clean up the mess." They had paper towels all over the floor under the sink they were using to prove it.

The security guard mumbled, "These damn Walmartians," as she left the bathroom.

They'd looked around at how other people in the store dressed and gotten what they could off the racks that would blend. Mia's prepaid Visa covered the cost of a men's royal blue poly cotton coveralls, a pair of Carhartt wannabe boots, and a University of Georgia ball cap for herself. For Chiara, a cheap can of hairspray to spike her new white hair, traditional green medical scrubs, and what Mia called 'frocs,' fake crocs. A surgical mask hanging from one ear and a stethoscope around her neck completed the look.

They tossed sunglasses and the sloppy teenager clothes into their backpacks, then put those in large Walmart bags they begged from a cashier.

Before they left the bathroom, Mia hissed, "Be sure you clomp across the parking lot to the restaurant. Do not do that float-like-you're-a-ballet-dancer thing you do. Nurses are burdened people, so walk like one!"

They split up and left the store separately, bearing no resemblance whatsoever to the women who stepped out of Marilyn's truck a couple of hours earlier. Chiara managed a slight limp and Mia put a phone to her ear and watched her feet. Twenty minutes later, they were calming their anxiety with margaritas and relieving their hunger with chips, salsa, and queso, waiting for Jake.

January 17: Lovers' Quarrel
Atlanta, Georgia

One hour and two drinks later, Jake walked through the door. Mia stopped listening to Chiara. It was Jake. Normal Jake. Average height and weight, brown hair, and soft brown eyes, just like always. But she saw something more. Intangible or maybe ineffable.

A glow that couldn't be seen, only felt. That something reminded her of the first glimpse of home after being gone for weeks at a time on a project. Beautiful.

"You're not listening to me." Chiara tapped her hand.

Mia shook her head and came back to the present. She nodded, directing Chiara's attention toward Jake, then winked. They decided to test their disguises; see how long it took for him to spot them. He scanned the place three times, then pulled out his phone to call and check the address. At that, they both laughed just loud enough for him to hear.

He looked toward the giggling, rolled his eyes, and shook his head. And smiled. He slid into the booth next to Chiara and looked at Mia.

"Hilarious," he deadpanned behind the grin. "You girls appear to be having a superb time for someone who had to crawl around under a bunch of 18-wheelers, hitchhike for nearly three hours, and spend time and money in a Walmart to create new disguises." There wasn't even a hint of irritation in his voice.

"We are not drunk!" Chiara said, just a little too loudly.

Mia playfully chided her as she pointed to Jake. "You don't have to tell this man who's drunk and who's not. He *owns* a bar!" She could hear herself overarticulating yet judged herself only a smidge intoxicated.

Jake laughed and signaled a server to the table. "Two coffees and a soda for me. Coke, Pepsi, whatever you have is fine."

Both girls moaned in disgust, rolling their eyes at his boring drink order. Mia put her forehead on the table. "For just a few minutes, Jake? Can't we laugh for just a few minutes?"

"You can. And you should. Because in a few minutes, I don't think you'll be laughing anymore."

The laughter died, the grins disappeared, and both women straightened up in their seats.

“What? You did it? Checked on your way in?” Mia, instantly all business despite the tequila.

“I drove through the Walmart parking lot before I came over here like you asked. Smart, by the way. There is indeed a dirty gray truck with two road-weary men in it. They’re parked in a spot close to the main entrance. Watching it like hawks. I don’t know how they tracked you to Walmart, but they did. Since you’re both here, and they aren’t, you did a good job disguising yourselves. But that main entrance is right by this restaurant. After you have some coffee and we get some food to go, I think we should get out of here. My rental is parked out back.” He pointed toward the back of the restaurant, opposite the Walmart. “They won’t see us from where they’re parked. Also, I booked a hotel.”

“We’re spending the night here?” Chiara asked.

“Boudreaux advised against dropping you back at Robbi’s until we confirm the money transfer. And”—he stretched and talked through a yawn—“it’s a long drive to start at this time of night.”

The front door of the restaurant opened. The two men from the truck stop walked in. Her gut clenched. They looked discouraged and, Mia thought, hangry.

She grabbed a menu, looked down, and spoke softly. “Everybody act natural. No sudden moves or loud laughter.”

Jake and Chiara had their backs to the door and question marks on their faces.

“Guess they got tired of waiting in the parking lot and decided to get something to eat too.”

The color drained from Chiara’s face.

“What kind of vehicle, Jake?” Mia asked, *sotto voce*.

“Tan Suburban, back side of the restaurant, opposite the Walmart,” he repeated.

The server returned with the coffees and soda. They were silent as she set the drinks on the table.

When she was gone, Mia channeled her inner director. “Jake, you and me. Lovers’ quarrel. I’m drunk and demanding one more shot. You want to take me home. Chiara, when all eyes are on us, you slip out the front door. Take my bag and yours, get in Jake’s rental, start it, and then get in the back and lie down or whatever you need to do to make sure no one can see you.”

Jake slipped the key fob out of his pocket and handed it to Chiara who was pale but focused. “I’ll act like I’m going to the ladies and stop at the service bar. It’s across from where they’re sitting and right in their line of sight.” She looked at Jake who laid two twenty-dollar bills on the table, then at Chiara, and whispered, “Action.”

She stood and walked slowly and unsteadily toward the ladies’ room, then veered left toward the bar.

“Hey! Hey there!” She waved her hand. Her voice was louder than it needed to be but not quite a shout. She put on a goofy smile when the bartender turned toward her. “Hey there. Um, can I get a couple shots of Patrón? You got Patrón, right?”

“Sure. Yeah, no problem. I’ll send your server over in just a second.”

“Awe, but I want it now,” Mia whined, then gave the bartender an ‘I’m drunk but I’m so cute you’ll do this for me right?’ smile. “Can I get it, like, now?” She cupped her hands around her mouth and whispered loud enough for the bartender to hear her. “Before he”—she tossed her head toward Jake, already headed her way—“ruins the party?” His expression told her the goofiness conveyed ‘more than a little drunk’ very effectively.

Jake walked up to Mia and took her by the arm. Didn’t shout but made sure he was getting some attention. “I thought you were going to the ladies’ room? Come on, no more tonight. It’s time to go home.” He waited a beat while Mia looked up at him, sparks in her eyes. “Honey,” he added.

"I just want one more shot before we go. The bartender is pouring one for you too!" She smiled, then changed moods instantly. "It was a shitty day, you know? Shitty." She turned back toward the bar and said, a little louder, edgier. "Can't you just give them to me? Two little shots of Patrón? Then I can go with this man who claims to want to make me happy . . ."

The bartender looked at Jake.

Jake told him, "Please, don't do that. I've already paid the tab." He held onto Mia's arm, and noticed that she was pulling really hard, trying to get out of his grip. The sparks in her eyes looked real. "Come on, sweetie! I've got Patrón at home."

She jerked her arm and shouted, "You cheap fucker! You wouldn't spend that much money on an entire meal for me, let alone one bottle of tequila!" She looked at the bartender and saw the two men at the bar behind him staring at her and Jake. She quickly glanced at the booth where they'd been sitting. Empty. Good girl, she thought. Then she started crying.

"Dammit! You never let me have any fun!" Mia wailed and snuffled.

The bartender looked at Jake and pointed to the phone on the counter. Jake knew what that meant. He nodded yes at the bartender and leaned over to whisper in Mia's ear.

"Good job, but it's time to go, or the bartender is going to have to call the cops."

Mia looked up, tear-streaked face. A woman who's had too much to drink to remember what she was angry about. Smiled at Jake and, just loud enough for a few people to hear, she changed her tune.

"Well now, mister. That sounds more like it." She put an arm around his waist, listing hard to the right, dragging him along with her. "Let's just go see about that, shall we?"

She looked back at the bartender and out of the corner of her eye, the men from the gray truck. They were shaking their heads and laughing. The younger one said, “Bartender? Will you serve us those two shots of Patrón?”

*January 17–18: Jorge and Arturo Travel
Atlanta, Georgia*

Jorge sat next to Arturo at the bar in the restaurant next to the Walmart parking lot. Arturo had asked for “. . . the two shots of Patrón the drunk lady wanted . . .” and ordered chicken enchiladas he pronounced not as good as the crepe-like *panquecas de frango* his mother made. Jorge agreed. Then he thought about the afternoon and, despite not capturing the woman, he believed the bosses would not be disappointed with the outcome.

They had almost lost the trucker but had arrived just in time to see her pulling away from a Walmart cargo bay.

Jorge looked at his watch. “She did not have time to unload major cargo. I think the two women were with her, and we just missed them.”

They had watched her drive across the lot to the RaceTrac fuel station. Then Arturo shook his head and parked in front of the Walmart so they could watch both places. And waited.

An hour later, the trucker left RaceTrac, but they had seen no one leave or approach her truck. They watched the store for another two hours, then admitted hunger and defeat.

Jorge’s phone pinged. He had taken a photo of the license plate on the Escalade back at the truck stop and sent it to the office. The text contained an address in a town that neither man could pronounce. They both stared at the word.

"Looks French to me, Jorge, like some of the signs we saw a few weeks ago when we passed through that little place in, where was . . ."

"New Guinea, Arturo. And you are right, but . . ." Jorge copied the address into his phone's map app. "Hmmm, this place in Louisiana is near New Orleans, probably French Creole." He tapped his phone a couple of times and a computer voice pronounced 'DELL-a-roë.' "To Delareau, Louisiana, we go. It must be some relative of Orzmondo's wife that we didn't know about."

Arturo signed the tab and took a picture of the receipt. He said, "Are you sure we have followed the right people, Jorge? You based the decision to follow them on seeing those two people walk across the street. It is a long way to drive if you are wrong."

"I am not wrong, Arturo. The way that woman moved, there is elegance that cannot be hidden beneath sloppy clothing. And besides, at the truck stop, they ran. We are following the right woman."

"If they went in the back door of the Walmart, where do you believe they went?"

"Maybe another ride? Maybe still waiting for a pickup. But whoever owns the car she left behind knows her. Or the other person who is helping her. Whether they go back to the car or not, there is something to learn. There are others working on leads, so we do as we are told and go to this address in DELL-ah-roë," he pronounced carefully.

Jorge sighed heavily as they exited the restaurant. "You cannot hold your liquor any better than you can stop a woman's shoe with your face, Arturo. Sleep it off." He took the keys from his young trainee and slipped behind the wheel.



Several hours later, the sun was up. Arturo had taken the wheel shortly before dawn so Jorge could sleep. He followed the GPS directions to Robbi's house on the outskirts of Delareau. Arturo nervously touched Jorge's shoulder to wake him as he turned off the highway onto the unpaved road that led to the front of the house. He hit the brakes hard and said, "Look, Jorge! Just look at this!"

Jorge rubbed his eyes and looked uncomprehendingly.

"Any moment, I expect that man will come running and the girl behind him will yell, 'Run, Forrest, run!'" American movies were wonderful, and *Forrest Gump* got better every time he watched it. His high-pitched, Southern-accented impression of the woman was impressive. Arturo laughed out loud and saw that Jorge, a hard man not given easily to humor, wore a grudging smile. It was, however, short-lived.

Jorge looked at his watch. "Okay, Arturo. Get us up this forest driveway. It is late enough in the morning to knock on the door."

Which led to nothing.

When no one answered the door, Arturo could see that even Jorge was not sure what to do. He assumed the older man was tired, wanted a shower, and longed for something other than fast food as badly as he did.

"This house does not look deserted. We will wait here for a couple of hours. See if anyone comes home. If not, we will find a hotel and take a break before we call in for instructions."

They took turns going around the back of the house to relieve themselves, then got back in the truck. Confident they could not be seen from the road, both fell promptly asleep.

January 18: Boudreaux Gets Pinged
New Orleans, Louisiana

Boudreaux, at his desk reviewing spreadsheets, jumped when his phone pinged. It was the camera system that his nephew Xavier helped him select to install at Roberta's Delareau home.

"It has an app! For your phone. See?" Xavier'd demonstrated to Boudreaux. "It'll let you know if someone comes nosing around, no matter where you are."

And now, sure enough, someone was nosing around.

Boudreaux's men placed the cameras so that those who came to care for the grounds wouldn't easily set them off. To trigger a notification, someone had to be at the front door, knocking or ringing the bell. Or trying to force open a window.

Boudreaux peered at two men. Even distorted by the front door camera's fish-eye lens, their bearing and demeanor an almost perfect confirmation—the South Americans chasing Chiara. He sat at his desk for a moment. Then picked up the phone and called another of Roberta's admirers. It was a man who'd been one of Boudreaux's competitors for her attention back in the day. He didn't hold it against Sheriff Allain. The man had excellent taste.

"Allain speaking." The sheriff sounded wary.

"Sheriff, Boudreaux Marcellas here."

He heard a creaking chair and what he guessed to be boots hitting the floor.

"Marcellas," he said, then cleared his throat. "Always good to hear from old friends. *Ça va*? You are well?" Allain's Cajun accent flowed as slow and sweet as the cane syrup out of a South Louisiana sugar mill.

"I am, Sheriff. I hear you run a tight ship in Iberia. And I'm counting on that being true."

The sheriff harrumphed, uncomfortable with compliments because they usually preceded an expensive request, especially when it came from someone in ‘the family.’ He decided to soften things before they got down to any kind of business. “I heard about the passing of your wife, Boudreaux. My condolences. I am sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you, Sheriff. It’s been a few years now, and while the pain has lessened, I will always miss her. She was a fine woman. A good wife.”

“Yes, I only ever heard the best of her.” He paused a beat, then got to the point. “Why do you call upon us here in little Iberia Parish today? What may we offer you that isn’t already at your fingertips?”

“Well, Sheriff, it has to do with Roberta.” The squeak of the sheriff’s chair was followed by banging noises. Standing up in surprise, no doubt.

“What’s wrong? Does this have anything to do with Remy’s family?” Boudreaux heard all the posturing in the sheriff’s voice fall away. The man was earnest. Concerned. “I have heard only that they have no intention of pursuing Roberta’s daughter. None at all. They appear happy to have that chapter in their lives closed and behind them.”

When he’d spoken to Jake about retrieving Roberta’s vehicle, he was certain the men following them were after Chiara. But it was Roberta’s car they’d tracked. If they were going to follow that lead, he wanted to direct their journey.

“I’m not one hundred percent sure, but I don’t think so. As you’re no doubt aware, Roberta is on sabbatical from Delareau for a while. I’m keeping an eye on things while she travels to visit family and friends.”

“Yes, I am aware. I assumed she had some kind of security enabled out there.”

“Yes. We do.” Boudreaux realized instantly that he’d used ‘we’ instead of ‘she.’ But figured that it couldn’t do any harm for Sheriff Allain to know that there was a ‘we’ of some sort between himself and Roberta. He continued, “And I have it on good authority that there are two men parked in front of her house right now, probably waiting to see if anyone comes home. I would consider it a personal favor to me if you’d drive out there, preferably you yourself, and suggest they come see me here at my office in New Orleans about whatever it is they’re looking for.”

“I don’t have to tell you, Boudreaux, the esteem in which I hold Roberta. I’ll go immediately.”

Boudreaux texted the sheriff his address.

January 17–18: A Dream
Atlanta, Georgia

Jake dropped them at the hotel and went to get food. Chiara was in the shower and Mia looked forward to being next. It was a big room, a suite, with two queen beds and a sofa bed that faced a huge TV. Jake left his bag sitting by the sofa, which Mia read as they’d all share the one room. Mia sat on one of the beds, stared contemplatively at his bag. Tapped her foot, gently bit the inside of her cheek. When she felt the corner of her lips pulling up in something like a smile, she shook her head, wondered briefly what that was all about, then turned her thoughts to Chiara.

She stood and paced the room, muttering to herself. “We’re too close to Meridian. We need to get somewhere totally disconnected from Chiara’s life. They don’t know I exist, so we can go anywhere I have connections, as long as it’s nowhere near anything in her life,

including her work—or anywhere that would show up on Aleks’ radar”.

Chiara came out of the bathroom, toweling her hair. “At least this platinum doesn’t color the towels when I wash my hair.”

Mia smiled. “It’s the little things, right?”

Chiara smiled back.

“I’m not sure we can stay at Robbi’s much longer, Chiara. They got a bead on you in Meridian, where your work is. We need to completely disconnect.” She picked up her bag and headed for the bathroom. “Anything you’re famous for around Lake Superior? The Upper Peninsula of Michigan?”

Jake opened the door and Mia smelled french fries, saw the Five Guys bag, and instantly turned toward the food.

“No. I have a piece in Montana. My mother’s Nakota; not a good idea to go there. And I bid for some work in Detroit but haven’t won it yet. Why?”

Speaking over Chiara, Mia said, “Jake, you are a genius! Five Guys is excellent insurance against a hangover!” She didn’t answer Chiara’s question and, because she was hungry too, Chiara didn’t ask it again. After they finished eating, all three declared themselves exhausted.

Mia, finally showered and in bed, huffed, puffed, tossed, and turned. When she wasn’t sleeping, she heard much the same from Jake and Chiara. First up the next morning, she pulled her baseball cap on and risked a run to the lobby. Brought a tray of free hotel-lobby coffee and mini muffins back to the room. They drank the lukewarm coffee, ate the muffins, gathered their things, and hit the road.

Simultaneously mesmerized by thoughts that swung like a pendulum between her own situation and Chiara’s pursuers, lulled by the drone of the engine, and soothed by the seat heater, Mia fell into a deep sleep.

She was in the cottage in Ontonagon, the one that she shared with Louanne and the baby a few months ago. And there were two of herself: one, adult Mia. Her. She knew some things but couldn't see clearly. And Mia the child, whom she could see but not be inside. There was a woman speaking, then shouting. Adult Mia saw legs, bare from the knees down. Dirty sneakers. When she tried to look up at whomever was shouting so frantically, all she could see was the back of a moving head, a blur of dark-brown hair. Searching for context, she thought: *That hair is so big, it's got to be from the '80s.*

And while she didn't recognize the frantic voice of the woman speaking, in that way that dreams work, she knew it was her mother. Adult Mia knew Little Mia saw everything but understood nothing. The woman was shouting at her: "See this? Look at this, Mia. Look at it!" She was frantic but didn't sound angry. Something shiny and metal was in the woman's hand. Little Mia clearly saw the hand shove it into a pocket in a bag and heard the woman say, "Don't ever forget this. This is yours. Always in your bag, Mia. Don't ever lose it. And when the time comes . . ." Little Mia stared at the bag, afraid to look up again. Adult Mia wondered why her mother wasn't running. Little Mia saw a hand reach out and pull her backward; heard the woman scream.

"Mia? Mia, wake up. We're almost home."

Mia's eyes sprang open and she gasped a deep breath. She saw Jake and exhaled. His hand rested lightly on her arm. Steady Jake, driving. She took another, slower breath. Remembered they were on their way to Robbi's. Straightened up in the seat. Squinting her eyes as if she could bring the cottage back into focus, she yawned.

"Dreams are weird," she said.

Jake briefly glanced in her direction, narrowing his dark-brown eyes in concern before turning his attention back to the road. Mia hoped she hadn't been whimpering. Back when she was a teen,

Jessi would wake her from dreams that always seemed to slip away upon waking. She'd called them 'loud dreams' due to the moans, shrieks, and other sounds Mia made.

"Yeah?"

She saw the question in his raised eyebrows. He always wanted to know more. "Yeah," she replied, because she wanted to know more too. But not right now. "How close are we to Robbi's?"

"Another twenty minutes or so. Chiara's sacked out in the back." Grateful he let the question pass, Mia turned to look. One seat pulled down flat, she used her cross-body bag as a pillow. Mia wondered how the woman looked so blasted elegant! Even with messy, bleached-white hair, wearing cheap green scrubs, and sound asleep in the back of a Suburban. She shook her head in wonderment.

"Jesus! How does she not sprawl when she sleeps in a car? Or drool?" Mia asked, only slightly envious. She jostled herself awkwardly, trying to arrange herself and her clothes a little more neatly. In the end, she sighed in acceptance. She'd always be the tomboy who could never quite be what she thought of as poised, polished.

Jake brought her back to the business at hand. "Louanne went into Meridian and said people there were talking about a black SUV, government-looking, driving around town."

Mia jerked upright to full attention. "Someone looking for me? Or Chiara? But hopefully not Louanne and the baby."

"Louanne didn't pick up on any threat. And I don't see how it could be anyone connected to Remy. In Delareau, it's as if she and Remy were never married. Which, I guess since the annulment, they weren't. Technically, I mean."

"Right, but that doesn't mean someone wouldn't want revenge."

"Well, in the family, a deal is a deal. Remy's already dating someone else. In fact, at the ladies' Tuesday gathering at Enola's, I saw nothing but happiness on Remy's mom's face. She was showing

photos of Remy and whomever he's seeing as if she were talking about a new daughter-in-law."

"So . . ." Mia couldn't finish the sentence.

"Yep, it's gotta be Chiara or you," Jake said.

"For it to be me, someone would have to connect me with Robbi. Or Robbi's house in Mississippi. But there's not even a paper trail connection between the house and Robbi yet. She's just living there, overseeing her aunt's estate, keeping a low profile. The title is still in Mertice's name. Even if by some magic Aleks or his people figured out there was a connection between me and Louanne, or even me and Robbi, finding me in this random house in Mississippi is pretty much impossible."

"Then it's Chiara," Jake said with finality.

"It has to be," Mia agreed. She closed her eyes in exhaustion. It wasn't just the last twenty-four hours; it was the last few months. Hiding, running, and helping others when her own efforts were stymied by Aleks' machinations: It was so much slow, grinding, discouraging work. She looked at the road ahead and realized they were only a few minutes from Robbi's house. Mia unbuckled her seat belt and leaned into the back seat. She touched Chiara softly on the shoulder to wake her and hoped she wasn't having a horrible dream too. The news she had to deliver would be bad enough.

***January 18: Boudreaux Meets Jorge and Arturo
New Orleans, Louisiana***

Jorge took seriously the sheriff's suggestion that they leave the house they were watching and visit this man in New Orleans. He rarely interfaced directly with a legitimate American law enforcement official. And while insistent, the sheriff was respectful. Jorge

explained to Arturo, in Portuguese, that things probably worked here the way they did back home and that this sheriff spoke for the local syndicate families.

Jorge thanked the man for his guidance. Arturo started the engine and pulled back onto the main highway while the sheriff watched. Jorge fell fast asleep.

He awoke as Arturo parked the truck at the address the sheriff gave them. He rubbed his face and said, “We will make it clear that we are simpatico with the ‘business’ and perhaps arrange for a payment to his organization that is appropriate for the information we receive.”

Arturo nodded, appearing to understand better this morning than usual that his role was to learn.

Once in the office, pleasantries exchanged, Jorge gave Boudreaux what he believed was enough—but not too much—information about what they were doing. Enough that a knowledgeable man in a criminal syndicate would understand it was urgent they find the two people who had been using this woman’s car. He gave no name but showed Boudreaux a photo of Chiara. He indicated, without specifying an amount, that his organization would provide a generous reward for Boudreaux’s support.



Boudreaux gave the photo serious consideration, then said, “Gentlemen, I appreciate the task your superiors have assigned you. Our businesses are similar, and I have men who work for me in roles like your own. You have my greatest respect.” He looked down at the photo. “You have my assurance that the woman who owns that house and the vehicle you were following is not connected to your search for the woman in this photo.”

Boudreaux saw doubt in the older South American's eyes. "Mrs. Broussard is a pillar of the community, both in Delareau and here in New Orleans. She is from one of the oldest and most respected families in South Louisiana. She does not take in strangers."

He waited a few beats for this to sink in, and the younger of the two men handed him a phone with a photo on the screen.

Boudreaux looked at it for a moment, then up at the two men. "I have no explanation for how Mrs. Broussard's vehicle got to Mississippi. Yet. It's possible these, what did you call them, 'snowboard stoners' stole it." Boudreaux remained solemn and held eye contact to convey how seriously he took the request. He kept his hands on his desk where they could be seen.

His own mobile phone was lying in his lap, hidden from view by his desk. He'd opened an app his nephew Xavier had encouraged him to install. It ran strategically positioned surveillance cameras in his office and was capturing photos and video of Jorge and Arturo.

Jorge nodded and said, "I see. Mr. Marcellas. Yes. We too have such families in our area of the world. But our superiors are very insistent that there is a connection. It would be a great help if you could perhaps contact this woman and confirm she is missing her vehicle? Preferably while we are here and can listen to her explanation ourselves. We can share this with our superiors—as you would probably require of your own men. This will give assurance to them of our attention to detail on this lead."

Boudreaux experienced a second moment of gratitude for Xavier and Little Jimmy Quinn who'd schooled him about his phone and made him practice. Boudreaux took his hands off the desk, put them in his lap, and looked down for just a second, as if considering. He swiped the text app open and touched the microphone.

He looked back up at the two men. "Gentlemen, I understand the position you find yourselves in completely. I cannot guarantee to you that Mrs. Broussard will answer my call to confirm that her vehicle is stolen. But we will call her. Hopefully she will answer, and we can get this sorted to your satisfaction before you leave." He touched Send with one hand as he reached over his desk with the other to pull the landline speaker phone closer. As he dialed Roberta's number, he silently prayed that the text she just received would make it clear what was about to happen and what he desperately needed her to say.

January 18: Trust but Verify
New Orleans, Louisiana

Jorge and Arturo got back in their vehicle, headed for the interstate. Jorge told Arturo to find a spot where they could observe Boudreaux's office.

"What are you expecting will happen, Jorge?" Arturo swerved away from the interstate entrance ramp and remained on the frontage road. He saw a multilevel parking lot across the interstate that, if there was an open spot facing south, they could park and watch the man's building and parking lot.

"There is a saying I learned when I first entered our employer's service. It is '*confiar pero verificar*.'"

"But I thought we verified we could trust him by listening to the woman on his speaker phone," Arturo said, his tone of voice high with anxiety. "She said she hadn't used the vehicle in days and only just this morning realized it was gone; that her daughter admitted to losing her set of keys." Arturo's hand trembled on the wheel as

he realized he should have called his boss, reported their findings, and awaited new instructions.

Jorge's voice was flat. "I almost believe it. But my years have taught me that there is always something, sometimes many things, that I do not know about the motives or connections people have."

"You think he is going to leave his office? And if he does, we will follow?"

"He is a powerful man. And he describes her as a powerful woman. Powerful people connect with each other in business. In life. They may even be lovers."

Arturo took a ticket at the parking garage entrance and drove to the top floor. When he parked facing south, and they could see Boudreaux's office, Jorge spoke again.

"He may do something only by phone and, in that case, we have no way to listen. But when he leaves, we will follow. And if there is a connection that he is trying to hide, he may go to her. But most important to you and me, Arturo, the bosses will be pleased we established as much certainty as possible."

Arturo thought about the consequences of screwing up and shivered at what he imagined.

CHAPTER 6

January 18: Enter Sam and Michael Meridian, Mississippi

Sam Jackson drove the black Ford Explorer through downtown Meridian in search of the Art Center. Michael Stone, the temporary partner she'd been assigned, was searching for a recently installed sculpture designed by Chiara Blackwell, agent Ricardo Orzmondo's wife.

"I'm not sure we need to actually look at the art, Mike."

"Samantha, please. I've asked you to call me Michael."

She'd only been with him a few hours and was already tired of his pissy attitude. It seemed to Sam as if he resented having a partner.

"Okay, sorry, Michael. But if you call me Samantha again, I'm going to make your pretty nose bleed."

"I'll only call you Samantha when you call me Mike." Sam heard the effeminate exaggeration and refused to react to it. He clearly enjoyed baiting her, but she didn't care about the man's sexual orientation. She only cared if he could run a case or not.

"Like I said, Michael"—articulating both syllables of his name—"I apologize. Sincerely. My best friend growing up was Mike, and I just forgot."

“Well, he might have been a Mike, but I am not.”

“A she. Her name was Mike. Like I’m called Sam. We were really close. You know, thick as thieves.” Sam’s voice, as deep as her shoulders were wide, reported this somewhat intimate fact about herself with a cop’s dispassionate tone. With a little more feeling, she added, “I still miss her.” Before Michael could insert a snide comment, “She was as masculine as you are feminine and did a better job than you do of hiding it, by the way.”

“She wasn’t trying to hide it from a bunch of law enforcement people. Sam.” Then he thought about it for a moment. “Was she? I mean, I do a good job minimizing at work, but when I’m away from the office—”

“She was trying to hide from everyone back in the day. But she has nothing to hide anymore.” Sam wouldn’t tell Michael that her Mike was dead. Didn’t want to go there.

“Well, that’s good news. Things are better. In most career fields, that is.”

“Back to the reason we’re here. You want to look at the sculpture?” Sam said, flipping the blinker arm to turn right.

“The last message we got from Orzmondo indicated someone had blown his cover. He’s missed three check-ins. And someone who works with his wife reported to the police that she’s gone missing. I want to begin at the art installation because that’s the last confirmed sighting of Blackwell. And because . . .” As the car turned right, Michael’s tone changed completely. “Oh. My. God.” He took a deep breath and brought his hand to his heart. “Look at that. That is one thousand percent Chiara Blackwell. That girl is a goddess of light!”

Sam looked at the statue in front of the town’s art center. She knew little about art. Even less about statues. They didn’t do statues in the little Midwest town where she was born and raised. Statues

were for museums or important buildings. Sometimes for airport entrances. But even to her untrained eye, the way the midday light played on the burnished gold was really something. She wondered if there were LEDs inside. Hard to believe it was just workmanship and the sun.

“You know her work?”

“Chiara Blackwell? Honey, I knew her work before I knew she was married to one of us. She is almost famous. You should see the piece she—”

“Let’s stick to this one for now, Michael. You’re in charge. What do you want to do here?”

“I can tell it’s Chiara’s work, but we should find someone here to confirm it and tell us the ‘what, when, and where you last saw her’ routine interview stuff.”

“I’m on board with that.”

Sam parked the SUV in the lot next door to the Art Center; they went inside to find out who knew what.

January 18: Leading and Following
New Orleans, Louisiana

Boudreaux would have expected his people to get absolute verification if they’d been doing this job. He assumed these guys would have to do the same.

After they left the office, he called Robbi and told her what he was about to do, then walked out to his car and headed her way. Ten minutes into the trip, his tail called—the men pursuing Chiara were in a gray truck about two minutes behind him. Boudreaux smiled and slowed down. Exactly as he expected. He didn’t want

them to miss his transfers to the I-610 and I-59, a route that would draw them away from South Louisiana.



Robbi met Mia, Chiara, and Jake at her front door. “I know y’all are probably tired and hungry. I’ve got some food together for you. But you have to go.”

“Robbi, what’s going on?” Mia said as they followed her into the kitchen.

Robbi, shoving containers and Ziploc bags into a small cooler, said, “There is no need to be afraid. Boudreaux and I have this totally under control. But those two men who forced you girls to leave my car at the truck stop? They tracked down my address in Louisiana and went there looking for information. Sheriff Allain sent them to Boudreaux, and he’s leading them here.”

Mia groaned; Chiara gasped.

“Y’all cannot be here, I mean. I’m guessing you’ve got ten minutes. Girls, y’all run upstairs and grab a change of clothes.”

“Robbi, what—” Chiara stammered, but Mia broke in.

“Chiara, later. Let’s get our stuff.” Chiara, stunned, stood still. Mia grabbed her arm and tugged it. “Now!”

Chiara ran up the stairs behind Mia.

Jake stared at Robbi. “You wanna tell me so I can fill them in?”

“It’s like I said. Those men found my address in Delareau because it goes with the license plate on the SUV. Thank God I haven’t taken the time to become a Mississippi resident yet or they’d have landed at my door first! Boudreaux gave them a story about me not taking in any strangers, stoner-looking people, something like that. And that someone had probably stolen my truck. We had a phone call so they could hear me say it, but Boudreaux didn’t

want them hanging around asking anyone else in the area any questions. He figured if he left, they'd follow. And they did. They'll be here in about twenty or twenty-five minutes. I told Boudreaux not to drive too fast so y'all would have time."

Robbi handed Jake two bags and the small cooler as she prodded him into the foyer. "You can take them to my house in Delareau. That's one place these South Americans won't be going back to. And Boudreaux's men installed security all over the place."

Louanne followed Mia and Chiara down the stairs. "Aw, this is not fair. Y'all are having all the fun, getting to go places, and I am stuck here. Not that I don't love Momma and the baby, but you'll probably even get to go to Enola's tonight."

Jake, Mia, and Chiara hurried out the door.

"But seriously," Louanne's voice became much more adult as she followed them onto the porch. "Y'all be careful and, when it's safe, make sure you get back here and tell me everything."

Chiara looked back at Louanne as if she were about to cry.

Louanne waved. "Don't worry, Chiara. Mia and Jake and Boudreaux will help you get somewhere safe just like they did for me and Haggy. And since you'll get to go to Enola's, Jake makes the very best mint juleps; in case you've never had one."

They threw their stuff in the back of Jake's rental and climbed in.

Robbi watched them, praying and crossing her fingers at the same time.

Mia shoved Chiara toward the front seat and said, "You're up front now. My turn to take the back and see if I can get a nap."

Robbi shouted, "Jake, take the state highways south. Boudreaux is leading them here via the interstate." She looked at her watch. "And hurry!"

*January 18: Bledsoe at the Airport
Washington, DC*

A tough conversation with Hasapsis. But even he would open his wallet given enough reason. Bledsoe grinned that he'd done it. And without pissing him off.

Fidgeting in a worn-down seat in front of the Delta gate at Reagan National. Tuning out the boarding calls and passenger shuffle. He unfolded the 8½" x 11" photo from Bozeman stored in his pocket. Snapped it after pulling Aleks away from the woman on the stretcher. Harsh airport lighting, deep shadows, and facial features distorted by panic. Or pain. Labor would do that. Plus, all that thrashing around on the stretcher blurred the image. But in a town Delareau's size? Someone would know her. Might take time, but someone would give up a name.

Another photo from the pocket. Mia this time. Beautiful shot of a beautiful woman. Those eyes though. Had to be contacts. Nobody's eyes were that green. And that magnificent red hair? Successfully hiding this well for this long? She wasn't stupid; no way she kept that. Long blonde maybe, but smarter if she cut it all off.

Third photo. Aleks' shot of the new mother at the Ontonagon cabin. Face partially turned away. Something weird about it. Nagging at him. Kept staring until—there it was. The kid. Red hair. Red hair. He shifted uncomfortably. Squinted. *Shit. Another hole in this Swiss cheese case.*

Focus on something else and let his subconscious do the work. He stood and walked over to the glass wall. Watched ground crew work while connecting the dots between Mia and the baby. Both redheads. Hasapsis claimed no living relatives for his wife. Shook his head like a wet dog. Maybe something there. Some connection not visible yet. Or maybe just a rabbit hole. Best leave it alone for now.

He sat back in his seat, checked his pockets, portfolio; nothing to do but wait. Fingers drummed on chipped chrome. “Just stay focused on identifying the other woman.” Guy in the next seat looked over, eyebrows up.

“Everyone talks to themselves sometimes, right?” Smiling at the man and pulling his phone out to check his boarding pass.

The guy nodded but stood and headed for the restroom.

Time to line up. Tomorrow night. Next day latest. Name of the redheaded baby’s mother. Then find her. Or the family. That would lead to Hasapsis’ wife. Quick calculation: five, maybe six billable days. Tuition payment covered. Small, tight smile.

Stuck his phone on the scan plate, screen down.

“Thank you, sir. Have a good flight.” The attendant was already behind him.

*January 18: Sam and Michael in Meridian
Meridian, Mississippi*

By late afternoon they’d interviewed all the airport, hotel, and restaurant staff who’d engaged with Chiara Blackwell on January 15. Mayor Mary Harris’ office—except for the surprising level of sparse decoration and lack of self-congratulatory photos on the wall—was about as common a municipal office as she’d seen, Sam thought. She and her irritable partner saved Harris for the end. She was the last to see Blackwell the day the statue was unveiled.

The mayor’s shock that the woman had gone missing was palpable. “But I put her in an Uber to make sure she didn’t get lost getting from the Art Center to the Threefoot!” She paled. Slumped into the chair behind her desk.

Sam squinted in confusion. “A three foot?”

“Hotel. The Threefoot Hotel. Probably the most famous building in town. Art deco. Beautifully restored. Only a few blocks from the Art Center. It was dark and chilly, and I just wanted to make it easy for her. I booked her an Uber.”

Michael jumped in. “Did you schedule the Uber, Mayor Harris? From your own phone?”

The mayor pulled her phone out of her pocket and touched the screen. “Yes. I’m the only one who has a city government credit card linked to the app. And I wanted to make sure the city paid for it.” She looked at the screen while she touched it a few more times. She looked up at the two FBI agents, confused.

“Well . . . wait. This is weird. There’s a cancellation charge?” Turning the statement into a question as she looked back down at the phone and kept swiping. “I mean, how does that happen? I didn’t cancel the ride, and I watched her get into the car. Well, in this case, a truck.”

As Michael reached out to indicate that the mayor should hand the phone to him, Sam spoke.

“I’m not an Uber expert, but if you order a ride and the passenger doesn’t show up, I think the cancellation just happens.”

Michael looked up from the phone to the mayor and said, “You watched her get into a car. Or truck. But do you know for sure that it was the Uber you ordered?”

The mayor closed her eyes. “I remember suggesting she head out to meet the car and actually intended to walk out with her. But someone asked me a question, pulled me away.” She looked at the two agents with genuine anxiety. “And I hate to say this, but I didn’t look at the Uber app to see what kind of car was coming or who the driver was. The next time I looked, the truck and Ms. Blackwell were both gone.”

“A truck, huh?” Sam asked while Michael continued digging into the app on the mayor’s phone.

“Yes. Probably sounds weird to you, but around here, lots of folks have pickup trucks, and naturally, they’re a part of our local gig economy.”

“Can you describe it?” Sam asked.

Michael jumped in, “The cancellation shows up, but only the first name the driver uses. Mayor, do you know someone named Bubba?”

The mayor’s head slumped in resignation. “In this county? Yes. All ten of them.”

“Mayor Harris.” Sam spoke again. “Can you describe the truck you saw Ms. Blackwell get into?”

She closed her eyes again. After a moment she said, “It was dark, of course, but the truck was an older model, a Silverado. It was dirty. The color, I’m not so sure. Maybe tan or gray. It was a 2014. Or maybe a ’15.”

“And you would know the year because?” Sam cringed at the sarcasm in Michael’s voice.

As if Harris heard Sam’s quiet discomfort, she looked at her. Sam smiled apologetically at her, and Harris turned toward Michael.

“My daddy owned a body shop, Agent Stone. Some families talk about the news or the neighbors at dinner. My father encouraged our intellectual development by pitting my siblings and I against each other to test our accurate knowledge of design changes made year-over-year to the trucks and cars he worked on. I could tell you a vehicle’s make, model, year, and what chassis and body changes were unique to it by the time I was seven years old. Because when I won, I earned a smile from him. It’s the kind of thing that sticks with you.”

Michael, Sam saw, blushed. She pressed her lips to hide the grin.

But he also pushed back. “And what can you tell us about that 2014 or 2015 Silverado, Mayor?”

Sam couldn't tell if the mayor was more pleased to offer more information that might lead them to Blackwell or to put Michael in his place.

"I noticed amber LED running lights. I suspect a 2015 because I think that was the first year those were standard on the Silverado. Could have been 2014, but I'm almost certain it was 2015."

Sam smiled conspiratorially at the mayor. "That's very impressive. Anything else you can think of?"

She put her finger up to her lips and made a show of thinking. Then looked back at Sam. "Yes. I'd bet money it was gray. Not tan. The streetlights reflecting off the roof were more silvery than gold."



Sitting at the bar, waiting for a table at the Threefoot, Sam exhaled relief for the remarkably productive day. She mentally ticked off what they'd learned about Blackwell's activities the day she disappeared. Confirmed arrival and transport to the hotel where she'd checked in and that she'd ordered an in-room snack and left for the unveiling event. The mayor had even hooked them up with Uber driver Bubba's contact information. As a junior member of the team, she submitted a report that more than justified the expense of sending two agents from Washington, DC, to Meridian, Mississippi. It was in Michael's inbox, whenever he was ready to review and submit it.

Seated at a booth with menus and drinks they'd carried from the bar, Sam said, "You think it's worth another day or two here? Follow up with Bubba? And that truck. It had to have been around for a day or two before they tried to kidnap her. Might still be around, if you ask enough people—"

Michael snapped back, "Of course by 'you,' you mean we. If *we* ask enough people." As if Sam wouldn't pull her weight.

Dear God. Clearly, the man resented her presence. No, she wasn't as experienced as he, but she wasn't a newbie either. So why? She shook her head in resignation and held up two fingers for the restaurant hostess.

*January 18: Jorge and Arturo Play Detective
Meridian, Mississippi*

"You think maybe this Boudreaux is her lover? And has come to make sure she feels supported in the theft of her Escalade?" Arturo asked.

Jorge rolled his eyes. "That embrace he received was not a professional one. That they are lovers is obvious. But we men go to our women to comfort them all the time, do we not, Arturo?"

"Uh, yes. Of course, Jorge." Arturo, young enough to have received a great deal of comfort from his *mãe*, and even his *tias*, could not imagine comforting a woman. "But what do we do now?"

They had parked about a quarter mile from the long driveway that led to the house where Boudreaux had parked. Jorge, behind the wheel, trained his binoculars on the house for another minute. Then put them down and looked at his phone.

"It will be dark soon. We will find a place not too far from here and park the truck where it cannot be seen. Then, after dark, we will inspect the property. If we find something of interest, we will knock on the door and speak to Mr. Boudreaux again. If we find nothing, we will go into town and get a room for the night."

"And some decent food?"

"Yes, hungry one, food. And since we will spend the night in town either way, call the hotel where we stayed before."

As Arturo followed his partner's instructions, Jorge pulled back onto the main road, executed a leisurely U-turn, and half mile south of the house, found a ditch shallow enough that he could back up across it and tuck the truck among trees.

***January 18: Robbi and Boudreaux
Meridian, Mississippi***

It was dark outside. Boudreaux sat with Roberta at her kitchen table. He watched her speak with her daughter, Louanne, and adore her *granbébé*. He wondered if he'd be here, exactly where he wanted to be, if he and his wife had been able to conceive. Before he could analyze the thought, his phone pinged.

They're headed up to look around
the place boss. You want us to do
anything?

Boudreaux looked up from reading the text and smiled at Roberta. "Just as I expected, *mon cher*. They are about to inspect your compound."

Boudreaux touched the microphone icon for talk-to-text:

Let them look all they want. Stand
by in case something goes sideways,
otherwise, do nothing.

Louanne jumped in anxiously, "Oh! Should I take Haggy and get upstairs? Or hide or something?"

A soothing lilt in his voice and shake of his hands. "Louanne, there is no need to hide. Be comfortable here at the table, and then, perhaps when you're done feeding him, take the baby into the family room." Looking at Roberta. "I believe the curtains there are sheer?"

She nodded and he added, "The most important thing is that we appear normal. I don't want them to know that we know they're here. And besides, they aren't interested in you or the baby. Or Roberta, for that matter. We need them to see that Chiara isn't here."

"Oh, that makes sense." Louanne exhaled her anxiety and looked at her son. "Hear that, Haggy? We're going to be actors tonight. Let's go play in the family room now." She put the boy against her chest and patted him on the back to burp him as she left the dining table.

"Your calm and collected demeanor has been a steadying force these last months, Boudreaux. It's such a comfort to have you here."

"Roberta, there is nothing more important to me than ensuring the safety of you, your daughter, and your grandson." He paused a second, then asked, "There is a light on in one bedroom upstairs, correct?"

Roberta reassured him, "Yes. I made sure Louanne left the light on in her room, but all else upstairs is dark."

"Great. Let's take our wine glasses with us to the sunroom. We'll turn on a lamp, and since it's dark outside, they can watch us for a while. They'll see Louanne and the baby through those sheers, and when she goes upstairs, they'll see it's her and the baby in that one room. And they'll probably look in the barn—"

Roberta interrupted, "I unlocked it right after Jake and the girls left for Delareau. I also unlocked Mia's SUV to keep them from breaking in, and while there are some maps of Montana and Michigan in there, there's nothing—no vehicle registration

or insurance—to identify anyone. Not even Mia.” She grinned. “I hope you approve of my extra precautions and staging.”

