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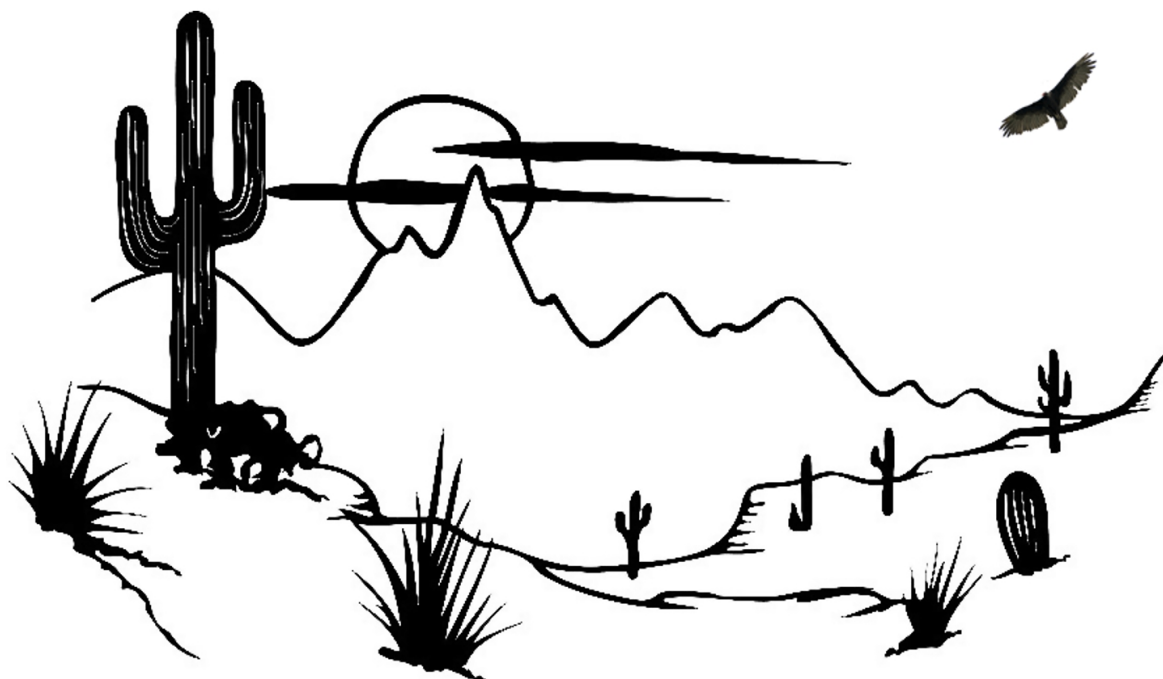
Scottsdale Sleuth

*Cheating can
be Murder...*



*A fun, romantic,
thrilling, adventure!*

Laura Black Mysteries - Book 11



The Laura Black Scottsdale Mysteries

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Scottsdale Mystery Series

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The Aloha Lagoon
Mystery Series

Hula Homicide

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Contents

[Introduction](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Homicide Honeymoon](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

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## Author's Note

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Dearest reader, this book contains a fair amount of drinking, some cussing, talking about sex, and plenty of suspenseful action. Bullets fly, men get beat up by women, and we usually have a dead body or two. If these sorts of things aren't your cup of tea, it's best that you know now...

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Introduction



If you've never read a Laura Black Scottsdale mystery, you may want to start with *Scottsdale Heat*, the first book in the series. If you'd instead like to begin with this book, here are a few of the key people in the story:

Laura Black – A Scottsdale native with a degree in philosophy from Arizona State University. She's five foot seven, skinny, with shoulder-length medium brunette hair parted down the middle. After working for a few years as a bartender at Greasewood Flat, she now works as an investigator in a Scottsdale law firm. She wants to make the world a better place, but she also has bills to pay.

Sophia Rodriguez – Laura's best friend, who also works in the law office as the paralegal. Sophie is a former California surfer chick and a free spirit. She's currently exploring the concept of only having one boyfriend, Milo.

Gina Rondinelli – Laura's other best friend. She's a former Scottsdale police detective and the law firm's senior investigator. She has a strict moral code and likes to play by the rules. She's recently begun dating a former Navy SEAL named Jet.

Leonard Shapiro – Head of the law firm and Laura's boss. He's miserly and always pads his bills. He has few morals, loose ethics, and no people skills, but he usually wins his cases with the help of Laura, Sophie, and Gina. Lenny has started weekly training sessions in discipline and obedience with a dominatrix named Countess Carla, the Cruel.