“Roberta, if I didn’t know better, I’d think you were born to a life of subterfuge and obfuscation.” Boudreaux’s eyes were twinkling with affection. He stood up. “Shall we retire to your lovely sunroom? Give the boys from South America something interesting to watch for a little while?”

“Absolutely.” Roberta stood with her own glass.

As they walked toward the sunroom, Roberta took his arm and said, “I’ve prepared things so that you can stay over this evening if you’d like. With me this time.”

Boudreaux’s heart skipped like a well-thrown stone across Lake Pontchartrain as they made their way to the sunroom.

It was noticeably cooler in the semidark, glassed-in solarium. Boudreaux sat closer to Roberta on the overstuffed sofa and turned to her. “Roberta,” he said softly as he raised his glass.

“Yes, Boudreaux?” she replied with a sly smile and raised her glass too.

“You honor me with your trust and affection. When we finish this wine and our surreptitious visitors are gone, may I take you to dinner at the Threefoot?”

She frowned, “What about—”

“My people will be here all night.”

“In that case, Boudreaux, I would be delighted to have a date with you this evening.” They touched glasses, took sips of their wine, and looked out into the dark of the early evening where they could see, essentially, nothing.

“By the way, where is my Escalade?”

Boudreaux cleared his throat and shifted forward in his seat. “Oh, well, yes. I do apologize for not discussing this with you first. But I thought it best if my people, uh”—he thought for a second,

waiting for the right word to come—“well, they appropriated the vehicle.”

Boudreaux flinched when Roberta sat up straighter and, shock in her voice, said, “Appropriated? You mean, you stole it, Boudreaux?”

“Well, yes . . . but . . .” He paused, looking out at the dark, and started over. “Roberta, *ma chère*, I should have mentioned it to you. But there’s just been so much going on today. I did not want that vehicle coming back here. If all has gone as planned, my men have delivered it to a chop shop in Mobile, Alabama. He looked at his watch and cringed. “The guys there will reduce it to its component parts.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Roberta shaking and, afraid she was angry, turned to look. She was wiping away tears of laughter. Relieved, he went with it.

“Several of those parts are in high demand and extremely valuable, you know.” Roberta laughed out loud, and that emboldened Boudreaux to chuckle too. “Especially the catalytic converter. People just can’t steal enough of those.”

They both laughed out loud and, when they settled, Roberta said, “Well, what’s my share of the take?” And they were off laughing again.

Surprised that he could still read her so well, Boudreaux sensed her excitement about their upcoming date. Wondered too if she was thinking about the future, perhaps imagining a time when they could enjoy a night out in New Orleans, dine at Galatoire’s and—remembering her affection for jazz and blues—catch a show at The Spotted Cat. But she surprised him again.

Mock vexation in her voice, “But seriously, Boudreaux, you are going to compensate me for the truck, aren’t you? Because I’m certainly not going to file an insurance claim. My rates will go up.”

Boudreaux answered with a caricatured but gentle outrage, “Roberta Broussard, if I recall correctly, you told me forty-five years ago you wouldn’t have anything to do with money generated by my family’s criminal activity.”

She sighed. “True. But I was awfully young back then. And while I don’t regret most of my choices in life, it—and by ‘it’ I mean life itself—has been an excellent teacher. Good and bad are not as black and white as I used to believe. I live a lot more in the gray these days.”

He took her hand and squeezed it, then turned his head to listen.

“Roberta, I think your barn door needs a shot of WD-40 lubricant.”

They giggled like teenagers.

***January 18: A Date at the Threefoot
Meridian, Mississippi***

Boudreaux felt like he did when he was seventeen, taking Roberta out for the first time. Meaning, so nervous and excited that he couldn’t separate the two. He almost stumbled at the Threefoot Hotel entrance as he took her elbow to go up the steps. Once inside, he looked at the architecture and restoration of the historic building. It was as impressive as anything he’d have chosen in New Orleans for a second, once-in-a-lifetime first date.

The hostess took them to the back booth Boudreaux had requested when he made the reservation. He sat with his back against the wall so he could see everyone who entered the restaurant. Old habits die hard. He immediately engaged in another of his habits and scanned the other diners. He felt mildly uncomfortable

realizing he knew no one in the room. Wondered if perhaps that meant he should get out of New Orleans more often.

A server Boudreaux judged to be about Xavier's age brought water. Another, just old enough to be legal, took drink orders.

Roberta was about to say something when Boudreaux cocked his head and held his hand up to stop her. He pointed to his ear, the booth next to them, and she nodded.

They listened to a woman sitting in the booth behind Roberta. Her voice was low. Intense. "If Chiara Blackwell thought she could handle this situation without our help, maybe she knows something we don't?"

Boudreaux raised his eyebrows at Roberta, put his elbows on the table, and leaned forward. A man's voice responded.

"No way! Orzmondo might be a good husband, but he is an outstanding FBI agent. He's worked a lot of undercover ops for us, and there's been no sign he would defect and try to have his wife brought in."

Boudreaux nodded to Roberta, who turned her head and ear slightly right toward the booth behind her.

The woman interrupted, but not defensively. "Well, you were his handler, and I didn't know him—don't know him, that is. But if defection isn't a possibility, based on what we know, I only see two others. The mayor saw her get in a truck she thought was an Uber, but the actual Uber was canceled; she checked in at the hotel online, but never checked out; and she didn't get on the flight home. That tells me they've got her. We just haven't heard from them. Yet. And maybe won't. Ever."

They listened to a few beats of silence between the two.

"Well, Sam," the male agent said, "that is pretty obvious. What is the second?"

"She got away," the woman said.

“Got away? You mean they got her and she escaped?” He paused and exhaled frustration. “That would be, well, almost impossible. I mean, she’s an artist. Not a . . .” He searched for the right word. “Not an athlete or martial arts expert for heaven’s sake.”

“I know she’s an artist. But we really don’t know—at least I don’t—what else she is. Statues are heavy. So, maybe not impossible?” The woman stood up and continued. “Look, that she escaped and is in hiding or running? We just don’t know.” She took her coat off the hook on the side of the booth. “And I figure you hoped we could head back to DC tomorrow, but based on what we learned today, I don’t think that’s happening. We were very lucky that the Uber driver who was supposed to pick her up pulled up when Blackwell got in the probably gray truck. And that he snapped a pic thinking he’d need it to file a complaint.”

“Yeah. Maybe the tech folks can get us something useful from that.”

Two servers arrived; the woman standing with her coat turned sideways to give them room. One laid a check down on the FBI agents’ table. The other, a perky early twenties blonde dressed in all black, delivered drinks to Boudreaux and Roberta. She said, “Can I tell you about the specials?”

Boudreaux answered so quickly that he almost cut her off, “Give us a few minutes,” and waved his hand once, dismissively.

It rattled her a little. “Okay, sure. My name is Adrian, and you can just signal anyone when you’re ready to hear about them.”

Boudreaux almost shouted for her to go before she finished, but he held back. Not sure how much they’d missed.

“ . . . wait for the info; interview others from the party; see if anyone else saw anything at all that might give us a lead on where she is,” the woman, whose name Boudreaux now knew was Sam, said with finality as she picked up her bag and walked away.

The man sounded a little pissy. “You’re leaving me with the check?”

She sighed and turned back. “I’m going to file the report, so it’s only fair. Besides, Michael”—she emphasized his name—“it’s not like you don’t get reimbursed.”

Sounding a bit like a petulant child, he said loud enough for a few tables to hear him, “Well, Sam, at least we’ve finally gotten each other’s names right.”

Boudreaux hung his head and Roberta put her hand over her mouth, each attempting to stifle laughter.

They kept quiet while the male agent, Michael, paid the check. When he stood to leave, Boudreaux watched the man put a phone in his pocket. Then pull a different phone from his bag and make a call as he left the restaurant.

Roberta pulled his attention back to their booth. “Well, I don’t think I’ve ever had a date arranged with such care and attention, Boudreaux. How in the world did you manage to get us seated next to the two FBI agents apparently assigned to find our Chiara?”

“Oh, Roberta.” Boudreaux shook his head as he chuckled. “If only I were that good.” They both took a sip of their drinks and relaxed a bit. “Now, all we have to do is figure out what to do with this information.”

“What do you mean?” Roberta asked.

“It would be naive to think the FBI didn’t know their man was in trouble in time to warn her or take her into protective custody. There’s a reason they didn’t tell her before she came here for the installation of her work. And that concerns me because it’s not unheard of for . . .” He paused, looked up toward the front of the restaurant and flicked a finger to signal their server, then looked back at Roberta. “. . . law enforcement to use family members as bait. I don’t know for sure, of course . . .” He trailed off as he smiled up at the server approaching their table.

Then he shifted his gaze back to Roberta. His eyes softened. “What I do know is that we can figure that out in the morning. Tonight, let’s not talk about these people we’ve both been trying to help. Let’s go back in time. Start when we were in our mid-twenties; share about the separate lives we’ve lived for the past few decades.” He looked up at the server who was standing at the table and added, “While we enjoy a *bon manger*.”

The seriousness melted away from Roberta’s smile. “Since it’s a good meal I haven’t had to cook in quite a while, and I am certain your life’s been interesting,” she raised her glass and said, “that is a fantastic plan. And you’ll go first.”

The server saw her chance. “But before you do, let me tell you about the three entrées Chef created for tonight. They are so good they ought to be illegal!”

As the laughter bubbled up between them, Boudreaux’s body relaxed. He noticed a warmth spread through his chest. If he remembered correctly, it felt something like joy.

CHAPTER 7

*January 18: Jake's Place
New Orleans, Louisiana*

They were on the west side of the city when Mia woke. As she often did, her eyes popped open; she sprang up as if she'd been awake for hours. It was dark.

"Where are we?" she asked loud enough to be heard over the front seat conversation. Jake and Chiara answered at the same time with different words.

"I don't know."

"Forty-five minutes from Delareau."

All three laughed; Jake spoke next.

"I don't have a good feeling about leaving you two at Robbi's place. It's too far from everything."

"Yeah, and when they don't find anything at Robbi's in Mississippi, who's to say they won't come back?"

Chiara said, "Mia, thank God you've had some experience. I didn't even think of that."

Mia hated thinking about her 'experience' expanding. "Well, anyway, Jake, what's everything we're too far away from?" Mia asked. "Did something else happen while I was asleep?"

Chiara answered, "I did what you suggested before you crashed and logged into my email through a browser on the burner . . ." She trailed off and handed Mia the phone.

Mia looked at the list. “You don’t get a lot of spam, do you?”

“I deleted it already. What’s left is what’s meaningful. There’s nothing from Ricardo.” She sighed.

Mia read for five full minutes and learned how popular Chiara had become in the past three days. There were about twenty messages from her assistant, the last of which informed her that—if she was still alive, had her phone, and was reading this email—she could ignore the hundreds of calls and texts on her phone. He’d given up and reported her missing. Also, three from the FBI asking her to contact them and a number for her to call. Another message from an address made up of thirty or forty randomly generated characters confirmed the reason for the kidnapping attempt:

Call the number below if you want to see your
husband alive.

Mia shuddered. The number would be as untraceable as the email address. The last message was another from the FBI. This time, the sender identified himself as Michael.

TO: Chiara Blackwell
FROM: Agent Michael Stone
SUBJECT: Contact me

Chiara, we hope you are receiving our messages. If you are, and are not responding because you are afraid, please don’t be. If you call the number below, I am the person who will answer the phone. We have not heard from him but believe Ricardo’s cover’s been blown. And the people who have him are coming for you, not in exchange for him, but as leverage. If you are reading this, please call me. We can help and protect you.

Mia harrumphed.

Chiara said, "You read the one from Michael?"

"Yeah. If they could protect you, they should have done it before you were almost kidnapped."

"That's what I thought. They should be trying to find him, help him. But they're saying nothing helpful about that at all."

Jake chimed in, "And it could be fake. I think we should see what Boudreaux has to say. He knows more about how these things work than all three of us put together. But in the meantime, there are too many people looking for you, and I'd feel much better if you stayed at my place."

"Where's that?" Mia asked.

"Enola's."

"I know where your bar is. I meant your home."

"Same. It's everything upstairs above Enola's. I've got windows on all sides of the building, a rock-solid security system, weapons I'm comfortable using, and, well, I'm there. With you."

They rode in silence while Chiara and Mia considered.

Mia answered for them both. "Makes sense." Silence again. Jake broke it with an attempt to lighten the mood.

"I think those margaritas and the restaurant escape did you in last night."

Chiara chimed in first, "Yeah. No mint julep for me tonight."

"And I'm back to my usual," Mia said flatly.

Jake smiled. "Speaking of which, I ordered two new kinds of sparkling water for you, Mia. Can't wait to see what happens when you've had a couple."

Mia rolled her eyes.

Chiara turned sideways in the passenger seat. "Tell us about the menu, Jake. I'm starving!"



Jake opened the door. Chiara was first through.

“Wow,” was all she said.

Mia stepped in behind her, dropped her bags, and walked wide-eyed into the vast open space. “Did you do this yourself?”

“I’m pretty good with a floor sander, and I’m not too bad with tools. I installed most of the lights and some of the appliances and stuff. But I had design help. Especially choosing what to keep original and what to modernize.”

Chiara walked to the seating area in the center of the space and put her bag down. “Your designer did a fantastic job of keeping all the beautiful lines. And that kitchen? That’s the original black and white mosaic tile floor. How did your designer get this restored so beautifully?”

Jake felt himself blush. In truth, he loved the tile, the refinished wood floors stained a warm whiskey color. He’d repointed the antique exposed bricks himself, and the space above the exposed beams made the relatively small space feel expansive.

“I, uh, don’t really know all the answers. I gave him a budget and told him I wanted to keep as much of the original decor as possible.” He almost never had guests in his private space. And while Enola’s did well, much of the money he’d spent on his home he’d inherited when his father died. He hoped his parents would be proud.

“We’ll just walk around and stare for a while if you don’t mind.” Mia skimmed her fingers along the wall, the kitchen countertop, and—as she walked toward Chiara—the sofa. “Did you know the brown leather of this sofa is the same color as your hair, Jake?”

Jake’s discomfort dissolved, and he felt a *frisson* of . . . something. He stared at Mia, who put her face into the leather and breathed deeply.

Chiara broke the silence. “Yeah, Jake, you go ahead. We’ll be fine here for a while.”

Jake cleared his throat and opened the door to leave. “There’s food in the fridge or come down and eat whenever you’re ready. Kitchen’s open until eleven.”

But Mia’s good luck ruled. They didn’t take him up on the invitation.

*January 18: Martin Has a Pale Ale
Delareau, Louisiana*

Jake came in through the kitchen. Enola’s was busier than usual, about ten deep in food orders. The kitchen staff worked quickly and quietly, shouting out only with questions, answers, or corrections. Jake was grateful for everyone who worked for him—they’d brought everything his father taught them at the old place to the new Enola’s.

He pushed through the double doors from the kitchen into the bar and took his usual place. Kenny Wayne saw him and said, “I have two complaints that the mint juleps I made aren’t up to standards. Thank God you’re back.” He tossed Jake a stainless steel cocktail shaker and smiled. “Make two for me, boss.”

Jake enjoyed crafting a fine cocktail. He picked up the bourbon and felt a sense of calm wash over him, like everything might actually turn out right.

He looked around. Knew almost everyone seated at the bar. But there were always a couple of folks visiting friends or family or in town on business. He made the two mint juleps, set them down in front of two women at the far end of the bar, and—as he usually did—introduced himself to a man he didn’t know.

“Hi there. I’m Jake.” He stuck out his hand. “Welcome to Enola’s. You need anything?”

The man looked up from his phone and shook his hand. "Hi Jake. I'm Martin." He leaned back on the stool and looked around. "Nice place you have here. I mean, if you're the owner."

"Got it in one."

"Kinda young to own a place like this. Very impressive."

"My dad passed it on to me when he died a couple of years ago." He changed the subject abruptly. "Whatcha having?"

"Pale ale for a change. I usually have Miller Lite, but this place is so pretty it makes me want a better beer." He chuffed a brief laugh.

"That one looks warm and almost gone. I'll get you another."

Boudreaux'd suggested that he pay special attention to strangers who showed up at Enola's. Jake watched him out of the corner of his eye as he pulled the fresh beer. Took in the details: medium-black skin, close-cut hair, brown eyes, and a generic dark-brown suit. Not tall but not short; average weight for his size.

Jake put a fresh coaster, napkin, and the beer down in front of him.

Martin said, "Appreciate that," and handed his nearly empty glass to Jake who remained standing as if to invite conversation. Martin picked up the fresh beer and took a swallow. As he set the glass back down, he looked Jake in the eye.

"I'm in town on business. I find people who've gone missing."

Jake's internal alarms screamed. He prayed his face showed nothing more than mild interest. "Oh? That probably means you live an interesting life."

Martin chuckled. "Interesting, yeah. Sometimes more interesting than I prefer. But it pays, almost, for my kid's very expensive Ivy League education." He took another sip of beer, set it down, pulled an 8½" x 11" paper out of his pocket and flattened it on the bar. Jake instantly recognized Leanne Fortier, now Louanne Brousard, on a stretcher in Bozeman, Montana. It was dark and blurry. Very little of her face was visible, but he knew the scene by heart.

Jake looked Martin in the eye, then leaned over the photo, resting on his forearms. Calculated options while he waited for the question.

"I'm looking for this woman, and I believe she's from around here. Or nearby. Experience has taught me that bartenders"—he smiled at Jake—"or in your case, establishment owners who are also bartenders, know most of the people in the area."

Jake felt Martin watching him. Closely. He tilted his head a couple of times as if considering.

"You mind?" he said, indicating that he'd like to pick the piece of paper up and get a closer look.

"No problem," Martin said, pushing the page toward Jake, who decided that quicker was better.

"She do something wrong? Do I need to ask for an ID or a badge number or something?"

"No, not at all. I'm a private investigator and, in this case, I'm only looking for her because I hope she has some information I need. Nothing sinister at all, Jake."

Jake smiled at him. "Well, that's good to know. I think that's Leanne Fortier, or rather not Fortier anymore. Her husband divorced her or maybe annulled the marriage. I'm not too clear on the details. But I know"—he looked down at the paper again—"more accurately, I *heard* she left town a while back." Jake purposely didn't say her last name.

Martin looked at Jake as if waiting for more information.

Jake called down to the other end of the bar. "Kenny? Hey, Kenny, finish that drink and come here for just a sec."

"Sure, boss!"

Jake turned to Martin, who looked a little confused, as many people did when they heard Kenny Wayne speak. "Kenny's folks are Vietnamese on his father's side and Cajun on his mom's. But he was born and raised near Shreveport, so, culturally speaking, he leans hard into redneck."

Martin said, "Ah. Makes some sense now."

"Kenny moved back down south because he claimed the South Louisiana *joie de vie* vibe resonated with his heart. Loves living near his grandmother. Plus, he's a walking, talking human version of social media."

Jake watched Martin, whose eyes remained fixed analytically on Kenny as the young man poured two Long Island iced teas, wiped the outside of the glasses, and served them with a flourish. That done, he joined Jake and Martin. "Boss, there's a package for you in the usual place. Forgot to mention it before."

"Oh, okay. Thanks. Kenny, this is Martin. Martin, this is Kenny Wayne." The two men shook hands and exchanged pleasantries. Jake held up the printout with Leanne's photo on it for Kenny to see, and said, "Martin is looking for Leanne, and I told him I was pretty sure that she left town. I don't know the details. All I know is that someone—Remy, or maybe his parents—did something. Divorce or annulment? You keep up with this kinda stuff more than I do."

Kenny's enthusiasm to help showed in his smile and his instant response. "Remy annulled the marriage when he found out the baby wasn't his. His family, well"—he glanced at Jake—"you know how they are"—and then back to Martin—"they were really pissed. Wanted to bury the scandal and move on. I heard he demanded an annulment, gave her no money whatsoever and"—Kenny fingered air quotes—"suggested' that she never come back to town." Kenny bobble-headed between Jake and Martin as he told the story. "As far as I know, she hasn't. In fact, his . . ."—he looked at Martin—"Remy's that is, his momma's been showing photos of his new girl at her usual Tuesday women's lunch thing. But as far as the Leanne part, that's all about as 'hush hush, don't ask, don't tell' as any scandal this town has ever seen."

Martin remained quiet, Jake assumed, hoping for more. But the sooner the conversation was over the better. He turned toward Kenny Wayne and broke the silence.

“As far as you’ve heard, there’s nothing else? No one knows where she went or whether she’s been back?”

“No, boss. You know Remy. He kept her kinda, well, isolated while they were married. What I hear is that she didn’t have many friends by the time this all came down. And you know how it is with the Fortiers—no one’s gonna risk pissing them off. If anyone’s talking about where she is these days, I sure haven’t heard it.”

Martin pulled another piece of paper out of his jacket pocket. A card came out with it and landed on the bar. Martin absently picked it up and put it back in his jacket pocket with one hand as he laid the paper on the bar with the other. He smoothed it out and said, “Kenny, you ever see this woman? Maybe hanging around with Leanne before she left town?”

Jake’s heart froze midbeat. Mia, before she chopped off her hair and dyed it. Vivid green eyes not hidden by contacts and a smile that would melt ice. He swallowed and hoped his face didn’t betray anything. Or, Kenny’s reaction, maybe sufficient distraction.

“Oh. My. God.” Kenny’s eyes bugged open wide and he clapped both hands to his chest. “Mister, if I’d seen that woman, I might have hog-tied her to a barstool in here so she’d never leave.”

Jake stood there, eyes on the photo, not looking at Kenny or at Martin.

“Noooo . . .” Kenny dragged out the word, disappointment in his voice, as he looked back up at Martin. “No, sir, I would definitely remember that woman if I’d seen her. Jake, you ever see her and not tell us about it?”

Jake couldn’t produce a smile but turned toward Kenny and kept his voice light. “Kenny, I’m with you. Unfortunately. Never laid eyes on that combo of red hair and green eyes.” He looked up at Martin. “Don’t think I’d have missed that. Or forgotten it.”

Jake felt Martin’s focus as if the man could see right through him. “Well, that’s the woman I’m ultimately trying to find. Just had

some intel that this woman, uh, Leanne, might know where she is.” Martin picked up the two printouts, folded them carefully, and put them back in his pocket.

“But these kind of nights—as you said, Jake—keep my life interesting.” He picked up his beer and took a long drink.

Kenny spoke again. “You know, Leanne’s momma lives outside of town. I can probably get you an address. Maybe, if you catch her at home, you can find out something helpful from her.”

Martin looked at Kenny, then at Jake.

Jake, hoping he’d betrayed nothing, looked back up at Martin and smiled his bartender’s best.

“I’m telling you, Martin, Kenny here is Delareau’s social media hub.” He smiled at Kenny. “I’ll take your spot at the service bar while you round up that address for our friend here.” Then he turned back to Martin. “I’ll be back in a bit,” and went to the service bar. He texted upstairs to let Mia know it wasn’t safe to come downstairs, then looked up at three very irritated servers waiting on drink orders.

When Kenny Wayne came back to man the service bar, Jake turned, and Martin was gone. He pulled out his phone again. This time he texted Boudreaux.

***January 18: Martin in His Hotel
Delareau, Louisiana***

Detecting when someone had something to hide wasn’t hard to do. Like Jake the bartender. The problem? Jake and Kenny Wayne told the same story: Girl gets pregnant, marries boyfriend from powerful family, boyfriend turns out to be abusive, wife runs away, confesses after the baby is born—with bright-red hair—that her

husband is not the father. Powerful family makes the marriage, the wife, and child all go away. But neither saw Hasapsis' wife, with or without Leanne.

Lying in the Holiday Inn Express bed, Martin ran through the conversations, looking for gaps. Once Jake brought Kenny over, Jake went quiet. He replayed the part where the photo landed on the bar. Then again in slow motion. Kenny's expression? Clear he'd never seen her. But Jake? A flash of confusion, or maybe shock. Just for an instant something had passed across the man's face.

Something wasn't nothing. Maybe it would come to him later.

Tomorrow? Leanne's mother's house. Lunch at the bar. Another shot at Jake.

But for now, lights out.

But drifting toward sleep, his brain shifted into calculator mode. Added up earnings from the last two days. Calculated potential for the next two. Then three.

An exhausted sigh. The constant worry about money. He turned over, pulled the sheet up, and offered a silent prayer that his son's career would be less financially fraught than his own.

January 19: Good News—Bad News
Delareau, Louisiana

It was just after midnight when the last customer left. The crew was shutting Enola's down, and Jake grabbed the package Kenny Wayne told him was on his desk and headed upstairs. He found both women on the sofa awake, Mia talking, Chiara listening, and neither of them distracted by his entrance. He closed the door and cleared his throat. "Ladies, I have good news and bad news."

Mia and Chiara spoke simultaneously:

Mia: "Bad news being why we couldn't come down?"

Chiara: "Good news even though we couldn't come down?"

Jake smiled at them and answered Mia first. "A private investigator at the bar is the bad news. And now I know why you, Mia, were so sad to chop off and dye your hair."

"He's showing pictures of me around town?" Jake felt his stomach drop as the color drained from her face.

"I'm not sure where he's shown it or will show it if he hangs around a few days. But he laid it out on the bar for Kenny and me right after he showed us a blurry sideways photo he took of Louanne when she was on the stretcher in Bozeman."

Mia said, "Then he's investigating the link between us."

He watched her. Amazing how lightning fast she could move from shock to analysis. Planning would be next.

"An investigator with a photo of me and the South Americans at both of Robbi's places." She stood and said, "I think we need to get out of here. In fact, I'd just told Chiara that I think she should leave the country. But until she has an ID and a passport, she can't do that. And if I need to leave the country with her, we're out of luck. I have an ID, but no passport."

Jake walked over to the kitchen counter and slid the contents out of the package he'd brought up from the bar.

The three of them stared. "Same thing Boudreaux did for you, Mia." He spread out a driver's license with Chiara's pink-haired photo, a couple of prepaid credit cards with the same fake name, and a handwritten note confirming Chiara's bank transfer made it to an offshore account. "Your money is safe, but there's a little more work to do to get you connected. For the time being, you're limited to these prepaid credit cards just like Mia. This," Jake said, pointing to the driver's license, "will get you on a plane, but—"

Mia chimed in, "Yeah, but domestic flights only."

Chiara took the cards, then inspected the driver's license. She ran a thumb over the little star that made it TSA compliant.

Jake looked at Mia. "And yours is still perfectly good for domestic. But passports? Good ones take longer. We can find out more when Boudreaux gets back from Mississippi."

Mia turned to Chiara, arms straight up in triumph. "Yes! I told you so!"

"Dammit!" Chiara stomped her foot.

Jake looked back and forth at the two. "What?"

"I bet Chiara five dollars that Robbi, or should I say, Roberta"—Mia said the name in a low, Cajun-sexy imitation of Boudreaux's voice—"would have Boudreaux spend the night. Chiara thought it would take longer for them to consummate this incredible attraction they still have for each other. But I was pretty sure Robbi wouldn't wait any longer." Mia laughed, and Chiara smiled.

"Well, you've known her longer; I should have known not to bet against you." She sighed. "I don't know when I'll have five actual dollars, but I'll pay up when I do." Chiara turned back to Jake. "And anyway, I'm happy for them. It's obvious they're drawn to each other."

Jake tossed the empty envelope into a bin under his sink and said, "We gotta figure out where to take you two and how to do it."

"I know exactly what we're gonna do, Jake," Mia announced. "Robbi texted us. They searched the compound, didn't find the Escalade, and left. It's safer there than moving around here where the PI is. Jake, if you drive us back to Mississippi, I'll get my truck and take Chiara to Ontonagon."

Jake's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "Why Ontonagon?"

"Because, for me, they're done there. Aleks and his people, I mean. They've been there twice and not found me. And there's absolutely no connection between Chiara and Ontonagon." She

turned to Chiara. "Plus, Claire Smithton told me that if I needed anything from her, all I had to do was ask. I think she kind of enjoys being on the periphery of something exciting."

Chiara jumped in, "Well, this certainly qualifies as that!"

"Definitely," Mia confirmed. "Her house is lovely, and I feel really safe there, what with all the family and friends willing to jump in and provide support."

"It's cold up there this time of year," Jake said with a bit of warning in his voice. "Like, subzero cold."

"Well, you have connections somewhere else?"

"Is your friend's house in Bozeman an option?"

"Yeah. But not a great one; I don't know anyone in Bozeman. Chiara?"

Chiara shook her head. "I bid on a piece of work there. No award yet, but . . ."

Jake shrugged. "Yeah. Not a good idea. Ontonagon it is."

All three stood silently for a few minutes. Mia spoke.

"Jake, how many hotels in this town? Too many to call and make sure this investigator guy is checked in and not hanging around waiting to see if anyone leaves town?" Mia shook her head. "I'm probably being paranoid."

Jake interrupted. "I don't think you're being paranoid. And he's staying at the Holiday Inn Express."

Chiara huffed her surprise. "How do you know that? I mean, this is a small town, but how could you know that?"

Jake laughed and said, "Nothing to do with the small-town gossip this time. His key card fell out onto the bar when he was unfolding the printout of Mia's photo."

Mia said, "Yes! My good luck continues."

Jake looked at his phone. "My sister is probably still awake, and I think she knows the night staff over there. Let me see if I can get some intel while you two pack."

Chiara groaned. “Again. Packing again, just when I thought I was going to get to spend the night in your beautiful home, Jake.”

“Hey, at least we’ve got clean clothes now,” Mia said with more excitement than defeat. “We’ll stop along the way to Ontonagon and get some heavy-duty winter gear,” she said as she tapped Chiara on the arm. “C’mon, let’s get our stuff together. We’re either leaving shortly or very early in the morning”—Mia tossed her head back—“and if I know Jake, he’ll have an answer in about five minutes.”

He did. Jake’s sister told him that her friend Becky, who worked nights at the Holiday Inn Express, reported the “beautiful black man” retired for the evening a couple of hours ago. And yes, his sister said, she would pick up the rental Jake drove back from Atlanta and take it to the Hertz place for him tomorrow.

The three loaded their bags into Jake’s truck—this time with Mia driving because she’d had the most sleep—and headed back to Robbi’s place in Mississippi.

Jake got the navigation programmed for Mia and laid his seat back. Mia asked, “What was the good news?”

Jake sounded sleepy when he answered, “Huh? Good news?”

“Yeah. When you first came upstairs, you said good news, bad news. What was the good news?”

“Oh.” Jake laughed through a yawn. “The good news is that I roped Kenny Wayne into answering most of the questions. He directed the man to Robbi’s house and, of course, there won’t be anyone there.”

Mia pondered Jake’s assumption. “If only that could be the end of it, huh?”

“Yeah.” He paused and settled deeper into the seat. When he spoke again, his words came out slurry with exhaustion. “We don’t know who else in town he might interview. Or what they know or think they know or might even make up from scratch that would cause trouble. Showing Leanne’s photo, or yours for that matter,

around town? I'm just worried about what that'll stir . . ." Another yawn cut him off.

January 19: Pillow Thoughts
Meridian, Mississippi

Boudreaux lay in bed, thoughts drifting in and out like the morning's partly cloudy sunlight through the window. He liked the way his new office was shaping up, especially its smell. It had taken almost a week of ozone filtering to eliminate an odor from the woodwork he'd dubbed 'old.'

He appreciated his own transformation too. Eating better, exercising, getting routine checkups, a prescription inhaler—no more wheezing. Beside him, Roberta stirred, and he marveled at how his love life, if he dared call it love, was evolving. His mind lingered on the specific shape lying next to him. Roberta in his life again? More than he'd ever hoped for. He lay still, inhaling clean linen and a warm, spicy scent from her body. Taking a deep breath of her, he closed his eyes. She roused and scooted closer, spooning him.

He and Roberta had followed their plan for the rest of their date, catching up on the good, bad, ugly, and beautiful aspects of their lives and marriages. They'd left the restaurant warm and relaxed after a splendid meal with just enough wine to feel good without drowsiness. Later, at her place, they discovered something far more tender and thrilling than anything he'd envisioned since they'd reconnected. Like opening a forgotten forty-year-old love letter tucked away in a dresser drawer, its contents igniting a passion as fierce and irresistible as the day the words were written.

He'd loved his wife, but something was different now. Maybe it started with Jake's request to help Mia, which led to aiding Roberta

and her daughter. Then seeing Xavier work for Jake, and now, helping Mia and Chiara simply because Roberta cared about them—it had changed something. Changed him.

Boudreaux considered his day-to-day work, the Marcellas family's activities. His job: ensuring financial stability. His days revolved around spreadsheets, investments, meetings, risk analysis, and the occasional odd problem. He'd refused to partake in violence from the start; never directly dirtied his hands. His LSU and Tulane education enabled him to contribute real value—increasing wealth, decreasing risks, and sometimes, when the old man listened, shifting the family's focus away from the most morally objectionable activities. Might be able to move that needle a little further as Jake recently pointed out. Let smaller, bottom-feeding groups handle those.

The idea of retirement materialized in his mind, a non sequitur that vanished as Roberta pushed deeper into their lovers' spoon, deep enough for Boudreaux to stop thinking altogether.

A little while later when his phone pinged. Boudreaux reached over and picked it up. A text message from Mia. The woman who started it all.

I'm thinking Canada. You got anyone or any place useful that far north? Any ETA on the passport docs?

January 19: Bledsoe in the Library
Delareau, Louisiana

Bledsoe walked up the steps to the library door. When looking for runners, he'd found public libraries a popular place for them to spend time. They were quiet, and no one asked questions. They

had computers and bathrooms. Nooks and crannies where someone could hide out or rest. Even nap sometimes. And these days? Even fewer people than ever. Easier to spot a stranger.

He went through the double doors and approached the elderly woman at the desk. When she looked up, he smiled.



Ms. Roussel stood at the library counter, checking in a few books left in the drop box the night before. She looked up at the man who came in and smiled.

“Pretty quiet today,” he said.

“It’s always quiet in here,” adding the irony with a smile. “What can I help you find?”

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a photo. She looked down at the paper, then back up at Martin. Her smile evaporated. “So, not a book.”

She’d known Leanne Broussard as a student, Leanne Fortier as the wife of a controlling, abusive man, and as one of her most frequent library visitors. It was one of the few places Remy Fortier allowed her to go.

In helping Leanne escape, Ms. Roussel met Mia Evanescence. Knowing the Fortiers had erased Leanne from their family’s history, she made the leap that this man was really looking for Mia. She wasn’t sure yet how he’d made the connection, but it was the only thing that made sense to her. She kept her eyes on the page and decided on an approach.

“It’s a blurry picture.” She looked up at Martin with raised eyebrows and kept quiet. Hoped the question on her face would be enough to get her point across. It did.

“I’m Martin Bledsoe. I am an investigator. A private investigator. And I only need to find her to ask her some questions.”

Ms. Roussel tilted her head slightly to the left, pressed her lips together, and maintained eye contact. She'd used this approach on hundreds of students and library patrons over the years. After thirty seconds or so, Martin cracked.

"Honestly. She is in no trouble with me or the person who hired me." Ms. Roussel continued to stare and then redirected him.

"You aren't working for the Fortiers?"

"No, ma'am. I don't know the Fortiers. I only heard of them last night."

"And exactly what did you hear last night? And where did you hear it?"

"From the bartender at Enola's on the Têche," which Martin pronounced 'TeshEE.'

"Mr. Bledsoe, that's pronounced 'tesh.' And with whom did you speak at Enola's?"

"The owner, Jake. And one of his employees. A guy named Kenny Wayne."

She paused, more for effect, and sighed heavily. "Well, Mr. Bledsoe, Leanne was a student of mine. She's a good girl. I need to know why you want to find her before I give you any additional information."

Martin reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out the paper that had the color picture of Mia on it. Her suspicions confirmed, she knew what to do.

"And this is?"

"Have you seen her around Delareau?"

Ms. Roussel responded instantly, "No. And I can assure you, strangers in this little town are rare enough that I would have noticed. I don't spend all of my time behind this desk." She looked back up at Martin. "Is she a criminal?"

"No, ma'am. Her husband is trying to find her."

"I see." She took a deep breath and gave Martin a small, careful smile. "Well, Leanne was married to a man who kept a very tight rein on her. Anyone who cared about her rejoiced at the outcome of that situation, even though we don't know where she is. And we're all sad that she probably won't ever come back to Delareau."

Martin took a chance. "She went to Bozeman, Montana. That's where this picture was taken, or . . ."—distancing himself from the events surrounding where and how the photo was taken in case this woman had spoken to Leanne after the fact—"where I'm told it was taken. And this one"—Martin pulled the second photo he had of Leanne out of his pocket—"in Ontonagon, Michigan."

Ms. Roussel smiled. "Neither are great photos of Leanne, but I am delighted to see that she had the baby. And the baby looks healthy here."

"Yes, ma'am. As far as I know, that is the case. And I think she and the other woman, the one with red hair, I believe they met here in Delareau. If I'm right, and I can find Leanne"—Martin pushed the photo of Mia toward her—"I'm hoping she can help me find my client's wife." Ms. Roussel felt him watching her, measuring her reactions. After a few beats, he said, "But maybe imagine this woman with different hair. Or even a different eye color. I have reason to believe she is—or was—in this town, and without many resources. I came here because libraries are popular for folks who need someplace to hang out for a while, do research, use the computer . . ."

Ms. Roussel continued looking down at the photo of Mia. She thought to herself how wonderful it would be when Mia could be herself again. Finally, she looked up at the investigator.

"Do you know why her husband is looking for her, Mr. Bledsoe?" She watched minor changes in his expression indicate a variety of emotions. Among them, conflict. He finally spoke.

“Ma’am, I don’t get involved much in the whys of why I’m hired. I am divorced and poorer for it. I have a son attending a pretty pricey university. Smart enough to get a scholarship, but not a full ride. I’m an investigator and I get paid to investigate. Not to judge.”

Ms. Roussel stared at him for another minute before she spoke again.

“The woman in this photo is lovely enough that I’m not sure a little hair dye and some contacts would conceal that. I truly cannot help you with that aspect of your investigation.”

Martin began folding and putting away his photographs. Ms. Roussel spoke again.

“You know, you remind me of one of my students, Mr. Bledsoe. He was smart, ambitious, driven, and even clever when required. He wound up working for the Fortiers because he also didn’t dig very deeply into the whys of his job.”

Martin was ready to go, but Ms. Roussel could tell he wasn’t going to be rude to an old woman.

He asked, “He was good at the job?”

“Oh yes. Very good. I liked that young man a lot.” She sighed. “But he came to a terrible end.” She crooked her wrinkled face into a sad smile. “They became unhappy with him.” She stared at Martin for another beat or two, then turned deadly serious. “He had a son too.” She took a deep breath and went on. “Take some advice from an old lady: Ask yourself if this woman you think our Leanne can help you find might have excellent reasons for getting away from your client. Try to imagine what might happen to her if you do your job too well. Or, if you can’t find her, what happens if your client becomes unhappy with you? I’d hate to learn one day that you, too, came to a bad end.”

Ms. Roussel looked at Martin until he gave her a brief nod. She went back to her work until she heard the door close behind

him. When she was sure he was gone, she pulled the burner out of her purse.



Back in his car, Martin sat in shock. He didn't think the librarian threatened him, though she sounded threatening. And no one had ever spoken to him so directly about the dark side of the jobs he sometimes accepted. She cut close to thoughts he already had and—in the name of making a living—pushed aside. Hasapsis' enraged face kept shoving itself into his mind. His bragging about diplomatic immunity, about his powerful family. He wondered what kind of person even got that angry. Over anything. And what that kind of anger was capable of.

A garbage truck passed by. The noise broke his concentration. The sun shone through the window directly on him. How could it be hot in January? He touched the rental's start button and lowered the window. Fresh air helped. Shook his head and rubbed his eyes as if to clear them. Came back to himself. The job.

He'd waited a couple of hours this morning for Leanne's mother to get home, then gave up, and drove to the library. He'd drive back out there and give it one more try before he started showing both women's photos all over town.

CHAPTER 8

January 19: Aleks and His Family Washington, DC

Aleks dreaded, with every fiber of his being, the meeting that was about to happen with his parents. They flew to the US from their primary home in Greece to ‘discuss expenditures.’ His father wanted explanations for his use of the family jet, certain unusual withdrawals from family funds, contracting expensive car services, and staying in hotels in odd cities. The opulence of the sitting area in his parents’ room at the Jefferson Hotel in Washington, DC, infuriated him. They had so much! What did it matter? And why must his father always question his judgment?

What Aleks dreaded most? The ‘I told you so’—implied and spoken—about his move to the states and the marriage itself. He had ignored every tradition, suggestion, and bit of advice his parents had given him and married Mia Evanescence anyway.

And completely underestimated her. All the babble about her ‘creative this’ and ‘emotional connection that.’ Her inane chatter about her work, which he regarded as little more than fluff. That she intended to travel the country with other people instead of remaining at his side as he built his career? Unbelievable. But just as his father warned him it would be.

When Aleks had learned that she intended to keep her own life, her business, and travel as she pleased without him, he had done what the men in his family always did: shown her what would happen if she did not behave as a proper wife. But instead of compliance, he had instigated rebellion. She returned home meek and pliable. He never imagined she could rappel out of a window and hide so effectively that even the professionals he paid could not find her.

Now, even as Bledsoe continued his search, Aleks had not thought beyond what to do if he got her back. He could not imagine she would become a good wife. Much more comfortable with his hope that she would be declared dead, he did not allow himself to plan what he would do with an alive Mia.

Pacing in the vast suite, where his parents always stayed, Aleks rehearsed what he would say. Foot tapping on the floor in time to his frantic thoughts, he was startled when the bedroom door opened.

Leandros Hasapis exuded the energy and intensity of a much younger man despite being in his mid-sixties; a lion-like mane of white hair and piercing blue eyes combined with his years only increased his gravitas. Decades running a multigenerational crime syndicate had hardened him. Aleks gagged at the thought of another fifteen or twenty years in his shadow or under his thumb.

His mother, Seleny, walked gracefully a half step behind her husband. Painfully thin and immaculately dressed, she was excited to see Aleks. Her tentative demeanor told him she, too, was fearful about the conversation to come. She had worn the weight of her husband's expectations, and his disappointment in her, since Aleks' mid-teens.

Seleny quickly approached Aleks, placed her hands on his face, and kissed him on both cheeks twice. A gesture, Aleks thought,

to indicate she understood his sorrow. If she doubted his story of Mia's ill-fated trip to Croatia, she showed no sign of it. Aleks regretted he could never tell his mother the truth, the way he did as a young boy. Her life was about obeying and serving her husband and the family. The consequences of doing otherwise were too severe.

Leandros commanded the room even as he stood back, watching his wife be a mother. When she was done, he indicated with a hand gesture they should all sit.

"Please, Aleksanteri, now. Bring us up to date."

Aleks sat straight, looking his father in the eye. "There is no word yet of Mia. As I told you, she described to me a trip she was to take. A trip to many places to find appropriate locations for some work project. My investigators and I have searched every location that we can find evidence she might have visited. The Croatia incident is clearly the most likely scenario. But the search continues and will until she is found or the courts declare her dead."

Leandros sighed deeply, a hint of exasperation in his voice. "You must end this, this whole mess, Aleksanteri! Leave it behind and come back to Greece where you can take your place in our family's business. This—everything that has happened—we expressed these concerns to you, but you would not listen. All sons want to prove themselves. I, myself, went through the same thing. But leaving your home for a job at the embassy in Washington, DC, was a risk. A risk that you would forget. You have become . . . Americanized. And then, to marry this American woman who lacks even a family of her own? Now, with the woman gone, you can put this behind you."

Leandros looked at Seleny, granting her permission to speak. But, as Aleks knew, only the words they would have agreed upon in advance. She spoke softly, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. "Aleksanteri. Aleksy. You have proven your independence and

manhood, my son. You can return home and take the position your father has for you with pride. You will be respected, looked up to. Please, as your mother, I beg you. We will petition the appropriate authorities and have the marriage annulled based on her abandonment of you to take this trip you begged her not to take. You can leave it to the people with whom she lived for a while to settle her affairs. Your father and I want you home."