Maximilian Bettencourt – Laura's boyfriend and the head of the legitimate resort side of the former DiCenzo crime organization. Before

coming to Scottsdale, Max was a secret operative for the U.S. government, mainly in Eastern Europe. They had needed to keep their relationship a secret for Laura's safety, but that is slowly changing.

Deborah Thompson – Debbie is the new receptionist and admin at the law firm. She's a pleasant middle-aged woman, and everyone is starting to accept her into the office.

Anthony "Tough Tony" DiCenzo – Retired head of the local crime family. He likes Laura and almost thinks of her as a daughter. Through various adventures over the past year, he owes Laura several favors.

Gabriella – A former government operative from somewhere in Eastern Europe. She currently works as a bodyguard for Johnny Scarpazzi.

Danielle Ortega – Laura's friend and the head of the Arizona branch of the Black Death crime organization.

Countess Carla, the Cruel – Professional dominatrix and protégée of Mistress McNasty. She has weekly training sessions in discipline and obedience with Lenny.

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Chapter One



“Are you sure this is how we’re supposed to be doing this?” my best friend Sophie loudly whispered. “I’m halfway freezing to death and nearly tripped over something back there.”

We were creeping through a thickly wooded forest on the outskirts of the Arizona mountain town of Pinetop, trying not to snag our shirts on any of the dead branches sticking out from the junipers and ponderosa pines.

Our goal was a rustic log cabin at the end of a dirt road with a fire engine red Jaguar convertible parked out front. A single low-wattage light bulb lit the covered porch and the courtyard beyond.

From nearly fifty yards away, we could hear Taylor Swift’s music pouring out from an open window near the rear of the cabin. Listening to one of my favorite pop stars sing a lively dance tune while Sophie and I shivered in the forest seemed a little surreal.

It was almost ten thirty at night, and without a moon, the night was incredibly dark. Since the town was at an elevation of nearly seven thousand feet, it was also surprisingly cold for the first part of April.

“Stop complaining,” I whispered back, trying to do so quietly. “I didn’t tell you to wear shorts, and you’re the one who wanted to come with me.”

“Hey,” she grumbled. “You said that *you* were going to wear shorts, and I didn’t want us to look stupid by *me* wearing long pants. Besides, when you asked me if I wanted to go on a road trip to the mountains, I assumed you meant somewhere fun and a little warmer.”

“What do you mean, fun?” I asked. “You knew where we were going and what we were trying to do here.”

“I mean, like the time we went down to Rocky Point with Annie to

look for Jackie Wade and watched the sunset from the Captain's House. Or maybe the time we went up to Sedona with Suzie Lu and stood in a vortex. What about when we went to that old brothel in Jerome with Christine Johns, one of my favorite rock stars of all time? Now, those trips were fun."

"Yeah," I had to agree. "Those *were* great trips."

"I didn't think we were going to be crawling through the woods in the dark to try to take naked pictures of Moogy LaFontaine and his skanky mistress through the bedroom window of a nasty log cabin in the middle of freezing freaking nowhere."

"This is *exactly* what I told you we'd be doing," I said, rolling my eyes. "You told me *anything* was better than sitting in the back of a stuffy office typing up motions for a real estate case that's been dragging on for two years. Or did you forget about that part?"

"*Fine*," she moaned out. "Let's get your dirty pictures and get out of here. I can already feel the deer ticks starting to crawl up my legs. I'm a desert girl. I don't like having these creepy crawly mountain insects near me."

"Seriously?" I teased. "You'd rather have a scorpion crawl up your leg than a deer tick?"

"Shut up," she grumbled. "You know that harmless desert critters and the vermin that live in the mountains are two completely different things. The insects and spiders up here are downright nasty."

We crept closer to the cabin, and the sound of Taylor Swift grew louder. We swung wide of the light from the front porch and went around to the open window in the back, presumably a bedroom.

As we pressed ourselves against the wall, the sound of a woman's frantic moaning became mixed in with the music of the bouncy pop star.

"Oooh, baby," the woman called out in a loud voice. Give it to me, that's right. You know just how I like it. Hard and nasty, baby. *Oooh, yeah!*"

From the file, I knew the woman being pleased was likely Hannah Higgins. Still in college, the ASU art history major had reportedly met Miles "Moogy" LaFontaine at the club he ran in Old Town Scottsdale, also called Moogy's.