Aleks drew from years of practice to hide his true intentions. He put on a sad smile of humility and acceptance; certain it had some effect. "Mother, Father." Aleks pulled papers from the folder on the sofa next to him. "Here you can see that my attorneys are working their way toward allowing me to do just that, but with the outcome that I am due as her husband."

He laid the paperwork on the cocktail table in front of him. Leandros picked up the papers, glanced at the first page, and quickly thumbed through the stack. "This looks like a case that may have merit. Why is it so important to you?"

"Father, you and Mother are very generous. But besides the family money, I want to bring my own money into my life. By rights, the business is mine. And because she abandoned me, it is my due."

Seleny spoke again, more quickly, a little louder. "But you do not need this money, Aleks. And you are wanted, needed, back home."

His father wanted him where he could be controlled. Aleks heard a trace of the weary desperation she carried from years of defending him. And knew very well that his mother wanted him home too. Wanted him to marry a local girl from one of the other families; someone with whom he could produce grandchildren. He would always pretend to worship and respect them. But living at the whim of his parents would require work. Probably until he was an old man himself. It would require him to accept the quiet scorn of other men in his father's empire. The same scorn

and mumbles under their breath he had endured for every mistake he'd ever made.

"It will take a little more time, Mother." He smiled at her again. "The law moves no more quickly in the US than it does back home. And I am doing important work in the meantime."

"Important work?" His father nearly spit the words out. "This embassy job is child's play compared to what we do." Leandros stood and paced the room, his footsteps heavy on the plush carpet. "I will give you another three months. If you are not in my office by then, I will advance another within the organization into the spot I've held for you, Aleksanteri. Meanwhile, these extravagant travels and expenditures, you must bring them under control."

Aleks stood to face his father. "Father, I understand. But I must make every reasonable effort to find her. It is different here. In the US, the husband becomes the primary suspect when a wife goes missing. My attorneys assure me I am taking all the right actions." He paused, meeting his father's steely gaze. "And if you need to, you can deduct the money from my inheritance when the time comes."

Leandros roared like the lion from which his name derived. "Do not imply that I am concerned about money, boy. I produce enough. Much more than enough. But you spend a great deal on activities that do not advance our goals. And you do not replace what you spend. This cannot continue indefinitely."

Aleks' body slumped a little as he cowered under his father's assault. He summoned the rage in his heart to press his weak argument. "I am only using funds to deflect suspicion that I am behind my wife's disappearance and to have her death confirmed by law so our marital estate will be settled. Doing this, I protect the family's reputation abroad, Father."

Seleny used a tiny handkerchief to dab her eyes, her hand trembling slightly. "Please, Leandros, is this not enough? Can you

not see Aleks understands what is required of him in this mess that involves these US laws?”

A heavy silence hung in the air, and the faint scent of Seleny's floral perfume mingled with an acrid trace of fear. A smell Aleks associated with myriad too-similar discussions. Leandros' eyes narrowed as he considered his wife's plea, a flicker of annoyance passing over his features. Aleks held his breath, knowing that this was a crucial moment. His fate, and the fate of his plans, hung in the balance.

Finally, Leandros spoke, his voice low and measured. “Very well. You have six months, Aleksanteri. No more. And I expect regular updates on your progress.” He fixed Aleks with a piercing stare, the unspoken threat hanging between them. “And use only those resources that are absolutely necessary.”

Seleny smiled at her son. “And Aleksy, to be a widower, it is preferable to being divorced, is it not?”

Aleks nodded, relief and trepidation warring within him. He had bought time—and continued use of his family's resources—from his father. And his mother was right.

He would not risk losing everything he had fought so hard to achieve. He would work quickly and carefully to find and eliminate his wife. The rest of his life would unfold just as he planned.

January 19: Vikki and Park Update
New Orleans, Louisiana

“And even with all this other shit about her dying in an earthquake in Croatia they've filed, they don't have any proof. And they won't get any because she never went there, and she's not dead.” Vikki Lobertelle's tight black-brown curls were bouncing as she raged

and paced the floor of her boss' office. Parker 'Park' Ellis, with his slow drawl, elegant accent, the charm of a stereotypical Southern gentleman, and a mind that took great pride in—as he called it—'playing law' like a world-class chess game, had hundreds of moves to consider and choose from. To Vikki's dismay, he didn't toss them out for consideration. Instead, he listened hard, thought long, and doled them out judiciously. When he was ready. She continued to pace and wait.

Thought about her boss and his Elvis Presley tribute concerts. Now at seventy-three, the pompadour white and a little slower on the shimmy, she'd learned two things about him and his relationship with Elvis. First, he loved the songs and truly enjoyed performing them in public. He also knew how much it caused shallow-thinking others to underestimate him. He used that to tremendous advantage. It made her wonder if she should develop an act of her own—maybe Blondie? Ellis interrupted her musings.

"Vikki, I know it's not gonna sit well with her and probably not with you either, but I think we're going to have to produce some evidence that Ms. Evanescence is alive and well."

Vikki was shocked. "You want her dead, boss? Because she's convinced me that this man, with his Greek Mafia connections and the diplomatic immunity his embassy position allows him, will in fact kill her. At this point? Mia says that's the only reason he's still looking for her. He's humiliated and—if they know what's happened—embarrassed his family as well. For all we know, they're investing in the effort to find her too."

"Yeah, I know. And we aren't the witness protection program. But what I'm thinking is this." Vikki immediately sat in the chair across from her boss and prepared to hear something innovative.

"We're gonna prepare a statement for Ms. Evanescence to sign and we're gonna hold on to it until Mr. Hasapsis' attorneys show their hand." Vikki started to interrupt, but Ellis put up his hand

to stop her. "Yes, yes, I know we have discovery. I've seen what they've sent us. And that's all well and good. But we're going to let them walk through it just the same. Then we're going to stage a coup."

"A coup?" The idea of a side gig as a Blondie tribute band dissolved like sugar in water. She smiled at her boss.

"Yes, a coup." He chuckled. "I thought you'd like the sound of that." She settled back in the chair, prepared to learn something from the old man.

"First, we're gonna need access to some photos and maybe some video too."

"Sir?" Vikki was expecting him to bring up something from case law and was thrown for a loop. "You mean work she's done for her clients?"

"No, no. I mean the stuff she has on her phone. Personal photos of her, her husband. Video footage too, if she's got it. I realize her actual phone is gone. You'll need to find out if there's anything up in her cloud storage we can use." Ellis thought for a moment. "And a couple of other things. I'll give you a list."

"Uh, can you tell me what you're up to, boss? A case I can look up and read about?"

Ellis chuckled. "Well, Ms. Lobertelle, what we're about to venture into might be more like the old-school pranks we used to play when we were kids at Tulane than historical case law."

Vikki turned her head sideways and looked at the old man. She bit her lip just a little.

"Are you gonna get us in trouble, boss?"

"No. We are absolutely not going to break any laws. But we're going to spend some money, even if we have to front a little of it for our client. And we are absolutely going to have some fun at this asshole Hasapsis' expense." His chuckle turned into a huge belly laugh.

Vikki didn't know what was about to happen. But she couldn't hold back a grin. She was pretty sure that whatever Park had in mind, it would join other stories told at the firm's annual corporate retreat and eventually become legend.

*January 19: The Smithton Family
Ontonagon, Michigan*

In the few months since Mia and her friends left Ontonagon, Michigan, Claire Smithton had kept the prepaid burner phone Mia left there fully charged. Just in case. She cared more than she probably should for Mia, Robbi, Robbi's daughter Louanne, and that adorable little redheaded baby boy. Closer in age, experiences, and interests, she'd felt the beginnings of a genuine friendship with Robbi. She'd grown accustomed to exhaling a sad sigh when she passed the phone and there was no text. But when she walked by it on this cold, dark January morning, she was stunned to see a message notification. Her hands shook a little, excitement tinged with fear, as she picked up the phone and touched the screen to read the message.

On my way C. Bringing a new friend. Arrival prob
22nd. Ping back if a problem.

Claire was sixty-seven. Lots of silvery gray in the brunette, but she was healthy, strong, and energetic. She kept her mind fit too. In fact, she'd taken on a research project after her new friends left Ontonagon. She wasn't sure yet how to share what she'd learned. But now that Mia was on her way back, she'd have to figure out how to approach her with the information.

Claire took the phone downstairs into the kitchen. "Look at this!"

Her daughter Brenda looked up from the coffee pot she was filling. "What's the news, Mom?"

"She's on her way back." Claire pushed the phone toward her daughter so that she could read the message herself.

Brenda said, "Reads like nothing bad's going on. Maybe just a midwinter visit?"

"I certainly hope that horrible husband of hers isn't back on her tail. And for sure, Mia and whoever is with her will relieve some of the winter doldrums around here."

Brenda's raised eyebrows asked the question, and Claire didn't wait for the words.

"Oh, Brenda, I just don't know. I'll have to see how things are when she gets here." Claire thumbed back to Mia:

All good. Come on!

"I'll just play it by ear." She hit Send, then looked back up at her daughter. "Anyway, we don't know for sure yet. Promise me you won't say anything about—"

"Mom, you know me," Brenda cut in. "I like my life really simple. You're the one who enjoys complications and a touch of drama from time to time. I care, and if I'm needed, I'll help."

Claire smiled at her daughter and both women turned as they heard Claire's son Benjamin lumbering into the foyer in his clunky boots. "Coffee smells good," he shouted.

Brenda said, "Come and get it."

He stepped into the kitchen and asked, "What's with the burner phone?"

Brenda answered for them both. "Mia's on her way back. Says she's bringing a friend."

Benjamin nodded, slowly. “Wonder what that means?”

Claire said, “Whatever it means, let’s hope this visit doesn’t require you to fish anyone out of Lake Superior.”

Benjamin reached for a cup and said, “Especially not this time of year.”

They chuckled at the memory, but Claire’s chest tightened when she thought about Mia and everything the amazing young woman didn’t know about her own life.

***January 19: Jorge and Arturo Follow the FBI
Meridian, Mississippi***

Arturo’s brain was not wired to think administratively, but the organization he worked for demanded it. This entailed filing a daily report and confirming receipt of orders. He and Jorge checked into the motel in Meridian around 7:00 p.m. Before they shut off the light at midnight, he had submitted only the briefest of emails:

No evidence of Ricardo Orzmondo’s wife at the home where this Boudreaux man ended up.

Jorge swore to Arturo that this would not get them in trouble.

“The bosses want Orzmondo’s wife. But to capture her, they need many people doing many things and reporting with accuracy. Being sloppy is what will get you killed. That is why we came here to inspect the house in Mississippi, Arturo. Because we are not sloppy.”

Arturo left the bathroom in his pajamas and looked at the older man. “Jorge, do you know what they want this woman for?”

Jorge shook his head, but Arturo was not sure if it meant Jorge did not know or would not tell him. He turned off the lamp on the nightstand between the two queen beds, plunging the room into darkness.

As soon as Arturo woke the next morning, he logged in. There was a reply to the report he had submitted. It made his head hurt, but he got up and turned on the room coffee maker.

Jorge stirred and Arturo said, "We have new orders."

"They want us to stay for a while longer, yes?" Jorge had been on dozens of jobs like this one. He yawned and got out of bed.

"Yes. They say to get a different vehicle. That Orzmondo's employers are in the area. They want us to confirm and follow." He looked up from his phone. "How do we do that?"

"We get dressed. We eat. Then you will watch and learn."

Half an hour later, Arturo followed Jorge's lead. They put their gym bags, along with Jorge's oversized equipment bag, into the old gray truck. Jorge drove them to the airport, parked the truck in the long-term parking lot, and removed the license plate. Jorge folded it back and forth until it broke, and as they carried their bags toward the terminal, he put the two pieces in different waste cans. They rented a new model midsize sedan and drove back to town. Jorge did not talk when he did not have to, and Arturo, by nature a talker, made a sincere effort to talk less and watch more. But on their way back to town, he could not stand it any longer.

"Okay, what now?" he asked as he gingerly rubbed his still-healing nose. The bandage was off; the bruises fading to light purple and yellow where Orzmondo's wife had kicked it during the failed kidnapping attempt. Now it itched.

"I am shocked that your familiarity with American movies is failing you, Arturo."

“You are always teasing me, Jorge. Please, just tell me, would you?” He desperately wanted to scratch his nose but stopped himself.

“They will do as we did and start at the woman’s art, her sculpture downtown. Unlike us, they will probably stay at the fancy hotel that is nearby.”

Arturo shook his head. “The hotel that is named after someone’s feet?”

Stunned that his partner laughed out loud, Arturo was not sure what he had said that was funny.

“Yes, that is the place. And what are we looking for? Arturo, what do they always drive? Think.”

Arturo’s eyebrows furrowed, pressed his lips in concentration. Then he smiled. “A large black SUV.”

Jorge’s lip curled. An almost smile.

Arturo asked, “What will we do when we find it?”

“We confirm it is being driven by federal agents. And you will file a report confirming that. Then, just as the orders request, we will follow it.”

Arturo nodded. Stared at the older man. He could see there was more on Jorge’s mind. But he remained quiet. He would watch. And learn.

Two hours later, they found the SUV. A female agent was driving it around the downtown area in what seemed to Arturo like an aimless way. But he was afraid he would sound stupid if he asked; he continued to watch. Jorge was doing a good job of hanging back, taking different turns, then sometimes parking for a few minutes.

Finally, Jorge put the car in park across the street from the hotel entrance. “They are looking for something. Perhaps the truck we were driving. But if they are staying here, they will be back.”

“I will take photos? Send them in with our report?”

“You can do that, Arturo. It appears these agents are looking for the woman too. And they may have information we do not. Perhaps they will lead us to her. To fully execute our new orders, I have another tool we will employ. But first, patience.”

Arturo shifted uncomfortably in his seat, his mind racing with all the ways this mission could go wrong, and what would happen to him if it did. He wished he could be anywhere else, doing anything other than this.

They did not have to wait long. The black SUV pulled up and parked in front of the hotel, presumably because the agents were going to have lunch. Jorge nodded at his partner to get out of the car. The breeze was cold. Another good reason to be home instead of this place.

Jorge opened the trunk and unzipped his oversized gym bag. He took out two small devices and let Arturo watch him open one of them: a small magnetic case from which he removed a thumb-sized device. He turned it on and checked that the little blue light was active. He put it back in the magnetic case, looked up at Arturo, and smiled.

He pulled his mobile phone out of his jacket pocket and said, “We will walk toward the restaurant, and when we get to the back of the SUV, you will stumble and bump into me. When I fall and drop my things, position yourself between me and the door to the restaurant. Keep offering to help me up until I brush you aside.”

Arturo nodded his understanding; Jorge headed toward the SUV.

About a foot from the taillights, Arturo purposefully tangled his feet and fell into Jorge. He hit his partner hard enough that Jorge bounced off the back of the SUV and then, he hoped, on purpose, fell to his knees. Jorge’s mobile phone bounced on the asphalt. Arturo righted himself and took three steps around Jorge to block anyone entering or exiting the restaurant from seeing them.

Arturo bent over slightly and, sounding convincingly upset, said loud enough for anyone to hear, “Oh no! I am so clumsy! Please forgive me. Let me get this for you,” as he reached for the phone. Jorge folded from his knees down to his side, and then, moaning, rolled over. The man’s movement was quick, Arturo barely saw his right hand plant the magnetic box on the underside of the SUV.

CHAPTER 9

*January 20: Martin in Delareau
Delareau, Louisiana*

Martin was not easily discouraged. He'd watched the Broussard home from a distance the day before. Windows dark and no activity. No joy. In between, he'd shown Mia's photo around town at a couple of pharmacies, grocery stores and—a real wild hair, but he thought worth a try—at the airport. No surprise that he didn't get a hit there, but all bases covered. Naturally hardened against the boredom of waiting for something to break open, he spent his time productively.

When not interviewing and asking questions, he analyzed the case from every angle, examining it like a tesseract—multiple dimensions folded into a single problem, waiting to be unfolded. The approach often yielded new options for consideration. But today, sitting in his car in the driveway of Roberta Broussard's Delareau, Louisiana, home, he had *nada*. Nada opportunity to speak with Leanne's mother, nada locating anyone who'd seen Mia, and nada in the new idea department. He must have drifted off and was startled when someone tapped on his window.

An elderly black man with a head full of startlingly white hair smiled at him through the driver's side window. He hit the ignition without starting the car and lowered it.

The man's smile was huge, teeth as white as his hair. He reminded Martin of his Uncle Cyrus. "You okay in there, sir?"

Martin smiled back at him. Only in the Deep South would the man not start with 'What the hell are you doing here?'

"Yes, sir, I am. I am just fine. Waiting to speak with the lady of the house."

"Well," the man chuckled. "You might be waiting a while. I'm Samuel." He stuck his hand through the open window toward Martin. Martin patted the air to indicate the man should move back. He opened the door, got out of the car, and accepted the handshake.

"Martin Bledsoe. I'm an investigator, hoping that Roberta Broussard can help me find someone."

"Well, sir, I care for the house and grounds, and when Ms. Broussard is away, as she is right now, I check in on things. However, I am not informed of her travel plans, locations, or dates. My instructions are to get any visitors' information and pass it on."

Martin thought about it for a moment, then reached into his pocket. "That's very kind of you, Samuel. Here's my card." He handed Samuel the card and then unfolded the paper. "And if you don't mind, have you by any chance seen this woman? She might have been here visiting Ms. Broussard's daughter. And she might have colored her hair differently or used some colored contacts to change her eye color."

Samuel took the paper from Martin and looked at Mia. Then he took his sunglasses off and studied it some more.

"Uh, uh, uh." He shook his head. "What in the world could this young woman have done to need investigating?"

Martin laughed lightly and said, "Oh, nothing wrong. I just need to speak with her. I know she was here in town for at least a few days, and I believe she might have made friends with Ms. Broussard's daughter."

“Well, I am not here every day. Sometimes not even every week. But I can take a photo of it and send it along with the card if you like. I can even show it to some of the other folks who help the Broussards out from time to time.”

“That would be great. If anything useful comes up, just give me a call.”

Samuel smoothed the photo on the hood of the car and took a picture of it with his phone. Handed the printout back to Martin, stepped back, and extended his hand again.

“I will do that, sir. Now, I’ve got some work I’ve got to get done today. I wish you safe travels.”

Dismissal and nothing else to do. He got in the rental and headed to the highway. Turned left toward town and thought about the librarian. She was right: Working for no-good people often led to a bad end. Made him want to quit working for Hasapsis. Couldn’t decide if it was intuition or tuition that compelled him to continue.



Samuel stood there while the car rolled toward the highway and thought about the promise he’d made Mr. Broussard before the man died. Samuel swore to the man that as long as he continued working for Roberta, he would do anything in his power to keep the family safe.

He’d helped his cousin who worked for Mr. Marcellas in New Orleans install the security system at Roberta’s house. Between the two of them, Samuel and his cousin couldn’t piece everything together, but knew something serious was going on as Mr. Marcellas had ordered the system himself. And—after all that mess with the Fortiers—he was very sure that a stranger investigating anything to do with Roberta and Leanne could not be good for either. He thought about the redheaded woman and how good people tended to stick with other good people.

Samuel's cousin had shown him how to trigger a notification, so when the car was out of sight, he stepped up on the porch close to the front door. He held the investigator's card up first, long enough to make sure whoever monitored the camera feed would have time to read it. Then he held up his phone displaying the picture of Mia. When he judged he'd kept it there long enough, he put his thumb and pinky finger up next to his mouth and ear, making the universal sign of a phone call. He smiled, gave a thumbs-up, and stepped off the porch. Mr. Marcellas and his people would know best what to do.

Samuel made his way to the back of the house, nodding to himself, his job protecting Mr. Broussard's girls well done.

In the gardening shed, he got a wheelbarrow and some shears. It was mid-January and time to prune the roses.

January 20: Kenny Wayne Spins a Tale
Delareau, Louisiana

Martin drove back to Enola's on the Têche. He wanted to see if he could learn more from Jake, or even better, from Kenny Wayne, if the younger man was working. He'd checked out of the Holiday Inn Express, assuming he'd turned over all the rocks in town and would have to fly back to DC sooner than he, and his wallet, had hoped.



Kenny Wayne smiled at Martin and invited him to seat himself at the bar. Handed him a menu.

"What can I get you, Mr. Bledsoe?"

“Wow, you remember my name?”

“Well, it’s a gift.” Kenny Wayne laughed. “Also, the boss insists on it. It’s real important to him that people feel at home when they come to Enola’s.” Kenny Wayne leaned on his forearms against the bar. “You talk to Leanne’s momma yet?”

“I tried, but she’s not home.” Martin looked at the menu for a moment. “What should I have for lunch?”

“Oh, you should absolutely have the fried shrimp po’boy. Our chef uses Jake’s great-grandmother’s recipe for the shrimp seasoning, the breading, and the sauce. It’s awesome.”

“Sold. And a light beer. Any kind you have on tap?”

Kenny went to the register, entered the order, then pulled the beer and brought it back to Martin.

“You know, there’s one other thing I heard. May or may not be helpful.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. At my mom’s last night, her mom, my MawMaw . . . uh, my grandma, loves to know what’s going on. When I told the story about meeting you, you know, investigators are kind of uh, a rare thing here, right?” He put down a placemat, and as he set the napkin/silverware roll on it, leaned toward the man. “Well, she said Ms. Broussard and Mr. Marcellas were friends when they were in school.”

“I see.” Martin took a sip of beer.

“Yeah. She says Ms. Broussard’s husband died a few years ago, and she wouldn’t be surprised if Ms. Broussard wasn’t seeing her old high school sweetheart, Boudreaux Marcellas.”

Martin thought for a moment, trying to figure where this story could possibly lead.

“Marcellas. You know, right? The Marcellas family? They’re like the closest thing we got to a kind of big-time Mafia family in ’Nawlins.”

“NAW-Lings?”

"No, 'Nawlins." Kenny looked at Martin like he was thick. Then understood. "Oh, sorry, that's local speak for New Orleans." He gave Martin a sheepish smile.

"Ah. Okay, the Marcellas family. In New Orleans."

"You got it! Well, see, MawMaw says Ms. Broussard dated Marcellas when they were young."

"Interesting." Martin nodded, waiting for Kenny to keep going.

"Exactly!" Excited the man was getting it. "And she's even more convinced that's happening because of all the stuff going on with her daughter, you know, Leanne? And the Fortiers? She thinks Ms. Broussard's old beau is involved. Claims even though he married another woman, he never really got over Ms. Broussard. And Boudreaux's wife died a few years ago too. MawMaw says if there's anything, you know, hinky going on, you might find out more if you talk to Mr. Marcellas." Kenny looked sideways at the service bar. "Be back in a minute."

Kenny Wayne wondered whether his boss would be impressed. Jake told him Bledsoe would probably be back and to figure out a way to send him to Boudreaux without actually telling him to go there. He smiled as he poured two glasses of white wine and headed back to the bar to put the icing on the cake.



Martin took another swallow of his light beer. A South Louisiana Mafia family connection? Could this be the man that his client met with? He pulled out his phone, thumbed through texts, found the string from Hasapsis, and started scrolling backward. Sure enough, there it was. Boudreaux Marcellas. Martin smiled. Another couple of days' work.

Just as he finished an excellent fried shrimp po'boy, Kenny Wayne appeared with the bill.

“Thanks for coming back to Enola’s, Mr. Bledsoe.”

“Thank you for the help.” He laid a credit card down on the ticket and went to the restroom.

When he returned, he found a note on the receipt. “MawMaw gave me Boudreaux’s address. Good luck!”

Martin smiled a lot on the drive from Delareau to ’NAW-lins. Was that how he had pronounced New Orleans?

January 20: Boudreaux Sets a Hook
New Orleans, Louisiana

Boudreaux pulled into the parking lot at his office to find a car with a rental plate on it. Based on his discussion with Jake, he suspected he knew who it was. One of his men, Little Jimmy Quinn, waited by the entrance to speak to him. He parked his car and walked up the steps.

“Visitor?” Boudreaux asked.

“Yeah, boss. I put him in your office. It’s the same guy we’ve been seeing at Ms. Broussard’s place. I asked him what he wanted to see you about. Appears he works with that asshole Greek guy who was coming around for a while. You know, the one with that photo of the redhead?”

“Yeah, Jimmy. I remember. I’ll go on in and see what he has to say.”

“K, boss. Just ping me if anything gets weird.”

“What might get weird, Jimmy?”

Jimmy gave a shrug. “I dunno. But if he works for an asshole, he might be one too.”

Boudreaux chuckled and nodded in agreement as he headed for the office.

When he opened the door, just for a second, he ignored his guest and took in the progress on the office update. It was a new feeling to be proud of his space. More like a first-tier art dealer's office than someone in 'the family.' Neutral colors, clean lines, good art on the walls, and light pouring in from the skylights. A standing desk by the window, treadmill underneath, and above, a new laptop and wide-screen monitor. The door hinges were so quiet, Boudreaux coughed to get his guest's attention. The man stood and turned toward him.

Boudreaux assessed the Black man standing before him as having rather average physical capabilities and real intelligence in his eyes. He hoped he was right. The man reached out his hand and introduced himself. Boudreaux took it and got right to the point.

"You work for a Greek guy from up DC way?"

"He didn't give you his name?"

"Nope. No offense, but he's kind of a . . . well, what we'd call a '*coullion*.'" Boudreaux gestured toward the meeting table.

Martin raised his eyebrows.

"Local speak for asshole."

"You're not wrong about that," Martin said, pulling photos out of his jacket pocket. He unfolded one on the tabletop.

Boudreaux decided he was talking to a straight shooter. He looked at the photo and wasted no time. "I let him know I'd keep an eye out for the redhead. If I had anything for him, I'd have been in touch."

Martin laid out the other two.

"Leanne Fortier," Boudreaux said.

"Yes. Well, I think so anyway. Based on information I've gotten so far."

"Why are you looking for her?"

"I think she's connected somehow." Boudreaux stared and said nothing. Martin continued, "You know, connected to my client's wife, the redhead."

Boudreaux stared at Martin for ten seconds. Taking the measure of the man once more.

"The young lady on that stretcher? Same one holding the baby? She is the daughter of someone very important to me. And if I have anything to do with it, and believe me, I do, you aren't getting anywhere near either one of them."

Boudreaux watched the man take that in. Made sure Martin was taking him seriously.

"I take it you know something about my client's wife? Mia Evanescence?"

Boudreaux wanted to test the man's skills. "I told your client that I distributed her photo." He pointed to the piece of paper in Martin's hand. "It's probably the same photo you're holding there. Me doing that is kind of like an APB, but within the family and our staff."

Martin waited a beat. "I notice that you didn't actually answer my question, Mr. Marcellas."

Boudreaux's lips turned up in the very smallest of smiles.

Martin continued, "And that lets me know that while you may or may not have actually distributed that photo, if you did, you might also have told your staff not to report anything. Or if they did report something, you have no intention of getting it to my client."

This time, Boudreaux waited a beat while he studied Martin. He saw a slight shake in the man's hands. Knew he was nervous. Made a decision.

"Mr. Bledsoe, do you like your job?"

Martin sighed heavily. Then chuckled. He probably wondered why a man whose family ran an operation like this would ask a question like that.

“Mr. Marcellas, I’m not like you. I’m not part of a family. Well, not a family like yours, anyway. There’s no organization to protect and enrich me. I bill by the hour to earn every dollar I make. And I don’t know whether you have kids or not, but I’ve got one right now who’s attending a prestigious university on the East Coast. And by prestigious, I mean expensive. My dream for him? A career that will be more”—Martin thought for a few seconds—“more satisfying and stable than mine. I accept jobs, lots of different jobs. Some . . .”—he looked down at his feet for a second—“some for good people. Some who aren’t so good. And irrespective, I do the best job I can. I don’t ask for any information that isn’t directly relevant to doing my job. I hope for the best, always. And try really hard not to know enough to keep me awake at night.” He paused again, took a deep breath, let it out slowly. “Try to limit my worries to paying tuition. Because even with scholarship money, that’s still high double-digit dollars.”

Boudreaux, surprised at the honesty, watched Martin’s body fall into a slump as he talked. He worked with enough men who had hard lives that he understood all too well how a person could take a job they’d rather not. Because sometimes they had to.

“You say you’re good at this job you don’t always like?”

Martin squinted his eyes and tilted his head. “Well, my client wrote it off; any connection between these two.” He gestured at the photos. “He’s convinced it’s between his wife and the woman who owns the jet that flew Leanne to Bozeman. I’m the one who’s convinced she’s connected to this young woman that you’re so protective of. Not sure how, but I flew to Delareau feeling about eighty-five percent sure. After sitting in your office for”—Martin

looked at his watch—"the ten minutes I've been here, feeling more like ninety-five."

Boudreaux raced through careful calculations. He'd never hired anyone solely motivated by money. There was always need. And he understood now that Martin Bledsoe worked to get his kid educated. To be a good father.

"Tell you what: We've got a contract with a nice hotel down in the Quarter. You go check in over there. Walk around the Quarter, find some good entertainment, have a nice dinner at the hotel. Get a good night's sleep. Let your client know you're making progress. I'll come by tomorrow morning and we'll talk some more." He watched Martin take that in.

"Uh, no offense, but being here with a man like you? This is new for me, so I gotta ask. No one's gonna visit my room tonight and hurt me, are they, Mr. Marcellas?"

Boudreaux grinned at him. "Mr. Bledsoe, I make sure the finances are good for the family. I assure you that if I, or anyone else, wanted you hurt or dead, we wouldn't waste money on an excellent hotel to get it done."

Martin smiled, visibly relaxed, and said, "Well, that makes sense."

"Besides, you'd have to pose a threat to the family. And if that were the case, and we had to take some drastic action, you'd never see it coming."

Boudreaux was smiling and watched Bledsoe's smile evaporate when the statement landed.

"Well, I don't know what's going to happen next, but since I am pretty sure my search for Aleks Hasapsis' wife poses no threat to your organization, I accept your very kind offer to spend the evening in 'NAW-LEE-UNS.'"

Boudreaux burst out laughing at the three-syllable pronunciation. "Are you trying to say 'Nawlins?'"

"Was I even close?" Martin winced and blushed.

Still chuckling, Boudreaux said, “Just call it New Orleans like everybody else who isn’t from around here. You won’t insult anyone, and you won’t sound stupid.”

“Got it,” Martin said, as he pulled his phone out of his pants pocket. “You wanna air drop that hotel info or text it?”

Boudreaux picked up his mobile and looked at Martin with pride. “My nephew Xavier schooled me on the air drop thing. Got your wireless and Bluetooth turned on?”

After Martin left, Boudreaux told Little Jimmy to make Bledsoe’s hotel reservation.

Then he called Park Ellis.

January 20: Boudreaux and Park
New Orleans, Louisiana

“Boudreaux!” Ellis’ melodious voice drew Boudreaux right back to their time together in undergrad as he grabbed the man’s hand and practically pulled him into his office. “I wondered if I might hear from you.”

Boudreaux smiled. He was a couple of years behind Ellis at LSU. Boudreaux’d looked up to him and occasionally even socialized with him before Park went on to law school at Tulane, again, a few years before Boudreaux arrived. In Louisiana, alumni were fiercely loyal and their lives naturally intersected at the occasional university, civic, or community effort. Boudreaux and Park had even negotiated a few business deals over the years.

Park guided them toward guest chairs on the window side of the office and indicated Boudreaux take the chair facing the window. Ever the gracious host, Park poured them each a glass of water, giving Boudreaux a few moments to look out at the Mississippi River.

As a touchstone that renewed his sense of awe about the world, Boudreaux had memorized its flow rate: nearly 600,000 cubic feet per second—a volume that would meet New York City’s per-day water requirement of one billion gallons every thirty-seven minutes. Folks didn’t call it the ‘Mighty Mississippi’ for no good reason.

“It’s a powerful thing, isn’t it?” Park said quietly.

“*Effet* . . . indeed,” Boudreaux said, almost reverently. Then turned away from the window. “Two things, Park. First, I need someone in your house to do a little digging for me.”

Ellis chuckled softly. “I’m sure that can be arranged. But I didn’t think there was anything your folks couldn’t touch if you needed to.”

“Every business has its tender spots, and in this case, the sensitivity is between the families. The Fortier branch gets touchy when anyone on the Marcellas side starts digging around in their past.”

“Well, families are a mess. So that makes sense. What are you looking for?”

“About twenty years ago, one of Old Man Fortier’s grandsons went missing,” Boudreaux said, leaning back in his chair. “You might remember that . . .”

Ellis’ brow furrowed. “Oh, I remember alright. He was kind of a black sheep, like his daddy. I was never clear about the details. Maybe something about father and son being forced out of Iberia Parish?”

Boudreaux nodded. “Well, I’m a couple of years behind you, but the way my momma told the story, Ms. Evangeline Fortier got in a family way.” He paused, giving Ellis time to think. “Didn’t last long—I’m cloudy on the details—they married or didn’t marry? He left or got killed?”

“Yeah, it was a long time ago,” Ellis said, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. “But I remember this: She had twins. One of ’em is

the black sheep I'm referring to. The father? That's the part I'm not clear on."

Boudreaux looked at his phone and said, "Uh huh. Hang on just a sec, I'm gonna send you a couple of photos."

"Okay."

Boudreaux waited in silence while Ellis looked at the photos.

The attorney cleared his throat. "Hoh-LEE-shit." Another thirty seconds of silence.

Eyes on one photo in particular, he asked "Has Ms. Lobertelle's client or anyone else who might be affected, seen this?"

"No. And I don't want her to. Not until you do some digging. I think you can see what we need to find out. And since it's on the fringes of the Fortier family, and taking our agreements to stay out of each other's businesses into consideration, well, you're in a much better position to investigate than I am."

"Yes," Ellis said, sounding far away. "Yes, I see what you mean." Then he snapped himself back into the moment. "Oh, and what's the second thing?"

"I'm about to spend some money to help keep Ms. Lobertelle's client out of harm's way. Wanted to see if you're making any progress on her legal situation. Hoping you have some kind of defense against her husband's substantial efforts that will give her and, well, you too I guess, time to get her situation completely cleared."

Ellis gave a short laugh. "Boudreaux, I believe I may have outdone myself this time. When we get done with Mr. Hasapsis, he's going to want to get his Greek ass on a plane back home to the other side of the planet so fast, heads will spin."

CHAPTER 10

January 21: Money and Clothes Carbondale, Illinois

They drove north and it got colder. Then colder. By the time the backroads delivered Mia and Chiara to downtown Carbondale, they'd almost cleared out their supply of preloaded credit cards and needed cash for food and clothing for subzero winter temps in Ontonagon. Chiara, reading a text, said, "Mia, your team is amazing. Robbi kept some of my money in her account since it would be a few days before I can access the offshore account."

"And she found the Western Union office in this town?"

"Yes. Money should be here already."

"Good, since we are too." Mia grinned and shut the engine off.

Mia pulled open the old glass door to the Western Union office. "We'll find some place that has hardcore winter clothing around here, I'm sure." Chiara followed Mia into the store.

One look and Mia expected to hear a bell when they stepped into the classic old building. She inhaled a mix of oiled wood floors, industrial cleaner, moist radiator heat, and something vaguely like anxious sweat from the decades of disadvantaged people who'd been dependent on the service provided here.

"Yep. Fewer cameras in small-town local places, right?" Chiara asked.

“You catch on quick, grasshopper,” she said, giving Chiara a light punch.

Chiara’s new ID worked perfectly to collect the cash. While she counted it, Mia talked with the clerk about restaurants and clothing stores.

The clerk, half-closed eyelids looking down at his phone, may have been in his late teens or early twenties. Mia couldn’t tell. But she wanted information and started with a compliment.

“Nice hair. Goes well with the earrings.” A purple feather dangled from each of his ears. Her genuine smile elicited an almost smile in return. “Where would you send us for heavy-duty winter clothes and some good local food?”

The young man did not look up. “If it were me, I’d go to Dick’s or the Mall. They’re both right up the street on Main. But some people prefer Rural King. And if you want something really cheap, check The Thrift Shop over on Illinois Avenue or maybe the Goodwill Store.”

Chiara asked, “Any food that isn’t fast in town? Owned by someone local?”

The young man looked up. Squinted, scratched the back of his hand, and finally said, “There’s Chili’s and Applebee’s. They’re more fancy-like than fast food, if that’s your thing. But if you want something different, maybe the Indian place over on south Washington. I think those people are like, you know, the owners and the cooks and everything.”

“We’re not really into fancy, so thanks for the recommendation.”

Mia tapped Chiara’s arm, thanked the clerk, and opened the door. They stepped out into the January Illinois cold. Back behind the wheel, she blasted the heat and said, “Okay, you’ve got money, and I’m willing to use some of what you’re paying me to get some fresh clothes. Preferably that aren’t used. I’m in the mood for clean and warm.”

Chiara took a deep breath and exhaled heavily. “Me too!”

Mia watched the elegant woman. Among her pants pockets, backpack compartments, and a wallet Robbi had found in a drawer somewhere, Chiara was separating the cash into three or four different places. In case she got separated from any of her belongings.

Mia tapped her phone for directions and drove. Thought about Chiara and clothes; figured her for more of a Bloomingdale’s kind of woman. Imagined the beautiful things in her closet at home. Sparking a memory of her own—the roomy closet in the condo, the contemporary home she’d lovingly made her own. She’d missed it terribly after moving into the huge colonial Aleks purchased and decorated to match his Eastern European tastes just before they’d married. No input from her. So clear now—a sign of things to come.

Three hours later, exhausted, wearing heavy-duty, sherpa-lined coats, and the SUV’s back seat packed with bags, Mia touched the screen on her phone again.

Chiara watched for a moment, lips pressed, eyebrows pinched. Finally said, “Okay, I give up. We’re sitting here in the back lot behind the Hilton, and—”

“I’m checking in.”

“Oh. An app?”

“Yep. I set up a profile using my fake ID and put a prepaid MasterCard on the account. I made the reservation when we stopped for gas. Now I’m checking us in and getting digital keys so that we don’t have to pass through the front lobby. We’ll go in this back door, use the stairs, keep our heads down and our hands full of bags.” She looked up from the phone. “I’m texting you the digital key to your burner so we both have one. It’ll open the hotel’s outside and room doors.”

Chiara checked her phone, slumped in her seat, and closed her eyes. “I don’t know how a few hours shopping and hauling

these bags made me more tired today than working with the wood frames and bronze in my studio.” She turned to look at Mia and pulled the handle to open her door. “But it did.”

Mia touched Chiara on the shoulder. “I know what you mean. But you know, it’s the other weight. A much heavier load.”

January 21: Go Girl
Carbondale, Illinois

Later that night, after Indian food (they’d scanned for cameras and found none), Mia and Chiara were in fresh flannel pajamas, opening packages and sorting their new belongings. Mia finished first. She tended not to fold things as neatly as Chiara. She picked up her phone and said, “I’ve been focusing on cameras too much.” She laughed out loud. “Get it? Focused? On cameras?”

Chiara smiled and said, “Pun intended?”

“Well, not at first, then I just went with it. Anyway, I’ve focused on avoiding them and found this site that shows where all the traffic cams are located. You know, along the highways?”

“So . . .” Chiara tilted her head. “We, like, look down or scrunch down in the seat when we drive by one?”

Mia gave her a sympathetic look. “Mostly hard to see passengers. But keep the big sunglasses to be safe. Most important? We can do a better job of making sure we don’t put ourselves directly in front of one when we’re stopped.” She swiped up on the screen a few times. “In fact, I think we should avoid food or bathroom breaks at any of the public, uh, state-owned rest areas. Looks like they all have cameras. And, I don’t know, maybe not stop at any of the gas stations or truck stops at major intersections.”

“You mean like the one we stopped at in Jackson, Tennessee?”

“Exactly. I mean, on these small highways, we can stop every couple of hours when we see a small, local-looking convenience store to get gas and use the restroom and avoid the big places that are more likely to have cameras.” She looked up at Chiara and sighed. “I wish I’d thought about this earlier, but I didn’t really think too much about the FBI’s resources at all until you read that email from Michael.”

“What I wonder,” Chiara said, “is whether it’s really the FBI. That’s why I’m not answering. I just can’t figure out why they didn’t warn me. How could they not have known something like this was in the works? I thought they had eyes and ears on everything Ricardo was doing.”

Mia shook her head. She hoped her creativity, ability to take action, and tendency to stay calm in an emergency were enough. She figured she’d done well for Louanne and Haggy but worried that evading South American cartel men and the FBI far exceeded her ad agency production planning and even her Aleks-evading experience. But maybe she was better than nothing. Or better than Chiara trying to do this alone.

“Yeah, sorry. Wish I knew more, but I barely understand Aleks’ resources, let alone the FBI’s. And certainly not a South American cartel’s.”

Chiara cut the tags off the last of her fleece tops. Held it up for Mia to look at.

Mia smiled. “I bet that’s the very first camo-patterned anything you’ve ever purchased in your life!”

“You’d win that bet. And”—she rattled around in the packages for a moment, then proudly held up two pink bags—“look what else I got!”

Mia squinted. “That looks like you ripped the oxygen mask and tubes out of an airplane. Except I’ve never seen them in pink.”

Chiara hooted. “Ha! Mia, read the label.”

Mia squinted. "Something . . . something Go Girl?"

"Exactly! Especially about what you just said. They'll come in really handy the next few days."

Mia continued to squint. Put her hands up in an 'I still don't get it' gesture.

Chiara stood up on the bed as she opened one of the packages. She pulled the pink oxygen mask-shaped part out, then attached the tube, and let it fall next to her leg until the bottom laid on the bed. She cupped the pink plastic part against her pelvis.

Mia's squint slowly relaxed and her mouth shaped a silent O.

"Exactly. It's for peeing. We can stand up wherever we need to, put this pink part right here, and go. Right next to the car or a tree or whatever!"

Mia shook her head, then looked down at her phone when it buzzed. A message from Robbi:

The FBI agents are real. Sat next to them at the restaurant last night. B says keep going.

Chiara read the same on her phone. They sighed at each other.

"I don't want to meet with those people, Mia. I don't know exactly why, but—"

"Unless you say so, I'm not changing the plan. That they didn't get a hold of you and scoop you up the minute someone sniffed a threat? Could mean many things, most of which I can't even imagine."

"My husband is a good man and very good at what he does. I don't know how long he's been missing. I don't know if he's somewhere safe, working his way back home. For all I know, if it's true his cover's blown, he may be on the run or locked up somewhere or . . . I don't know. He could be fine and they're trying to kidnap me and he doesn't even know it."

Mia saw Chiara's fear for her husband was greater than her fear for herself. "How do you do that?"

"Do what?"

Mia thought for a minute and realized that her question was bigger than ‘how do you not cry when you are clearly afraid for him?’ “How do you find someone to date, to trust, and then love? Then know they really love you?”

Chiara slowly tilted her head, as if trying to make sense of Mia’s question.

After a moment, Mia bit her lip and got off the bed. Pacing seemed to help the words flow.

“I’d never really dated anyone until, wait, that’s not exactly true. I didn’t date in high school. I had a few one-off dates in college, but I loved what I was learning and boys and dating and romance just weren’t ever on my mind. It’s even occurred to me that I didn’t date Aleks. It was more like he dated me, and I was so busy . . .” She trailed off. The words felt like broken glass, honed sharp by secrecy. She’d never even talked to Jessi about it. She looked at Chiara. Her eyes were locked on Mia’s and she was nodding slowly. Carefully.

Mia looked for shock, and not finding that, for pity. Didn’t see that either.

“Yeah. I see what you mean. My life was a bit like that before I met Ricardo.” Chiara didn’t look away, and Mia began to suspect, hope, that Chiara wouldn’t think she was a complete weirdo like the other girls, then young women, in her life had. The little bit of relief she felt was enough that she moved the packaging out of the way and sat down next to Chiara.

“You were, or are, a late bloomer. So what? No harm, no foul. I did it in a different order, but I’m not where I am as a sculptor because of a robust dating life.”

“Okay, but how’d you do it? Is it just dumb luck, and I didn’t have any?”

“No. My mother saw my first couple of attempts and decided to school me.”

It was Mia's turn to nod. *It always comes back to this. The mother thing.* A wave of exhaustion moved through her, and she felt as if she'd just finished a sixteen-hour shoot day. She sighed, checked her phone for the time. "It's getting late—"

"Yeah, maybe we can come back to this, Mia. Whenever you're ready, okay?"

"Sure. Yeah. I will."

"Good." Chiara looked at her for a moment, nodded, then picked up the unopened GoGirl and turned it over in her hands. "Right now, the only thing I know for sure is that you, and the people you've surrounded yourself with, have my best interests at heart. That's why I'd rather not involve the FBI in our plan."

Grateful for Chiara's ability to let the personal stuff go, maybe even see what it cost her to share what little she'd shared, Mia smiled and said, "Then we won't." Then she pointed toward the package in her hand. "Toss me that GoGirl. I'm gonna make sure I know how it works."

Chiara tossed the package to Mia, then stood up, and walked gracefully over to the mini fridge. As she pulled out a bottled water, she said, "Let me know when you're done. I'm going to stand in the shower and try it with a bottle of water first."

The two 'GoGirled' several times between Carbondale and Ontonagon. They avoided most of the traffic cameras. Most. But not all.

January 22: Sam and Michael Leave Meridian Meridian, Mississippi

Sam, standing in her hotel room bathroom at the Threefoot, shouted, "What?" Knew the knock wasn't housekeeping. Had to be her pissy partner, Michael.

"Get ready. We're out of here today. Finally got a hit."

"I thought they wanted us to keep looking for a gray extended-cab truck?"

"Hot new lead. They want us to hit the road."

"I'll be down in twenty."

"Meet me in the restaurant."

Sam looked in the mirror. She knew she could be prettier if she did some girly things. She enjoyed looking at other women who put in the time, energy, and money on makeup and jewelry. Just didn't want to do that herself. She stepped in the shower for five minutes. Took another five to get dressed. Ten minutes after that, she sat in the booth across from Michael, looking at biscuits, eggs, bacon, and coffee.

She looked up and cocked her head in a 'what the hell is this all about' look. He sipped coffee then put the cup down.

"I'm trying to be nice, Sam. I also ordered lunch. Club sandwiches and chips to go."

Sam continued her sideways look at her usually irritated partner.

"Look," he said, dropping his fork dramatically, "we're about to go north and likely spend several days together. I'm trying to make nice."

"I see." Sam, aware of his resentment, decided it would take more to convince her that he actually cared. Or that his good mood would continue. But bacon? She smiled at him, put half a slice in her mouth, and closed her eyes. "So good," she moaned. Then she picked up her fork and dug into the eggs. She looked up from her plate to see Michael dipping a biscuit into a small bowl of some kind of white sauce.

"Sausage gravy. I'd never heard of it and had to try it."

"Why is it white?" Sam asked. "Sausage is brown. That sausage right there on your plate. It's brown."

"I don't know. Some kind of Southern magic. Who cares?" He chewed. "It's good."

Sam swallowed and asked, "Where to?"

"First, Jackson. Tennessee, not Mississippi."

"Someone caught a cam shot?"

"Yep. Different hair and weird clothes, but facial recognition gave us a ninety-eight percent it's Blackwell." He dipped his biscuit in the gravy and looked at her. "What I still can't figure out is who's helping her."

"Helping her?"

"Yeah, the cam shot showed someone else with her. Driving. They're in a gray or silver SUV with temporary plates. Fuzzy, of course, but Nebraska? Maybe Montana? The techs are guessing, but either way. I mean, how the hell did someone with temporary plates from out west wind up in Meridian, Mississippi, and connect with our girl?"

Sam shook her head. Looked at her temporary partner and saw nothing in his expression or his voice resembling concern for the woman. She set that aside and asked if he had any intel on Orzmondo's status.

"Still a whole lot of 'we don't know.'" He swallowed some coffee. "Might be in a hole or on the run."

"But," Sam said, "not dead yet?"

Michael shrugged. "Only thing for sure? No communication."

"But if he were dead, they wouldn't need her." It wasn't a question.

"Makes sense," Michael said as he spooned some gravy on his last bite of biscuit.

Sam continued eating. Remained quiet.

Michael pushed his plate back, used his napkin to wipe away the crumbs, and let out a heavy sigh. "Look, I know you think we should just hide her away until this is all resolved. But it just makes no sense to do that, Sam. If it's true they want to use her to get him back or force him to do something or—"

Sam interrupted. "Or just kill her before they kill him? Make him watch?"

Michael exhaled and said, "Yeah. Or that. But in all scenarios, she's our best bet. She's what will bring the cartel to us." The server slid by and laid a check on the table. "They have most of the same resources we do. Maybe they're ahead of us, maybe behind. Maybe they do something that helps us or show up when we get her. Either way it's an incredible opportunity to get some of the cartel's men and turn them. Or at least get information from them. And since we aren't going to get them through Orzmondo's undercover work, we'll follow her. Because they are too. We'll get them all at the same time."

"Yeah, yeah. I'm going to do my part, Michael." Sam pushed her plate away in disgust. "But I don't have to like it."

*January 22: Little Jimmy at the Threefoot
Meridian, Mississippi*

Little Jimmy Quinn enjoyed his breakfast at the Threefoot. Figuring the two agents sitting in the booth next to his were about half-way done with theirs, he finished his coffee and opened his laptop.

Using specialized penetration-testing software, Jimmy located the restaurant's wireless network and checked out the Threefoot Hotel's inexpensive, off-the-shelf firewall. He snorted at its simplicity and, tapping quickly, easily identified and exploited vulnerabilities in the network infrastructure to capture a nearby phone number and IP address. He grinned and instantly gained temporary control of the phone.

Jimmy watched the onscreen action, his eyes darting like a cat watching a laser dot. Remote control confirmed, he installed a GPS

tracking app, set the phone's permissions to give it access, then hid the app's existence. He sent a copy of the monitoring side of the app to the phone number Boudreaux'd given him. Waiting for Send to complete, he sipped the last of his coffee.

Tracing his steps when he finished, Jimmy inserted a self-destruct code that would delete the app in ten days. He then removed all traces and evidence of his activity on the phone.

Head of the Marcellas family's technology activities, Jimmy spent enough time in rooms and vehicles behind screens that he enjoyed the opportunity to get out into the field. He sat back in the booth and listened to the agents; chuckled at the tension between the two. When the female agent left, Little Jimmy signaled for a coffee refill. He looked back at his screen after she was gone and confirmed: The app was on the male agent's phone, Michael.

Ten minutes later, Agent Michael left the restaurant. Jimmy gathered his jacket and laptop case, laid two twenties on the table, and stood. Then, as if to answer a call, pulled his phone from his pocket and put it up to his ear. As if disturbed by what his caller said, he sat down in the booth next to his own—the one the federal agents had just left. Continuing the fake call, he held his phone to his ear with his left hand and peeled a tiny disk from underneath the tabletop with his right.

"Sorry, sir. I need to clear this booth." Jimmy looked up at a confused busser, dish bin and dishtowel in hand.

"Oh, sorry. Yeah, sure. I uh, I left cash there on my table," pointing to the booth where he'd just had coffee. "Just got distracted by a call." He said into his phone, "Sorry, boss. Yeah, no problem. Leaving now."

With the deftness of a seasoned magician, Jimmy slipped the microphone he'd removed from under the table into his jacket pocket. As if to end a call, he touched his phone. Hit Send. The audio file would be on Boudreaux's desk in a few seconds.

“Sorry I got in your way,” Jimmy said as he walked away from the booth. “You have a nice day.”

Little Jimmy Quinn did not know how Boudreaux ensured the two agents would be in that specific booth. But he did know that cash greases a lot of wheels. Shook his head at his boss’ ingenuity.

He walked out of the Threefoot restaurant wearing a Mississippi River-wide smile, deeply satisfied that his morning’s work hacking a federal agent’s phone—a welcome change from the criminals he usually dealt with—would help save a life Mr. Marcellas believed worth saving.

January 22: The Bug(s)
Interstate 55 North of Meridian, Mississippi

On the road finally, Sam watched the dead-brown, winter Mississippi countryside slip by; tried to put herself in Chiara Blackwell’s shoes. Hard to imagine an agent’s wife not trusting the FBI enough to return a call. But Michael’s approach to the case proved the woman’s intuition was perhaps serving her well.

“Did you find something last night?” Michael asked.

“Yep. No bugs in the car. But I found a magnetized box under the bumper. Satellite GPS tracker. They are definitely following us.”

“See? Exactly as I said. They’re looking for her too, by following us.”

Sam kept checking the side mirror. She was looking for their tail. “And that means we’re headed in the right direction?”

“Sam, the cartel has almost the same resources we do. If they have information we don’t—”

Sam interrupted him. “You mean they have information that shows she’s headed this direction too?”

“Exactly! If not, they wouldn’t bother with us.”

Sam had no experience with cases like this. And as irritatingly self-serving as she found her temporary partner to be, she didn’t discount his experience. She figured her priority—making sure Orzmondo’s wife didn’t get kidnapped by the South Americans or killed in some kind of cross fire—would come into play when they found her. If they were lucky enough to get to her first. She pushed back a little.

“What if they’re thinking the same thing about us?”

Michael turned his eyes from the road for a second to look at her. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, what if they think we know where she is or, at least, which direction she’s headed, which we kind of do. What if the guys who tried to kidnap her are just one source they’ve deployed, and they don’t know shit but hope we do? And that’s the only reason they’re following us?”

He thought for a minute and said, “Then they aren’t being as smart about this as they usually are. And Sam, the guys following us may or may not be smart. But the men who run them? They are very, very smart.”

Sam nodded quietly. They rode a few miles in silence.

Then Michael said, “Besides, if they keep following us, we’ll get to the end game we want anyway. We’ll have Chiara Blackwell, and they’ll be so close to the bait, they won’t resist biting at the hook.”

Sam closed her eyes and tried to keep the disgust out of her voice. “You’ll dangle her?”

“I’ll do . . . I mean, we’ll do whatever we have to. It may be the only way we have to bring them down.”

Sam thought, but did not say, that she believed there were better ways—safer for civilians anyway—to capture the bad guys before they were a threat to Orzmondo’s wife. But she wasn’t the senior agent on this case. And she didn’t have as many years with

the bureau as Michael did. But she was good at planning. And risk mitigation. When the time came, if a wrench needed to be thrown into the works to protect Orzmondo's wife, well, that was something she'd do.

She took another look in the side mirror. No gray extended-cab truck. She couldn't confirm they were being followed, but an itch at the base of her skull left her with little doubt.

CHAPTER 11

January 22: Stand By. And . . . Action!
New Orleans, Louisiana

Vikki Lobertelle had no idea what to expect when her boss Park Ellis sat down next to her in the edit suite and said, “Play it, Soren, from right before he comes back to the room.”

The video editor tapped a button. The video began with a shot from a camera positioned in the upper corner of a room. The quality was good, but not great. Soren paused for a moment and demonstrated how zooming in created a more pixelated image. Vikki thought it might be a perfect imitation of security footage taken of a hotel or a room at an Airbnb.

The video began again, and—quickly scanning the footage, trying to figure out what her boss was doing—she noticed a small desk with a laptop and some papers on it positioned under the window, curtains closed. Vaguely patterned commercial-grade wallpaper on two of the walls, neutral paint on the other. The art had color in it, but otherwise as generic as the wallpaper. A second later, Vikki gasped. She saw the woman lying sideways on the bed, back to the camera.

The woman writhed, struggling to get a little more comfortable. Her wrists and ankles were bound with zip ties, but there was a cloth underneath each of them, apparently intended to leave

bruises instead of bloody cuts. There was no audio. Vikki couldn't tell if she was crying or having trouble breathing. And the camera angle didn't show her whole face. But the high-angled side view allowed a clear view of long, wavy red hair. It stood out against the white bed linens as starkly as the blood stains from injuries the woman's assailant had inflicted on virtually every part of her body that would not be visible in public.

As she writhed, the woman's face turned far enough to the right for Vikki to glimpse her eyes. They were a striking, brilliant green. The bright-orange masking tape on her mouth was like an angry gash across her face.

A man entered the room, about six feet tall, trim, well-dressed. He had dark-brown hair and skin that screamed Mediterranean tan. His smile, harsh. Cold. Vikki shivered. He spoke, and even without audio, Vikki could see anger. It wouldn't take an especially talented lip reader to interpret.

Looming above his victim, the assailant's sarcastic expression and body language revealed a perverse pleasure in the scene he'd created; the control he wielded over the woman. Soren paused the video again and examined the nightstand clock, which had intentionally been reset during the shoot to portray how long the victim had been left alone. Resuming, a grayish wet spot formed on the bed around the woman's hips. She'd lost control of her bladder.

Even though she knew it to be only a reenactment, Vikki's heart raced when the man drew a knife, but he quickly passed it through each of the zip ties. He tossed a package of wipes onto the bed next to the woman. He did not remove the tape from her mouth or offer a hand to help her up.

"That's enough," Park said, and raised his hand to let the editor know he could stop. The room was silent for a few seconds.

"Aleksander Hasapsis is so royally, unbelievably, and completely fucked!"

Vikki said, “Well, yeah, boss. This is, uh, amazing. You did a—”
 “Not me! I called my actor friend Kevin, you know, who plays the cowboy on that big ranch—”

“Yeah, boss. I know which Kevin,” speaking over him. Vikki’d heard the stories. Ellis kept talking.

“. . . and he got this amazing director who owed him one, who got the producer and the actors and”—Ellis bowed slightly toward the man sitting in at the edit console—“our friend Soren here.” Ellis stood up and pulled a buzzing phone out of his pocket and said, “In fact, Soren, you don’t have to play the early part of the program, the . . . you know. The really bad part. But fill Vikki in on the rest of what’s up our sleeve while I take this call.”

“Sure, Mr. Ellis.” Soren turned to Vikki and gestured toward a monitor displaying a photograph of Aleks Hasapsis. “Basically, I take this face”—Soren used his mouse to do something onscreen to the photograph—“and I place it into this program.” It took a few seconds for Soren to copy and paste Hasapsis’ face onto another screen. “Voilà!”

Vikki looked at the monitor, and instead of the actor they’d just watched slit the zip ties, Hasapsis cut them.

“Holy shit!” Vikki stood up. “I thought this was some kind of instructive reenactment of what my client’s husband did to her last fall. But replacing the actor’s face with her husband’s?” Vikki paled in shock at what she now understood Parker Ellis intended. “And this is legal?” She looked at Soren, then closed her eyes, and hung her head. “Wait, don’t answer that.”

Soren explained, “What I’m doing is not in and of itself illegal. How the program is used determines whether or not it’s legal.”

“And you’re okay doing this?”

“Well, things didn’t go so well for my sister. When Astrid called me to help with a favor for Kevin . . .” Vikki looked at the young man, saw how his gentle smile reached his eyes. “. . . well, you know,

helping someone who got hurt, that feels good. And of course, it being Kevin and all, just like everyone else on the team, that made it an easy yes. All of us signed the nondisclosure, but really, based on what Mr. Ellis told the team, keeping it all off the books and not talking about it? Also, an easy yes.”

Vikki wanted to scream no and laugh at the same time. She bit her lip and said, “What about the room? The woman? I mean, how . . .”

“I wasn’t in on that part. That’s the camera folks. But as you can see, the camera’s placed so you don’t see the woman’s entire face. Well, except once.” Soren fast-forwarded the footage and stopped on a scene where the Hasapsis actor was frozen in the act of dragging the injured woman out the door. Soren tapped play, and Mia Evanescence’s face looked back at the room.

Soren said, “Just long enough to know. You know?” He stopped the playback and looked at Vikki.

Vikki shook her head slowly. If Park used this video the way she thought he would, this one would definitely join the infamous PE-OLLS: the Park Ellis Oral Library of Legendary Stories. And, using no one’s name of course, she would get to tell it. She rubbed the chill bumps from her arms and grinned.

Ellis came back into the suite. “Well, Soren?”

Soren nodded at Park, turned back to the control board, and while he cued the video up to play from the beginning, said to Vikki, “And don’t forget: Lots of Airbnbs have cameras in their properties these days.”

“Vikki, the main part of this is hard to watch. Based on what the client told you and you shared with me, it’s very realistic.”

But she didn’t have to live it herself. And it was, well, a movie.

“She’s my client.”

Park nodded to Soren. He turned to the screen and played it from the beginning.

Two minutes in, the blood rushed from her head and her stomach roiled; the ‘just a movie’ intellectual distance gone. Someone she knew experienced this. Told her the story but that was just words. Seeing it was something else. Made it so real.

Pale and shaky when it faded to black, Vikki had to close her eyes, lean back into the sofa to breathe.

A few silent minutes later, Park came over to her. She cleared her throat and sat up. Felt around inside for the professionalism she wanted to demonstrate.

Softer than she’d ever heard him speak, Park said, “I know. It’s hard.”

She turned to him, trying hard to come across as ‘attorney’ more than ‘woman,’ she asked the only question she could think of: “But I don’t understand, boss. What are you going to do with it?”

January 22: Martin Meets ‘Nawlin’s
New Orleans, Louisiana

Martin had a quiet, anxious beginning to his evening in ‘Nawlin’s, trying to imagine what Boudreaux wanted to talk about. But standing in front of the historic Hotel Monteleone, he gave the man credit: Whatever he was up to, he wasn’t shabby about it. The Beaux-Arts style architecture of the hotel’s exterior and the interior decor blend of Victorian and art deco intimidated with its beauty.

He took the walk around the French Quarter that Boudreaux’d suggested and went back to the hotel for dinner.

Seated at his table, Martin fidgeted. A male Cinderella at the ball. Wished for a scotch he knew he wouldn’t order. But crawfish étouffée over rice, the suggested glass of pinot noir that paired

perfectly with it, and beignets lightly dusted with powdered sugar? No problem relaxing into food like that.

“What did you think of your meal, sir?” The server, an older gentleman wearing a black suit and white shirt that probably cost more than any clothing Martin had ever purchased, gently placed a tiny espresso in front of him.

Far above Martin’s usual financial and caloric budget, he’d eaten slowly, placing his cutlery down in between each bite. He picked up the espresso and said, “It was amazing. Truly. Those, BEN-NAYS . . .”

“The beignets, sir?” A respectful correction if he’d ever heard one.

“Yes, BIN-yays. They were like clouds. In my mouth. Sweet little clouds.” His expression soft and warm, like falling a little bit in love.

“I’m pleased to hear you say so.” The server smiled. “Mr. Marcellas will be pleased that you enjoyed it too.” The man nodded and turned to care for other diners. He didn’t leave a check on the table.

Martin finished his coffee, wiped his mouth, and used his hands to brush specs of white off his shirt and pants.

Then he walked for hours, amazed at how many people were wandering the streets, calling out from the open doors of bars, exercising their ‘open container’ rights to carry drinks from one establishment to another. And when he’d absorbed enough of the French Quarter’s main drag, he continued walking side streets. Turned his thoughts back toward Boudreaux Marcellas. He imagined the syndicate boss making thinly veiled threats that would effectively shut down his ability to investigate. But he couldn’t imagine why they’d put him up in a luxurious hotel and feed him so well only to block the investigation; or harm him the next day. Maybe some kind of Creole Mafia last supper tradition?

When he’d exhausted every horrible possibility he could think of, his brain just stopped. There was nothing he could do until

tomorrow. He'd enjoy the rest of what he expected would be his last night in this city like none other he'd visited.

Found himself at the intersection of Royal and Frenchman streets. A sign for *The Spotted Cat* and the music coming from within caught his eyes and ears. Be crazy to pass up a club with a name like that.

A man with a washboard sat in the spotlight. Washboard as an instrument? And when the musician played it, a blues band backing him, Martin's foot tapped, his hands clapped, and before he knew it, he stomped in time to the washboard along with everyone else in the club. Someone pulled him onto the dance floor. Dancing was not something Martin Bledsoe did. Ever. But this night? A night with people, music, food, and accommodations he never imagined, dancing just one more domino that could fall. Even if only for this one night.

When the place closed at 2:00 a.m., he stepped out into a street wild and alive, wondering how, amid an enigmatic—possibly threatening—situation, he could feel so light in his soul.

January 22: Deal Making
New Orleans, Louisiana

Boudreaux's sources reported that, after his meal at the hotel, at which he had one glass of wine, Martin Bledsoe walked the Quarter and then went to a club and had a beer and several glasses of water. Given the information, he read exhaustion rather than hangover in the slightly glazed look in the man's eye when they met at nine o'clock the next morning at the hotel.

Breakfast ordered and pleasantries exchanged, Boudreaux got right to the point.

“Mr. Bledsoe, I need some additional boots on the ground down here in New Orleans. And perhaps in parts unknown. There could be some intersection with the project you’re currently working on for, well, I don’t know his name, but I’m hoping you’ll tell me before our meal is over.”

“You’re, uh . . .” He shook his head as if to clear it, then said, “You’re offering me a job?”

“I am. I’m also known for being blunt. So let me lay this out for you.”

The server delivered a basket of bread, and when he left, Boudreaux was impressed that Martin looked him straight in the eyes.

“Your boss strikes me as a very unpleasant, even dangerous, man. I’m guessing you work hard for a dangerous man that you’d perhaps rather not work for because you have a son to put through school. An excellent school, yes?”

“Yes. It’s a wonderful school.”

“And also expensive. That makes you, in my book, a good man. In my business, it’s possible to find good men, but almost never when I need them. I more often stumble upon them unexpectedly. And when I do, if they’re willing, I hire them.”

The server placed a breakfast plate of eggs, boudin, and bacon in front of each man. He set a container of Tony Chachere’s Creole seasoning down in the middle of the table. Boudreaux stopped talking, sprinkled some of the seasoning on his eggs, and started eating while Martin took this in. He swallowed and asked, “Would you like to say no now? Or hear more?”

Martin didn’t pause. “I’m listening.”

Boudreaux smiled. “Excellent! Please, eat. We’ll take our time. I hope, at the very least, you’ll be intrigued enough to give my offer serious consideration.”

In between bites, Boudreaux told Martin what he wanted from him and described the compensation. Two hours of coffee and

discussion later, they stood outside the front of the hotel under a bright January sun and shook hands.

“I’ll have everything sent over this afternoon. If you decide to sign it, you’ll get a copy and can start work tomorrow.”

Martin hadn’t said yes yet, but body language was often a good barometer of the heart and mind. It was pretty much a done deal.

January 22: Double Agent Man
New Orleans, Louisiana

Martin paced the room like a big cat in a zoo cage while he reviewed the agreement for the fifth—or was it the sixth—time. *A good man? A crime syndicate that hires ‘good’ men?* Yes, he was afraid; smiling too. Moving to a city he already had a crush on to do something sort of like the job he’d been doing for years without the financial worry of nonpaying or nonexistent clients? And for money that would eliminate his tuition concerns? Perhaps the most dizzying, life-changing twenty-four hours he’d ever lived.

The document Boudreaux Marcellas sent him was clear. He may work on cases that conflict with past, present, or future work for his own clients, until he concludes their cases and is able to focus only on work for ‘the family.’ Further, the agreement spelled out with extreme clarity that when work for the Marcellas family businesses overlaps or conflicts with those, Martin would prioritize the Marcellas’ work.

What would have been boilerplate in another contract, anything but in this one. Violation or disclosure of information about his work with the Marcellas family, their clients, staff, or others with whom he may come into contact or any information he received directly or indirectly while working for the family, yada, yada, until “. . . will be cause for immediate separation and other

recompense to the family, as deemed appropriate solely by Marcellas family leaders based on the specific violation and its impact on the family's business priorities." Martin was under no illusion about what that meant.

But the compensation was extraordinary. His responsibilities: observe, research, and investigate. Figured he'd deal with any asks beyond that if—come on now, be real—when they arose.

A dry mouth and nervous signature sure, but an adrenaline-fueled buzz raced through his core when he set the pen down. Live-wire ready to take on whatever Marcellas laid in front of him.



After a morning spent meeting and an afternoon reviewing the contract and making the decision, Martin sat down for his last magnificent meal as a guest at the *Maison du Dauphine*. An intense day. But the menu? Whether true Cajun or Creole, unknown but extraordinary. He chose wood-fired oysters with chili-garlic butter, had a glass of crisp Chablis, then went back to his hotel room to make the call he and Boudreaux discussed. It would transition him into his new position.

Hasapsis answered the call with more irritation than usual.

"It is about time, Bledsoe. You keep me waiting too long. What have you to report?"

"Sorry, boss. It's been a busy couple of days. I finally got the connection." He waited a beat for Hasapsis to say something.

"Do not keep me waiting. Tell me," Hasapsis shouted.

Martin pulled the phone away from his ear, then put it back, and closed his eyes to focus. "The woman you first saw on the stretcher in Bozeman and then at the door of the cottage in that little Michigan town? Ontonagon? With the baby in her arms? That woman is Leanne Fortier. It took a couple of days after I nailed that bit of intel down to find out two additional things. First, two

people are pretty sure they saw your wife. And one of them saw her with the Fortier woman while she was still pregnant, so—”

Aleks interrupted, “And all of this leads us to my wife, exactly how?”

“I’m getting there, boss. The Fortier woman is gone. She left town or didn’t come back to town after the baby was born. Best I can tell so far, she’s gone for good over some kind of family problem that had to do with who fathered the child. No one seems to know where she is. I have a couple of contacts working their networks to find out.”

“Get to the point! How will this get my wife back?”

“Well, Mr. Hasapsis, I’ve confirmed that your wife and Fortier connected here in Delareau. We already know they both used the same jet owned by your wife’s friend, Sondra Cervantes. Clearly, your wife called Cervantes and got the Fortier woman out of Delareau to Bozeman. Your wife’s adopted family inherited the property in Ontonagon. It appears she played a role in Fortier being located there too. I’m confident that as soon as I can track down Fortier, I’ll have a new lead on where your wife is.”

Aleks was silent. Martin waited a beat but received no acknowledgment of his work, and of course, no praise for the progress he’d made.

“Here’s what I propose: I have some work I need to do for another client. I can do it from anywhere. It could take a week or so for the leads I’ve put out to come back with a location for the Fortier woman. I’ll shut off the day rate charges and work on the other case, but you reimburse me for hotel and food while I wait here for my sources to get back to me, and—”

“You want me to pay for your upkeep while you do another client’s work? Do not be ridiculous. Your upkeep is your problem. When you have something else on my case, let me know what it is.

If I think it is worthy of spending more time and money on, I will authorize additional charges.”

Martin smiled. The offer worked like a charm; he was off the hook for a professional conflict of interest.

He sighed heavily into the phone as if it were a burden. “I understand, Mr. Hasapsis. I’ll be in touch when my sources get back to me. Keep in mind, it could be a week or two.”

“Of course it could. But if you learn anything at all relevant to my case, call me immediately. Especially if you come up with anything at all that offers proof Mia is dead. Or alive. Anything that will affect the court case.”

“Certainly, sir.”

Hasapsis hung up without saying goodbye.

Martin exhaled a quick laugh, more relief than humor.

Now, on to his first assignment for Marcellas. He would go to Ontonagon, Michigan, find the Smithtons’ house, and introduce himself to Claire Smithton, Chiara Blackwell, and Blackwell’s driver. Boudreaux didn’t give him a name, but Martin was pretty sure he knew who it was.

Boudreaux’d also told him, “On your way out of the hotel tomorrow, pick up a package at the front desk. There’s a phone with an app on it you’ll need when you get to Ontonagon and keys to a vehicle that’ll get you there. It’ll be parked out front of the hotel. There’s more to tell you, but I’d rather brief you during the drive. When you get on the road, ping me, and we’ll set a time for you to listen while you drive.”

As he brushed his teeth, he heard his phone ping.

Hey Dad! A on the big exam I told you about!
Knew you’d be worried, which hopefully, now
you’ll stop doing!

Martin knew better than to respond seriously. He thumbed the word ‘good’ followed by the poop emoji. Rinsed his mouth and went to bed less worried about his son’s education than he’d been in a very long time.

But sleep didn’t come quickly. The long-term consequences of working for South Louisiana’s version of the mob? He held his hand out in front of him. Even in the dark he could see it shake.

CHAPTER 12

*January 23: Ricardo Orzmondo
Aboard the MV Bremen Voyager in the Atlantic Ocean,
East of Delaware*

Ricardo Orzmondo hated being cold but was too grateful to be alive to complain. Grateful he'd planned an escape route from Brazil before he went undercover. Grateful the boat in which he'd stowed himself would reach New York Harbor soon. And especially grateful that he'd held his emergency plan closer than the rust eating the steel bulkhead against which he lay. Not another living soul knew where he was. He shivered and pulled the blankets closer. Ricardo calculated he'd been on the run and in hiding almost a month since something, or someone, blew his cover on December 27.

The first week he spent in the Brazilian wilderness traveling east on dirt roads and trails via rickety buses, wagons, and once a donkey, all the way from the cartel's compound to the Port of Santos. There, he identified a container ship fully loaded and ready to leave for New York Harbor. He chose the *Voyager* for its straight shot to New York and its preponderance of Brazilian crew; the Portuguese he'd learned for the assignment retooled to release him from it. The trip would take twenty to thirty days. From there he'd find a Seawaymax icebreaker through the St. Lawrence Seaway to Duluth-Superior Harbor. Using his alternate ID, he hoped to take

that leg of the journey as part of the crew, with a bunk, bathroom privileges, and hot food on a regular basis. But, to get from the harbor to the safe house? Maybe a dependable beater purchased with cash. Even with a fake ID, there's no way he'd risk renting a car to make the last leg to Canada. Ricardo knew the Maple Leaf provided better cover than the 'look at me' Stars and Stripes.

In Port of Santos, filthy rucksack on his back and a hat pulled low, he'd used the blank canvas of his unremarkable Latin features to put himself in the middle of a chaotic group of intoxicated crew members rushing aboard in the very early morning at the last minute of shore leave. Peeling off carefully from the group, he slipped shadow to shadow until, down in the hold, he'd found a small space where four containers met unevenly, creating a half-wall empty space in the bow perfectly sized for a one-man sleeping bag. Their tamper-resistant security seals more likely to remain untouched by crew until the ship reached New York.

Roughed up from three weeks in the wild and dressed in used crew clothing he'd purchased before boarding, Ricardo kept his head down and his mouth shut except for the occasional one-word response, moving with a seaman's plodding boredom, as unremarkable as any other crew member, through hallways to galley, garbage rooms, and the head to find food, deal with bodily necessities, and occasionally wash himself.

The first two weeks, the Southern Hemisphere summer made his home in the bow a humid, oil-smelly sauna, but still cooler and safer from crew than in the stern near the engines. As the ship sailed further north into colder wind and water, he slid quiet and quick as the rats he shared space with around midship containers, a tiny penlight in hand, and found a few that weren't locked. In one, he found winter clothing and home goods, pulled a couple of heavy outfits and blankets out of separate boxes, then restored order to hide his theft.

In his rucksack, along with a couple of tees, one extra pair of pants, a bag of cash, and ID materials, were two ragged books he'd picked up somewhere: a Spanish edition of *Moby Dick*, the classic by Herman Melville, and *Red Sparrow* by Jason Matthews, in English. He loved them both but regretted the fantastic meals Matthews described. His mouth watered imagining the meals he and Chiara prepared together when their time off allowed it.

With little to do while underway, boredom opened the door to its best friend—rumination. He focused on his two greatest fears: First, that someone within the FBI betrayed him. In one exhaustive examination of events after another, it was simply the only explanation that made sense. Second, that he hadn't heard from his wife. And if the betrayer gave the cartel his real name, they would go after her to lure him back. And to punish him. Before killing them both.

Thinking back to the instructions he'd given Chiara about leaving voicemails, he prayed she'd remember; had left her a message almost every day. He'd urged her to leave messages on his burner phone and to share nothing he told her with anyone. Even the FBI. That he hadn't yet heard from her, even with her intense focus on work, left him stunned. Sometimes terrified. It was impossible she hadn't noticed how long it'd been since he'd checked in. It only partially relieved his anxiety that no one else had called his burner. Could mean the FBI didn't have Chiara's phone or access to her voicemail either. At least not yet.

He scratched another mark on the wall of the container—his twenty-first of endless rocking. The makeshift nest he'd built like a crow in the bow, both safe haven and prison. And the lulling, timeless void without day or night and storms the only break in the monotony. He pulled the two books out of his bag. "Which of you will distract me now?" he whispered.

It would be another twelve hours before he could reclaim his phone from the cubby where it was charging. He opened the Melville and closed his eyes. Prayed he would hear Chiara's voice.

***January 23: Mia and Chiara Arrive
Ontonagon, Michigan***

Mia and Chiara stood at the front door of Claire Smithton's massive log and stone lodge-style house—two snow-dusted dumplings in their puffer coats.

Claire Smithton opened the door and gasped. "You girls! Oh my goodness, get in here!" Standing on the rug in the foyer, Claire shut the door and pulled Mia—snowy jacket and all—into a bear hug.

Mia closed her eyes and leaned into the hug like it was the last one she might ever get. She came closer than she had in a long time to shedding tears. Instead, she opened her eyes and let her heart swell to see the familiar mountain retreat setting she'd left a few months before. The rustic wood floor and deep leather sofas and chairs contrasted with the sophisticated piano in the corner near the stone fireplace. Mia's fists relaxed and she flexed her hands. She felt safe for the first time since she'd met Chiara in the ladies' room at the Threefoot Hotel in Meridian.

"Claire, this is Chiara Blackwell, she's—"

Claire let out a little inhale of surprise and looked across Mia's shoulder at her new guest. "Chiara Blackwell? You're the sculptor?" She closed her eyes a moment to think. "The one whose outdoor work plays with light, right?"

It was Chiara's turn to gasp. Chiara focused on getting her backpack off as she spoke. "Well, Mrs. Smithton, I—"

"Claire, dear, just call me Claire."

“Claire, I’m sure I’m not the only sculptor whose work plays with light, but if you know that about my work, then I’m grateful you noticed.”

Claire laughed. “One of the reasons I leave Ontonagon when I do is to get out into the world, listen to music, and see art that isn’t available in our little township. I believe you have a lovely piece in front of . . . is it an investment building? In Minneapolis?”

“Yes. Not as well known as *Spoonbridge and Cherry*, but I am honored that you noticed *My Kite*.”

“Chiara, how you got that piece of bronze to look so light and delicate? I mean, it appears that a good gust of wind will lift it right up into the sky. And the angles you chose. I’ve seen it all four seasons, and in each one, the light draws my eye to a different element.”

Mia felt Claire let go; hated having Claire let go. Started working her arms out of her black backpack and Michelin Man puffer coat.

Claire continued, “It’s just amazing.”

Mia watched Chiara look down at her feet. She could feel Chiara’s discomfort. “Chiara, you really need to move past how hard it is for you to accept praise. Channel that energy that allows you to kick bad guys in the face and break their noses, and toughen up enough to just accept it.”

Chiara looked up, blushing. But she stood a little straighter, took a deep breath, looked at Claire, and said in a stronger voice, “Claire, thank you for those kind words. My mother was Nakota, from Montana. She taught me to see how light moves across the land through the seasons. I think that shaped everything I do.”

Claire nodded and said, “Delicate beauty and you kicked a man, a bad guy as Mia says, in the face and broke his nose?”

“Well, I was being kidnapped at the time. It just, well, happened. Reflex maybe? Years of taking martial arts off and on. Feels more like my body did it for me before I even had time to think.”

“That’s simply outstanding in my book. A girl has to defend herself.” She looked down at the two backpacks, snow melting on the rug they were sitting on. “Let’s leave those bags right there. I got your text a few hours ago, Mia. I have some stew on the stove. Perfect thing to warm you two up before I get you sorted upstairs.”

Chiara and Mia murmured their thanks as they removed their boots. Claire spoke over her shoulder to them as she headed toward the kitchen. “Whatever the story is, I cannot wait to hear it.”

They sat down at the kitchen table, and as Claire served them, Mia saw the worry in her eyes. But she didn’t ask about it. She figured if she wanted to get Mia and Chiara out of her house in a hurry, she’d let her know. The three women ate and told Claire the story.



Settling in, taking long showers, and waiting for that still-on-the-road buzzy feeling to go away made the afternoon languorous. And fidgety. Mia felt out of balance. Like another shoe might drop. Finally, around 9:00 p.m., she could stand it no longer. With Chiara in bed with a book, Mia padded down the hall to Claire’s bedroom. The older woman sat at her writing desk and appeared nowhere near ready for bed.

Mia tapped on the door frame.

“Come in, come in,” Claire said, and patted the seat of a small chair positioned by the desk for just such moments. She put down the paper she’d been holding and looked at Mia.

“It seems like you’re worried in a way that you weren’t when I was here before. I just want you to know that if Chiara and I need to get out of here, if you can give me a day or two to get organized and hopefully get the package with Chiara’s new passport in it . . .”

Claire put a hand up.

"No, Mia. That's not what's going on at all." She stood up and started pacing. "It's something else entirely."

Mia sat back in the chair. Her quizzical look asked the question.

"What I'm going to ask you may seem disconnected from all that's going on, but if you trust me, maybe just humor me and go with it?"

Mia leaned forward slowly and gestured with open hands. "What's not to trust?"

Claire let out a breath and offered a half dubious, half smile.

"Let's start with what you remember about your childhood."

Mia straightened up in the chair abruptly as if slapped. She closed her eyes and wilted until her elbows rested on her knees and she held her head in her hands, face completely hidden. The big question. Again. No question on the planet felt more defeating. Was there even one single adult in the whole of her life who hadn't asked her that question? And 'nothing' the answer that always came first. She almost said it to Claire. Nothing. But perhaps Claire Smithton, of all people, deserved better.

"Not very much, Claire." Mia stood up, exhaled exhaustion tinged with defeat. "And nothing from actual experience; I mean, that I can recall firsthand. Mostly just bits that I remember being told here and there. And some of that, after so many years, is iffy." She stepped over to Claire and took her hands in hers. "It's something I don't think about and almost never talk about. But because it's you asking, I will tell you what I can." She smiled sadly. "But if it's okay with you, let's talk about this in the kitchen tomorrow morning with a cup of your fantastic coffee."

Claire pulled her into a quick hug. "That's a good idea, Mia. You get some sleep. I'll have the coffee ready when you get up in the morning."

Mia shuffled slowly to her bedroom, a low-level roil in her stomach and her mind. It didn't occur to her to ask Claire why she wanted to know.

January 24: Sensitive Information
Ontonagon, Michigan

Claire held a warm cup of coffee close to her heart and stared at a manila folder on the kitchen counter. She'd not slept well. Her body ached from tossing and turning. Her mind hurt from going over and over various ways to approach Mia with the information she had. As if summoned by her worries, she heard footsteps coming down the stairs.

"Morning."

"Good morning, Mia," Claire said, her voice warm and soft. She could see the dread in Mia's whole body; shoulders drooping, eyes avoiding contact. "That pot is fresh. Get one of the big cups and help yourself."

Mia pulled up the ratty sweatpants she wore as pajamas and tried to put a smile on her face. Claire thought she almost did it.

"Thanks."

She watched the younger woman fill the cup, take her time adding cream, and without making eye contact, shuffle back to the kitchen table and sit. Claire kept quiet.

Mia looked up. "There's not much to tell." She put the cup to her lips. Sipped. "I mean, as far as what you asked me about what I know or what I remember. I have something like, um . . . glimpses of things, and I don't know whether they're real or things I've made up based on . . ." Her voice faded as if someone had slowly turned down the volume.

Claire waited a few beats. “Dreams?” Her voice as soft as she could make it.

“Maybe?” Mia drank more coffee as she thought. “The clearest early memory I have is when I was seven or eight years old. Jessi and I were playing with dolls or maybe doing homework.” She looked up at Claire. “Do you have homework when you’re seven or eight? I don’t know. Anyway, we’re sitting on the floor with stuff spread around us.” Mia drew into herself as she spoke.

“Mia, let me ask the question a different way.” Claire paused for a moment, swallowed anxiety, and spoke carefully. Her young friend’s life might depend upon it. “What do you know about your early life? By know, I mean, verified. Know based on records that you’ve seen or anything Jessi’s mom—”

“Susan. Susan Avery,” Mia supplied, looking down at her cup again.

“Yes, something Susan, or even Jessi, told you.”

Mia shook her head. Let out a soft snort. “Claire, as far back as I can remember, even in school, the kids in Beta Club and in Art Club, they made a game of asking me questions about the past because I could never remember. They’d ask about things that happened at school a year or two before. I’d have nothing, and they’d laugh. Sometimes I’d make up stuff to keep from saying ‘I don’t know’ and they’d laugh. But bottom line? It’s like my brain does a permanent data dump when it thinks I don’t need something anymore.” She looked up. “I remember pretty much everything when it comes to a client’s history and the work we do for them.” A little pride in her voice; the beginnings of a genuine smile on her face. “I can remember what a vendor charged the company for a camera or a lighting tech; the dot on the map where I found the perfect location for a scene, you name it, five, even ten years ago. The details of a client’s creative brief and the strategy we came up with—I’ve got savant-like clarity on that. But things that happened with people

and places at home or vacations? Social events or dates I had in school? Especially if it's unpleasant?" She completed the thought with another quick shake of her head.

Claire thought for a moment. "Susan didn't tell you anything? Or you don't remember what she told you?"

"Probably both. I remember Susan told me we met at a park when I was really little. But she didn't know our names. Susan didn't remember—wait—or was it she never knew my mom's name? Only met at the park once or twice." Mia squinted, closed her eyes for a few seconds, then opened them again, shaking her head. "But, anyway, somehow my mom got Susan's name because whoever found me found a note with Susan's name and the words Northern Virginia on it. I don't know where. In my pocket or something."

"And your name? Do you know how you got your name?"

Mia pressed her lips together, thinking. "There's a birth certificate. My mom's name, Janet Evanescence, is on there. Says I was born in Idaho to an unmarried woman, I think? Or maybe it just didn't list a married name for her. Only a maiden name."

"Didn't you tell me that your friend Jessi, that it's her mom's cottage? The place you and Leanne were staying before your husband"—Mia flinched as if hurt by the words—"before Aleks found you two?"

Mia took a deep breath and canted her head in confusion. "Yeah, but . . ."

Claire waited to see if she'd get the connection. Mia didn't; she went on. "I'm thinking it might not have been the first time you were in that cottage." Mia cocked her head. Confused. Even doubtful.

Claire got up and refilled her coffee cup. When she sat back down at the table, she saw a new awareness in Mia's expression. She touched the manila envelope and said, "I want to tell you what's in

this envelope. After I tell you, you will be one hundred percent in charge of what happens next. Okay?"

Mia gave her a single nod. Tried to smile.

Claire pushed the envelope slowly across the table and said, "Or you can just open it." She drank a little coffee and watched Mia stare at the envelope as if a poisonous creature might jump out of it.

"Tell me. First, just tell me."

"Okay. Remember when you were here in the fall and I mentioned something unpleasant had happened in that cottage you and Louanne were in?"

Mia squinted her eyes and looked up at the ceiling. "Uh, well, no. Not really." She paused a beat. "Things were pretty crazy during that time, so . . ." She shrugged.

"Well, that memory just kept tapping me on the shoulder. After you left, I wondered about a possible connection. You told me that you fainted when you and Louanne first stepped into Jessi's family's lake cottage down the road. I went to the Township Library and started looking through old newspapers. It took a couple of weeks, but I found something. A story about what happened, and two photos."

Mia looked up at Claire, who saw the question and didn't make her ask it.

"I printed the stories I could find. And the photos. I think one is of you at about three years old, and the other is of your mother. But the photo of your mother is really a drawing." Claire watched tears fill Mia's eyes.

"I've never seen a photo of my mother. I tried one time, when I was a teenager, but never found one. It was as if she never existed. So even a drawing would be something, uh, pretty incredible." Tears spilled down her face as Mia stared at the manila envelope. "I mean, if it's really her." She wiped her face. "And me, I guess." She looked up at Claire. "I'm scared to open it, Claire."

“If it helps, the artist who did the drawing did a good job. She drew her smiling.”

*January 24: Sam and Michael Arrive
Ontonagon, Michigan*

“Oh. My. God.” The disgusted tone with which Michael expressed his reaction to the Township of Ontonagon, and more specifically the place they’d be staying, told Sam everything she needed to know about what it would be like to stay here with him. You’d think someone had offered him raw reindeer meat. Motor running, they parked in front of the Superior Lake Cabins resort. It was dark, but the blue-bright reflection of ambient light on the snow made it feel twilight-ish.