Moogy's wife had contacted Lenny about having us follow her husband

and gather evidence of an affair. We'd worked on the assignment for about a week and a half, and I was hoping to finish it tonight.

We'd previously determined that Hannah drove a white Jeep Cherokee. Since it wasn't parked next to the convertible, they must have driven up together.

"Oooh, baby," the woman moaned out again. "That's it, that's it, *deeper*. Now faster, do it faster. Moogy, you're *soooo* big. *Oooh, yeaaaaah!*"

I looked up at the open window. Unfortunately, with the way the ground sloped around the cabin, it was about a foot higher than I could reach.

"Oooh, yes. *Oooh, yes!*" the woman cried out. We then heard her slapping her hand against her thigh, or maybe on Moogy's, and letting out a loud, vibrating squeal. "*Oooh, my God!*"

I set the phone to video mode, held it above my head, and jumped. I tried several times, but I couldn't quite make it high enough to get a picture of the inside of the room. Unfortunately, even if I did happen to get an image, I knew it would likely be too blurry to be helpful.

If I've learned anything about my boss, Lenny, I knew he wanted the pictures I took of spouses being unfaithful to be as sharp and crisp as any of the naked images he could find on the internet. It was an easy thing for him to ask for, but in practice, it turned out to be a lot more challenging to achieve.

"I need a way to get up there," I whispered. "Help me look for something to stand on."

Fortunately, the cabin's windows gave out enough light for us to make out shapes and silhouettes among the evergreen trees. Sophie gave me an exasperated sigh and then took off to look for something to stand on, and I did the same.

My best friend found a pile of split firewood that we could probably stack high enough, but I quickly gave up on that idea. It would be noisy to set up and take a long time.

Judging by the urgency of the sounds coming out of the window, we likely only had a few minutes before Moogy and Hannah would be finished

for the night. Deciding to give up on the firewood, I found a battered wooden bar stool next to the back door.

As I moved it under the window, I could tell it was severely weathered. The wood creaked in protest as I pushed my hands against the seat to test it.

“Is that thing going to hold you?” Sophie whispered. “It sounds like it’s about to fall apart.”

“There isn’t anything else,” I said as quietly as possible. “Hold onto it so it doesn’t fall over.”

I almost heard Sophie roll her eyes at me as she grabbed the backrest. I carefully climbed onto the rickety stool and was now high enough off the ground to make it to the window.

I peeked in carefully and saw that I had a great view. From the picture we had in the file, I could see that the woman was indeed Hannah Higgins.

The tall blonde college student, who had a toned body from playing on the university’s intramural volleyball and water polo teams, was riding Moogy hard in a lusty reverse cowgirl. Even as I watched, she seemed to be approaching another climax.

The angle from the window clearly showed Moogy’s face, along with his hairy pale-white chest, his black and gray hair, and his prominent beer belly. I checked to make sure the phone was still in video mode, hit the record button, and started to lift it.

Crack!

There was the loud sound of splintering wood, and I found that one of my legs had fallen straight through the seat of the bar stool.

Thud!

I hit the ground hard, and pain shot up my leg. I was trapped in the chair frame, broken pieces of the seat pressed against my thigh. Worse, I’d landed at a bad angle and felt myself starting to tip over.

“Hold on to it,” I called out in a panic.

“I’m trying,” Sophie grunted. But even as she said this, we both tumbled over.

Thud!

I hit the ground first, and Sophie landed on top of both me and the bar stool.

“*Ooof!*” she moaned out as the side of the seat smacked solidly against her ribs.

“Moogy, what was that?” the high-pitched whimper of Hannah Higgins called out from inside the room. Her voice had more than a touch of panic in it.

“Get dressed and stay here,” Moogy called out in his raspy Brooklyn accent as Taylor Swift was shut off. “I’m getting the shotgun.”

Crap.

Sophie’s head shot up. Even in the dim light, I could see her eyes were open wide, almost popping out. “Did he say shotgun?” she loudly whispered. “Let’s get out of here.”

“Help pull this off of me,” I said as I struggled to free my leg from the shattered remains of the bar stool.

Sophie grabbed the chair and began to yank frantically. This only caused the splintered wood that had been the seat of the stool to dig further into my thigh.

“Nope,” I gasped out in pain as I felt blood start to trickle down my leg. “That’s not going to work. Help me get this piece of wood off the frame. It’s jammed against my thigh.”

“*Moogy,*” Hannah moaned loudly from inside the cabin. “They’re still out there. I can hear them talking.”

“Well, they won’t be for long,” Moogy growled. We then heard the distinctive and terrifying sound of a pump-action shotgun being racked.

“Crap,” I said. “We’ve got to hurry.”

Working together, we pulled at the splintered chunk of wood that had trapped my leg inside the frame of the bar stool. It broke off with a loud crack, and Sophie was able to pull the remains of the chair off my leg.

My phone had slipped out of my grasp as I’d fallen, and I frantically searched the ground for it. Sophie could tell what I was doing, but she was already starting to panic.

“Leave the damn phone,” she yelled to me in a voice that definitely

wasn't a whisper.

"I can't leave it," I yelled back at her in the same loud voice. Fortunately, it had dropped straight down, and I was able to find it right away.

"Let's go," I said, pointing in the direction that would place the cabin between us and Moogy. Of course, that was assuming he went out through the front porch, next to his car, and not out the back door.

We moved as quickly as possible, me limping badly and Sophie holding her arm against her side where she'd fallen onto the chair. In ten seconds, we'd made it forty or fifty yards from the cabin.

That's when the back door swung open with a creaking, splintering sound. I looked behind us to see the light from the inside spilling out in a wide arc.

Moogy LaFontaine was silhouetted in the doorway, only dressed in loose pants. His bare chest and the outline of a shotgun were visible.

"Hide," I loudly whispered to Sophie, unaware if she had seen the pissed-off nightclub owner. My best friend must have already been aware of the situation because she let out a loud squeak and dove behind one of the juniper trees we'd been running through.

I found the biggest tree within twenty feet and ran behind it quickly. I hit the dirt and peered around the trunk as I lay flat to see where he was.

"I know you're out there, you freaking Peeping Tom bastards," Moogy called out, and there was a loud blast of the shotgun. Fire erupted out of the barrel, briefly lighting everything around us.

There was the all too familiar bumblebee sound as pellets whizzed by, only a few feet above my head. Then branches, soft needles, and several juniper berries rained down on me.

"You like that? *Huh?*" Moogy called out. From his tone, he seemed to be enjoying himself. "Did you like watching the show? You bastards interrupted my girlfriend. She wasn't quite finished yet. Why don't you show yourselves and get a taste of my twelve-gauge."

I heard him ejecting the spent shell and racking in a fresh round.

Crap.

“I have five more surprises in my little friend here. I think I’ll pump a few of them into your guts,” he shouted. “What do you think about that? Huh? Come out and take it.”

Without the music blaring from the window, the night had become deathly silent. We heard Moogy take six or seven slow steps away from the cabin, his bare feet grinding against the dirt and pine needles. He then stopped for several seconds and listened.

There was another blast from the shotgun, and the bark of the juniper tree next to me seemed to explode. I immediately caught a whiff of the shattered branches and berries.

It smells like gin.

As he began to hum to himself, Moogy racked a fresh shell into the chamber, the spent casing bouncing on the forest floor. Hearing those sounds frightened me on a purely emotional level, and I felt the start of a panic attack coming on.

I reached into my bag and began to feel around frantically. I felt a blast of fresh fear as I couldn’t find what I’d been looking for.

Then, my fingers wrapped around the grip, and I pulled out my Glock. It wasn’t my goal to shoot him, well, unless I didn’t have a choice. But I did feel better being armed.

Moogy began to walk towards us, taking giant, exaggerated steps. “Be vewy vewy quiet,” he called out in a cartoonish Elmer Fudd voice. “I’m hunting wabbits.” He then let out Elmer’s distinctive laugh.

Wow, he’s pretty good at that.

“What is it with this guy?” Sophie whispered. “He sounds a little wasted.”

“Shush,” I whispered back, but it was too late.

“Noisy wabbit,” Moogy yelled as he barked out his Elmer Fudd laugh again. There was another booming blast of the shotgun, and pieces of bark from the tree Sophie was hiding behind were blasted out in all directions.

Crap, that was close.

I had a horrible flashback to the last time I’d been in this situation. Only then, I’d been on the side of a mountain in Vale, skiing with Max, and

the shooter had been an insane sniper called Major Malakov.

“Come out, you screwy wabbit,” Moogy called out in a sing-song voice. “I have a nice bunch of carrots for you.”

Wanting to make sure I didn’t shoot the guy that I was supposed to be secretly watching from a distance, I pointed my pistol to the side and fired off two quick rounds.