That rustic log cabin look, precisely the slow-down vibe get-away she craved when she had time to take a vacation. Still trying to keep the peace with her temporary partner, she decided not to give him a hard time.

“Let’s get in there, Michael. Get checked in. You might find the rooms much more to your liking than the exterior would suggest.”

“There’s probably a moose head on the wall,” he said.

Sam laughed. “You might be right but look on the positive side. They’re usually mounted high and heat rises. You can rinse out your underwear and hang them on the antlers to dry quickly.”

Michael rolled his eyes.

His boots crunched behind hers on the icy tunnel sidewalk between four-foot-tall walls. Her Midwest, winter-tested, old Gore-Tex fleece-lined parka, snow pants, and Sorel boots were a muted, practical contrast to Michael’s colorful puffer jacket and matching slim-fit snow pants. His fashionably faux-fur accented winter

boots were lightweight; the crunch of his footfalls like walking on Rice Krispies marshmallow treats. Sam shook her head. Pretty sure they were from Target.

In the lobby, Michael's grunts and moans mirrored humans who, for millennia, expressed the simultaneous hurt and pleasure of frozen parts warming. Drawn like a magnet to the giant fireplace, he followed behind. Neither stopped at the front desk.

"Ohhhh," Michael sighed. "That feels wonderful!" Hands behind his back toward the fire, his eyes were closed in rapture. Sam said nothing but stood in front of the fireplace in the same position. As she warmed up, she went back to the case.

"That sedan I thought our guys were driving? Did you see it any time in the last few hours?"

"No. But since they know our car, I suspect they followed at a professionally discreet distance, so I didn't expect to." He was quiet for a moment; Sam tried to think of anything else she could ask. But Michael spoke first.

"They could be at this hotel, or plan to be, and we wouldn't know it." He waited a beat and turned to her. "Yet."

Sam nodded in agreement. They were at a disadvantage. But she was from a small town and, indicating an idea, she put her finger to her lips and stepped over to the front desk. Michael followed, a question in the frown lines of his face.

The young man at the front desk smiled at them. "Checking in?"

Sam answered for them both. "Yes, two adults, two separate rooms. Jackson and Stone."

"Got it. You want a door between your rooms?"

"No!" Sam and Michael answered at once, causing the front desk clerk to step back. Then he laughed.

"You betcha! No easy access for you two." Pecked at a keyboard and eventually pulled out two keys and presented them with a

flourish. “You two sort it out. I don’t want to be in the middle of any fights about who got the best room.”

Michael pushed Sam aside and stepped forward. “What do you mean? What constitutes the ‘best’ room in this place? The one with or without the moose head?”

Sam closed her eyes and prayed for patience while trying not to laugh at the confused look on the clerk’s face.

The clerk said, “Well, for sure, they’re all good. But what’s best? That all depends on what’cha like.”

Sam read the clerk’s name tag and noticed the beaded leather bracelet that hinted at a tribal background. With her small-town upbringing near native people, no way should Michael be the one who takes the lead here. She took the key from his left hand and asked, “Migizi?”

Michael tried to jump in, not done sussing out the best room, but Sam kept talking. “Michael and I are federal agents.” She pulled out her ID and held it up for inspection.

Michael huffed in resignation and took the other key from Migizi.

The clerk’s almond-shaped eyes opened wide. He nodded reverently. “There are a couple of people, men, who followed us here. And I wonder if you’d be willing to help me find out whether they’re staying here at your lovely establishment.”

Migizi’s breathing sped up just enough to show excitement. He pulled his eyes off the ID and looked back and forth from Sam to Michael, thinking. Sam waited patiently.

“Sure. You got it. Are they, well, you know, bad guys? I mean, we don’t really want criminals here in any of our rooms. But, you know, how would I know?”

“I noticed there were only a few motels around here, right?”

“Yes, ma’am. There are two that most people use this time of year. The other is closed during the worst of winter, though the

family that owns it will open a couple of rooms if it's someone they know or if we call because there are too many people in town and we're booked." He stared at Sam and she waited. When he didn't speak again, she smiled at him, a gentle encouragement to go on.

"Yeah, that doesn't happen very often, of course. And, right now, just the two."

"Well, here's what I'm thinking. If you look at your register, or if you can let me look at it, we could see if anyone else plans to check in today or will tomorrow, that might look, you know, suspicious." She rushed to add, "I don't mean they'd look suspicious to you. They are professional enough to pass for regular folks, if you know what I mean."

Just as Sam hoped, the idea of helping transformed Migizi's fear into eagerness. She watched him shift his weight from one foot to the other and fiddle with his computer mouse as he weighed being an exemplary employee against assisting a couple of FBI agents.

"Just so you know, I'm not supposed to show anyone the guest register or anything like that."

But Sam had bigger fish for him to fry. First, she assured him of her intentions.

"Ah. Well, I don't want to get you in trouble. But if you can tell us whether you have any other groups of two, maybe reserving different rooms like Michael and me, or maybe they'll share a room. They'd be checking in this evening or tomorrow morning. And the names might be Latin."

Migizi nodded. "As long as I don't give out any names." He looked back at his computer screen, and after about fifteen seconds, the nods became negative.

"No, I have two families checking out, a couple of other families checking in, and I have one guy checking in tomorrow." He looked up from the computer, an eager puppy having just returned the ball. "The last name is not Latin."

“Oh, Migizi, I can’t tell you how helpful that is. You’re from around here, right?”

He smiled with pride. “Grew up right here. On the reservation. I’m taking online college classes now. Not sure what the future holds, but education.”

Sam nodded and smiled to acknowledge his ambition. “You probably know most of the folks, maybe who’s working the desk at the other hotel?”

Migizi pressed his lips together, his wrinkled brow a study in concentration. “You’re asking if maybe Boyce could look at his register?”

Sam kept smiling and nodded.

“Before I call him, any other information? Descriptions you can give me?”

Michael stepped away, zipped his parka, and headed toward the door. She heard him muttering like a resistant fourteen-year-old boy told to take out the garbage. All she could make out was ‘get the suitcases’ and ‘four fucking degrees.’ Sam gave Migizi what little information she had.

*January 24: Jorge and Arturo Arrive
Ontonagon, Michigan*

Arturo pulled into a motel parking lot about five miles south of the Township of Ontonagon.

“Yooper Rocks Inn,” he said out loud. “Yooper?”

“I do not know, Arturo. And it matters not. We do not have to know what it means to sleep there.”

“You are right, but I thought you might have run into it before.”

“No. I’ve never been this far north.”

Arturo said, “Maybe it is another word for cold.” He looked out the windshield of the sedan they had driven from Meridian, Mississippi, at something he had never seen before; not just snow, but snow-tunneled walkways. A thin layer of excitement wrapped a deep-down kernel of dread he had had since he had started working with Jorge. He shivered. Wondered why Jorge did not. Perhaps he was hardened to whatever a job threw at him.

Jorge’s voice had a gravelly, exhausted edge. “You said the federal agents are stationary, about two miles up the road. Let’s check in and get some sleep.”

Arturo opened the car door, glad for the inexpensive winter wear they had purchased at a Walmart the day before. He thought the shiny nylon of the coats and snow pants looked expensive and wondered why his hands still felt cold in the gloves.

At the front desk, fake IDs shown and cash paid for four nights, Arturo took both keys to the room (a double with two queen beds). As they carried their bags down the first-floor hall toward the room, Arturo heard the desk clerk answer the phone.

“Migizi! What’s shakin’ up the road?”

*January 25: Martin Arrives
Ontonagon, Michigan*

Boudreaux had assigned Martin a four-wheel-drive SUV, a mercy once he got off the main roads and had to negotiate secondary and tertiary roads covered in snow as dry and slick as the agreement he’d signed with the man two days ago. The data dump he’d received about the situation—FBI and South American drug cartel players all headed in this direction—certainly described a potential need for more than just the investigative and research tasks.

Sounded exciting. But unlikely. Until he saw the armory he was carrying around. The variety of weapons and very impressive kit sparked a frisson of fear at the base of his spine.

Martin found the coat he'd brought with him to New Orleans from Washington, DC, too lightweight to deal with the temps in the UP. He did some shopping at a Tractor Supply on the outskirts of Minneapolis. He'd left Minneapolis around 4:00 a.m. and planned the five-hour drive to Ontonagon, hoping to knock on Claire Smithton's door midmorning.

When he rang the bell at Claire's house, he stood at her front door feeling huge and awkward in a parka as heavy as the backhoe that wore the same Caterpillar logo. He was aware, however, that the major source of his discomfort was about meeting Mia after supporting her husband's efforts to find her.

Claire answered the door and stared.

"Ms. Smithton?" Claire remained silent. "My name is Martin Bledsoe. Boudreaux Marcellas sent me."

The formal tone with which she answered made perfect sense. "I'm Claire Smithton. I was expecting someone, but I still need to see your ID."

Martin pushed the hood of his jacket off his head with one hand so she could get a good look at him; pulled his ID out of a jacket pocket with the other. Smiled as he held it up.

She nodded and stepped back so he could come in. "Thank you, Mr. Bledsoe."

He struggled out of the coat and looked around for somewhere to put it. "Please, ma'am, call me Martin."

Claire took the coat and put it on a hook by the door. As she did, Martin pulled a cross-body bag over his head. "I have even more important ID documents in here." He patted the bag. Smiled again, and finally—apparently convinced—she smiled back. Bright

and warm enough to take the chill out of his bones. She shouted toward the stairs.

“Mia! Chiara! You girls can come on down now. Boudreaux’s associate Martin is here with the goods.” She looked at Martin and added, “Whatever that means.”

“Oh, I think they’ll be . . . well, you obviously care about them too. You’ll all be thrilled with what I have here.”

“I’m glad to hear that, Martin. Call me Claire. I’ve got coffee in the kitchen if you’d like some.”

Nice people offering him coffee, not a common occurrence in his previous day-to-day work. He smiled his surprise and said, “That would be wonderful, Claire.”

CHAPTER 13

*January 25: Sam and Michael
Ontonagon, Michigan*

Sam stepped into Michael's hotel room. No moose head on the wall. Small favors: no rant either.

"What do we have?" he asked, wrinkling his nose in distaste as he sipped cheap coffee from a paper cup.

"No more sightings reported after Blackwell's vehicle crossed the M-64 bridge headed south. It's the only traffic camera in Ontonagon."

Sam exhaled relief. She wasn't ready to find the woman just yet. Paced the room, window to door and back. Restless and jittery, thinking how this long-ass road trip was making her feel as if they were out to capture someone they were supposed to protect. As if Orzmondo's wife were a target. It made her itchy under the base layer she wore. She looked at Michael sitting at the tiny desk in this hotel room, appearing relaxed and excited.

"Two things now."

"Yeah?" She looked away but listened carefully.

"They sent us a photo of Blackwell and someone we can't identify yet in that older gray or silver SUV. A Nissan with a temporary plate on it. Maybe Montana, maybe Nebraska. Doesn't matter. Temporary plates look pretty much the same, and there can't be more than one of them in this tiny little town. Right?"

Sam stopped pacing and stared. The man was actually smiling. Countered his enthusiasm with a cop-flat affect. "Number two?"

"Migizi left me a message before he went home. We're gonna drive south and have some coffee at the motel where someone 'foreign'—his words, not mine—checked in shortly after we did last night. They should stand out enough that we'll see them. And not let them know we see them."

"You want them to follow us?"

"How else do we know for sure who they are? Visit some places, chat a few folks up, pay attention to who's following. In a day or two, we find Blackwell and take her in. More likely, we find her, they swoop in to grab her, and we take them down. Either way, a win for us."

Sam heard a buzzing. Michael looked at his phone and put his finger up. He left the room to take the call.

An hour later, Sam had to admit it worked exactly as Michael described. They drove to the other motel and asked for a table in the Yooper's dining room. The huge stone fireplace in the rustic room easily pushed the temp up to almost hot. They removed their winter coats before sitting down. As they did, Sam and Michael made a big deal of it, ensuring everyone got a look at their East Coast, government-type, off-the-rack suits that reeked 'federal agents.'

The room smelled of Northwoods pine, medium roast grocery-store brand coffee, and the morning soap of a few other diners. They kept their conversations low.

They ordered breakfast sandwiches with coffee, pulled out phones, and focused on the screens for a few minutes. Sam put her phone down and looked around. A spike of anxiety when she saw them: two men at a table in the back of the room. They stood out like sore thumbs. Probably as much as two government agents.

The server placed their sandwiches and coffee on the table. Sam took her time eating and forced herself not to look at the South Americans again.

It only took half an hour for them to finish their food and leave. Ten minutes later, Michael said, "Let's start at the coffee shop in what they refer to here as 'downtown.'"

January 25: Awaiting Instructions
Ontonagon, Michigan

In a white sedan parked in a far corner of the snow-piled lot, Arturo alternately watched Jorge, who reclined in his seat behind the wheel, eyes closed against the full-blast glare of sun on snow, and the parking lot. He had scraped a scrim of frost from the passenger-side windshield through which he watched for the two feds to leave. Tucked the toes of his new boots as close to the heat vent as he could get them. But even with heat flowing, Arturo was cold to his core. He thought about home, playing *pau na lata* with friends; the sun hot, and . . .

Jorge's question dragged him from the memory. "What is our instruction for the day, Arturo?"

"They are providing two sets of instructions."

Jorge turned toward Arturo and opened his eyes. "Tell me."

Arturo read:

Be prepared to remain for several days. When not following the feds, maintain a low profile and observe on your own. If the woman is found, use the sedative, head to Minneapolis, and advise.

He then read the second instruction.

Follow feds. If they find her, stand by for handoff.
You will be assisted.

He looked up again. "What does that mean, Jorge?"

"It means what it says, Arturo. Someone else will assist us in taking her from the federal agents."

"We are following the agents and someone else is following us?"

"Arturo, we are two of many who work for our organization. They tell us nothing we do not have to know. If someone else is here, or coming here, they may have a relationship or access that we do not have. And that we are safer if we do not know about."

Arturo had played soccer growing up, so he had trouble understanding why a team would not know all its members. "But working together—"

"Are you thick?" Voice tight and harsh, Jorge sat up and turned to Arturo. "As I have told you, you must learn to accept that there is much you will never know. You cannot question. Follow instructions, literally, exactly, thoroughly, and without fail. Then you have nothing to fear. And in this case, I have nothing to fear either."

Arturo swallowed a ball of fear as cold as the icy windshield he anxiously monitored. Fretted with his phone until Jorge spoke.

"They are getting in their vehicle." He looked at Arturo. "You see it on the app?"

"Yes. The tracking device is still working. I see it."

"Good. We will wait a few minutes, remain far behind, and track until they have time to uncover some information."

*January 25: First Stop, Coffee Shop
Ontonagon, Michigan*

Julie heard her old-fashioned brass bell tinkle when the door opened and two people, definitely not locals, stepped into her coffee shop. They both sported dress coats; at least the woman wore the right boots. The man, not so much. She sighed and wondered

if those fancy shoes would mean a lost toe or two. As they headed for the counter, she poured fresh beans into the hopper of a meticulously polished stainless steel espresso machine, popped the lid back on, and made sure the beans made their way into the grinder. She purged the steam wand and greeted them.

“Good morning! What can I get ya?”

She noticed the woman look at her name tag.

“Hi there, uh, Julie. I’m Sam.” She flashed a badge and pointed behind her. “This is my partner Michael, and well, as you can see by the badge, we’re with the FBI.”

Julie looked closely at the badge. She’d never seen an FBI badge before; only James’ deputy sheriff badge. This one was much fancier. Then she looked down at her steam wand. Purged it again for a few seconds while she thought, the hiss of steam reminding her to come across as ‘friendly barista’ instead of ‘suspicious local’ when she looked back at the woman. Sam.

“Well, welcome to Ontonagon, FBI! What can I get started for ya?”

“Actually, Julie, we’re in town looking for a woman we believe is in terrible danger. She’s the wife of one of our agents.”

Julie pressed her lips together. *No way! Mia said her husband was powerful. But the FBI?*

“Oh yeah?” She dimmed the customer service smile. “That’s sad. And a little scary.” Julie looked at the male FBI agent. He looked like he’d already had too much coffee. And he was dying to jump into the conversation. She couldn’t resist the temptation.

“How about you, Agent Michael? You want a coffee to take with you on this search?” It was all the prompt he needed.

“No. What we need to know is whether you’ve had any customers in the last day or two that you didn’t recognize. Or if you’ve heard anything about someone new in town.” He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a photo. Held it up for Julie to see.

She reached out and took it. He added, "She may have changed her hair."

Julie studied the photo. Definitely not Mia. But she was helping someone else when she was in town last fall. Leanne, someone? Better check in with James. Or Claire Smithton to find out more. But no need to lie. "No, sir," Julie said. She pushed the photo back his way. "I have not. But if you have an extra copy you want to leave with me? And maybe a phone number?"

"You can keep that one. And"—he handed her a card—"here's my card. If you see anyone that even remotely looks like this woman, call me."

Sam laid a card down on the counter. "And if you don't get an answer, try me." Julie picked up Sam's card and looked at the woman.

Michael said, "And I just want to point out that if you see her and you don't call us, you could be in for an obstruction of justice charge." Julie tilted her head and squinted her eyes in confusion. She kept her eyes on the female agent who closed hers as if in pain.

"I thought you said she was in danger. Warning me about obstructing justice makes it sound like she's a criminal. Or that you think I'm a criminal."

Sam jumped in, "Sorry about my partner. He's just worried. Technically, obstruction of justice can apply to standing in the way of resolving any investigation. But I'm sure you'd want to let us know if you think you see her or hear anything. She's not in any trouble. I assure you."

Julie nodded her head as if she understood. But the hairs on the back of her neck that had stood up, stayed up.

"Well, I'm gonna give you both a coffee to go. You probably spent the night at one of the only two open hotels this time of year and, my opinion, their coffee is just horrible."

Sam gave Julie a thousand-watt smile. "That's very generous of you. But I'll have to pay you."

“Oh, just leave a dollar in the tip jar, Sam,” Julie said. She turned her back, filled a to-go cup for each of them, and placed them on the counter. “Sweetener and cream options over on the counter.”

Michael picked up a cup. Said ‘thank you’ almost under his breath and practically bounced to the condiment station.

Sam dropped a five-dollar bill in a tip jar. “Thank you, Julie.” Then she mouthed, ‘Call me,’ as she picked up the cup. Julie gave the woman a nod.

When they’d gone, and Julie had a moment between customers, she grabbed her phone and took a photo of the printout. She texted it to James along with a message.

FBI agents in here this morning looking for a woman. Left photo. Creeping me out. Come get some coffee and see.

*January 25: An Early Lunch at Kivi's
Ontonagon, Michigan*

Arturo asked, “Is it too early for lunch?”

Jorge shook his head in amazement. They had waited in their vehicle half a block from the coffee shop on a side street, watching the agents go in and out of several stores. It had not been long since breakfast. “Your nose is almost healed, Arturo. But your continuous hunger is the same.” He opened the driver’s side door. “We will go to that restaurant over there. These agents, they will visit most of these places, and we want them not to see us sitting in the car.”

“Thank you, Jorge. I will keep a close watch on this app. If it appears the vehicle is on the move, I will let you know instantly.”

“Time to pull out the headset, I think.”

Jorge was pleased to see his young apprentice pull a wired headset out of his pocket. And to have him ask the right question for a change.

“Why did you wait until we arrived here to begin listening to them in the vehicle?”

“The more features we use, Arturo, the greater the chance the battery dies. We did not need to hear them until we were close to the woman. Now, when they are in the vehicle discussing what they learn and making plans, we will hear.”

“I’ll put this in one ear so that I can listen to them and to you.”

Jorge tried not to let his shiver show as they crossed the street and walked two blocks up to Kivi’s. The sun was so bright, how could it be so cold?

It was only ten in the morning, but the place was busy. He was not hungry, but the food smelled good. Fresh. Like his grandmother’s kitchen. He looked around. The café was small with a mix of booths and tables, all with tops that reminded Jorge of those in the fake vintage diners he had seen. Except these really were old. He judged most of the people to be workers, much like the people back home in Brazil—rural, rugged people who worked the land and on the water. He and Arturo would fit in here.

In the booth, Arturo pointed to the menu and asked the server, “What about these things? Pasties?”

“Sir, pasties are those little coverings strip club girls wear on their, you know . . .” She motioned vaguely toward her own ample breasts. “PASS-tees,” she pronounced carefully, and grinned, “are a pastry stuffed with meat, potatoes, onion, and rutabaga. And Kivi makes the best.”

Jorge laughed and enjoyed the glowing blush that crept up Arturo’s face.

“I will have one of those, please.”

Jorge said, “Coffee.”

She frowned at Jorge, then turned back to Arturo with a smile.
“No worries. Everyone from south of here makes that mistake.”

Arturo laid his phone on the table where he could watch the app. After a few minutes, he turned up his headset volume.

Jorge felt it in his bones. They would soon make real progress.

CHAPTER 14

*January 25: Martin at Claire's
Ontonagon, Michigan*

Martin sat at Claire's kitchen table, a cup of the best coffee he'd ever had in his life in hand. Even compared to coffee at Café du Monde in the Quarter. The kitchen smelled like hot coffee, good food, and fresh-burning wood. Must be a fireplace somewhere.

His phone vibrated. A text from Boudreaux.

Feds and cartel in town now. Use app Jimmy sent you. Locate and track. Stay and help until all resolved.

He sent a thumbs-up, then enjoyed the coffee as Claire moved about the kitchen and said something about the girls coming down to join them shortly. He didn't know Chiara Blackwell. Or much about her case other than what Boudreaux had briefed him on and what he had to deliver. But he dreaded meeting her 'driver,' who he assumed to be Hasapsis' wife. Conjured by his dread, Mia stepped into the kitchen.

The red hair, familiar from her photos, now short, spiky, and black. Those familiar green eyes glowed with excitement. The weight of having hunted her sat like an elephant on his chest.

“Hi there!” Mia stuck her hand out to Martin. “I’m Mia. And this is my friend, or client? Anyway, the person we’re all helping. Chiara Blackwell.”

Martin set the coffee cup down, stood, and took Mia’s hand. “I’m Martin. It’s nice to meet you.” He reached out to Chiara. “Good to meet you too, Chiara. Though I am sorry for your trouble.”

Chiara nodded as she shook his hand.

“Girls, you two have the rest of this pot and I’ll make another,” Claire said. “Martin, no offense, but you look like you could use another cup or two.”

“I don’t want to impose. But it was a long trip and a short night. But if it’s no trouble . . .”

Mia looked at Chiara and said, “If I’m not mistaken, that package contains the keys to our freedom.” She looked down at the envelope.

Martin pushed it toward Mia and said, “All yours. Boudreaux wanted me to deliver these in person so there was no chance of interception or loss. Also to tell you this: They’ll pass visual inspection with no problem at all. Make sure you use them as normal tourists and avoid situations where officials scan for embedded tech.”

Eager to get a look, Mia and Chiara sat down at the table. Mia slid two small blue booklets out. They each took one, opened them, then simultaneously traded with each other.

Claire brought Mia and Chiara each a cup of coffee. “Let me see!” She leaned over Chiara to see. “Not a bad photo. The pink hair helps a lot!” Chiara looked at her and wrinkled her nose as if she’d smelled something bad.

Martin sat. Remained quiet. Reeling from being in the same room with Mia, he struggled not to stare at her and glanced quickly down when she looked up at him.

Mia slapped the table. “Seeing these passports reminds me: Vikki keeps trying to talk to me about my ID. Seems there’s

something she's worried about with the one I have." She turned to Martin. "Are you supposed to head back immediately?"

He cleared his throat and looked up. "Not immediately. I'm tracking the feds and the South Americans. I'll report to Boudreaux, and, uh, well, hang with you. See what I can do to help here." He looked back down at his coffee cup. Picked it up and took the last sip. "And I can look at your ID materials if you want; maybe see what the concern is."

"Do you have any spook skills?" Mia asked.

He nearly spewed the coffee in shock, picked up a paper napkin, and wiped his mouth. Did she suspect? Know what he'd done before this?

"Sorry about that." He looked at Claire. "Not the coffee's fault. Just swallowed wrong." Then he turned to Mia and looked her straight in the eyes. Waited a beat. Then another. Realized there was no fear or recognition in her eyes. He exhaled in relief that he hoped read simple exhaustion. He smiled and said, "I have some knowledge. About some things. What's on your mind?"

"I downloaded an artificial intelligence program on my burner phone last night. Trying to learn more about how to communicate and travel, you know, incognito. But I read that sometimes AI's answers are not so dependable. I wanted to run this information by someone who has real-world knowledge. Maybe that's you."

***January 24: A Chat with Sye the AI
Ontonagon, Michigan***

The idea of downloading an AI and asking it questions came to Mia the night before. She and Chiara had laid on their backs on Mia's bed, staring at the ceiling.

“Feels kinda like a sleepover, huh? Like when we were in high school or something?”

Chiara smiled. “Yeah, so we should share our innermost thoughts, huh? I’m lying here wishing I hadn’t left my phone behind. That’s the only number Ricardo has.”

Mia bit the inside of her bottom lip. “And you think he might call it?”

“Well, we didn’t talk much about worst-case scenarios. But there was this sort-of plan . . .” She faded off, then turned on her side toward Mia. “When I woke up this morning, maybe something from a dream made me think back. Had Ricardo ever told me what I should expect to happen or what to do or what he would do if, well, anything like this ever happened? I remembered a conversation from a few years ago. He said he would call my cell phone and leave a voicemail letting me know where he is or what he’s doing. Whatever information he could share. And that I should do the same. But I’m scared to call the only number I have for him. I don’t know who else has the phone. And if he’s called mine, I wouldn’t know it because I don’t have my phone. And anyway, I wiped it that night and marked the phone as ‘lost.’”

Mia was quiet for a half minute, then turned on her side to face Chiara. “If something happened, you were supposed to call each other’s phones?”

Chiara half smiled. “Yeah. And we actually did it one time. We were downtown for the Fourth of July fireworks and got separated. It must have been around the time we discussed it because after looking for him for a few minutes, instead of texting him, I called his phone. Just to see what he’d do.”

“Did he answer?”

“No. We figured it out later. He couldn’t hear his ringer . . . lots of noise from everyone partying. But when he couldn’t find me, he was about to text, then saw I’d called. He checked his voicemail.” Chiara sighed. Frowned. “If only it were that easy.”

Mia was quiet. She didn't want to get Chiara's hopes up but thought there must be something she could do. But she wanted to be alone to investigate. She said, "My eyes want to fall shut."

Chiara sighed. "I'm pretty tired too." Mia watched her roll herself fluidly off the bed and stand. The woman moved like water. "Sleep well, Mia."

Mia watched the door shut. Pulled her phone out and searched for AI apps. She read for a few minutes, then downloaded 'Your friendly personal assistant Sye,' created a login, and started chatting.

Sye, can you tell where I'm located?

Sye responded immediately:

As an AI, I can't determine your physical location based on our chat.

Mia:

Could someone break into your system and see that I'm online with you and find me?

Sye:

Technically, it's possible for someone with advanced hacking skills to access information about who is using a particular service, but that is extremely unlikely, Mia. 🛡️ My makers take security seriously and have strong security measures in place to protect users' information. A hacker would have to know you were using this system to even begin. Just to be extra safe, avoid communicating with me using public Wi-Fi networks as they can be vulnerable to hacking. If you're on your own network, make sure it's password protected and encrypted.

It's always a good idea to be cautious and vigilant when it comes to your online activity.

Mia:

No kidding! I'm hiding from someone who's very dangerous. And I have some other questions you can help me with.

Sye:

You bet, Mia! I am here to help and support you any way I can. 🙌 Let's get you through this together. Now, what other questions can I help you with?

Mia:

How do you know my name is Mia?

Sye:

When you registered for your account, you entered your name as 'Mia' and didn't include a last name. So I know to address you as Mia.

Mia:

Okay. I had to ditch my phone, then wipe it, and mark it lost. But I didn't close the account. If someone calls me, where does the call go?

Sye:

When you ditch your phone, wipe it, and mark it lost, depending upon your service providers' policies, incoming calls will usually go straight to voicemail. If you had previously set up call forwarding, the call might be forwarded to the

number you specified. ☞ Remember, if you wiped your phone, whoever finds it won't be able to access any of your data, so they won't be able to use your phone to track you down. That is one less thing to worry about, Mia. 📁

Mia:

You mean if I call my number, I can check my voicemail?

Sye:

That is right, Mia. If you call your old number from a burner phone—any phone for that matter—you should be able to check your voicemail messages. You'll just have to use the voicemail pin or passcode that you set up on your old phone. If you haven't set up a voicemail pin or passcode, don't worry, you can usually reset it by calling your carrier's voicemail service and following the prompts. Don't do this from your own phone. That way you won't inadvertently expose your location to anyone who might monitor your old phone's activity.

Mia:

Can someone have my old number tagged or something so that they could tell I'm calling my voicemail?

Sye:

It is technically possible for someone to have your old number tagged, but it is not likely unless they have access to some advanced

monitoring systems or have a connection with your phone carrier. Even then, they could only see that a number called voicemail, not that it was you specifically. But to be on the safe side, it is a good idea to use a prepaid burner phone for this. Those phones are not linked to any specific account or individual, and they cannot be easily traced back to you. This will help keep you more anonymous.

You can also use different SIM cards or a proxy service or a virtual private network, also known as VPN, when you call your old number. This would essentially mask your burner number by routing your call through a different number.

Mia:

I think proxy services and VPNs are way out of my wheelhouse. But maybe I could buy a bunch of SIM cards and keep trading them out?

Sye:

That's right, Mia! 😊 Buying multiple prepaid or burner SIM cards and rotating them on your burner phone is a more practical and cost-effective option compared to destroying a phone. Using a different SIM card when you make a call will effectively change your phone's number, making it more difficult for anyone monitoring your old phone to link the call back to you. Just remember to be cautious when buying and

disposing of the SIM cards. Don't buy them with your credit card or in a store where you have an account. And dispose of them in a way that's not easily traceable back to you.

Mia:

How can I safely destroy a SIM card?

Sye:

One of the most effective methods is to use a shredder designed for electronics. Another is to use a pair of scissors or a hammer to physically destroy the SIM card, but make sure you wear protective eyewear in case of splinters. You can also scratch off the metallic contact area and cut it up.

Mia:

Can I burn them?

Sye:

SIM cards are not made of flammable materials, so burning them will not be effective, and it could release harmful chemicals in the air. Scratching or cutting the SIM card is a safer and more effective way to destroy it.

Mia:

Scratching and scissors. That's plenty low tech enough for me to handle. Last thing. Is any of this easier to do in Canada or other countries outside the US?

Sye:

In some ways it might be easier to avoid monitoring in Canada or other countries outside of the US. Firstly, Canada and many other countries have stricter privacy laws than the US, which could make it more difficult for someone to track your movements or monitor your phone calls. Additionally, SIM cards are more widely available in many international locations, making it easier for you to swap out your SIM card as needed.

Mia:

I'm concerned about being monitored by a South American drug cartel. Do they have less access to get things done in Canada compared to the US?

Sye:

If you are in immediate danger, you should call the authorities. Would you like me to help you report a crime?

Mia:

No. Can you answer the question hypothetically?

Sye:

Sure, Mia. In general, South American drug cartels may have less of a direct influence in Canada compared to the United States due to distance, stricter border security, and stronger law enforcement. That being said, while drug

cartels may have less of a direct presence in Canada, they do still have the ability to infiltrate the country through criminal networks and middlemen. While you might be safer in Canada, you will still need to be vigilant.

Mia put the phone down, grateful to know she'd come up with something that might work to reconnect Chiara with her husband. And she decided to wait until the morning to call her phone's voicemail.

She got up from the bed and went to the dresser to plug in her phone. And there it was. The envelope Claire handed her that morning. Unopened.

She spoke softly to herself. *You will not ignore this. You will not do your usual thing and forget this.* She straightened her body. Breathed deep, going for strong and relaxed. It didn't work. That she might have been in Ontonagon as a child and that her mother might have died here was too much to deal with right now.

Back in bed, possibilities swirled in, around, and out of her head like slippery fish in a too-small puddle of water, until fully exhausted, she slept.

***January 25: Checking Voicemail
Ontonagon, Michigan***

Back at the kitchen table, Claire poured everyone another cup of coffee. Mia pulled the folded papers she'd printed from the back pocket of her jeans and handed them to Martin. "This makes sense to me, but not everything that makes sense actually works in the real world. You tell me."

Martin nodded his thanks to Claire, took a sip, then unfolded the papers, and took a couple of minutes to read Mia's conversation with Sye.

"Mia, what is that about?" Chiara asked as she walked over to the spread of oatmeal, fruit, and toast Claire had set out for breakfast.

"What you said last night about you and Ricardo calling each other's voicemail."

Chiara turned back toward the kitchen table, eyes wide. "What about it?"

"I wondered if we could still call your voicemail at no risk. Remember, like a long time ago? When there was no visual voicemail that showed up on the phone to read? Or before that when home lines or landlines had voicemail, but you had to call the number from wherever you were to check it? I realized when you brought it up last night, we've been acting as if voicemail lives on the phone itself. And therefore, gone if the phone's gone. But then I thought, maybe not."

She watched Chiara's face morph into an expression so hopeful it hurt to see it.

"It says—this AI I downloaded and used to do some research last night—it's called Sye. It says we can get your voicemail. But I also read that AI hallucinates; like, makes stuff up. I thought Martin should—"

Martin interrupted her. "That's correct, Mia. Have either of you called your phone to check voicemail already?"

Chiara stood stock-still, her face pale. Frozen in shock.

Mia spoke slowly. "Chiara, get your burner. Let's call your old phone and find out what's there." She looked back at Martin as Chiara set her coffee cup on the counter and ran upstairs. "And no, I haven't called mine. The idea just came to me last night when Chiara told me she and her husband had this deal to leave voicemail messages for each other as a kind of emergency plan."

Claire walked over to the table and sat down. "Mia, I'm old enough to remember calling to check voicemail for years. I never thought of this."

Mia walked over to the food. "Well, I tossed my phone into a dumpster the night I rappelled out of the third-floor window of my house. Then I logged in, wiped it, marked it lost, and a few weeks later, logged in from a burner and closed the account. It never occurred to me to check voicemail before I did all that."

Spooning oatmeal into a bowl, Mia looked back at Martin, about to ask another question. She saw the beginnings of a smile on his face. "What?" she said.

Martin looked at her. "What what?"

"You've been so solemn since you got here. But I swear, one side of your mouth is trying to smile."

"Yeah. Um. Well . . ." He looked down, picked up his coffee. Then sat it down and looked up at her. "Yeah, it makes me smile, the idea that you thought to use AI. Very creative. And that you rappelled out of a window. More than creative. I don't know. It just . . ." He paused, looking for words. "To prepare yourself to do that as an emergency option and then have the guts to do it; it just makes me smile."

"But I—" Mia started, then Martin interrupted her. His smile expanded, even as he reassured her.

"Don't get me wrong. It's awful things were so bad you had to do that. But you took your situation seriously. Prepared. And when the time came, you actually did it."

The man sounded as if he were her coach and had some kind of personal stake in her escape. "It's just, well . . . just great, Mia."

Mia's cheeks turned crimson. She started to say something but stopped at the sound of running footsteps on the stairs. Chiara sailed into the room, phone in shaky hand, outstretched to whom-ever would take it.

"I'm too nervous. Someone else dial the number."

Martin said, "Since it's a burner, we can use this phone, Chiara, but we could also call it from Mia's burner."

Claire jumped in, "What about from mine? Should we use my landline? My cell or the sat phone?"

Martin's face crinkled with a sad smile. "I don't think that would be wise, Claire. Your phones are tied to you, and while everyone's staying here with you, that's a location we don't want to risk revealing. Best to only use anonymous burner phones. And if you call very often, change out the SIM cards." He held up the printed pages Mia had given him and said, "Just like the AI said."

Mia got the number from Chiara and dialed it.

January 25: Chiara and Ricardo's Voicemails
Ontonagon, Michigan

Mia watched Claire fuss over Chiara. 'Petting her' Susan Avery used to call it when she'd comfort Mia or Jessi. Chiara ugly cried so loud and hard her body shook; her gasps of relief alternated with angry self-reproach for not having thought to do this days ago. Mia couldn't call them tears of happiness. Not yet. But knowing something was better than knowing nothing and Chiara would get there. Meanwhile, Claire sat and held her on the big leather sofa while ten days of anxiety poured out.

An hour ago, Mia had dialed Chiara's phone number, tapped the speaker, and learned she had thirty-five voicemail messages. The first five or six they listened to were from her assistant back in Washington, DC; after that, one from Michael, basically saying the same thing he'd written in the one email Chiara got shortly after Mia rescued her. Then, it was all Ricardo.

"I know, I know . . ." Claire cooed, smoothing Chiara's hair.

"And in my ignorance, I know, he sounds fine, but I know him. I've scared my husband to death!" Chiara cried.

"Yes, but now we can leave him a voicemail, Chiara. And we will, as soon as you have gotten all this horrible fear and anxiety out. In just a few minutes, you'll call him."

Mia and Martin leaned against the wall, waiting. He murmured, "What an incredible journey. By foot, on donkeys, in carts, stolen motorcycles, a container ship, and still not out of harm's way." Mia heard the admiration in Martin's voice.

They watched Claire and Chiara as the younger woman gained control of herself. When she took one last tissue and blew her nose, Mia said, "Chiara, we need to compose a message for you to deliver to Ricardo. He's done a great job trusting that you're okay. But you'll feel better when you confirm that for him."

"Yes, let me go wash my face. And think about what to say. I'll be right back."

When Claire led Chiara to the bathroom, Mia turned to Martin.

"If I understand the intel, the FBI and the guys trying to kidnap her are all here in town?"

"Yes. My job is to locate and track them all. And, as other plans evolve, to do whatever I can to keep you all out of harm's way. Boudreaux's words, 'Stay until all is resolved.'"

Mia nodded and said, "First we call the burner number Ricardo gave us and leave him a voicemail with Chiara's burner number. Maybe mine too. Just in case."

"Agreed."

"And nothing else yet. I heard so much anxiety in Ricardo's voice. He's got trouble enough, and I don't think we should tell him that the FBI and the South Americans are nearby. At least not in the first message. It'll just distract him from protecting himself. Make him more afraid for Chiara."

Martin looked doubtful for a few seconds. Mia figured he was being a guy, picturing himself being left out of the loop. But then he pressed his lips and nodded agreement. "I wouldn't like it, but it makes sense."

"Now, Ricardo telling Chiara not to tell the FBI anything? When I add that to the FBI not giving Chiara a heads-up in time to protect her from that kidnapping attempt? One plus one definitely equals too suspicious."

Martin nodded his agreement. "Something's definitely not right there."

"I'm thinking he's like us, on the run because he thinks someone blew his cover. If he knows who, he's not saying; we certainly don't know either. But there's nothing any of us can do about it. Not right now, anyway."

"Yes. The only thing we have any knowledge about is on the ground right here in Ontonagon. We know there are two cartel kidnappers and two late-to-the-party FBI agents all looking for Chiara."

Mia nodded; her eyes narrowed as pieces of something like a script floated around her mind. "Exactly." She looked up at Boudreaux's assistant. "It's possible I've seen too many movies, Martin. But I think we need a plan that treats both 'dynamic duos' as the enemy."

As Claire and Chiara came back into the family room, Martin pushed off the wall and followed Mia toward the sofa. "I must've seen the same movies, Mia."

"Chiara, let's write a quick script so you can reassure Ricardo and not break down while you do it. We want him to feel better, not worry more, right?"

CHAPTER 15

*January 25: Boudreaux and Park
New Orleans, Louisiana*

Boudreaux met his longtime associate Park Ellis at the LSU Alumni Center. The locale gave the impression to observers from either of their very different worlds that the meeting was for university business. The tactic had worked well a handful of times in the past; Boudreaux assumed it would this time too.

He observed, not for the first time, how the differences in their physical appearances mirrored the vast difference in their career paths. Boudreaux felt his dark and mysterious Cajun-Creole-French heritage—and criminal career—acutely when he shook hands with the light-skinned, blue-eyed, Southern white boy in his exquisite custom-tailored Luca Falcone suit and humorous crawfish tie—and *his* legitimate law practice. But he took a moment to enjoy the fruits of his recent self-improvement project: the lost weight, the new tailored shirt, and soft leather shoes. The better haircut. The new bounce in his step. Money, he had. But the renewed energy even more precious.

Park's laptop sat on the table. Ellis himself unable to sit still with excitement, had ended the handshake greeting, offered a brief hello, and indicated a seat at the table, facing the screen. He tapped the touchpad and smirked with a hint of savage satisfaction. And pride.

Boudreaux watched the video. Not that he hadn't seen worse. He had. But only among criminals. He reached over and tapped play to watch it again. When it ended, he rubbed his face with both hands; tried to shake off the horror. Dreaded the answer to his next question. "This footage actually existed? That Airbnb has a camera in the room?"

Park answered carefully with a grin. "Well, there's a camera in there now. And the owner's mighty happy to have it. But to answer your real question, no. There was no camera there when Hasapsis harmed our client. It's all magic made by very talented people and some software."

"A deep fake?"

"A deep fake." Park nodded as he sat back down.

Boudreaux closed his eyes for a second and slowly exhaled his relief. Park, seeing the concern, added, "A deep fake, but one that accurately represents what Hasapsis did. If we're gonna talk about ethics—"

"*Mon dieu.*" Boudreaux, grateful to focus on abstraction and set aside the horror of what he'd seen, put up both hands. "I'd be the last to point an ethics finger." He looked askance at the man. "But you're going to use this in court?"

"My God, man! Do you think I'm crazy? I still wanna work a few years if you don't mind! Hell no, I'm not taking it to court."

Boudreaux started nodding. "So, blackmail?"

Park nodded, side to side, and slowly. "Well now that's a harsh word, Mr. Marcellas. I mean, you might have more direct experience in that area than I do." He chuckled. Boudreaux remained quiet. "But since we won't ask for money, or make any direct threats, technically we won't step over that line."

Ellis stood up and paced, looking every bit the attorney making a closing statement. "And I won't enter it into discovery either, it being a deep fake and all. That would be a step too far. Instead, I

reached out to schedule a meeting with counsel for Hasapsis and specified that we meet informally. Just among ourselves. I provided the lead attorney my personal assurances that Ms. Evanescence is alive and well but no longer wishes to be married to Hasapsis and is willing to settle to get him off her back. I let him know we have something material to share that we are certain will clarify things a great deal.”

Boudreaux ran his hands through his hair. “I take it you gave them no indication of Mia’s location?”

“Couldn’t if I wanted to, Boudreaux. You, or whoever’s running this show, are doing a fine job keeping that under wraps. I. Am. Clueless. And . . .” He raised his eyebrows to reinforce his seriousness. “I intend to remain so.”

Boudreaux stood up and smiled at his old friend. “What do you expect to happen?”

“I seriously doubt Hasapsis told his legal team the truth. They may doubt she’s dead, but it’s a reputable firm. They’ll be shocked when they see the video. Of course, they’ll remain noncommittal in the meeting. They may investigate, and if they do, the Airbnb owner has everything necessary to back up the story that the camera was in place on the day in question. And we have a signed nondisclosure agreement from him. I’m told he was happy to help out when he learned what happened on his property.” Ellis poured himself a glass of water and took a drink. “We gave the owner backdated, of course, invoices for the installation. As you well know, it’s the details that’ll come back to bite if you don’t take excellent care of them.”

“Yes.” Boudreaux rubbed his chin, thinking. “You got that show in the cloud somewhere? I’d like Mia to see it. If she will. She’ll be able to point out any obvious weaknesses.”

“Not yet. But I’ll tell you what I can do: I’ll post it on a private server—one that’s outside the firm’s IT systems. And I’ll give you login information for an email account. I’ll create an email, put a

link to the video in it. You, Mia, anyone else who needs to see it can log in and look at it.”

“Wait a minute. Log in? You don’t send the email?”