“*Shit!*” Moogy called out, shock in his voice. He then began to hurry back toward the cabin.

Wow, I thought, somewhat surprised. *That actually worked.*

As he ran, I was startled to hear hissing air from somewhere on the far side of the building.

“What’s that noise?” Sophie asked, still hiding behind her tree.

“I don’t know, but let’s get out of here,” I said, already moving to put as much distance between Moogy and me as possible.

“*My car!*” we heard Moogy yelling from behind us as we ran. “Damn it. You freaking pervert Peeping Tom bastards shot my car.”



Ten minutes later, we’d looped around the cabin and managed to find our way back to where we’d stashed my white Miata convertible. The entire time, I’d been expecting to hear the booming sounds of a shotgun as it blasted away at us, but it never came.

Since it didn’t appear that Moogy had been wearing shoes when he’d first come after us, perhaps he’d given up on chasing us through the woods. Maybe he’d been startled by the pistol shots and hadn’t wanted to get into a gunfight with someone who was armed.

Honestly, I didn’t care what the reason was. I was only glad we were getting out of there in one piece. I started up the convertible and took off down the country road at high speed.

We ended up at One Eyed Jacks, a cozy sports bar off Highway 260 in the nearby town of Show Low. Before we could go in, we needed to spend

several minutes cleaning ourselves in the parking lot. My leg had several long scrapes and a couple of minor cuts, but luckily, nothing that was too severe or would need stitches.

Sophie's ribs were painfully sore from where she'd fallen on the bar stool. Fortunately, she said it didn't feel like she'd cracked or broken any of them. We'd both agreed that, at the very least, she'd have a nasty bruise from it.

As we walked in, the place was packed with locals, even though it was after midnight. Dwight Yoakam was on the jukebox singing about guitars, Cadillacs, and hillbilly music.

I was still upset with myself after not getting the pictures and for getting shot at. My hands trembled slightly as I ordered a couple of big draft beers from the friendly college-aged woman behind the counter.

We then spent several minutes standing at the bar, drinking beer. Neither of us said a lot.

Even as messed up and dirty as we were, a couple of tall cowboys approached us while we were standing against the brass rail. Sophie took in their pointy boots, oversized belt buckles, and wide-brimmed cowboy hats. From the way she licked her lips as her eyes traveled up and down the men, she seemed to approve.

"Howdy, ladies," the better-looking of the two started. He had a three-day beard and several tattoos over his muscular arms. "What are you two doing in Show Low? I'd bet my horse you aren't from around here."

Sophie shook her head and placed her hand on his muscular arm. "Sorry, cowboy," she said in a flirty voice. "Unfortunately, my friend and I only stopped by for a quick beer, and then we'll be taking off."

"Are you sure you wouldn't like some company?" he asked as he leaned close, pulling a piece of the juniper tree out of her hair. "It looks like you two just came in from a long trail ride."

"Oh, aren't you adorable," Sophie giggled. "But not tonight. We're only passin' through town. Perhaps next time?"

She looked up, wrapped her arms around his neck, and kissed the man on the cheek.

"Yes, ma'am," he said as his face turned red. He then pulled out an

oversized leather wallet, which was attached to his jeans with a bright chain, and pulled out a business card. “Definitely next time.”

Sophie took the card and glanced down at it. “Thank you, Rafael. We’ll be sure to give you two a call the next time we’re passing through.”

Grabbing our beers, we went towards the back to find a place to sit that was as far as possible from the busy pool tables. If I was being honest, I also wanted to be away from the cowboys.

Sophie’s kiss had seemed to get them going, and I could see them giving us the eye from where they stood at the bar. I was worried they’d come back to try again.

“What’d you do that for?” I asked. “Are you giving up on being exclusive with Milo?”

“It was only a kiss on the cheek,” Sophie said as she shook her head and rolled her eyes. “Besides, it got rid of them, didn’t it? And I *have* been thinking about Milo. I’ve been thinking about my Pooh Bear all night, and it’s been getting me going. Like seriously, I haven’t been with him all week.”

“But I do appreciate you coming with me,” I said, giving her the closest I could come to a smile under the circumstances. “I know it messed up your weekend.”

“Yeah, this is a hell of a way to spend my Saturday night,” Sophie grumbled. “I could have been out on a date with my boyfriend. He would have poured me a glass of wine and offered me a shoulder to rest my legs on. Instead, we’re up here in this god-forsaken mountain town, and we’ve got some sleazy nightclub owner shooting a freaking shotgun at us.”

“Yeah, it sucks,” I moaned as we sat at our table and sipped our beers. “It took us a week and a half to set this up, and we got jack squat out of it. Lenny’s going to shit out kittens when I tell him how it went.”



Sophie and I had made it as far as Payson during the wee hours of Sunday morning before we’d decided to call it a night. We probably should

have found a place before then since Sophie hadn't even made it to the town of Heber before she'd passed out.

Unfortunately, I'd been too wound up to sleep. Plus, for my own peace of mind, I'd wanted to put as many miles as possible between me, Moogy, and his shotgun before stopping for the night.

As expected, my phone call to my boss, Lenny, on Sunday morning didn't go all that well.

"You're telling me that you caught Moogy La Fontaine and his mistress in the act?" Lenny had asked, not sounding pleased. "They were having intimate relations in a room with an open window, and you weren't able to get a single picture of them?"

"Yeah," I admitted. "The window was slightly out of reach, and when I found something to stand on to see inside, it collapsed and alerted both of them."

"For Christ's sake, Laura," Lenny said, exasperated. "Have you ever heard of a selfie stick? You could have taken the pictures even if the window was four or five feet over your head. Talk with Deborah tomorrow and have her order you one."

"Fine," I reluctantly agreed. "You're right. It'll probably come in handy the next time I do this."

I hate that there'll be a next time.

"Something else you maybe should have thought of," Lenny said as he continued his rant. "Since you interrupted them in the middle of their relations, don't you think it likely they would have resumed the activity at some point that night? Why didn't you and Sophie stick around to try again? Maybe you could have found something better to stand on and completed your assignment."

"We'd already been shot at, multiple times, with a shotgun," I fumed. "I knew Moogy would be jumpy for the rest of the night, and I wasn't all that eager for him to have another go at us."

"Laura, you gotta take these assignments seriously," Lenny lectured with a disappointed sigh. "I expected you to have this one wrapped up over the weekend, and I had Deborah schedule another one for you starting tomorrow morning. I hate to say it, but now you'll have two cases to work

on.”

Great.

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Chapter Two



My name's Laura Black, and I've lived in Scottsdale pretty much my entire life. For the last few years, I've worked as the junior investigator at an Old Town Scottsdale boutique law firm, Halftown, Oeding, Shapiro, and Hopkins.

It's run by a greedy and self-absorbed attorney named Leonard Shapiro. I've often questioned my choice of profession, but so far, I haven't found anything better.

The law firm's senior investigator was another Scottsdale native named Gina Rondinelli. Before coming to work for Lenny, Gina had worked for several years as a detective in the Scottsdale Police Department. She'd been trained as an investigator and had professional shooting and self-defense skills.

After dating a few guys from her gym, none of whom seemed to work out, Gina began dating a former Navy SEAL named Andrew "Jet" Kramer. They were both tall and athletic and had a lust for adventure. So far, it seemed to be working out for them, and I was glad.

My best friend, Sophia Rodriguez, had lived in Scottsdale since she'd come out to Arizona with her husband from southern California several years back. Before that, Sophie had spent her youth as a Laguna Beach surfer chick, catalog model, B-movie bit-part actress, and lead vocalist in an all-female punk band called the *Black Plague*.

Sophie has always had a complicated relationship with men, and after her divorce, it had only gotten worse. She was a beautiful and overtly sexy woman, which made it easy for her to go to a nightclub and have her pick of men to hook up with for the night or a weekend.

On the other hand, Sophie started seeing a man named Milo a little over a year ago and seemed to be completely into him. A few months ago, she decided to date Milo exclusively, ignoring the fact that he was a mid-level gangster for the local crime syndicate.

Until a month ago, Sophie had been the firm's receptionist and paralegal. With an uptick in workload due to some recent high-profile cases, Lenny had hired a receptionist, a pleasant and efficient middle-aged woman named Deborah Thompson. As a result, Sophie now worked from the back offices alongside Gina and me.



I made it into the office Monday morning a little after eight thirty. As I walked through the rear security door from our back alley parking area, Sophie and Gina looked up from their desks.

“Hey, ladies,” I called out, shaking the box of Krispy Kremes I’d picked up along the way.

“Nice,” Sophie moaned. “After the crappy weekend we had in the mountains, we deserve something yummy.”