“No. No sending. It’s a great way for a small group of people to exchange information that needs to be kept out of the digital ether. If it’s never sent, it just sits.”

“Like a draft email?”

“Exactly.” Park’s eyebrows went up as he took on a teacher-to-student tone. “A draft that anyone who logs into the account can access. So be very, very careful about sharing that login information. Right?”

On the elevator down to the parking lot, Boudreaux exhaled a deep breath and considered Park’s confidence that the video would stop Hasapsis in his tracks. He agreed, it would stop something in its tracks. But having met the man in person, he suspected Park was being naive. Weaponizing video—using the very skill Mia had built her life around—to stop Hasapsis? The irony as thick and sweet as cane syrup. Yet in every scenario racing through Boudreaux’s imagination, his intuition told him the same thing. A man who could do to his wife what he’d just watched deep fake Hasapsis do to the actress playing Mia? Remembering what his own mother endured? Boudreaux believed it more likely the Greek would become even more enraged. And find other ways to channel it.

Boudreaux decided Mia would have to prepare for escalation.

January 25: Claire's Kindness
Ontonagon, Michigan

The way Boudreaux had treated him in New Orleans, the respect he'd experienced from Mia and Chiara, and now Claire's kind insistence that he stay with the girls at her house left Martin feeling more than a little off-kilter. He tried, and failed, to protest.

"Not another word about it, Martin. I haven't had the pleasure of meeting this Boudreaux character yet. But I know Robbi and Louanne. Our whole family cares about Mia. And since all these fine folks care about Chiara, and you are on the team, well, then our care just naturally follows. You'll take my son Benjamin's room."

Martin interrupted, "But what if he—" Claire spoke over him.

"Aren't you sweet?" Claire laughed. "He's a grown man now. Has his own home a few miles from here. Come on. I'll show you where to put your things. And while I do, tell me, do you have any children?"

"Yes, I do. I have a son. Peter. He's in college in the Northeast now and doing really well." Martin smiled when he said it, which also felt new. He smiled because his worry about how to pay for it was gone.

They reached the top of the staircase and Claire beamed at him. "Well, congratulations! That is just wonderful. And that room right there"—she pointed to a door in the corner—"is yours for as long as you need it."

Martin felt a lump in his throat. Afraid to speak, he smiled again, nodded. Cleared his throat. "I'll just go down to the car and get my things."

"You do that. Make yourself comfortable. If you need anything, I'm down the hall," Claire said and pointed as she walked to her room.

As he unpacked, Martin thought about the last three days. After years of dealing with hard, angry people full of mistrust and often out for revenge, it was going to take some time to find a new normal. Though working for a criminal syndicate family from New Orleans to take care of two unrelated women trying to escape violence—one from a husband, the other a drug cartel and probably the FBI too? Not much normal about that.

The earthquake-level of change for the better in his job and the grace everyone he'd met the past few days had shown him pushed against his concern that this assignment would be more dangerous than his previous work. Lying in the rustic bedroom's wood-warm decor on a cloud of a mattress between sheets as soft as Claire's good care, Martin fell asleep easily.

January 25: New Communication Protocol
Ontonagon, Michigan

Mia sat in front of her laptop at the small antique desk in the guest room. Her safe room. The old iron headboard would have made it too rustic if it had not been for the soft, sophisticated fabrics Claire used for the bedding and the contemporary art on the log walls. The phone pinged. A text from Boudreaux.

Log in at zoho.com

Username: team.email@zoho.com

PW: Drafts.check

She followed the text instructions and logged in. There was nothing in the inbox, but taking a hint from the password, she saw one email in the Drafts folder.

SUBJECT: Jan 24 from Boudreaux to Mia

Mia, this idea from your esteemed attorney's boss,
Park Ellis. How to use and why? COMMUNICATE AND
NEVER EMAIL.

Email address and login created here because Zoho
less well known. Highly unlikely even very sophisticated
hackers will look here or could find us here if they did.
Goal is to communicate without sending email across
the ether; just log in, read, create a new draft message
to respond. Very secure.

1-All who have login credentials can read drafts. So far:
me and you. We'll add others after you get set up.

2-Create new dated draft to respond. Example in sub-
ject line of this email.

3-When done, select "Send later" and it's saved.

4-Text a ✓ to trigger email recipient to login to read
messages.

Your turn. Create a draft reply to me to make sure we're
on same page. Don't forget to send check mark.

PS: You and I have communicated infrequently on your
burner. Unless prepaid balance is zero, no need to toss
it. Write down the info I texted so you can share it with
others, then delete the message. If you have an extra
SIM, maybe change that out, but if not, no worries.

Mia followed Boudreaux's instructions.

SUBJECT: Jan 24 from Mia to Boudreaux

This. Is. BRILLIANT! I don't know what Mr. Ellis is billing
me, but he just earned his fee!

FYI, an ad popped up— these people in my industry! Limitless opportunities to monetize on free accounts. Anyway, once the ad left the screen, I went to drafts and got your message. Who all will we share with? Jake? Chiara? Vikki? And I want to share with my best friend Jessi!

Saving and will text you the check mark now.

I think I'm following protocol but advise if I missed something.

Super excited,

Mia

Mia saved the draft, sent the checkmark emoji, and closed her eyes. She smiled. Learning more about how to handle the voice-mail, how to use email securely, and little by little, figuring out how to better evade Aleks. And how to help Chiara. Skills she hoped she wouldn't need one day but it felt good; something like gaining mastery.

Half an hour later, Mia received a check mark and logged in.

SUBJECT: Jan 24 from Boudreaux to Mia re. Video

Mia, I added to the subject line the topic. Mr. Ellis' creative genius has outdone himself. He got a production crew together through some movie star he knows. Per the details you provided Vikki about Hasapsis' abuse at the Airbnb room you rented in New York, crew rented the same room, hired actors, and used some kind of magic to make a video that shows what you described Hasapsis did. I've seen the man twice in person and I wouldn't doubt it was him. The actress on the bed is convincingly you.

The video is a top-notch Hollywood production, including carefully degraded quality that mimics security system footage. It'll be a hard thing for you to watch, but you're the expert on what happened and on production stuff. Hope you can grit your teeth and do it. All input welcome but put it here. I'll copy and paste into Ellis' Drafts email folder. I'm advised, absolutely no phone calls or text messages that refer to this video.

Here's the link. It's housed on a private server Ellis uses, separate from anything associated with his firm.

LINK TO VIDEO

Mia jerked back from the laptop screen. Her stomach nose-dived like the first time she and Jessi rode a roller coaster at Kings Dominion. A wave of tingling dread spread throughout her body. Watch a video that would make her relive what Aleks did to her the first time she escaped? Revulsion became nausea. She ran to the bathroom.

An hour later, with everything she'd eaten gone, Mia still lay in stunned silence. Chiara knocked gently on the door.

"You're sick."

Mia didn't answer right away, so Chiara came in. "Virus? Or . . ."

She let the rest of the question trail off.

Mia took a deep breath and turned to Chiara as she sat down beside her. "It's or."

Chiara raised her eyebrows in question.

"My attorney made a video of what Aleks did to me in the room. In New York. Remember I told you about it, some of it, when we were at Robbi's?"

Chiara tilted her head. Mia could see the woman did not make the leap. “They want me to watch it and make sure it’s authentic.”

Chiara gasped in horror. Said softly, “Oh, Mia.” As it sunk in, she said it again, “Oh, Mia. What? I mean, how? Wait. First, are you going to watch it?”

“I have to, Chiara. I just have to. I can’t imagine it could be actual evidence. But whatever the attorneys are up to, there may be mistakes that would cause problems. So yeah.”

Chiara and Mia were both silent for a full five minutes. The only sound in the bedroom, the feather-light skittering of wind-blown snow hitting the bedroom windowpanes.

“Okay then. If you have to watch the damn thing, the least I can do is make sure you don’t watch it alone.” She stood up. “And I’m getting Claire too. She will not want to be left out.”

Mia sat up. “That’s not necessary. I don’t want either of you to have to watch something like this.”

“Well, unless you forbid it, we’re watching it.” She looked quiz-zically at Mia. “And where, by the way, do we even watch it? I mean, streaming, might that be risky?”

“Don’t have to stream. Well, it’s streaming, I guess, technically, but from a private server.” Mia stood. “Let’s go down to the kitchen. I need to eat something. I’ll explain everything to you both.”

January 25: QC the Video
Ontonagon, Michigan

She’d told them what to expect. All of it. Almost all of it. A hard conversation, words she’d never planned to say out loud to anyone. But now? She’d do anything to shut him down.

Claire laid a hand on her shoulder as Mia placed her spoon in the empty soup bowl. “Claire, I’m going to do my best to focus on the technicalities like wardrobe, movement, accuracy of the action. They didn’t consult with me on any of that and I can provide some useful input. Things Aleks—assuming he’s going to see it—might spot. I’ll look at camera angles and how they used the AI software. Basically, anything that might give it away as a deep fake.”

“I don’t know that it’ll be enough to shield you from the emotional impact, but it’s as good a strategy as any,” Claire replied.

Chiara said, “Mia, do you think you should find out how they intend to use this?”

Mia gave her a palms-up shrug. “Vikki’s been telling me that her boss, the ‘ole man,’ as she calls him, is pretty clever. He’d have to use some unconventional tactics to keep Aleks from taking my business. Maybe even to get him to stop looking for me. I mean, that this video even exists implies a threat to release it to, I don’t know, anyone who might ruin his life? Get him fired or sent back to Greece?” She exhaled palpable sadness. “I think I should trust that they know what they’re doing.”

Claire picked up Mia’s empty bowl and went to the sink. “That makes good sense, Mia. And if I can make a suggestion?”

Mia nodded. “Of course.”

“When there’s something really hard to do, best to do it quickly and get it over with. The longer you wait, the worse the anxiety about doing it becomes.”

Mia stood up, but slowly. Claire was right: Better to get it over with. Which reminded her of the unopened envelope upstairs. *One thing at a time.*

Chiara shouted upstairs for Martin to join them.

Another man watching this? A long, slow exhale while she thought. He'd see things she wouldn't. As Boudreaux recommended, she grit her teeth.

January 26: Jake's Assignment
New Orleans, Louisiana

Jake tried not to count the days. But he couldn't help it. The higher the number got, the more he fidgeted and the less he slept. Helping Mia and Louanne, then Mia and Chiara, and now, back to running Enola's. It wasn't boredom. And he'd never been addicted to anything, but he kept looking around for what was missing. Longing maybe? Restless in his home above the restaurant, he looked again at the crumpled paper with Mia's 'before' photo—red hair, bright-green eyes—on the bureau in his bedroom and settled on worried. Just worried. That's all.

He texted Boudreaux and drove to New Orleans.

Before Jake could sit down, as if he'd intuited the reason for the visit, Boudreaux said, "I have a new communication protocol you can use. Would that help?"

Jake said, "Show me." They sat in front of a new iPad at the meeting table. Boudreaux gave him the login and made sure he understood the messages remained in Drafts. Jake grinned. "You learn this from Xavier?"

He looked a little put out and replied, "No. He's too young. Not big into email. And anyway, us old people know some shit too. Ellis told me they use this method for stuff they want to keep offline."

Jake chuckled and shook his head. "Should have known. And yeah, another way to communicate securely is great." Jake exhaled slowly and scrubbed a hand over his face, buying himself a moment

to change his mind. Then he committed. “Never thought I’d say this, but I need you to give me an assignment.”

Boudreaux leaned back in his new purchase, a Herman Miller Aeron chair, an elegant yet pricey addition to upgrade from smelly rundown criminal hideout to fancy corporate HQ office space. The chair did not creak.

“Now, that’s something I never thought I’d hear coming from you.”

“I know. But I’ve got boundaries. I’m only talking about ‘working’”—Jake fingered air quotes—“the Mia-Chiara situation. What’s going on up there, Boudreaux? And what can I do to help?”

“Hmm . . . you shoulda said something earlier. I just hired a new guy and sent him to Ontonagon with passports.”

Jake looked at Boudreaux suspiciously. “A new guy?”

Boudreaux grinned, then chuckled, then broke into a laugh. Jake could tell Boudreaux was pleased with himself.

“You remember that guy, Bledsoe?”

“Yeah. The PI working for Mia’s effed-up husband? He was in the bar a few times.” Jake leaned forward in his chair. “Wait, you hired him?”

“Exactly. I hired him.”

Jake stood abruptly and turned to leave. Then one-eighty’d back to Boudreaux.

“What the hell?” He should have known better than to trust that side of the family. “What the actual—”

Boudreaux waved a calm down gesture and said, “Don’t panic, Jake. He’s actually a good PI. And a good man. He hates Hasapsis as much as anyone. Glad to get a job that covers the cost of his kid’s education. He passed all the tests, including presenting information to Hasapsis that keeps that door open so that we can monitor the man’s intentions and plans.”

“You mean, you turned him? He’s like a double agent now?”

“Yeah.” Boudreaux grinned again, clearly enjoying the intrigue. “I hadn’t thought of that specific term. But yeah, kinda. From Hasapsis’ perspective. But, based on the terms of his employment, I doubt he’ll pass our information back the other way.”

Jake paced the office for another minute or so, rubbed his chin, then ran both hands through his hair. Finally, adrenaline exhausted, he plopped down into the chair.

Boudreaux sat forward and said, “But we’ve got two federal agents and, we believe, two representatives from the South American cartel who tried to kidnap Chiara on the ground up there in Ontonagon. I guess it’s not too much of a stretch that Martin could use another set of eyes and ears.”

Jake sat up straight. “And a couple of weapons?”

Boudreaux nodded. “I gave him a company car with weapons, listening devices. He has an app on the company phone that allows him to track the agents; other stuff he might need. We assume the cartel guys have pretty much the same info as the bureau and are tracking along with them. But there could be others up there that we don’t know about. If that’s the case, it’ll get much more complicated.” He stood up and looked seriously at Jake. “If I remember correctly, you’re an excellent hunter. Good with weapons.”

Jake nodded and felt exposed; didn’t realize Boudreaux or anyone from that side of the family had noticed.

Boudreaux nodded. “Okay. But you gotta have some skin in the game. Say your own flight and car rental? I can only cover so much here without raising flags.”

Jake didn’t hesitate. “I’ll get myself up there.” He stood and headed for the door.

“Jake, wait. Hold your horses, *bon ami*. I need to brief you. Catch you up on the intel, talk about contingencies, and Bledsoe’s role.”

Two hours later, Jake sat in the parking lot outside Boudreaux’s office, anxious. Way past ready to go. He remembered Mia used

her burner to change their flights as they walked through the Salt Lake City airport and pulled out his phone. By the time he left Boudreaux's parking lot and got on I-10 headed back to Delareau, he had a direct flight to Minneapolis and a rental car reserved. He'd figure out where to stay when he got to Ontonagon.

As he drove, he went through a mental checklist. He had cold weather gear from the last ski trip he took with his dad the year before he died. Said a silent thanks he'd procrastinated donating the stuff. Jake walked himself through everything Boudreaux'd told him as a 'what the hell am I doing' pendulum swung every few seconds between wise and crazy, helpful and insane, capable and 'never in my life!' Some seriously scary shit, no doubt about it.

So why was he smiling?

CHAPTER 16

*January 27: Snowmobiles
Ontonagon, Michigan*

As they had worked their way around town the day before, Michael had fidgeted, drank too much coffee, and been outright rude to people Sam thought they should be nice to. She tried to take the lead—honey instead of vinegar. But the more she smiled, the more Michael frowned. She had less experience than her temporary partner but thought it just plain common sense to be nice to people, right? And why hadn't he gotten Michigan agents from Marquette or Traverse City who knew the people and the area to do this? Maybe today she'd ask.

She inhaled deadly cold air and struggled to get her sunglasses on against the blinding white of sun on snow as they headed for the SUV. She fobbed the lock, got in, and started the engine. And the heat. Shivering, she said, "We've visited pretty much every business here and driven through most of the neighborhoods, and still no gray SUV with temporary plates. And I'm just thinking—"

"I know all that! I was there too, remember?" he snapped.

Sam closed her eyes and counted to five. His bitchiness was getting old.

"Yes, Michael. I'm painfully aware that you are with me. Every single-solitary-painful-nonproductive minute." Then, with

sarcastic cheerfulness, she added, “And your attitude, I am just in awe of your sunny disposition! I mean, the friendliness with which you approach each and every person we talk to.” She looked over at Michael worshipfully. “It’s just so inspiring. You’re just such a joy.”

“Oh, shut the fuck up, would you?” Michael set his coffee cup in the holder. Exhaled frustration. They waited for the ice on the windshield to melt. “She has no known associates in this area of the world, no family or friends. Her closest project was in Minneapolis, but she never came this far north.”

Sam continued to stare, faked a cheerful smile, then picked up the thread she’d started. “As I was saying, I’m just wondering if we should walk that trail, the one that connects to the old railroad bridge or maybe rent snowmobiles? Get off the main roads and tool around some neighborhoods?” She dropped the fake smile and turned her cop-flat voice back on. “But you’re the boss.” She turned on the windshield wipers. They scraped against a crystal-hard layer of ice.



Jorge and Arturo sat in their hotel room watching the icon on the app. It sat still in the parking lot at a hotel a couple of miles away.

“That Michael, Jorge. He is not a happy man. He argues a lot and is mean.”

Jorge nodded.

Arturo was glad for a moment that Jorge was always so quiet. “He argues. A lot.”

“Let’s drive in that direction. Get close enough that we don’t lose the radio signal when they move.”

The two men hoisted their winter gear on, got in the sedan, and headed toward the agents’ hotel. They parked behind a snowbank

on the back side of the lobby. And listened. When the agents left the parking lot, Arturo announced, “There are two places to rent snowmobiles around here. Both are about an hour away.”

Jorge said, “I saw a man on a snowmobile at the RV park near the marina. Let’s see if he’d like to make a few hundred dollars in exchange for the use of his.”

“Will we lose them if we don’t follow, Jorge?” Arturo asked.

“They are coming back here. The only thing we lose is listening to boring music.”

Arturo grinned at the older man. “And arguing.”

*January 27: Martin Investigates
Ontonagon, Michigan*

Grateful again for the four-wheel drive capable of handling Ontonagon’s snow-packed side roads, Martin had spent part of the previous day driving around. Getting the lay of the land and trying to shake off the horror of seeing the video, what Hasapsis did to his wife. To Mia. What he hadn’t known—hadn’t let himself imagine—until the video made it impossible not to know.

He needed to find time to tell her who he was and how glad he was to be working with her. But the right moment hadn’t presented itself yet. Or his guilt hadn’t let him see it if it had.

Scouting the little town’s main highway, side roads, and intersections, he distracted himself from the heartbreak of hearing Mia piece apart the differences between the video and what had actually happened. Seeing her pale and have to put her head between her knees to keep from passing out once or twice during the viewing? Being frozen in place with shock at what he’d seen, the only thing that kept him in the room.

Martin would have to talk to Boudreaux about it; express his gratitude, sure, but also make sure the man understood that he would never work for a person like Hasapsis ever again. That included anyone in the Marcellas family.

He woke this morning determined to use his time to gain a complete understanding of the situation and ensure no more harm came to Mia. Or to Chiara. After a cup of Claire's coffee and some toast, Martin got back in the four-wheel drive and opened the tracking app Little Jimmy Quinn had put on his phone. In less than a minute, he located the feds' black SUV in a hotel parking lot. He pulled into a spot several cars away. Watched it until a man and woman he identified as the federal agents got in the vehicle, waited for the windshield to thaw, and drove away. He went into the lobby.

Before he could speak, the front desk clerk said, "I'm sorry, we can't accommodate you, sir. We don't open up all the rooms in the winter because we just don't get that many customers." The young man looked concerned, so Martin held up his hands and waved the global gesture for no problem. He checked the name tag.

"Makes total sense to me, Migizi. Hopefully, there's another option? Or are all of Ontonagon's visitors here?"

The clerk smiled in relief. "Oh yeah, sure. I mean, no. They're not all here. You've got one more choice if you want to stay in town." He pulled out a cartoonishly illustrated map from under the counter and highlighted a route to the only other motel open this time of year.

Martin nodded his thanks and went back out to his truck. Felt pretty sure he knew now where the South Americans were staying, started the engine, and turned on the heat. He opened the app and found the feds' vehicle moving southeast at a pretty good clip. He'd confirm the cartel was tracking the agents by following the feds at a discreet distance and see who else followed them. Theoretically, it would be the South Americans.

Thirty minutes later, he'd caught up to within a couple of miles of the feds. An hour later, they pulled into a town even smaller than Ontonagon. When the icon on the app stopped, Martin did too. Still two miles behind them, he pulled over at a pub, used the bathroom, and got another cup of coffee.

Sitting at a booth with a view of the road, he sipped his coffee and waited. An hour later, the SUV passed the pub pulling a trailer carrying a single, two-person touring-style snowmobile. He waited another five minutes, saw no other vehicles, and decided the cartel guys hadn't followed. Interesting. He laid a ten-dollar bill on the table and left.



Back in Ontonagon, he pulled over at a convenience store, got gas, and watched the app to see where the feds would stop. They drove into town and parked on what Martin thought of as Main Street. Gas tank full and a snack in hand, Martin drove there too.

He spotted the feds' SUV and trailered snowmobile parked about a hundred yards ahead. He pulled into an alley between two buildings. It didn't take long for him to spot two men in a sedan, his two kidnapper wannabes. They slowed down as they passed the SUV but, at the end of the street, executed a U-turn and drove back the way they'd come. Martin snapped a burst of photos from his cell phone as the vehicle passed him. When they turned right toward the main highway, he waited a few minutes. Then followed. Martin arrived at the motel Migizi told him about, just in time to see the two men enter the lobby. Martin drove around the side of the parking lot and smiled when he found a two-person snowmobile parked directly behind the hotel.

Certain it would be a rental; he snapped a shot of the sedan's plate and thumbed it via text to Boudreaux. Saw that Boudreaux'd sent some information about accessing email and headed back to Claire's.



He walked into the kitchen, pulling off the hat with furry ear flaps he'd purchased at the convenience store, to find Claire standing with her mobile phone in hand. She looked up and smiled.

"You find what you went looking for out there, Martin?"

"Productive day for me. Found two feds and two guys from South America. Both teams have acquired snowmobiles. Anything happen here I need to know about?"

Claire handed her mobile to Martin to read. "Text from Robbi."

I hope you have one more spare room, my
friend! Boudreaux's sending more manpower.
Jake Brusey, whose name you may remember,
will help even the playing field for y'all.

Martin handed the phone back; eyebrows raised in a question.

Claire said, "Jake. He is some distant relation to Boudreaux as I understand it. He has been so helpful to the girls. And if you don't mind heading back out real quick before you remove all that heavy winter gear, I'll make you a quick list and drop you a pin for directions to the liquor store. I understand this young man who's joining us is a fine bartender."

Martin's stomach flipped like a fish on a hook. That Jake. Owner of the bar in Delareau. He'd shown the man photos when he was working for Hasapsis. One of those photos was of Mia.

Claire stepped closer. “Martin, are you alright?”

He shook his head and looked at Claire.

“I can run the errand myself if you need to warm up or get something to eat.”

“No, no. I’m fine. I just . . .” Wouldn’t tell Claire or anyone else he’d worked for Hasapsis. Not before he sat Mia down. But how could he tell her? Especially after that video? She’d never be able to trust him again. Worse, she’d despise him.

Maybe he could get ahold of Boudreaux before Jake arrived. Surely he’d told Jake. Wanted to get ahead of this. “I just remembered a call I have to make. No worries. You give me the list and drop the pin. I’ll make the call while I’m out.” Then he smiled at Claire. “You’ve given me such a warm welcome and comfortable quarters, it’s the very least I can do.”

Claire’s phone pinged again when she handed the short list to Martin. She looked down and then laughed out loud.

“Anything I need to know before I leave?” Martin said as he pulled his Yooper Chook hat back on.

“No, just girl talk between Robbi and me.”



As Martin went out the door, Claire looked at her phone again.

You decide whether to let his arrival today be a surprise to our girls. Or not. ☹ Robbi

She left the kitchen and went upstairs to prepare Brenda’s old bedroom for Jake and thought the young man’s arrival was just what the doctor ordered for Mia right now. She knew Mia hadn’t yet opened the manila envelope, focused on Chiara as she was. That, along with that brilliant but horrible video reenactment, Mia

looked this morning as if she might fold in on herself. She'd get Benjamin, Brenda, and her granddaughter Lila over here for dinner. And mint juleps. Nothing like a gathering to lift the spirits.

***January 27: Jake Arrives
Ontonagon, Michigan***

Jake pulled into the driveway at the address Boudreaux'd given him for Claire Smithton. Three other cars were parked in between walls of snow that surrounded a beautiful lodge-style home; heat in wavy layers above the front hood indicated one recently arrived. The number of people on the porch looked like the beginning of a party.

Having listened to Robbi speak of her several times, he picked Claire out immediately. She stood on the porch next to Martin Bledsoe. A sinking feeling in his stomach: Had he said Martin Bledsoe's name in front of Mia and Chiara that night at his place when he came back to tell them that a private investigator had been in the bar? If he knew Mia at all, it would be unwise to keep it from her for very long. He'd get around to explaining what Boudreaux did and why. He'd just have to suss out the situation and find the right time.

Searching the crowd for Mia, he found her running off the porch toward his vehicle. A smile almost cracked his lips until she veered left and flew into a tall man's arms with a hug that threatened to knock him off his feet. Jake sagged. He'd heard about Benjamin Smithton's role in Mia's rescue. The man was tall. Good looking. And clearly happy to see her. He watched carefully but couldn't tell if there was anything more than gratitude in her hug. Well, the man had landed a plane on Lake Superior and pulled

her out of the freezing water. He pushed away the feelings and reminded himself why he was in Ontonagon. He was here to help Martin keep Mia and Chiara—especially Chiara—safe until they could get her out of the country. Chiara was shaking hands with a woman Jake assumed was Brenda Smithton and nodding to the younger woman beside her, who must be Claire’s granddaughter. He couldn’t remember the name.

But the stone in the pit of his stomach. He was stunned at the depth of feeling. Jake closed his eyes. *Don’t be an idiot. You’re not the kind of man who helps with strings attached!* He hissed out a breath that was part critical and part disappointment. He knew Mia was much too raw, maybe too damaged, to get involved in another relationship yet, either with him or Smithton. It had only been three or four months since she’d escaped from Hasapsis. He looked down at his feet, put a smile on his face, opened the car door, looked up at everyone, and stepped out to join the gathering.

Chiara saw him first. He watched her float toward him, arms outstretched. He opened his and pulled her into a hug.

“Claire didn’t tell us you were coming!” She turned toward Mia who was standing apart from Benjamin now. “Mia, look who’s here? Did you know and keep this to yourself?” She pulled out of the hug and, clutching her arms, ran back toward the house shouting, “I’m freezing!”

Mia turned from Benjamin and looked at Jake. She hesitated for just a second, a look on her face he couldn’t interpret. Irritation? Concern?

“Jake, what the . . .” Instead of finishing the sentence, she stepped over and hugged him. He hugged her for a moment, then, confused by a mishmash of joy and mild jealousy, took her by the shoulders and guided her back to the others.

“Chiara’s right. It’s freezing out here. Let’s get in the house.”

Brenda and Lila brought a feast in from their vehicles while Mia introduced Jake to everyone. Martin pulled him aside from the noisy crowd and said, "Jake, Claire showed me where your room is. I'll take you to it."

No smile, neutral voice, Jake said, "Thanks, Martin."

At the top of the stairs, Jake murmured, "Any sign of recognition from either of them?" He listened for discomfort in Martin's voice. He wanted to believe the man was trustworthy, and Boudreaux'd given him no reason to doubt. Still, Jake knew the dark side of his family had a history of skirting the truth when it suited.

"None. And for the record, I hated showing you those photos; hated working for Hasapsis. I've never been more grateful to anyone in my life than I am to Boudreaux Marcellas. I hope I can do enough good here to make up for working for that asshole."

Jake nodded as Martin pointed toward a bedroom. "Come on in for a second."

Martin followed him. Jake set his bag on the floor and said, "Let's set all that aside for now. I may need a little time to see you in a different light. But our job is to work together. Take some of the burden off everyone else and see what we can do to help Mia and Chiara."

Martin nodded. "Absolutely. I can bring you up to speed on what I've put together so far. Show you the weapons and kit Boudreaux sent up with me."

"Sounds good. But for now, we'd better get downstairs and join the party." *Give Bledsoe every reason to relax.* He'd smiled at the man he'd felt was an enemy and kept his eyes open for any sign that his double agent status was leaning more toward Hasapsis than Mia.

"Yeah, but first, I just want to say this: If there's anything you or Boudreaux, or Mia for that matter, suggest I do to misdirect Hasapsis, send him off down the wrong path, whatever, just tell me

what it is and it's done." He looked Jake straight in the eyes. And didn't look away until Jake did.

"Good to know."

Martin said, "Thank you, Jake." He turned toward the door and then looked back and grinned. "And just so you know who to blame, I'm the one who did the liquor store run."

Jake squinted his eyes in confusion.

"Claire heard all about your mint juleps and had me stock the bar. I suspect this party won't end sober."

They were halfway down the stairs when Jake said, "Wait a minute. Where did she find fresh mint this time of year?"

January 27: Reunion
Ontonagon, Michigan

Mia looked at the dining room table and shouted back to the kitchen, "Who else is coming to dinner? There are three roasted chickens in here!"

Brenda shouted back, "Don't cha know you gotta eat?" The heavy Yooper accent elicited the laughter she expected. Mia headed toward the kitchen, then stopped, and stared. A house full of Smithtons talking, laughing, teasing, unwrapping savory dishes, gathering noisy cutlery, and being a typical family getting ready for a meal. Mia, Jessi, and Susan certainly enjoyed celebratory and holiday meals. Usually small, and except for Jessi and Mia's chatter and music, pretty quiet. The closest she'd ever come to experiencing a big family event were a couple of commercials she'd directed. The front door opened and snapped her out of the reverie.

"Mia!" It was Julie from the coffee shop, behind her Deputy James. Mia didn't know their last names, but she turned and

grabbed them both. "You two are the reason we have three roasted chickens?"

James said, "Looking at this crowd, I hope three's enough. I've seen Benjamin eat half a chicken all by himself." They all laughed.

Mia heard footsteps on the stairs and looked up to see Martin. And behind him, Jake, in midsentence.

"... get fresh mint this time of year?"

Jake saw her and smiled, but Mia could see some of the warmth was missing. Sensed a level of anxiety instead of his usual calm. She tried to return the smile, but she knew what this meant. He'd helped so much already. Driving to pick them up in Atlanta, the back and forth between Meridian and Delareau. Back in the fall, helping her get a limo to vanish Louanne. Even going to Boudreaux for the first time in his life to get her an ID. Trusting her when he didn't even know her. But this? Coming here to work with one of Boudreaux's men? That could only mean one thing. Boudreaux'd called in a marker, and Jake had given up his most sacred commitment to never work for the dark side of his family. The people who'd burned down the original Enola's. The people ultimately responsible for his father's death. Jake spent his whole life avoiding that world. If Jake didn't hate her yet, he would before this was all over with. She looked down and saw her hand on her chest.

She started to speak, but Benjamin shouted above the noise. "It's every man for himself, James, or herself, ladies. Better get yourself a plate and fill 'er up."

Jake looked away from Mia toward the dining room and headed there with the rest of the crowd. She shook off the sadness, put a smile back on, and followed everyone else to the food.

They started at what Mia judged to be a ginormous bowl of smoked whitefish dip and the crusty bread Michiganders loved to spread it on. Then portions of juicy roasted chicken with mashed potatoes, gravy, and green beans. There was so much food on

Claire's huge round dining table, no one could sit there to eat. Mia watched and apparently they all had spots in the family room to sit, hold a plate in their lap, and put a drink on a nearby table. Mia sat on the floor where she could see everyone, held a plate in her lap and leaned back against the wall.

Claire tapped her glass with a spoon a few times and said, "I called Winnona and she had more of last summer's cherries put up than she could use. She made pies and sent them over. Make sure you save room for some."

Mia and Chiara, both more rested, well fed, and healthier than when they'd first arrived, looked at each other in between bites. Chiara put her hands up as if to ask 'why all of this?' Mia shrugged and smiled. "Family."

Relaxing after the big meal, Benjamin looked at Mia and said, "I hope no one has to be rescued from Lake Superior on this trip. The water temp is right at freezing."

Mia, laughing along with everyone else, said, "You telling me you can't land that floatplane this time of year?"

Benjamin clapped his hand over his heart, feigning hurt. "I can't believe you doubt my prowess after hauling your shivering ass out of that water last fall, Mia."

Mia grinned and said, "Yeah, well, can't let your head swell too big now, can we?"

Lila and her mother hooted their laughter. Lila said, "It's like a total waste of time trying to keep Uncle Benjamin's ego in check."

As the laughter died down, James said, "I hate to turn our attention to more serious things, but Julie's had out of town visitors. Thought someone here might know what's going on?"

Julie jumped in, "Yeah, sorry, I couldn't get a photo of them. But the whole incident reminded me of last fall. They're looking for someone. And Chiara, based on the photos I saw, well, it's you, of course. And, may I say, both hairstyles work really well for you."

Gentle laughter rippled around the room as Chiara ran her hand through the short bleach-blond hair she had left and gave her new friends a quick rundown of the situation. When she was done, Martin pulled out his phone.

"Are these the people you're talking about, Julie?" He tapped the screen as he stood and walked across to Julie. She looked while Martin swiped through a few photos.

"Yep. They've never come in at the same time, though. Does that surprise you?"

Martin said, "Not at all."

Julie said, "The ones in the suits, that's the feds, right? They came in two days in a row. And I watched them when they left the coffee shop. They seemed to make the rounds, you know, the restaurants and stores. The other two only came in once, a few minutes after the feds left the second time. They ordered plain coffees and sat nursing them for over an hour. The younger one you see there, wearing a headset, watched his phone like a hawk. I don't know what they were doing, but they didn't ask any questions."

"Let me see, Martin," Mia said, her voice soft and serious.

She sat next to Chiara, who looked at the photos with her, and said, "Those are the two guys who tried to kidnap me, for sure. The other two, the feds, right?"

Martin nodded.

Chiara said, "I've never seen them. But the guy might be Michael? I got an email and a voicemail on my old phone from him."

Martin motioned for her to pass the phone around the room. "I just got these photos today. And while we don't have a plan yet, whatever that plan is, Jake and I are gonna need some local knowledge from some of you."

Mia was pleased. And not surprised to see nods and hear 'sure' and 'anything you need' from everyone.

Martin said, "Great. Let's start with this: The feds drove to a town a little over an hour from here and picked up a two-person snowmobile. A touring model. And I found another one, also for two, parked behind the hotel where the South American guys are staying."

James said, "Snowmobiles, huh?" He thought for a few beats, then said, "Sounds like they've spent the past couple or three days asking around town and have no information."

Mia said, "There's none to get. We've only been here a few days, and we haven't left the house."

James stood up and started pacing. "Maybe they want to use snowmobiles to nose around off the principal streets; see if they can find something." He looked at Mia. "You've been here before, Mia. What might they know or think they could see?"

Mia thought for a moment. "Well, I've been proceeding as if the feds and the cartel have the same level of snooping sophistication that Aleks has, or better. They could know what kind of vehicle I drive. I mean, we did our best to avoid cameras, but pretty hard to miss them all. Right, Martin?"

Martin nodded his head. "Right. They probably did exactly that. They wouldn't have any way of knowing you, Mia. May not even know the vehicle is yours. But it would be standard procedure for both organizations to use AI to monitor traffic cams and facial recognition software if they can get a glimpse of a face. They probably started with a few miles radius around Meridian, where the cartel guys first tried to get you. Then widened the circle. When they got a hit on Chiara, they narrowed the search and started following possible paths. They couldn't have put a tracking device on your truck, because then they'd already have you, Chiara. The traffic cameras are the only way they could have wound up here. It only takes a hit every few hundred miles with good software. Then, when they got to town . . . I only saw one traffic cam in the area."

He looked at James to confirm, and the deputy nodded. "And that's where they'd have lost the trail. So now, the only strategy they have left is local intel and surveillance."

Jake asked, "Is there a plan for you, Chiara?"

"Not yet. We used a burner the day before yesterday to access voicemails from my phone, my old phone. The one I wiped right after I got away from them in Meridian. I don't know if Ricardo's picked up my first voicemail to his burner. But following instructions we discussed a long time ago, neither of us are saying where we are or where we're going. I'm sure he'll leave another message as soon as he's in a position to do so." She crossed her fingers on both hands.

Jake looked at James. "So, surveillance. Via snowmobile? Seems like a noisy way to surveil."

Benjamin laughed. "We have a network of four-wheeler trails around here that snowmobilers use in the winter. Maybe you haven't noticed, but people go places via snowmobiles as often as cars in the winter. They just become part of the background noise."

James said, "They do. Pay attention and you can almost always hear one."

Mia said, "I think I know what you're talking about. I thought it was chainsaws or something." She shrugged, wondered if that meant they should stay in the house. "But, getting back to the main thing here, keeping Chiara safe, sounds like we need to do something . . . I don't know, something more than hide?"

The room was dead quiet for almost a full minute. Mia gauged the room, envisioning something similar to a creative-concept preproduction meeting. Her mind started working.

Chiara broke the silence. "If these men want me, it's only because they want to hurt my husband. And Ricardo told me not to let the FBI know where I am. I can only think of one reason he'd say that."

Mia nodded. So did Martin and Jake. It only took a few seconds for everyone else in the room to get it.

Jake looked at Martin. "I don't know if Boudreaux told you this, Martin, but after you left, the guy who sent you and me that app that tracks the FBI? Little Jimmy? He also sent Boudreaux an audio recording taken at the Threefoot." Martin looked confused, so Jake added, "Restaurant and hotel in Meridian. Anyway, after the female agent Sam left the table, Michael made a call that made no sense. Could have been about another case, could have been anything. Or nothing. But Boudreaux said it made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. He says watch the agents. Both of them, just in case."

Chiara stood up. "I think before I go anywhere to be safe, we have to do something more than hide." She looked at Mia.

Mia thought about the night she found Chiara cowering in the bathroom, hiding. How she kicked the man who jumped into the back seat to drug her, got herself out of a moving vehicle, then ran fast enough and hid well enough that two supposed experts lost her. Mia said, "This woman has training. She moves like water and is strong enough to work with heavy metals." She looked around and saw a few frowns. "Not the radioactive kind. I'm talking about big, heavy statues." She sighed. "In other words, she's really strong." She looked around the room at each person. "If she wants to do something, I'm willing to help her do it."

Martin spoke first. "You can't be safe if you feel you have to keep running and hiding. Unless Boudreaux tells me otherwise, I'm in."

Jake said, "Yep. Me too."

One by one, everyone in the room agreed. Julie was last and said, "I don't know what a coffee shop girl can do, but whatever you need. I mean, karma, right? Who knows what kind of trouble I might run into down the road."

Mia sensed there was a next step and was about to suggest a planning meeting when Claire clapped her hands. "Okay! That's enough for tonight, people. Jake, time for some mint juleps!"

Jake stood up and grinned. "Yeah, about that. Without fresh mint, I can't actually promise—"

Claire interrupted him. "Sir, we are not heathens here. I have some very fine mint-infused simple syrup on my well-stocked shelves. We use it to make chocolate mint ice cream in the summer. And since most of us have never had a mint julep in our lives . . ." She headed toward the liquor cabinet on the far side of the room. "If you do your job as well as I'm told you do, that will work just fine." She looked back at Jake, a challenge in her eyes.

"Well, Ms. Claire, don't tell anyone, but we don't always have fresh mint, even in Louisiana. And I've never had a complaint about the ones I make with that very same syrup."

After Jake prepared and served the juleps, the 'wows' and 'oh my Gods' brought the noise level back up to predinner level.

Mia looked at Chiara, then the two of them at Martin as he stepped over to stand beside them. Mia put her hand up toward Chiara for a high-five. Chiara beamed and slapped her hand. The three of them followed the others to the julep-making station.

CHAPTER 17

January 28: Draft Email Updates
New Orleans, Louisiana

Boudreaux checked the Drafts Only email folder he shared with Mia. She described the video as ‘a work of art’ and offered only a few changes, all of which she said could be done in ‘post,’ whatever that meant. He read on:

Now I understand all the detailed questions from Vikki when we first spoke. It’s so close to what I experienced, in fact, retraumatizing. In other words, kudos to everyone involved in the production. Just amazing! My anxiety was acute during the actual event, so I remember most of what happened, clothes he wore, clothes I wore. And that part is a little different. But Aleks seemed to enjoy being in control that weekend. He was almost relaxed. My guess? He’ll remember far fewer details and won’t notice minor differences between what actually happened and what’s on this video.

Boudreaux shook his head, imagined, and hated what it must have been like for Mia to watch the damn thing. But would make

good use of her feedback. He opened another browser, logged into Ellis' Drafts Only email system, looked at the Team Mia folder, and smiled. That's what Robbi called the whole effort these days. And anything that made Boudreaux think of Roberta Broussard made him smile.

SUBJECT: From Ellis to Marcellas

They've delayed as much as they can; suspect they've concluded they have little chance of success with the current case. Nailed down Jan 30. All this, via my firm's team members in DC. Keeping attention away from South Louisiana.

Boudreaux replied by pasting Mia's feedback into the string and acknowledging that he'd let Vikki Lobertelle advise Mia of the date.

He switched back to the folder he shared with Mia, found a Drafts 2 folder and opened it. Chiara and Ricardo had connected. There was nothing that would tell him the where, when, or why about anything. But he couldn't blame the man. If Boudreaux were in his shoes, he'd Fort Knox everything too. Unaccustomed to being kept in the dark, he added a note of his own.

SUBJECT: From Boudreaux to Chiara and Ricardo

Good luck. Reply here if you need anything from me.

January 28: Who's Baiting Whom?
Ontonagon, Michigan

Over mint juleps the night before, they'd agreed it was safest to keep meeting at Claire's. Mia watched Chiara, Martin, James, and

Jake settle themselves in Claire's family room with cups of morning coffee and look around at each other, down at their feet, out the window—the kind of 'what's next' shuffling she'd seen in production teams a hundred times. All they needed was a director.

"I think we all got up to speed with shared information last night. And I don't know about you"—Mia gave each person a quick glance—"but it's feeling like we're going to take a page from the FBI's playbook and dangle some bait." Her gaze landed first on Martin. He didn't disappoint.

"I hate it, but I agree." Mia looked over at James, who nodded yes, but his tight lips indicated agreement with Martin.

She glanced at Jake and Chiara, both paling a bit at what they perceived this to mean. She nodded at Chiara. The woman bit her lip, thought for a couple seconds, and said, "And I'm the bait. No way around that, since that's what they came here for. Right?"

Mia stepped in with firm clarity. "You can say no to this, Chiara. Any time you want. We can wait for Ricardo to tell you where he's landed, and I know we can get you there." The room remained quiet until James spoke.

James leaned forward in his chair. "Chiara, you have every right to leave this to the experts. And frankly, I'm not exactly including myself in that group. South American cartels and FBI agents, one or both of whom may"—waffling his hand back and forth—"or may not be compromised? That's all way above my pay grade. I'm here because if you decide to go forward with this, I can round up resources, get some other folks involved like I did when we were keeping Mia safe last fall." He put down his coffee cup and added, "And if you go for it, the people I call on and what we can bring to the table—with planning and support from everyone—I think we can pull it off and do our part to keep you from being harmed."

Martin chimed in, "I agree one hundred percent with James, Chiara. I brought some impressive kit and weapons with me from Louisiana. Jake and I went over everything earlier this morning, and since he doesn't seem like the kind of guy who exaggerates his skill set"—he waited for a murmur of agreement to die down—"James and I agree that adding Jake to the mix gives us eyes, ears, and weaponry at enough angles that we can protect you."

Jake huffed at the praise. "Chiara, I'm just a bartender . . . well, and a businessman, I guess. But like most folks in South Louisiana, I've been shooting since I was a kid. I'm checked out on everything Martin brought along. When I'm hunting or out on the range, I shoot damn close to the bulls'-eye. Or at whatever I'm aiming. Consistently. But I'm not trained for this. I'll defer to James to decide where I can be most helpful. I'll go where I'm told, do what I'm told, and stay out of the planning piece."

Mia added, "As in all productions like this, the only thing we can't promise is that all will go as planned." She turned to Chiara. "It's all you, girl. Your decision."

She nodded to James who stood and said, "You guys want to get some more coffee?" He raised his eyebrows, and they hustled themselves to the kitchen.

When Mia and Chiara were alone, Mia said, "I get it. I'm in the same place. I hate that I'm dependent on so many people to do things that I can't do myself. I can't make Aleks be someone who'll just walk away. I can't make the attorneys work faster. I can't—"

Chiara put her hand up and shook her head. "I'll tell you what I can't do. I can't stomach the idea of leaving here and constantly looking behind me, wondering when someone will try to kidnap me again. And Ricardo's been through hell getting out of South America. If I lead someone to him? To us?" Mia read fear in the lines on Chiara's face, but she didn't read 'run.' They'd been

running for weeks, and no one understood better how quickly that got old.

She turned toward the kitchen and shouted, “We’re doing this thing, guys. Bring the coffee in here and let’s get started.”

It took nearly the rest of the day to create what Mia called their ‘script.’

January 29: Setting the Stage
Ontonagon, Michigan

“I just thought, you know, solidarity!” Mia laughed, brushing bleach on her own short locks. Claire had trimmed both women’s hair down to about an inch and a half from their scalps. “You hate having to bleach, and I’m sick to death of this shoe-black do I’ve been living with. So, you know, girly time together? And matching platinum blondes we shall be.”

They started early the next morning in the modern bathroom down the hall from Chiara’s room. Two sinks and a handheld wand in the shower made the job easier. “If I were making a statue of you, and I made your hair white, I’d switch the eyes to bright blue.”

Mia laughed. “That’s not a bad idea. I don’t mean making a statue of me. I ordered these multicolor contact packs a few months ago and I’ve used all the brown ones.” She sighed as she continued parting her hair and brushing on the bluish paste. “Blue won’t irritate my eyes any more or less.”

It was good to be doing something that felt like normal. Dying her hair every few weeks had become routine since last October. While each woman bleached her own hair and occasionally checked each other’s hair for spots missed, Mia thought the plan

through again. Like a production she was getting ready to shoot, she looked for story gaps and any visual details missed.

"You think of anything yet?" Chiara asked.

Through a sardonic grin, Mia spoke to Chiara in the mirror and said, "You've gotten to know me pretty quickly."

Chiara smiled, put her brush down, and turned away from the mirror to face Mia. "That night in the back seat of your truck when I agreed to go to Robbi's? I put my life in your hands." She turned back to the mirror and continued coloring. "I've been paying very close attention. And I think you're running through what we discussed yesterday, looking for problems."

Mia nodded.

"You find any?"

"No, Chiara. I have not. That old railroad bridge they've turned into a kind of trail? It makes me nervous as hell for you to be on it. I ran across it several times last fall. There wasn't any ice or snow on it then, but I still had to be careful. They pulled the railroad tracks up but left the ties and everything else exactly as they were. There are no safety rails. And some of the railroad ties are far enough apart that you really have to watch your footing. But with all this snow and ice, once we get all the players in place, it'll be practically impossible for anyone to get off it quickly."

"I'll do my best, Mia. I mean, I have no desire to fall into the Ontonagon River from a railroad bridge, in January. Tomorrow's rehearsal will make that a lot less likely."

Mia blew a raspberry. "Yeah, I know you're right. But I'm going to be nearby with those ice cleat things on my hiking boots. You know, in case you slip, I can get to you quickly without falling myself."

"James and Benjamin will start spreading the word today?" Chiara asked. "And Julie? And who runs the pub? Jim something?"

Mia nodded. “Yup, Jim Beason. Oh my God, Chiara, that man is funny. When this is all done, we’ll get him over here with everyone else and get him to tell the story of how he manipulated Aleks last October. It’s epic.”

Chiara smiled at Mia in the mirror.

“And after today’s intel gathering and tomorrow’s rehearsal, weather and gossip mill permitting, we’ll shoot the day after tomorrow.”

“Shoot?” Chiara cocked her head in a question.

“Well, yeah. I mean, figuratively. As in shooting a video. Anyway, change of subject. You got Ricardo off voicemail and into the Drafts email folder?”

“I did! Named it Drafts 2. I expect I’ll get something back from him in a day or so.”

“Good. I’m done brushing this shit on my head!” She put the plastic cap over her head and picked up a blow-dryer to add heat.

Chiara looked over at Mia. “That certainly is progress. And just think, you only have to do it one more time after you wash it out.”

Mia, a horrified cry in her voice, almost shouted, “What?”

Chiara doubled over with laughter. “Girl, you don’t remember? Bleaching the pink out of my hair at Walmart?”

Mia looked confused.

“It took two rounds to get it out! What you just brushed on your black will get you to orange. It’ll take at least a second round of processing, maybe a third, to get you all the way to platinum.”

Mia wanted to cry. She looked at her watch. Still three hours before they’d meet up with Martin and Jake to do the snowmobile runs. She stomped her foot and said, “Poor preproduction planning on my part, dammit!”

She didn’t need perfect platinum, but the imperfection gnawed at her professionalism. She mixed another round of bleach.

*January 29: Snowmobiles One and Two Prep
Ontonagon, Michigan*

Martin spent the morning reviewing kit, weapons, and ammo, then pulled the snowmobile housed in Claire's barn to the back of the house after lunch. Just as she'd said, it started quickly and ran smoothly. He turned off the engine and thought through the day ahead. With the sky clear, the sun sparkled on all the snow and ice. How would that affect conditions on the bridge? James and Benjamin would know.

He hated the idea of Chiara out in the open, riding on his snowmobile where anyone might spot her. But he couldn't deny the wisdom of Mia's plan. Or as she referred to it the night before, the script. He was also worried about Jake and Mia on the other machine, but he admired Jake's commitment to humility. Mia grew up having ski and snowmobile vacations in Pennsylvania. Martin had vacationed with his son in Wellsboro, Pennsylvania, a few times and had a sense of the experience Mia would have gained there. Jake had seen a snowmobile or two on a couple of ski trips out West but had zero experience driving one. And to his credit, no issue with Mia driving.

When Benjamin raised the same concern Martin had about Mia and Chiara being out in broad daylight, Mia saw the worry lines on Jake's face and did her best to quell their concerns.

"Look. Benjamin, you and James already got the rumor mill going, right?"

The two men nodded. "They'll be looking for an individual woman. Running. Not couples on snowmobiles. As long as we keep our faces covered and sound like locals or tourists, we can look for the feds and the cartel guys, even watch them, without being noticed. Plus, we have to scope out our positions for rehearsal tomorrow." Chiara nodded along with Mia.

That didn't make the men like it any better. They'd seen the photos Martin had taken, but it was essential they all knew what the agents and the South Americans were wearing and what their snowmobiles looked like—what they looked like. They also had to mark their positions, get a sense of distance, and a feel for the bridge's condition—snowpack vs. powder. They needed to determine just how slippery the bridge could be before tomorrow's rehearsal.

Another snowmobile engine in the distance. Benjamin and Jake arriving. Martin thought back to the night before. About Mia. Regret for his previous role; his admiration of her skills had evolved into something bright and fierce. Determination. To show her he could be trusted before he had to tell her what he'd done. He'd earn her respect. Then, hopefully, her understanding. Mia's commercials were successful because of her creativity and attention to detail. Her sense of costume, timing, continuity; her ability to know what each of the 'actors' would see from their vantage points, and how she could help them visualize what the locals (extras, she called them) around them would notice. Just amazing. She described how each bit would play out; made them see it as if it was a short feature film. How they would position themselves, how the angle of light at that time of day would affect their line of sight. Who among the extras could see them, from what position, and when. And most important, how to cue each other if for any reason they lost radio contact. By the time Director Mia finished with them at her table read of the script, they mostly believed that tomorrow's location rehearsal—the only one they'd get—would go well and they'd be as prepared as they could be for the real thing the next day.

Martin had never been on a film or video location production. Or an operation like this. But with all the prep, he could visualize how everything should go. Found it difficult to picture failure.

But at least four other people on that bridge would have guns, and some may be desperate to capture Chiara for reasons he couldn't imagine. And desperate people made dangerous choices.



Jake parked his rental car out of sight a few miles down the road at Benjamin's house. The Polaris snowmobile's engine purred like a kitten. Jake got on and Benjamin led them toward Claire's house to meet up with Martin and Mia. While Benjamin drove, Jake had him walk him through the snowmobile's controls. He needed at least a rough idea of how the thing worked, just in case.

"If you wanna come across as a local just joyriding around, maybe running some errands, you want to fiddle with the hand warmers or mess with the headlight switch," Benjamin said. Jake thought he could hear his grin even under the gaiter covering his face. Forgetting what they were doing for a moment, Jake considered the man: He was tall, lean. Kind of not bad looking. Definitely intelligent. And funny. He could see how Mia might be drawn to him.

Jake shook his head. Wondered what the hell he was thinking, then leaned slightly right, and located the heater and light controls on the instrument panel.

They pulled around back at Claire's and met up with Martin. Benjamin texted Claire to send Mia and Chiara down when they were ready.

January 29: Snowmobile Reconnaissance
Ontonagon, Michigan

Before they left the house, Mia gave her ‘cast’ a last look. They’d acquired well-loved, nonmatching snowmobile jackets, pants, gloves, mittens, boots, and neck gaiters from Claire, Brenda, Lila, Benjamin, and James.

“We look like we belong, but remember this: No matter what intel you’re capturing, be sure to sound like you’re having fun. Talk about a family member or what you forgot to put on the grocery list. Tell jokes. Play music. Talk and laugh. Sometimes loud, okay?”

After various iterations of ‘yes, Director Mia’ and ‘got it’ from everyone, Mia said, “Your turn, Martin.” She nodded at Chiara; the two of them pulled goggles into place and strapped on helmets.

Martin walked around the two women, performing a military-like inspection. “The winter outfits bulk you both up enough. Along with the goggles and helmets, I don’t think even the most sophisticated facial and body recognition tech could identify you.”

Mia smiled at the worriers and pulled up her neck gaiter. “See? Told you! No worries.” She looked at Chiara and said, “But remember, Chiara: Except for when you run across the bridge today, if you get off the snowmobile and walk around, you have to drag your feet a little, stumble occasionally, or lean to one side. Don’t move like a ballerina. Disguise how you move. It’s okay to run like one later on when you’re running over the bridge. In fact, then, it’s essential. Tomorrow and the next day when you run, our targets need to recognize you as Chiara Blackwell, whether they’ve seen you in person or only in photos. But when you’re playing someone local and get off the snowmobile while we’re looking for our bad guys, just, you know, imitate someone who’s awkward.”

Adjusting her goggles, she looked at Martin. “Any reminders or last-minute thoughts?”

Martin nodded and said, "Take lots of photographs. Especially of others on two-up snowmobiles."

Jake said, "You and me, Martin? We're ciphers as far as intel indicated, right?"

Martin got behind the wheel of his snowmobile, pulled his gaiter down, and grinned. "We don't exist as far as our targets are concerned."

A car horn blew and Benjamin said, "See you all out there this afternoon," and jogged to the front of the house where Claire waited to give Benjamin a ride.



Two snowmobiles revved to life. They all had general descriptions of their targets' automobiles, snowmobiles, and physical descriptions, as well as hotel locations, movements, and time-of-day patterns from James.

Each team spent the mile and a half from Claire's house to the railroad bridge trailhead getting to know their respective machines. They tested turn radius and swerve response and wove in and out of parking spots in a nearby RV park. In a marina parking lot down the road, they practiced taking off fast and braking hard. Jake snapped photos of positions he might use while they were in the marina.

When the drivers were comfortable, all gesturing thumbs-up at the bridge trailhead, Martin and Chiara headed southwest toward the cottages that lined the shore of Lake Superior. Mia and Jake went northeast toward town. They ran local trails, focused on those entering and exiting the railroad track bridge across the river. They explored off trail too; nosed around neighborhoods and the perimeters of shopping areas. Chiara and Jake, as passengers, chose the music and surreptitiously took photos. During the

afternoon, they took turns back at Claire's to warm up, eat, and take care of necessities.

At 3:45 p.m., everyone pulled out their phones and referred to the sketches Mia'd provided. Following carefully prescribed snowmobile parking plans and walking routes, they located their marks. At four o'clock on the dot, Chiara ditched her snowmobiling tourist attire and, in the winter-running outfit underneath, took off for the bridge. She ran from the trail far enough onto the south side of the bridge to be seen, paused, and ran in place for a few moments, appearing to enjoy the view of the river. A man on a four-wheeler entered the bridge from the opposite direction.

Watching from distant positions Mia selected, the entire team watched as they passed each other. Chiara didn't acknowledge the driver, but before either exited the bridge, the four-wheeler driver stopped, turned, pointed his phone at Chiara, then turned back and drove on. Chiara never looked back. Ran with fluid grace toward town.

Everyone else marked their positions and took photos of what they saw so they could cross-reference everything one last time after dinner tonight. Martin and Mia retrieved their snowmobiles and picked up their partners at the designated reconnaissance sites.

***January 29: Prerehearsal Intel Briefing
Ontonagon, Michigan***

Back at Claire's, while Chiara insisted on getting dinner for everyone, Mia took stock of the team; felt Claire's relief at takeout instead of cooking. She was stressed too. Tired but exhilarated, everyone chipped in to clean up, which was as close to a production's craft services as they'd get on this project.

Dinner complete, they all gathered round to compare notes for the next day's rehearsal.

"I think we've got enough intel to go through it as if it's the real thing. Most important, I'm thrilled the feds' and cartel guys' snowmobiles—and their outfits—are so obvious," Mia said. The photos showed the three men in colorful, matching outerwear that appeared newly purchased. They stood out like colorful sprinkles on a vanilla ice cream cone compared to Sam and the locals who wore a mix of earth tones, old and new, that rarely matched.

Jake said, "I'd rather be in white, but I dug myself in, covered myself with snow, and I think someone would have to know I was there in order to see me."

"Martin, let's see your photos of Jake's position." Director Mia, running preproduction.

Martin opened his phone and connected via AirPlay to the large TV on Claire's buffet.

James said, "Looking good, Jake. If I didn't know better, I'd say you were my Chippewa brother." He high-fived Jake while the others laughed.

Martin added, "Yeah, I think the snow is old enough, there's enough debris . . . you just kinda blend in."

Claire walked in and looked at the screen. "I guess it is a good thing that I can't tell what in the world you all are looking at there?" Over the success whoops and light applause, Claire spoke over the noise. "No mint juleps tonight. Or tomorrow night, for that matter. Before rehearsal and this 'show' you all are putting on, you get coffee or tea. I've set it up on the sideboard there," she said as she pointed.

James went for the coffee.

Mia stood and said, "Whoever got video footage of the FBI agents, throw it up here, will ya?" Jake tapped his phone and played two short clips. Mia said, "One more time, please."

Onscreen, the FBI agents stood in front of their snowmobile. In the first, they appeared to disagree about something. In the other, Sam stayed on the snowmobile. The other agent, Michael, was pacing around the machine. At one point, he went partially off-screen, phone to his ear. Then came back.

Mia turned to the group. "I can't be one hundred percent sure, but my best guess is the male, Michael. He's the one."

"What makes you think that, Mia?" Martin asked.

Mia grinned, a little sadly. "His body language is closed off when he's talking to her. Did you see it? His arms crossed over his body, and when she looked concerned, he seemed to smirk at her. And in the second piece. He paced, but it wasn't that focused thing that phone-pacer people usually exhibit. He was looking all over the place. Anxiety evident in different parts of his body. Even when he stood still for a few seconds, he was patting one hand on his pocket, messing with his hair, tapping his foot . . ." She trailed off, thinking. "And when he stood away from her for a couple of minutes with the phone to his ear? His back to her? I thought he looked scared."

James sat forward in his chair, shaking his head as if reorganizing bits in his brain. "I mean, I noticed his behavior, but I just thought he was impatient."

Mia nodded and said, "And you could be right, James. But when I'm directing talent, I get into the minutiae of an actor's physicality. It's a whole language we constantly speak to each other, pretty much unconsciously. I see all that and, well, yeah. Directorial experience helps for sure. And it might sound a little woo-woo, but, you know, maybe some intuition too?" She rubbed the back of her neck as if to smooth raised hairs. "Just saying. Especially you, Jake. Depending on how things play out, just . . . I don't know, don't let that one out of your sight." She went back to the table and sat down. Exhaled heavily and said, dragging out the words, "Sooo, I'm embarrassed."

Chiara asked, genuine confusion in her voice, "About what?"

Mia snorted, "Uh, Aleks?" Everyone frowned, not understanding. She gestured, arms out, palms up, and said, "Coulda maybe employed that superpower to spot the red flags and not married a dangerous man?"

Claire, who'd been sitting against the wall listening, said, "It's the red, Mia. Our very loving, blood-red hearts can be blind to flags of the same color."

Mia stared at Claire for a moment. Then deadpan, replied, "Yeah. I guess you're right. Until they hit us in the head with the flagpole."

After a few beats of silence, Martin cleared his throat. "James, Benjamin, you guys are the weather experts. How's that going to impact us?"

James answered first. "There's a little snow in the forecast tonight, but none after that for a few days. Nokomis is on track to groom the trails, and she does a great job. I think the temps will be high enough to soften some of the snowpack during the day. After it's groomed and folks use it, it'll be compacted. But could be a few snowmelt holes between the railroad ties and some liquid on top of the ice. In other words, probably more slippery than today."

When they looked his way, Benjamin grinned. "My weather specialty is usually in the air, so I'll just say be careful and don't go 'flying' off the bridge."

The group groaned and laughed; the release of tension palpable. Claire chuckled her way out of the dining room.

CHAPTER 18

January 29: Sleepless Martin
Ontonagon, Michigan

Bug-eyed in bed. The luxury lodge-like setting of his room, not as soothing as it was the night before. Too many worries. Hoped Hasapsis was so focused on his legal case he hadn't thought about Ontonagon. Or sent someone just to double-check on things. Or hired one of Martin's competitors. He imagined the cartel and the FBI having additional boots on the ground that no one knew about. Where they'd be. No way he could know. Then he tossed and turned, imagining scenarios in which he might tell Mia that he'd worked for her husband. How much he regretted it. How committed he'd become to her safety. How much he'd dreaded telling her; how he could ever explain himself.

Fell asleep worrying she could never forgive him.

January 29: Sleepless Jake
Ontonagon, Michigan

Lying in bed. Not sleeping. Who was he kidding? Not even lying really. More tossing and turning. It felt weird to be around Mia

with all these other people and the high-stakes planning they'd been doing; not spending time alone with her as he'd done in Mississippi. He'd grown accustomed to seeing her in Meridian where, after some time together with Boudreaux, Robbi, Louanne, and the baby, the two of them would take a walk or find a spot somewhere away from the others to catch up on everyday life.

Maybe the discomfort wasn't about Benjamin Smithton? Maybe just a different dynamic. Unfamiliar environment. He turned over again and whispered to himself, just to hear the words he wanted to believe. "Maybe it's just me. Uncomfortable being part of an operation that involves listening devices and weapons."

He exhaled a soft chuff of ironic humor. A whole life dedicated to avoiding involvement with those responsible for his father's death. Years of delicate communication that kept him free of the New Orleans crime syndicate that was his extended family, basically up in smoke. But he couldn't blame Mia. Didn't. His choice. And his job to figure out a way to let Boudreaux know this was a one-off. No way was he going full-time syndicate.

Jake closed his eyes, scenes from the past few months flickering through his mind. The first time Mia came into the bar. Her sadness for him when she learned how his father died, laughing at something Robbi said, Mia the actress, playing the drunk girlfriend at the bar outside Atlanta . . .

He spoke out loud to himself. "Man, you have got to get some sleep!" Turned over again, fluffed the pillow, repositioned it three or four times.

Then found himself replaying conversations since he'd arrived in Ontonagon, looking for evidence of her attraction to Benjamin. Or not. The thought alone upset him so much he turned over again and repeated the 'get comfortable' process. Ridiculous to think about that right now!

He remembered a relaxation technique Ms. Roussel taught him back in high school when his mother was dying; his life falling apart. He closed his eyes, placed his attention on his skin, and noticed the velvety feel of the cotton sheets, the weight of the blanket and duvet, a comfort. Pictured the wood walls and antique framed art on them. Beauty and calm all around him. Then, took slow, deep breaths and began at his toes. Consciously relaxed them. Moved up to his feet, then ankles, legs, and on up his body. One part at a time, softening. By the time he reached his chest, his eyelids were heavy. A few lyrics from a Kings of Leon song he'd listened to over and over as a teenager played low on repeat in the back of his mind. He fell asleep with no answer to which 'you' he could 'be' as they cycled through his thoughts: his mother instead of Ms. Roussel? His father to help him loosen ties to Boudreaux? Mia because he . . .

January 30: Sleepless Ricardo
Duluth, Minnesota

Ricardo checked his burner. 2:00 a.m. He rubbed his face, turned over, closed his eyes. Gave sleep a few more minutes to catch him and gave up. He threw on one of the two sets of coveralls he had, then his boots, and stumbled through the maze of containers to the ship's galley for coffee. A monitor on the wall allowed crew to check their location. He could see that they'd pull into Duluth Superior Harbor in just a few hours. Since he didn't know where Chiara was, he decided it was time. No one else around, he opened his phone, logged into what Chiara called the Drafts Only email server, and used the microphone to compose a message.

SUBJECT: Ricardo to Chiara

Highest priority: Do not share this information with the FBI or anyone who hasn't proven by their actions they are trustworthy. I saw a message to you from Boudreaux. Don't know him but trust your judgment.

Approaching Duluth Superior Harbor. Need to intersect with you on the other side of the Canadian border. We will not cross border together in case I'm intercepted. I will take MN-61 north. First stop, privately arranged safe house between border and Thunder Bay, Ontario, near Little Pigeon Bay. Available Jan. 30-31 only. Use resources to get yourself somewhere near there SAFELY on Jan 30. Advise can or can't soonest and if you can, include location and approx. time of arrival. A-OK to send check mark when you reply.

Love, R

January 30: Sleepless Aleks
Reston, Virginia

Aleks dragged himself into the bedroom, took off his jacket, tossed it carelessly on the clothes valet, and looked at his watch. 1:00 a.m. He sauntered over to the small bar he had put in the bedroom after Mia left and poured a generous ouzo. Tossed it down in one. Then poured another and sat on a chair to remove his shoes. Difficult as it was to play the sad, potentially widowed husband at yet another after-hours embassy event, he found it even more difficult to wait for a court ruling he was less sure every day he would win. He did not believe she was dead but hoped Mia would interpret his

attempts to have her declared dead as evidence that he would leave her alone once he succeeded.

He stood, pulled his phone from his pocket, and noticed a new email notification. He tapped it open.

SUBJECT: Informal Meeting with Estate Counsel

Mr. Hasapsis,

As previously advised, given the lack of physical evidence and the absence of a body, the likelihood of obtaining a ruling to declare your wife dead is slim. I believe we'll receive that ruling within days.

Her estate counsel has requested an informal meeting, which I have scheduled for January 30 at 2:00 p.m. Estate representatives will attend via video conference, and our IT department will ensure a seamless connection.

As your legal representative, I have confirmed this meeting. Please advise whether you will attend. I strongly recommend that you do so, as your input will be necessary regarding any information shared by counsel.

Sincerely,

#sig#

P. Panagakos, Esq.

Aleks put the phone down as he sipped ouzo and considered the possibilities. He spoke softly, as if Mia could hear him. "You are giving in, finally? Your attorneys have generated some evidence that you are alive? You want to fight me?" He snorted a laugh, downed the rest of the ouzo, and began to undress, speaking softly to himself. "Mia, you are mine, so have your attorneys do whatever

you like. I will find you. If you remain unwilling to be the wife you promised to be, then—one way or another—we will deliver the evidence of death the court wishes to see.”

He left the rest of his clothing on the floor on his way to the shower. The new housekeeper he had hired to perform the mundane daily tasks that a good wife would see to would take care of it in the morning.

CHAPTER 19

*January 30: Lila's PR
Ontonagon, Michigan*

As soon as they walked through the door of her coffee shop, Julie recognized the South Americans. She texted Lila, and five minutes later, Claire's granddaughter came strolling in like a teenager who couldn't take her eyes off her phone. Julie waved her to a table. It was a couple over from the two men but near enough she and Lila could speak normally and be confident the two men could hear them.

She brought two cups of regular coffee to the table and said, "What's gonna happen, girl? I hear your uncle's a mess!"

Lila, twenty-two but giggling as if she were seventeen, replied conspiratorially, "Oh. My. God. He's been all up in my face about this girl. Woman. Whatever! I've never seen him this shook before!"

"I heard! He was in here earlier with a photo he took of her running over the Peninsula Trail bridge yesterday afternoon. Wanted to know if she'd been in here. But I couldn't tell anything from that photo. The girl had her back to the camera."

"I know, right? Been on my case too. To like, play detective. 'Take a walk on the bridge around four when she usually runs. See where she goes.' Like it's my job to be his personal swipe-right date finder."

Julie thought what a perfect actress her young friend would be and didn't have to fake laughter.

"Well, Lila, enjoy your coffee. I'm sure you'll figure out whether you have time to help your Uncle Ben out. I've gotta get back to the espresso machine."

"Don't miss the big deal at the pub tonight," Lila said as she headed toward the door.

"Wouldn't miss it! If this town's gonna see whether four-wheelers or snowmobiles are faster on the trails, I want in on the action."

Lila opened the door and looked straight at Julie. "You betcha! 7:00 p.m."

Julie laughed as Lila closed the door. She removed the lid from the top of the espresso machine as if to check the beans. It gave her a clear view of the South American men. They were working at being nonchalant, gathering up their things to leave. Saw excitement and, in the younger man's face, fear. Hidden by the machines and the counter, she pulled her phone out of her pocket and replied to a group text.

South Americans in the 4 pm loop.

Then she texted friends at each restaurant open for lunch.

Let me know when suits show up at your place
for lunch and save me a seat near them.

The replies came instantly.



Then she texted the home team.

No sign of bureau for coffee. We'll feed them
the 4 pm intel at lunch, wherever they show up.
Team's on it.

***January 30: On Your Marks, Rehearsal
Ontonagon, Michigan***

Midmorning, day of what Mia called 'rehearsal,' Martin, James, Benjamin, Jake, Chiara, and Mia ran through all the photos from the day before. Memorized who was who and named the South Americans 'young/short' and 'old/tall' since they didn't know their names. They memorized their outfits and snowmobile descriptions. Mia had them take turns describing each until she was certain they wouldn't forget. Then she ran everyone through their marks and movements. Sitting at Claire's big dining table, Mia drilled them until everyone could recite their part without pause. Without thinking.

They picked at the lunch Claire gave them, making small talk, until James chuckled and said, "Those outfits . . ." He shook his head and broke into a full laugh.

Mia said, "What?"

Benjamin grinned at James. "You betcha they bought 'em new, right?" Leaned hard on the Yooper accent.

James, still laughing, said, "And cheap. Got the slippery shine on 'em." Looking up at Benjamin, added, "Don-chah-know?" Both men howled.

"What?" Mia, Chiara, and Jake all shouted over each other.

Benjamin got control of himself first. "It's just . . . when we were doing recon yesterday? If they wanted to blend in, maybe they'd've gone to one of the thrift stores and got something used." He glanced at James.

"Yeah. Something neutral in oiled canvas. Or even Thinsulate or Gor-Tex, like the female agent is wearing. She's gotta be the only one with any real experience. Those snowmobile coveralls the men are all wearing came overnight from Amazon. Or maybe a quick run up to Houghton to the Walmart."

Benjamin looked at the other three, wiping his eyes and rubbing his face. "Real pretty but cheap. And because they're nylon, kids around here wear 'em to play in. To slide. You know, like a waterslide but with snow."

Catching on, the three non-Michiganders grinned. Then Jake looked at Mia and Chiara. "Must be something like 'crawfish shorts' where I'm from."

Mia rolled her eyes at Chiara who just shook her head at the men and their weird jokes.

Lunch over, Mia ran them through all the 'what-ifs' until Martin said, "Enough, Mia. It's getting close to time. Jake, let's get everyone fitted with their listening devices and spread out around the house to test them." He pulled several packages out of a gym bag and began passing them out. "Ladies, you two stay in the house. Just get as far away from each other as you can. We'll go outside."

They put them on, linked up, and confirmed everyone could hear each other.

Martin said, "Okay. Let's spread out."

Mia went toward Claire's foyer closet and said, "Chiara, if you go upstairs to your room, I'll slip out to the barn. There's not enough separation in this house, even between the floors, to be sure our units work." James started to protest, and Mia put her unemotional director's voice in play. "Save it, James. We've worked

too hard, and there's too much at stake." She pulled a big barn coat out of the closet.

As the men left the house through the front door, Mia, hood pulled over her head and half of her face, walked out the back and headed toward the barn. Judged it one hundred and fifty feet, north-northeast of the house toward the river. She could hear everyone through the earpiece clearly. James, Benjamin, Jake, and Martin spread out toward the road. At the hard ninety-degree turn it made at the foot of Claire's driveway, they all went in different directions. It was windy. Made the audio scratchy. But she could understand what was being said. She looked up to open the barn door, and a gust of wind blew the hood completely off her head. She pulled it down with one hand as she opened the barn door with another. Caught movement out of the corner of her eye. Something moved past the barn toward the thick woods behind it. She stepped quickly into the barn, closed the door, and slid the wooden gate latch in place. She ran to the back and carefully pushed the wooden door open a sliver. About thirty yards away, two people got off a snowmobile, mostly hidden by trees and brush.

Someone shouted her name in her ear. She pulled the door gently shut and whispered, "What? Yeah. Uh, yes. I can hear you."

Jake said, "Mia, took you a minute. And you're whispering. You okay?"

"Yeah. Saw something. Pretty far away behind the barn. I'm ninety-nine percent sure it's the feds." Instantly angry that these two people who should have been caring for Chiara were not, she watched them get back on the snowmobile. Trying not to attract attention, the male agent, Michael, without revving the engine, maneuvered carefully around Claire's property. Looking.

Martin spoke quietly, "Phone app makes that one hundred percent."

“They’re moving toward the road, whichever of you is out there,” Mia whispered.

James said, “Copy that, and that’s me. I’m in uniform. You guys all stay where you are, mute your mics, and listen.”

Sixty seconds later, Mia heard James. Cracked the door open and watched.

“It’s a good day for snowmobiling, but you two are off the trail. You lost?”

They heard the man’s voice, “Oh, Deputy. Thanks. Just tried to take a shortcut and—”

“Yeah. I think I’ve heard about you two. Word on the street, you’re looking for someone. Might have checked in with us at the station, you know. We could help.” He sounded friendly. Professional.

The female agent, Sam, said, “That would be great—” but the male, Michael, spoke over her.

“Thanks, Deputy. It’s our case; we aren’t authorized to involve any locals.”

Mia imagined James playing it cool, nodding. “Any of this a threat to our town? Our folks?”

Michael said, “No. No national manhunt. More a protective services thing.”

“Well, if you change your mind, be happy to help. I may not be in, but plenty of folks at the station. It’s a couple of blocks off River Street on Chippewa. Drop off some photos at least.” James smiled and pointed his thumb straight behind him. “Just take this road around to where it dead-ends at M-64, take a left, then another left at the foot of the bridge. You’ll know where you are then. Just turn right on Chippewa across from the coffee shop.”

Mia heard the rev of a snowmobile engine, then Martin said, “Everybody stay where you are for a couple minutes.” Then, as the engine noise died away, James said, “We’re clear.”

Martin completed a call and response with each person on the team. Mia noted the time. "It's three-thirty. Time to head to the bridge to check our marks and timing."



Back at Claire's an hour and a half later, the rehearsal a success, Mia said, "I keep wanting to go talk to my videographer and lighting people. Make sure I'm not missing something obvious."

Chiara said, "I'll be your lighting person." She turned to Martin. "You'll want to be on the south side of the bridge if you don't want the sun to be in your eyes."

Martin tilted his head toward her. "How did you—"

"Looked at you like I would a piece of work. I could see that you were squinting your eyes from the sun. Just stay on the south side and look northwest toward the bridge and it won't be a problem."

"Good one, Chiara." Biting her lip at having missed it herself and thrilled that Chiara caught it, she shook her head and opened her mouth to apologize. But before she could speak, Jake stepped closer to her. Leaned close and spoke softly.

"You're doing great, Mia. I don't know about everyone else, but I could never have orchestrated this the way you have." He put a hand on her arm and tried hard for a reassuring smile.

Mia still didn't see the calm Jake she knew best; felt overwhelmed with guilt for a moment about what he'd been forced to sacrifice to be here. She leaned in and hugged him. Then let go and said, "Okay, everyone. Let's sit down and walk through it, see if anyone needs an adjustment. Then we can break for supper and a good night's sleep."

They spent an hour making note of minor tweaks to position for line of sight or obstacles and wrapped up just before dinner. As they gathered at Claire's front door to see James and Benjamin off,

Mia reminded them, “Tomorrow, remember! No meet up. Check yourself on your part of the script and be at your assigned spot, in place, ready for action at 3:45 p.m.”

Sitting in Claire’s dining room, the only one left at the table, Mia sighed. She closed her eyes and asked the gods of production to provide her with one unexpected thing, just one. Something minor. Something she’d be able to solve. She crossed her fingers. Because nothing had gone wrong yet. And years of experience had taught Mia that was a bad sign.

CHAPTER 20

January 31: Action

Ontonagon, Michigan—3:45 p.m.

“Check in, everyone.” Mia’s authoritative director’s voice dead calm in every ear. Her prayer had been answered: an unexpected change and a script rewrite. Crossed her fingers. Said a prayer.

Martin: “I’m at the northeast entrance to the bridge. Facing north, watching for locals. Excellent cover. Good visibility in all directions. One target, male fed, on the bridge waiting for the runner. Ready.”

James: “James, southwest entrance to the bridge, one hundred and eighty degrees of good visibility. South Americans are on snowmobile, parked about fifty yards from the shoreline. Female agent on snowmobile is tucked between some bushes about where we expected. I have good tree cover. Ready.”

Jake: “Jake, in position, about four hundred and fifty feet from the bridge, on the dock as planned. Good coverage, buried under the snow. Have excellent visibility through the scope. Locked, loaded, and ready.”

Mia: “Reminds me of a fake black ops commercial I shot two years ago.”

A few quiet chuckles.

Jake: “Mia, don’t make me laugh. I don’t want to shake off the snow I’ve so carefully hidden myself under.”

Mia: "Quiet on the set for another nine minutes."

Seven minutes later, Martin broke the silence: "Noisy four-wheeler with four happy people, not our targets, coming from town."

The four-wheeler turned right off the main trail onto the railroad bridge. It stopped in the middle; the passengers taking in the view. One got out; stepped around to the back of the vehicle.

Jake: "I'm watching through the scope. She's opened a cooler and is pulling out a can of soda or beer. Asking if anyone else wants one." A few beats of silence. "Headed back to her seat."

Mia: "It's 3:58. Jake, let us know when they continue moving."

Jake: "They're pulling forward now. We're good to go."

"Action," Mia said quietly. She touched her beanie cap; made sure some of her new platinum hair showed around the edges. Hoped Chiara was on her way now; that she'd be okay. She stepped out from behind the tree she'd been using as cover, shivered, and shook her arms to get rid of some adrenaline. Pictured the way Chiara ran, hoped she could pull it off long enough to fool the bad guys, then turned toward the bridge.



Martin: "Got a visual on you. You're clear to run onto the bridge. James, you should get visual . . . now."

James: "Got her. Your mask is good. I see the wisps of hair. Slow down just a little." A few beats of quiet, and he added, "Happy four-wheelers exiting the bridge on this end. And here come our foreign guests. They're walking it but briskly."

Martin: "You're looking good but watch it. The ice is soft in places. Wetter and slicker than yesterday."

Jake: "No visual on Mia yet, but I have their position locked in on scope."

James: “10-4. I’ll call it. She’s turning from the trail onto the railroad tracks . . . slowing it down . . . now, almost over the water. Whoa! The wind hit her hard. She’s stumbling . . . slipping a little. Okay. She caught herself.”

Jake: “You scared us. Good catch.”

Mia: “I’m okay. James?”

James: “South Americans over the water on this side. You should be able to see them. And they can definitely see you.”

A moment later, she sneezed. And slipped again.

January 31: Jorge and Arturo
Ontonagon, Michigan—3:59 p.m.

Jorge tested his apprentice. “Tell me what is what, Arturo.”

Arturo whispered, “They’ve split up, Jorge. The agent Michael is on the opposite side of the bridge from us, and the woman, Sam, she is on a snowmobile just up ahead, ready to enter the trail.”

Jorge nodded. “We will follow our second instruction, Arturo. The federal agents will take her. We will stand by. Wait to see who shows up to give us assistance.”

“And how do we know what to do then, Jorge? We’ve heard from no one. We know nothing!” The rising sense of panic, pure reaction to consequences he imagined he would suffer if he and Jorge failed.

“Shut up, Arturo. Just watch and learn. Let’s go. And when we are visible to those on the bridge, do not hurry.”

They walked from the trailhead gravel to the point on the bridge where they were over water. Jorge set a brisk but casual pace. Just two guys taking a late afternoon walk into town. Jorge looked over at Arturo and smiled. Heard Sam’s snowmobile power up behind them.

Orzmondo's wife ran toward them from the other side of the bridge. Jorge, wary, watched her closely. He saw white wisps of hair around the edges of her beanie. She was the right height and weight. But before he could confirm the fluid movement he associated with the woman, she fell.

Jorge saw Arturo's panicked face. The boy's inexperience; an automatic reaction to help. He ran. Jorge whispered sharply, "Arturo, wait!"

Arturo did not wait. So Jorge did the only thing he could. He played concerned citizen and ran behind Arturo.

January 31: Sam and Michael
Ontonagon, Michigan—4:01 p.m.

Sam fidgeted on the snowmobile. Nothing new to her Midwestern soul. Knew it wise that she was at the wheel. Michael had no experience, and a wrong turn on this icy repurposed railroad bridge with no side safety rails would send one careening into the partially iced Ontonagon River. There'd be no rescue from that. She closed her eyes and checked in with her body. Tension in her neck and the mild anxiety headache that had come and gone over the past several days nagged. She wrote it off as a lack of experience. To putting up with Michael's bitchiness. But mostly, the discomfort of using the Blackwell woman as bait. She hoped Michael's expectation of how this would go down would prove accurate. He'd laid it out half an hour before as if there was no need for a Plan B.

"Blackwell will be on her four o'clock run and won't be expecting anything. I'll stop her as if to ask a question. When the cartel men pass you on the trail, you pull out of your spot between the bushes. Hang back a little. Stay behind them."

“Okay. You’ll talk to her, and I’m behind the cartel’s men. What then?”

“Position yourself to block the South Americans’ exit. Stay behind them and have your weapon and cuffs ready. The instant they make a move toward her, pull your weapon and arrest them. If that doesn’t stop them, if they go for her, or me, or even come back at you . . . if they do absolutely anything other than raise their hands to surrender, shoot the biggest man first.”

Sam stared at Michael. She was a good shot but had never fired her weapon at a human being.

“But don’t kill him. We need these guys. You got it?”

She registered his impatience. Bit her lip. Nodded yes, got on her snowmobile, drove it to the other side of the bridge, tucked herself between some trees, and waited. Thought about what Blackwell might do if she was afraid of Michael or the South Americans if—or when—they went for her. Imagined what she could do to protect Orzmondo’s wife if things didn’t play out exactly as Michael had described.

When the two South Americans passed her, she stopped thinking. As soon as they were about twenty yards ahead, she navigated the snowmobile out of the trees and onto the bridge. She increased speed just enough to match their walking pace. Just as she reached to turn the music on, disguising herself as a local out for a joy ride, one of the South Americans broke into a run. Then the second. She leaned over to look around them. Saw Michael running toward her direction but couldn’t see the Blackwell woman. She accelerated, navigating closer to the edge of the bridge, and saw what they were running toward. Blackwell was down.

“Oh shit!” Sam whispered to herself. “And this is why we need a Plan B.”

January 31: She's All Yours
Ontonagon, Michigan—4:03 p.m.

Jake: "I'm watching through the scope, guys. It's real. She's hurt." He moved the scope back to the male FBI agent. Mia'd said to watch him closely.

James: "Fuck! Okay, I'm coming in behind the female agent's snowmobile. She's slowing down. She probably knows the two men in front of her are the cartel guys, but she's not racing to get to them."

Martin: "Everyone's on the bridge now."

James: "I called it in. My people are getting an ambulance."

Martin: "Parabolic microphone is on and directed toward the action. We'll hear them all now."



Michael walked quickly, then tried to run, boots slipping with every step. He shouted, "Chiara? Chiara Blackwell? Are you okay?" He got closer and shouted again, "Don't move. I've got you. You're going to be okay!"

Face down, she croaked, "Just let me lie here for a second. I'll be okay. Who are you? How did you know my name?"

"I left you emails and voicemails. I'm Michael. FBI. We've been trying to get ahold of you. Your husband's cover's been blown. And the cartel, they're after you. We're taking you into protective custody." His heart raced. So close to success and all that it would lead to.

"Wait . . ." she moaned. "My ankle! It's stuck . . . I don't know if . . ." She tried to turn over, face up so she could see, but screamed when her ankle didn't turn with her.

Almost upon her, Michael said, "Just wait, Chiara. I've got help

coming. We'll get your foot out of there and get you on a snowmobile." This was playing out even more conveniently than he'd imagined.

He shouted, "Sam! Come help me. Her foot's stuck between the railroad ties." He waved her closer.



Martin: "You guys hearing all this?" He adjusted the parabolic microphone's dish.

Jake and James at the same time: "Yes."

James: "The South Americans are close."



Jorge shouted, "Can we be of service to you? We have a snowmobile just on the other side of the river. And we can carry her!"

Michael shouted back, "My partner is right behind you!"

"We will wait then. Right here. In case you should need our assistance." Jorge put a hand on Arturo's shoulder to hold him in place. Then nodded at him, let go, and stepped aside at the sound of the advancing snowmobile behind them.



James started toward the bridge. Spiked boots secure on the icy bridge, staying just inside the tree line. Keeping everyone else in front of him. The South Americans separated to let Sam's snowmobile pass between them. But they followed, slowly, getting closer to the FBI agents. The female agent stopped and got off the snowmobile and spoke to her partner.

"I'll get her out of the ice and onto the snowmobile. You'd better—"

Michael interrupted, "I'll take care of our friends here."

James, as close to open visibility on his end of the bridge as possible, watched Michael stand and turn toward the cartel men, his partner behind him, kneeling on the ice. The agent pulled his weapon. When the younger of the two went to pull his in return, the older man stayed his hand.

Michael smiled at Jorge, turned around, and hit Sam on the back of the head. She crumpled into a heap on the ice.

Michael turned toward Jorge and Arturo. "You were promised assistance, I believe? She's all yours."

James pulled his weapon and ran.

January 31: Benjamin and Chiara
Lake Superior—4:03 p.m.

At cruising altitude, Benjamin's voice was calm and confident when he reminded her why they needed the airstrip instead of water. "Theoretically, we could have done it in my floatplane, Chiara. But you would not have been happy."

"Because of the ice?" Chiara asked.

Benjamin laughed. "Well, you could say that. Specifically, the ice that you and I would have turned into. The floatplane's cabin isn't pressurized. Or heated."

A visual thinker, she caught a flash of the floatplane crashing with their frozen bodies inside. Shivered and dismissed it. Imagined instead seeing Ricardo. She was comfortable inside the cockpit, even with the ice crystals that formed on the little plane's

windows. Beautiful little light-splitting prisms over the turquoise of Lake Superior. Even deadly cold could be lovely.

Benjamin said, “And I would not have been happy taking off on bumpy ice and worrying about moisture freezing on the wings, or . . .” He paused.

Chiara watched him listen to something on his headset that she couldn’t hear on hers. His face morphed from easy-going grin to pressed lips and worry-wrinkled forehead. “I’ll skip describing the other unpleasant possibilities right now.”