“How are your ribs?” I asked my best friend as I set the box on the side of Gina’s desk. Sophie reached over and plucked out a chocolate iced doughnut with cream filling.

“You tell me,” she said, taking a bite of the pastry. She lifted her shirt, exposing not only the bottom half of her lacy black bra but also a nasty red and purple bruise roughly the size of a Pop-Tart.

“Ouch,” I said as I looked closer at her injury. “That has to hurt. Are you sure you didn’t break something?”

“*Naah*,” she said with a shake of her head, her mouth full of doughnut. “I’ve cracked ribs before. These are only bruised.”

“From what Sophie’s been telling me, you both had quite the adventure up in Pinetop,” Gina said.

“Yeah,” I laughed. “I guess you could call having someone take

potshots at you with a shotgun an adventure. All I can figure is that Moogy must have been drinking or maybe was high on weed. He was acting a little trashed and didn't seem to be all that serious about hitting us."

"What's the next move in the assignment?" Gina asked.

"When I snuck into Moogy's office at his club last week, his calendar had three dates written in it. *Hannah Cabin* was marked for last Saturday. *Hannah Apartment* is on Wednesday, and *Hannah Condo* is down for next Saturday. The first one was accurate, so I'm pretty sure about the others, as well."

"How did you find out where the cabin was?" Gina asked, looking between both of us.

"I ran a search with the secret software on Moogy LaFontaine," Sophie said with a shrug. "Laura then cross-referenced to properties he owned and used a filter for everything outside The Valley. The property in Pinetop was the only thing he owned in the mountains that could have fit the description of a cabin."

As a result of us helping the Drug Enforcement Agency crack a particularly tough case about two years ago, they had given Sophie access to a secret government database. It had allowed her to retrieve vast amounts of sensitive data on almost anyone with only a few keystrokes.

After a surprise visit by the Men in Black a few months ago, we knew for a fact that the government was closely monitoring the searches she ran using the secret software. Fortunately, at least to this point, they had allowed her to keep using it.

"What about the *Apartment* and the *Condo*?" Gina asked. "Do we know where those are?"

"We haven't done anything with either of them yet," Sophie said as she looked at me and let an attitude creep into her voice. "I was kinda hoping we wouldn't need to mess with Moogy LaFontaine again after the weekend."

"Sorry," I said somewhat sarcastically. "Next time, I'll find a better bar stool to stand on."

Sophie shrugged, and I turned to Gina. "How was your weekend?" I asked. "Weren't you and Jet going to head up to Sedona?"

“Oh, it was great,” Gina beamed. “Jet also loves Sedona, and we thought we’d head up there before the tourists start arriving next month.”

“Weren’t you going on a hike or something?” Sophie asked, her mouth again full of doughnut.

“We hiked the West Fork of Oak Creek,” Gina said. “I’ve been up it several times before, and it’s probably my favorite path around Sedona. But this was Jet’s first time on the trail.”

“How’d he do?” I asked.

“He loved it,” Gina said as she grinned at us. “He was like a little kid on his first hike. We made it all the way to where the canyon walls come together, and the trail disappears. Most people turn back at that point since you have no choice but to walk through the creek from then on. Jet took off his boots, and we waded upstream until the water started to come up to our waists.”

“Wow, that sounds cold,” Sophie noted.

“It was,” Gina laughed. “But we had a great time. It’s been a lot of fun showing Jet around Arizona.”

There was a pause as Sophie sipped her coffee, and Gina picked up a glazed doughnut. After thinking about it, she tore it in half and put half back in the box.

“How’s your assignment going?” I asked Gina. “Are you any closer to being done?”

Gina had been working to track down information for the J. Barrett Knight assignment for the past three months. Our client had been the head of Scottsdale General Hospital but had gotten caught up in a narcotics ring run by his brother, Oswald Knight, and a nasty woman named Lillian Abbot.

Gina had been attempting to find evidence that Barrett had been acting under threat of death by his brother. Lenny was then going to use that information to arrange for a plea deal for Barrett if he testified against Oswald and Lillian.

“I’m pretty much done,” Gina said, sounding pleased. “Sophie’s putting together the last of the reports this week, and Lenny will turn over what we have to the U.S. Attorney’s office. After that, my part will be

finished, at least for the time being.”

“Nice,” I said. “It will be good to have you freed up again.”

“Well,” she said with a grimace. “I wouldn’t exactly say freed up. Lenny’s been holding back several cases and waiting for me to complete this one. I think I’ll be pretty busy for the next several weeks.”