She agreed. Describing frozen bodies or talking about what could go wrong would not untangle the ball of anxiety that sat in the pit of her stomach.

They’d gone through a host of negative possibilities just a few hours ago after reading Ricardo’s email in the Drafts folder. He’d asked that she be in Canada ‘by January 30.’ Mia had to rewrite the whole script to make it happen.

But the cold was dismissed as a problem. Benjamin told the group that his late father’s Pilatus PC-12 NG used for small group commercial flights around the Great Lakes region, had no problem taking off or landing in low temps. Chiara listened to plenty of discussion about crosswinds, sudden gusts, and patrolling the airspace borders.

In the end, Benjamin settled it. “OPP Aviation—Ontario Provincial Police—is a concern, but not a big one. They can’t monitor everything, everywhere, all at once. But if they do see us, we have to have a good story to tell.”

Chiara said, “Unless he’s captured and doesn’t show up, Ricardo will handle that. But how much do you trust your friends up there who own the airstrip where we’re going to land?”

Claire spoke before her son could. “We trust the Korhonen’s absolutely, Chiara. Our families have been close friends ever since Liam and my late husband Jack fought in Vietnam together. Liam

was one of the few Canadians who volunteered to serve with the US. We've flown back and forth for family events, dinner parties, all kinds of gatherings over the decades."

Benjamin nodded. "Yeah, no worries there. And in truth, you and I, Chiara, will have our IDs. If OPP happens to catch us landing on the Korhonen's strip, which is pretty unlikely, we'll hope those IDs, along with the truth about what's going down, hopefully from Ricardo himself, will carry the day."

Turbulence jarred Chiara back into the present.

Benjamin pointed northwest, and Chiara gasped at what looked like a wall of gray-white granite. "What is that?"

"Lake effect snow. Wasn't anything on radar earlier today, but these storms can come up quickly, and usually without warning."

"Do we need to turn back?"

"No. I'm instrument rated. We'll fly through it."

Chiara's stomach lurched at the thought. Her 'oh' response was too quiet to hear. She said, "What should I do?"

Benjamin's eyes were locked on the horizon. "Don't touch anything."

"Yeah, that's a given."

"The sick sacks are there." He nodded toward a compartment near her seat and added, "And if you want to avoid getting sick, try to sit still. Even in the turbulence. And don't close your eyes. Keep 'em fixed on the horizon."

Chiara found the airsickness bags, put one in her lap, then fixed her eyes straight ahead. She thought about all Ricardo had been through the past several weeks, how this was nothing compared to all that. She took another deep breath and resisted the urge to close her eyes. She was certain they were about to hit a wall.

They hit it. Chiara, thrown forward in her seat, couldn't see the horizon or anything else. They floated in a sea of white, tilted down, leveled out, and dropped again. Benjamin quietly cursed.

She sucked in air. Squeezed her eyes shut.

“Whoa, baby,” Benjamin spoke softly to the plane. “We’ve got this.”

Then another soft bump, and the plane slowed. The drop continued. Chiara wanted to say something but wouldn’t distract him with a question. Benjamin’s instruction forgotten for a moment, she closed her eyes. Saw her husband’s face. Smiling. Sketches of the work she’d planned for the coming two years. And then she thought about Mia. Hoped she was safe. And hoped her decision to be Chiara went more smoothly than this flight.

January 31: That’s Our Cue
Ontonagon, Michigan—4:05 p.m.

Through Martin’s parabolic mic: “She’s all yours.”

“That’s our cue, boys,” James said, cop flat.

Hidden under the ice 450 yards away, Jake’s perception of time stretched. Slowed. He’d shredded thousands of paper targets. Killed squirrels, rabbits, ducks, and deer; never even aimed a weapon at a human being. But the moment Michael knocked his FBI partner out, everything disappeared except Mia. Her dark form lying injured, helpless, trapped on the bridge, surrounded by people who thought she was Chiara; people who would take her if they could. Hurt her. Kill her.

In a single second, images of Mia passed before his eyes: Mia walking next to him on the Bayou Têche trail; Mia, playfully tilting the bottle of wine up as if to guzzle it at their impromptu picnic; Mia in disguise, tipping her limo driver hat; Mia’s photo showing long red hair and intense green eyes.

In that instant, every moral and ethical concern he'd struggled with for the past three days dissolved like bayou fog hit by a rising August sun. The Remington 700, loaded with five rounds of .308 Winchester—in case his shaking hands failed him on the first and second shots—became a solid extension of his body. He breathed in, breathed out, and squeezed the trigger.

As Michael fell, Jake made a microscopic adjustment to the rifle's direction and placed the two South Americans on either side of the crosshairs. The first one that moved toward Mia would go down next. He breathed again and counted. Four rounds left. He didn't shake.



Michael's knee collapsed with a spray of blood and bone. He fell to the ice, screaming in agony, writhing in a mix of his own blood and a scrim of snowmelt on the icy bridge. Martin dropped the parabolic microphone, drew his weapon, and, though awkward and inexperienced with the boot crampons, ran. He watched James closing in from the other direction with the South Americans between them, both directing their weapons toward the marina, desperately trying to locate the source of the shot just fired.

James shouted at them, "Stop! Put your weapons down! You're under arrest!" The two men looked at him, then turned to see Martin, gun drawn, coming toward them from the other direction. Martin stopped, weapon trained on the older man who stood stock-still, his own weapon poised to fire.

The younger one lowered his weapon, turned, and ran toward James, but at the front of the FBI woman's abandoned snowmobile, veered right.

James shouted, "Stop! Don't make me shoot you!" Arturo slid to a stop beside the snowmobile, his back to the open river below. The heel of his left boot halfway off the edge.

James thought for a second the young man was about to cry. But instead, he laid his weapon on the snowmobile seat, put his hands up, and stepped forward. He started to speak but looked down when his step forward put just enough pressure on his back foot to slide off the edge of the snowmelt-covered bridge. Like a hiker on a crumbling hillside, he fell to one knee, then the other, and slid backward. He shouted something in another language as he reached for the snowmobile. Missed it, then grasped and scrabbled at the ice for something, anything to stop his backward motion. But there was nothing. His scream lasted only a second when he slipped over the side and disappeared.



Jorge, eyes locked and weapon trained on Martin, looked quickly in both directions. Considered his options. If he were taken into custody, the cartel would ensure he was a dead man. He would not allow that to happen. He chose the smaller of his two opponents, took two running steps to gather speed, and dove at the deputy's feet. He hit the ice. Dead ahead, the deputy's boots, chains around them, came up easily, even elegantly out of the ice. Moved a half inch back. Just far enough. Momentum, liquid ice, and the jumpsuit he wore combined to defeat his efforts to stop. A memory: racing down a waterslide as a teenager flashed as he slid past the deputy. He reached, grappled, and flailed. Scratched with thick-gloved fingers in desperation. But speed and snowmelt on well-groomed ice, an enemy he had only a few seconds to recognize and no time to defeat. He slid irrevocably over the side.

A lightning-strike crack of breaking ice. Then nothing.



Jake watched through his scope. James, phone at his ear, kneeled between Sam and Mia.

Martin lowered his weapon and said, "Jake? What'cha got?"

"A man on the concrete piling on this side of the bridge. But the other one hit the ice, fell through, and isn't coming up. How's Mia?"

A few seconds of silence, then James spoke, relief evident in his forced cop-style humor. "We get a few broken ankles on this bridge every damn year! I guess it was Mia's turn."

Martin added, "The other agent is coming around."

Jake raised himself up out of the snow. "And I hear the ambulance."

He wiped away from his cheeks what he told himself was just melting snow and started the long walk from the marina to the bridge where Mia lay.

January 31: Long-awaited Reunion

Cloud Bay, Ontario, Canada—5:30 p.m.

Ricardo stood outside the small building he'd parked next to and watched the plane descend. He felt nothing more than a sense of mild astonishment. Weeks hiding in the container ship. The monotonous work he'd been hired to do from New York through the St. Lawrence. The constant fear of being caught. The fear someone would take Chiara. Even as they'd exchanged messages, he'd pushed the possibility of being with her again so far down and away that—at this moment, in Cloud Bay, Ontario, when he expected to be filled with joy—all he felt was numb.

He walked toward the runway, stretching his mind a few minutes into the future and found a vision. But instead of Chiara, he saw the head of the cartel walking down the plane's stairs, his wife's elbow in his hand, wearing that half-grin of triumph Ricardo'd wanted to rip from the man's face a hundred times during the past few months.

He felt the screech of wheels hitting the runway in his gut and let it flow through his body and move him forward. Toward the runway. The puff of smoke hung in the air behind the plane like fear itself. When he reached the runway, he stopped. And waited for whatever would come.

It took an eon to slow down, turn at the end of the airstrip, and head back toward him. When it finally stopped, Ricardo put his hand to his chest. Something there. Thick. So heavy he couldn't move. He stopped trying and watched as the stairs came down and then his wife. Alone, tumbling down the steps with the same balletic elegance that stopped his breath the first time he saw her. Before he ever knew her name. A Cirque du Soleil performer who couldn't have tripped and fallen if she'd tried.

She threw herself on him, nearly screaming the mix of fear and anger and disbelief and joy; no one came behind her to claim victory over them both.

Whatever had been in his chest bloomed into something soft, then warm, and then liquid; rose up inside him until it couldn't be contained and spilled down his face and into her hair.

CHAPTER 21

*January 31: Hours at the Hospital
Ontonagon, Michigan*

Jake sat by Mia's bed in the recovery unit of the only hospital in the tiny hamlet of Ontonagon. Her ankle fracture was compound. So much so, general anesthesia had been required for the surgeon to manipulate the bones and use hardware to secure them.

The pre-op surgical nurse reassured him. "We get a lot of this all winter long, and our surgeons and staff are absolutely the best. She couldn't be in better hands."

Staff allowed him to hover because she was, per the only ID she had—the ID Boudreaux'd prepared for her when she was working with Louanne back in the fall—Maria Brusey. It made perfect sense to the staff that Jake Brusey would be with his wife.

Emotionally and physically exhausted, he'd left post-takedown activities for James and local police. Asked Martin to update Boudreaux, hoping that would send the message: He did not work for the family and he would not be drawn further into their criminal activities.

He didn't know if Mia could hear him yet, but he whispered in her ear, "I'm going to let Claire know you're okay. I'll be right back."



Martin, exhausted, slumped in an uncomfortable seat in the surgery suites waiting area, didn't notice the usual hospital hubbub or the smell of disinfectant. He was more than a little overwhelmed. But even with the adrenaline rush over, no sense of a letdown. Couldn't remember ever feeling so good at the completion of a job. Waiting for Claire to be willing to leave the hospital, which she would not do until she got word that Mia had awakened and was okay, he reviewed the past few hours. Felt his lips pulling up into a smile.

He'd handcuffed Michael to the EMT's stretcher while James called the FBI's Detroit field office and briefed them. They respectfully requested he let them know when the man was out of surgery so they could send a helicopter and take possession of the prisoner. They'd all have to be interviewed, but not tonight.

James told them he wouldn't let Agent Michael Stone out of his sight until he saw the man safely in FBI custody.

The female FBI agent's injury was serious but not life threatening. Treated for a concussion, the hospitalist stitched up her head wound and kept her for observation.

While James dealt with the FBI side of things, Martin had a chat with the younger South American, a nineteen-year-old he learned was named Arturo. Martin stood by the bed in the ER where Arturo lay on ice packs. He had broken ribs, a broken leg, and because the anesthetic was wearing off, a shot of morphine. He was awake, but he wasn't going anywhere.

"Before the cops get here, I wanted to hear your story," Martin said to the young man.

"I am very afraid, sir. This was only my second operation, and there is much I do not know. I do not even know why we were supposed to capture this woman. But"—Arturo paused, and Martin saw terror in his eyes—"I think Jorge was the lucky one, not hitting a concrete slab. When we fail in our missions, Jorge led me to believe the rest of our lives would be short. He does not have to worry about that now."

Martin looked at him. He was about the same age as Martin's son Peter. His English wasn't bad. "How did you wind up working with Jorge?"

"They came to my village and recruited me. I knew they were cartel men, but when I resisted, they threatened to harm my mother. And my little sister. I had to go." Martin could see he was on the verge of tears. "I did not want to go. And now, unless I am dead, they will find me and make an example of me. If they know I am alive, they will hurt my family, maybe even kill them, to keep their power over others like me."

Martin nodded. "Do your bosses know what happened yet?"

"I am responsible for filing the daily report. And I have not yet done that. If I do not before midnight, they will reach out to me. I am not sure, but I believe the phone they assigned to me can be tracked."

"Where is your phone?"

Arturo reached for the pants pocket where the phone would normally be, but Martin reached under the gurney and pulled out Arturo's plastic bag of belongings. No phone.

Arturo looked up at Martin with hope in his eyes. "It must have fallen in the river. Along with Jorge."

Martin nodded and gestured for Arturo to wait, though that was totally unnecessary. He left Arturo's bed smiling.



The double doors banged open and Jake walked through. Claire stood up, hand at her heart, then dropped it and relaxed when she read his smile.

"Yes, Claire, she's fine. The surgery went well, but she's going to be in recovery for a couple more hours. You should go home. Get some rest."

"You're going to stay the night?"

"I am," he said with a tired grin. "What else would a good husband do?"

James walked up just in time to see Claire, Jake, and Martin laughing at Jake's commitment to his role.

"The Detroit field office will send a helicopter to get Michael. I talked to the ASAC and . . ." Martin held up his hand, and James said, "Sorry, the Assistant Agent in Charge. Anyway, she said they would be willing to take Arturo into protective custody and will work with him to get any helpful information he can provide in exchange for protecting him and his family."

Martin breathed a sigh of relief. "I'll let him know." Then, pulling James aside, said, "Meanwhile, if you'll take Claire in to see Sam so that we can get out of here sometime tonight and get some sleep, I'd sure appreciate it."

"Will do," James said with a sigh. "I'll tell her the nurse said five minutes. She's probably going to invite Sam to the house tomorrow night or the next, whenever they say Mia can leave the hospital, so we can all celebrate."

"You guys celebrate shit like this?" Martin was genuinely puzzled.

James chuckled. "Look, it's the dead of winter in a small town. Even snowmobiling and four-wheeling get old. We'll celebrate anything."

February 1: Informal Disclosure *Washington, DC*

Lead counsel for Aleksanteri Hasapsis, Paul Panagakos, and three of his Solomon and Silverman associates provided aggressive representation of foreign dignitaries on American soil in matters civil and criminal. Panagakos usually enjoyed navigating the complex

legal landscapes, systems, and cultural norms in Greece, Turkey, and Syria. His contacts in Greece led him to represent Hasapsis because he was Leandros Hasapsis' son; Aleks' father was one of the most powerful men in that country. But the son's issues were proving to be anything but enjoyable.

Hasapsis' absence at the recent meeting with his wife's counsel went as well as it did exactly because the son himself was absent. Based on what Panagakos had seen of him from the video they'd been shown, he'd have turned it into a shit show. Since Hasapsis had misinformed his legal team from the get-go, what the opposing counsel shared was devastating.

Panagakos knew he would convey the information back to Hasapsis' father. It was essential that he keep his reputation as an attorney pristine and his own powerful connections strong. Even so, he dreaded what he had to do today. It was never pleasant to confront a client about their lies. Especially in person.

He sat at the corner of the boardroom table, his associates on the other side, and Hasapsis at the head of the table. A huge screen hung on the wall at the other end.



Before he came to the US to work for the Embassy of Greece, Aleks sat next to his father through many long, boring meetings with lawyers and accountants. He had hoped never to sit through another. And yet, here he was.

That Panagakos knew his father, and many other important people in Greece, was motivation enough for Aleks to keep his impatience in check. Looking at the screen, he understood they would be watching a video, almost certainly of Mia acknowledging she was alive, pleading to be released from the marriage. He tried and failed to suppress a grin of expectant satisfaction.

Panagakos gently tapped the table a couple of times. “Aleks, the three of us saw this video yesterday and reviewed it again shortly before you arrived. I warn you: It will not be easy for you to watch. I ask that you keep calm. We will discuss after you’ve reviewed it.”

Panagakos’ junior assistant picked up the remote and hit play.

Aleks registered the first few frames of the video and recognized the setting. He felt the blood drain from his head and extremities toward his core; the effects of flight-or-fight vasoconstriction. His hands tingled, and the rich wood and brass appointments of the meeting room melted away as his vision constricted to pinpoints. He recognized the room where he had found his wife, knocked her out. His own face looming over her. Mia tied up on the bed.

He stood up, abruptly knocking his chair to the floor, and shouted, “*Aftó éinai éna pséma!*” Then screamed, “Where the fuck did . . . who has delivered this *skatá* to you? I demand to know. Now.” He went toward the screen as if he could stop the video by destroying it.



Panagakos nodded to his assistant to pause the video. He remained seated. This was not his first experience with the son of a powerful man; sons who lived as if a Teflon shield stood between them and the consequences of their poor choices. He looked at the three junior attorneys in the room. Flicked his head back toward the door. They gathered their notepads and files off the table and left the room. He waited another minute until Aleks understood that smashing the screen would achieve nothing and had controlled his anger enough to meet Panagakos’ gaze once more.

The attorney’s voice was calm, professional. “Of course. If that’s what you want, we’ll find out where this came from, along with evidence of how it was acquired.”

Aleks eyes bulged in disbelief. "How dare you imply this is authentic." His voice a growl.

Panagakos said nothing for a moment. Then, "As you calm down and think rationally, it will become clear that whether the video is entirely made up, depicts an actual event, or is like one of those true crime reenactment programs"—the attorney stood up and faced Aleks across the polished mahogany table—"like Cold Case or Forensic Files? Maybe you've seen them?"

Aleks licked his lips, blinked slowly, a hint of understanding in his eyes.

"I see that you're beginning to understand, Aleks." Panagakos nodded as he spoke. "No one in your family will allow something like this into the world. True or not, it can and would be made to appear true by those it would benefit. If the video's made public, here's what will happen: Your superiors at the embassy will have you replaced so fast your head will spin. Then, people who want to lessen your family's power base will use it against you all." He picked up his glass of water and took a sip. "As far as your country? Think of your family's hidden roles in the division and struggle within the Cypriot community or maritime boundaries in the Aegean Sea or . . ."

Aleks hissed an interruption, "Enough!" He ran his hands through his hair. "I understand."

A few beats of quiet, then Panagakos spoke again. "Okay then. Let's sit down and consider what comes next."

With a barely detectable slump of resignation, Aleks took a seat across the table from his attorney.

"I recommend we respond to your wife's counsel that you are relieved to learn she is alive. That, of course, if she is unhappy in the marriage, she is free to leave it. We'll convey your sadness and assure them you wish her only the best. Then, you will drop this case because, while diplomatic immunity might protect you from

certain personal consequences, in some situations, it won't protect your family, the embassy, or your country."

"I assume you will demand the original?"

"We will. And I'm sure they will provide one. But if I were in their shoes, I would keep a copy. You know, just in case."

Aleks stood and turned to leave. Panagakos read pure hatred in the ramrod posture and rigid spine as young Hasapis left the room.



Still raging hours later, Aleks lay in his underwear on the bed. He drank, rather than sipped, ouzo. Word would reach his father, and he would go back to Greece. He threw a half-full glass of liquor against the wall; the shattering glass a satisfying release of anger. He left the bed to pace the room and curse everyone and everything that conspired against him.

And especially Martin Bledsoe. *I should have known not to hire that kafros! He is no better than others of his kind. The filthy half-wit immigrants and refugees who try to enter our sacred soil back home.* He hissed. Decided he would withhold payment of Bledsoe's last invoice. *Will serve him right.*

He stumbled to the cabinet. Poured another ouzo. Gulped half of it in one.

Considered the recent financials he had seen from Mia's ad agency and smiled to think about how much the business had shrunk over the past few months. How much more the legal bills would drain her accounts. They had not been married long enough for her to have any ownership in the house. Aleks calculated that by the time he resettled himself in Greece, and she thought it safe to emerge from hiding, she would find herself a woman much reduced in the world. Reduced in the world, and easier to find.

He picked up a small, framed photo of their wedding and spoke out loud to the Mia looking back at him. “And you, Mia, my darling wife, you have no idea the power I will wield from Greece. First, I will demand a place of influence at my father’s side. Then, a Greek woman. There are many who would proudly stand by my side. After an appropriate period of mourning, of course. Because a widower gains respect from all. Becomes even more attractive. And I promise you now: A widower I will become.”

He drained the glass, threw it against the wall, and slammed the framed photo face down on the shelf.

***February 1: Gathering at Claire's
Ontonagon, Michigan***

Mia couldn’t wait to leave the hospital. Even under the name Maria Brusey, she felt exposed. And she was dying to find out what happened when Aleks saw the video. She feared he’d get on a plane and revisit every location he’d already tried, including Ontonagon, to find her.

Told it would be a couple of weeks before she could negotiate stairs, Mia promised she’d be fine sleeping on the sofa at Claire’s if they’d just let her out of the hospital. Lucky for Mia, Claire had assigned her the formal living room, which included the most luxurious leather sofa she had ever touched. Like sleeping on butter that wouldn’t melt.

She’d taken a dose of pain meds and left the sofa to join everyone gathered in the family room: Benjamin, Julie, James, Lila, Martin, Jake, Claire, and—though Claire’d had to apply a fair amount of pressure to get her out of the hotel and into the room Chiara had vacated—Sam.

Lila and Benjamin, picking up the slack for Claire and Mia, brought takeout. As everyone filled their plates, Mia said a silent ‘no’ to the plate Claire offered her. It would be a week before she could use crutches by herself, so in a wheelchair with her foot elevated, hands white knuckling the arms, she watched the others enjoy the food and silently begged the meds to kick in. “Benjamin, tell us about the flight to Canada. All I know is that Chiara is with her husband; nothing else.”

Benjamin recounted the unexpected lake effect snowstorm and the sudden drop in altitude. “Chiara turned white as the snow, but to her credit, she didn’t scream. Or puke. So, that was a win. Of course, it was rough and she was worse for wear when she got off the plane. But Ricardo was there, and I don’t know if I’ve ever seen two people so happy to see each other.”

Lila chimed in, “Uncle Benjamin, you’re making me cry!”

He said, “Yeah, well, you’re not the only one. There were plenty of tears. But they didn’t hang around. A few pleasantries, a handshake, and he got her out of there. I have no idea where the safe house is, and it’s entirely possible they’re not in Canada any longer.”

James said, “Wherever they are, we hope they remain hidden. And safe!” He raised a glass of beer as if to toast. Then said, “And, on another topic, I have to make it official. Martin and Jake, you are hereby, officially, no longer deputized. No paperwork required, I just had to say it out loud in front of witnesses. And inform you that—”

Martin and Jake both groaned and spoke at the same time, “Yeah, we know.”

Jake continued, “An agent from the Detroit office got my number, presumably from you, James, and already left me a message.”

Martin chimed in, “Me too. They’re making it sound more like a formality.”

James was nodding. "Well, it's for sure going to be a little more than that. Maybe Sam should take this one."

"Definitely more than a formality. James, no one in my house is going to like that you, local authority that you are, decided to take this on without calling us. But the part of your interview I was there for rings true: Mia met the Smithton's last fall when Ben pulled her out of Lake Superior after the party boat overturned her canoe. Met Chiara in Meridian, Mississippi, and—two women from DC—they bonded and a few days later Mia took them both to a place as far away from there as possible. Which, Ontonagon definitely qualifies as."

Laughter bubbled up, more from Mia than the others; she wondered if that meant the pain pills were kicking in.

"So they show up here and come to you. You're not sure; maybe Mia and Chiara are just a little overly paranoid and saw no reason to call the FBI in until you were sure they weren't imagining things. Then, with a little help from Mia, you staged the bridge thing to see if you could lure someone out. And it worked way better than you expected." She looked around the table. "You, Jake, shot an FBI agent to keep Mia from being handed over. And Martin, you're a witness, though I missed the part about how you got up here."

Martin, as if he'd expected the question, didn't hesitate. "I work for a friend of Mia's who was worried about her. Pretty protective woman who has a lot of money. She sent me up here to watch over. Help if needed. Turned out it was needed."

Mia flinched. *Robbi. Dear God. Even Robbi will be dragged into this.*

Sam nodded her head, but Mia couldn't tell if that meant Martin's explanation made perfect sense or would simply be someone else's job to confirm.

"Yeah, well, my experience? They'll do exhaustive interviews. Multiple agents. Multiple times. Multiple days. No joy at all for any

of you. Me either, by the way.” She turned to Martin, “Or for Mia’s friend, your employer. Probably send someone from the Jackson field office to interview her,” Sam continued. “But in the end, because Michael is so clearly guilty, was a threat to another agent and a civilian, and because the bureau’s gonna have some egg on its face for how this went down, not to mention all the pain-in-the-butt admin and, let’s not forget . . . they have the South American kid. I doubt any of you will have legal consequences.”

Martin and Jake both relaxed, and James asked, “Any chance they’ll have to come back and testify?”

“Depends. Our people will get the depositions, go through the process and, probably not. But we’ll have to wait and see.”

Martin asked, “Speaking of the kid, what about Arturo?”

“Not sure. He’s young, pretty new. But he’ll be a help,” Sam said. “And wants to help, probably more than he can. Mostly, he’s just glad to be alive, glad the cartel doesn’t know he’s alive, and that his family will be safe.”

Claire clapped her hands. “Attention! Attention! We must celebrate, so since you, Jake, will be leaving soon, I went all out!” She directed everyone’s attention to a heavily stocked buffet. Jake stood up and walked over, surveyed the bottles, sugar cubes, and lemon peels. He turned to Claire and said, “Sazeracs?”

Claire beamed. “I spoke to Robbi. She’d heard from Boudreaux that everything was fine but wanted to hear it from me too. And while we talked, she told me about the Sazerac—the official drink of New Orleans.” Claire laughed. “I thought, what better way to celebrate South Louisiana’s contribution to our exciting winter? And the good outcome for all!”

Jake laughed. “Very fancy, Claire.” He looked over at Mia and winked, then picked up the bar towel Claire’d laid out for him and got to work.

Mia watched him through her pain med-induced haze and for a moment was outside herself. Saw her own green eyes sparkling and a thousand-watt smile.

CHAPTER 22

*March 28: South
Ontonagon, Michigan*

Ankle finally healed and cast off, Mia supplemented the hospital's physical therapy regimen with YouTube videos, progressing from stretches to toe raises, a few brief walks, and today, finally, her first run since that short and painful one on the bridge on January 30. Less than a mile, but standing in the shower, rinsing off actual sweat, felt so good her throat tightened with emotion. *You know this choking up business is not about a run.*

Mia turned off the water. Dried her body and a few tears too. Looked in the mirror to take inventory.

The ad agency was about to sell, but there wasn't much left except a couple of decent contracts. A store with most shelves bare. A quick asset sale, minus attorney fees and taxes—far less than she'd hoped. She did some quick arithmetic: net sale proceeds plus what she had from her previous work for Louanne added to what Chiara paid her, minus attorneys' fees for the legal work fighting Aleks. She could get by for a while.

What to do with—or about—the manila envelope with information about her mother that Claire had given her? Other than look at it and photograph it? First, the drawing of her mother, the one of herself as a child, and then articles that appeared in the local

papers. She uploaded and attached them to an email in the Drafts folder in case she lost the originals. Or had to ditch the phone at some point. Without a home base, there was no such thing as too much backup.

Jessi had shown her mother the photos, but Susan Avery could only say that—best she could remember—that drawing ‘looked like it could be the woman she’d met in the park’ almost thirty years ago.

Learning that her mother had been murdered and that, according to the newspaper articles, no one was ever arrested for the crime didn’t hit her the way she thought it would. Or should. Low-level guilt showed up in dreams about client projects left unfinished; conversations with people she didn’t know interrupted; and once, a dream about being hungry, she picked up box after box of crackers—every single one, empty. Mia wasn’t ready to push on anything; learn anything more. Not yet.

She’d been relieved last week when Vikki confirmed that Aleks no longer lived in Northern Virginia or worked in Washington, DC. Mia hoped he would trouble her no more but doubted that would be the case. Vikki had the DC office forward him the divorce papers. He left the country without signing them. She didn’t know what he might do next, but she was not ready to come out of hiding and find out.

She grabbed a hair dryer and pointed it at the bleached-white pixie cut. While she dried her hair, she looked in the mirror and spoke to her reflection. “Basically, Mia, your life, your home, your business, the people you worked with—everything and almost everyone you care about. That’s what you miss. That’s what these tears are about.”

She had no home, few belongings, and no plan. She’d had a modest, in-person social life with ‘her people’ in Ontonagon while she recovered. With those far away, she communicated through

the Drafts email system. Less risky than sending messages through the ether, but a poor substitute for being with people in person. Mia'd grown to love Claire; to accept her love in return. And when they had time to hang around, enjoyed the rest of the Smithtons. She'd come to care about them. Maybe that's what having cousins felt like? Nomads had cousins. Didn't they?

But the closer her ankle got to fully healed, the more she paced and fidgeted. Like she did after a couple of months at Robbi's house in Meridian. Bored. Anxious. Antsy. Sometimes like a living sort of non sequitur—like thirty frames of snowcapped mountain in the middle of a show about the desert.

She switched off the hair dryer, looked in the mirror, and saw herself clearly. Lonely, sad. But not as skinny as she'd been when she arrived. A little out of shape from lying around, waiting on the ankle to heal. Still, without her own hair, Mia in the mirror was not the Mia she'd known all her life.

She thought of Jake and, without realizing it, cupped her hands around her breasts. He'd left so soon after the gathering at Claire's, they hadn't talked about what it meant that he'd come to Ontonagon at Boudreaux's direction. Couldn't imagine what he must feel. They both kept email communication upbeat. And superficial. She waited to see if he'd bring it up, but he hadn't; neither did she. But he responded to her most recent message about getting the cast off and feeling like it was time to move, reminding her that he had a spare room in his place over Enola's, should she want to visit. She thought about the night they'd shared a bottle of wine at the lake near Robbi's house and found the idea tempting. Then thought about how much trouble her life brought him. And sighed. *Maybe*.

She pulled clean sweats off the towel rack and dressed. Smiled, thinking of Chiara and Ricardo in Spain. Chiara's extended family there grew grapes for wine and olives for an oil press company.

Plenty of room on the estate for the two of them to stay while they figured out what their new lives would be.

Same thing with Jessi. She missed her even more than she missed Chiara. She loved reading the draft emails and hated not seeing her, hugging her, spending the night, and having coffee early in the morning. Mia's phone pinged. A checkmark from Jessi.

She looked in the mirror and rearranged a few stray hairs.

"It's time to go," she told her reflection in her clear, firm director's voice.

Less confident, Mia in the mirror replied: "I know. I can't hide at Claire's forever. So, I'll go. But I'm going south to somewhere warm."

Mia gave her reflection a suspicious squint. "Where?"

Mirror Mia, understanding the implication of 'south,' squinted right back. "I don't know yet, but the further away I get from snow, the clearer it'll become."

She went to her room and packed.



It was no surprise to Claire the next morning as she watched Mia pull her truck out of the barn and load her things. She made coffee and waited.

Mia walked into the kitchen, breathed in as if tasting the air. Claire poured her a cup.

"I'm going to miss you so much, Claire."

Claire smiled and said, "I don't think this is the last time I'll see you, young lady. And don't take this as pressure, but if you decide to pursue your past, please keep me in the loop. I might even be of some help."

Mia nodded. "You never pressure, Claire. And of course I will."

"You know where you're going?"

"I don't have a clue, except that I'll continue to take back roads, avoid cameras, and maybe get myself to a remote beach somewhere."

Claire laughed. "That sounds lovely. You have the sat phone number."

"Yep, and if you don't mind, I'll take one of those big to-go cups you have. This might be the last truly great coffee I have for a while."

Laughter tinged with sadness. A touch of fear swirled in her heart like the cream she added to the coffee Claire had poured for her. But when the cup was full, Mia snapped the lid on, smiled with courage and confidence she didn't feel, and stepped out the door to whatever would come next.

March 29: Threat On the Road

Mia Evanescence left Ontonagon, Michigan, and drove south. Still no clear idea of where to go. For now, just south. She and the sturdy old gray Nissan spent ten hours on back roads and stopped north of Grand Rapids for the night. She used a prepaid card, finally loaded with her own money—thank you, Boudreaux Marcellas, for the lessons in financial invisibility—to pay for a room at a cheap, locally owned motel. It was dark, but the forty-five-degree temp she stepped out into felt like a heat wave after the months in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan.

No app, so she had to stop at the front desk. Eyes down, hat pulled low, she kept the chatter with the clerk as neutral and generic as she could.

Lying in bed, she started to plug in her phone to charge and saw a message from Jessi.

Check draft email folder-be prepared-it's bad

She opened a browser and logged in. The latest one from Jessi had a photo attached. The image was of a note card. The message on it handwritten in an almost childlike scrawl.

I WILL BE A WIDOWER

Liquid fear flooded Mia's body like a tsunami. An all-at-once explosive detonation that slammed every organ, tightened every muscle, and left her weak and short of breath. A sledgehammer to the stomach, deeper and harder than when she'd watched the deep fake.

She'd left the safety of Claire Smithton's house in Ontonagon thinking Aleks was back in Greece, working for his family's criminal empire—the Godfathers of the Night—and if not disinterested in her, at least distracted enough to leave her alone.

She read the note again but heard the words in the same dead-flat voice Aleks used at the Airbnb in New York. It took her a full thirty seconds to steady her hands enough to power down the phone and plug in the charger.

That she didn't vomit, a win.

She left the bathroom light on; slept restless. Sweaty.

March 30: Dissociation
South Bend, Indiana

The next morning, bleary-eyed, she moved slowly, like an automaton, thinking nothing. Stuffing things back into her old black backpack, she missed something: the warmth and security of Claire's

kitchen. Poured water into the motel room's cheap single-cup coffee maker. Tasted it and missed Claire's coffee too.

She hit the road by seven o'clock; by ten passed through South Bend, Indiana, realizing her stomach and fuel tank were both nearly empty. Still on secondary roads, she passed a mom-and-pop convenience store on the outskirts. Gas pumps and no fancy brand-name signage, probably locally owned. If it had a security camera, far less likely it would be tied into a network. She made a U-turn and went back. Moving slowly, she pumped gas, then went in to use the facilities. She picked up a couple of breakfast sandwiches from a small hot case near the register.

"Coffee?" she asked the woman behind the counter.

"Sure, hon," she said, pointing. "It's right back there in the corner. I'll add it to your bill."

Mia laid a credit card on the counter and walked slowly to the coffee machine.



Back behind the wheel, she arranged her coffee and food so that she could eat, drink, and drive. She looked up through the windshield and blinked at the bright, sunny sky. Remembered putting her sunglasses in the back seat pocket, she sighed, got out, and opened the back door on the driver's side. There was a blanket she vaguely remembered packing but didn't recall laying over the bags in the back seat.

She pulled it aside and froze.

Time slowed to a crawl.

A young man—or boy—under the blanket looked straight at her. Mia, still in a dissociated state from reading the threat from Aleks, slipped back in time to the real life she had at the ad agency she'd owned. Before she'd had to run.

A casting call for a commercial. Actors. Models. This young man's face would be at home on a fashion magazine cover. Black hair, tightly curled and close-cropped, a lean face with very high cheekbones. But his eyes . . .

She blinked. The whites in contrast to his skin, huge, clear, and glowing neon white. But blue? She blinked again. Squinted, looked for the telltale rims of contacts. Found none. Confirmed. His eyes were blue.

Mia pulled back her focus for a broader view and saw his full lips, wet, cracked, and trembling. He was terrified. Auditions were a horror, she knew. Grounded in these familiar details, Mia forgot where she was. What she was doing. She didn't feel afraid. She didn't feel anything. She said the first thing that came into her head.

"Your eyes. They're magical." She wanted to touch his cheek. Console him.

As if he hadn't heard her, he whispered, "Please help me. Please! Close the door and drive away. Quickly! Before we are noticed." His accent was thick. African of some kind, Mia thought. But his English was crisp, impeccable. She could give him a speaking role.

She reacted slowly, shook her head to dispel some of her brain fog. She smiled sadly, placed the blanket back over the boy's head, and reached into the driver's seat back pocket. Mia pulled her sunglasses case out and closed the door.

Without rushing, she got behind the wheel, put the sunglasses on, and started the engine.

"My name is Mia. What's yours?" she asked, voice as matter of fact, as if finding a professional model in the back seat of one's vehicle were an everyday occurrence.

Muffled by the blanket, the boy said, "Koffi. I am Koffi Okafor."

She tried to wonder why he pronounced his name like the drink, but the urge to find out didn't stick.

She exhaled, looked in the rearview mirror, and saw nothing but her worldly goods reflected.

“Well, lucky for you. I’m a big fan of coffee.”

She put the SUV in gear and drove.

Thank you for reading *Vanishing Chiara*.

The Vanishing Series continues with
Vanishing Koffi



thevanishingseries.com

TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. **Chiara is introduced not as helpless but as physically capable, disciplined, and highly trained.** How does the opening escape scene challenge common narratives about victims? In what ways does Chiara's strength complicate her vulnerability rather than eliminate it?
2. **Unlike Mia, Chiara is not running from her own violence—but from violence being used through her.** How does the threat against Ricardo alter the emotional stakes of Chiara's flight? Discuss how coercion via loved ones functions differently than direct abuse.
3. **Chiara is deeply uncomfortable receiving praise—for her art, her resilience, and her courage.** What do you think this resistance reveals about her internal identity? How does it contrast with how others (Claire, Mia, Jake) see her?
4. **The novel repeatedly places Chiara at the intersection of visibility and danger: public art, media attention, FBI interest.** How does her public success as an artist become a liability? What does the book suggest about the cost of being known—especially for women?

5. **The FBI presents itself as a potential protector, yet Mia instinctively distrusts them.** Based on what the novel shows us, is this skepticism justified? Discuss how institutional protection differs from personal protection—and where each fails.
6. **Chiara and Mia form trust quickly, but not casually.** What moments in the story earn that trust? How does shared competence—rather than shared trauma—form the basis of their bond?
7. **Chiara's disguise—pink hair, borrowed clothes, erased markers of status—is both practical and symbolic.** What parts of herself is Chiara forced to shed in order to survive? Which parts remain nonnegotiable?
8. **Although Ricardo and Chiara are separated for much of the novel, the reader spends meaningful time with Ricardo in scenes written from his point of view.** How do these sections deepen your understanding of who Ricardo is—independent of Chiara—and of the choices he's making under pressure? In what ways do his actions mirror, complement, or diverge from Chiara's own survival strategy?
9. **Chiara must repeatedly choose between waiting for rescue and acting without full information.** How does the book explore the cost of decisiveness under uncertainty? Have you ever had to move forward without knowing whether help was real or reliable?

10. **By the end of *Vanishing Chiara*, Chiara and Ricardo are reunited—but the novel deliberately does not reveal their next chapter other than to land in Spain.** Why do you think the author withholds that information? What does that narrative silence suggest about safety, secrecy, and the long game being played across the series? How does this choice shape your curiosity about where—and how—their story may resurface in later books?

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Every book in a series carries its own weight—and its own set of debts. This one began quietly, gathered complexity over time, and reached completion through the generosity, insight, and steady support of many people whose contributions made it stronger.

My exceptional first readers gave their time and insights generously: Susan Allain, Susan Dawson, Rob Gehring, Libby King, Harrison McCoy, Marcia McMahon, Janet McNamara, Janice Odom, Caroline Randall, Jennifer Robinson, Gene Robinson, and Howard Toole. Each brought a distinct perspective that sharpened the story and challenged its assumptions in all the right ways.

To my brothers, Lary and Gary Horne, and my sister-in-law, Carmen Horne, who read the prepublication version with low expectations and high praise: Your enthusiasm—especially after all these years of knowing exactly who I am—means more than you know.

For invaluable expertise on technical details, special thanks to John Feldvery, Rob Gehring, and Tom Wiltshire. Their guidance on everything from aircraft complexities and airport procedures to embassy protocols and bar operations helps the story ring true.

My editors and proofer, John Bowers, Dee Kuhn, and April Rust, deserve immense credit for helping polish these pages into their final form. Every professional has a superpower: John's attention to emotional nuance slows me down to make sure you get all

the feels a thriller can offer without slowing the pace, and Dee's attention to the rigors of line editing is exceeded only by leveraging her multigenerational Michigander background to ensure authenticity in all things Yooper. April Rust's proofing continues to sharpen what the rest of us miss.

Yanely Allen says 'yes' to every legal, ethical, promotional, and administrative adventure with boundless enthusiasm and a commitment to approaching each challenge as an opportunity to learn and grow. Yazmin Tome supports the Substack and social media efforts that help readers who'll love the books know *The Vanishing Series* exists.

Whether they are clicking or reaching for them on a bookshelf, Karen Lonesome's cover designs are powerful calls-to-action, attracting readers most likely to enjoy the books.

Carla Green's book design instincts give this series the polish of a major house. Her industry experience saves us from mistakes we don't yet know we're about to make.

Writing is solitary, but publishing requires a found family of its own. Whatever merit this book has comes from the collective experience, professionalism, creativity, wisdom, advice, love, and support of the people named here.

Any remaining flaws are entirely my own.

JAKE'S SOUTH LOUISIANA CLASSICS

THE SAZERAC

The official cocktail of New Orleans, requiring precision and premium ingredients.

Ingredients

- **Top Shelf Spirit:** 2 oz. of Sazerac Rye or WhistlePig 10-Year Rye
- **Sweetener:** 0.25 oz. of premium simple syrup (1:1) or rich demerara syrup (for deeper flavor)
- **Bitters 1:** 4 dashes of Peychaud's Aromatic Bitters (essential)
- **Bitters 2:** 1 dash of Angostura Aromatic Bitters (for complexity, optional)
- **Rinse:** Small amount (about a bar spoon) of Absinthe (e.g., Lucid or St. George)
- **Garnish:** 1 lemon peel

Instructions

1. **Chill the Glass:** Fill a chilled rocks glass with ice water and set aside.
2. **Mix the Base:** In a separate mixing glass, combine the Rye whiskey, simple/demerara syrup, and both bitters.

3. **Stir and Dilute:** Add ice to the base mixing glass and stir vigorously until the mixture is well chilled and properly diluted (approx. 30 seconds).
4. **Absinthe Rinse:** Empty the water from the chilled rocks glass. Pour the small amount of Absinthe into the glass, swirl it to coat the entire interior surface, and then discard any excess liquid.
5. **Strain:** Double strain the cocktail mixture from the mixing glass into the rinsed, empty rocks glass.
6. **Garnish:** Express the oils from the lemon peel over the drink by twisting it sharply. Run the peel around the rim, then discard it (or balance it on the rim).

ENOLA'S MINT JULEP

An elevated, Bourbon-forward classic that maximizes the mint aroma and flavor.

Ingredients

- **Top-shelf Spirit:** 2.5 oz. of Blanton's Single Barrel or Woodford Reserve Batch Proof (high-proof) Bourbon
- **Sweetener:** 0.5 oz. of rich demerara syrup (2:1 sugar : water) or a Louisiana cane sugar syrup
- **Fresh Mint:** 8 to 10 spearmint leaves
- **Garnish:** Large fresh mint sprig, powdered sugar (optional)

Instructions

1. **Muddle/Press:** In the bottom of a traditional julep cup (or chilled highball glass), place the mint leaves and the rich demerara syrup. Gently press (do not crush) the mint with a muddler just enough to release the oils.
2. **Add Spirit:** Pour the premium bourbon into the cup.

3. **Pack with Ice:** Fill the cup completely with crushed or pebble ice.
4. **Stir and Chill:** Use a long bar spoon to stir or 'churn' the mixture briefly, ensuring the syrup and mint are incorporated and the cup begins to frost on the outside.
5. **Top:** Add more crushed ice to create a decorative dome above the rim.
6. **Garnish:** Slap the large mint sprig lightly against your hand to release the aroma, then insert it into the ice so the leaves sit close to the rim.

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 Chiara* is book two in a five-book thriller series about ordinary women and men on the run from deadly situations.

Horne's background spans broadcast 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, interviewing experts, visiting libraries, independent bookstores and even big brand bookstores when LightArc Press 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.