“Speaking of assignments,” I moaned, looking at Sophie. “While Lenny was chewing me out yesterday, he mentioned I’m going to get another one starting this morning. Do you have any idea what it is?”

“Well, I talked with the client on the phone for a few minutes last week, but I don’t have a lot of details,” Sophie said with a shake of her head, plucking a fresh glazed raspberry-filled doughnut from the box and taking a bite.

“The husband’s an independent electrical contractor,” she mumbled. “He works five or six days a week out on some job site or another. He’s always worked odd hours, depending on the job. But the wife noticed that lately, he’s always gone every Tuesday and Thursday afternoon. He says he’s working, but she has some doubts.”

“And she wants me to follow him around and take some naked pictures of him and his paramour so she can get a divorce?” I asked with a tired moan.

“Wow, you’re good,” Sophie said as she spread her fingers and swept out her hand. “It’s like you can see the future. Maybe you should buy some lottery tickets for tonight.”

“Shut up,” I scolded. “When’s the client getting here?”

Sophie shrugged. “How should I know? I’m only the paralegal. You’ll need to ask Debbie. She does the scheduling now.”



At ten thirty, Sophie and I were in the front offices, chatting with Debbie and waiting for the client to arrive. I’d asked our new receptionist to order me a selfie stick, and she’d started flipping through Amazon. Even

though it had originally been Lenny's idea, I thought being able to take pictures above my head would likely come in handy in the future.

"Is there anything special you want with it?" Debbie asked as we compared several selfie sticks on her monitor.

"I'll want to be able to put it in my bag," I said. "I should probably get the smallest one they have."

"Those are more expensive than the bigger ones," she said, pointing to the professional models.

"I like the neon pink one," Sophie said, pointing to a stick that shone out like a beacon.

"It's pretty, but it might not be so great if I'm supposed to be taking pictures without being spotted," I reminded her.

"Oh, yeah," she admitted. "I suppose that's important too."

"Hey," Debbie said as she pointed to her monitor. "This one comes in military camouflage. It's another twenty dollars over the flat black one, but what the heck," she laughed as she punched in the order.

"Oh, don't worry about the cost," Sophie said with a dismissive wave. "I'll approve it when I pay the office credit cards next month."

"Ever since you told us about geocaching last month, I've been looking into it," I told Debbie. "Scottsdale has a couple of active groups that do it, at least according to the internet. Sophie and I might go on one of their expeditions sometime. Gina and Jet might, too. You should come with us."

"Sure," she said with a nod. "It was mainly my ex-husband's thing. I was the navigator and mainly used being off-road and camping in the desert as an excuse to drink margaritas. But it can be a good way to get outside and hang out with friends. I still have a nice satellite GPS receiver we could use."

"I could see us doing something like that," Sophie said, sounding interested in the idea. "Driving around the desert with only a list of GPS coordinates to guide us while we look for hidden objects might be fun, for a weekend anyway."

"If you want to start with something simpler," Debbie said. "Old Town Scottsdale has a walking geocache tour. You use your phone to go from

place to place, following GPS clues. Whenever you find a cache, you leave a fun little trinket and pick up one that someone else has left. It's an interesting way to spend the afternoon and a good excuse to wander from bar to bar."

"Since you know about it, why don't you come with us sometime?" I asked.

"Sure," she said. "I'd love to. Let me know when. Only, I can't do it this Saturday."

"Are you doing something good this weekend?" Sophie asked.

"Saturday's my birthday," Debbie said with a smile. "I'm going out with a few friends for lunch. Whenever I'm with them, it usually turns into an afternoon of shopping or hitting one of the casinos."

"That'll be fun," I said. "But sure, let's plan on going out sometime."

The door to the street opened, and a woman in her mid-thirties walked in. She was on the thin side, with straight light brown hair down to her shoulders and black plastic frame glasses. She was nicely dressed in a navy skirt and lemon blouse and carried a high-end bag.

I recognized this was our new client from her slight nervousness as she looked around the reception area. Through years of trial and error, Lenny had set up the front offices to give off a vibe of legal competence, if not outright intimidation.

A high bookshelf behind Debbie's ornate wooden desk was stuffed with lawbooks of every description, including the current Arizona Revised Statutes. The walls were covered with dark wainscoting, and several antique legal documents were hung in custom gilded frames.

Overstuffed red leather wingback chairs and expensive coffee tables were scattered throughout the area. Through overhead speakers, classic jazz played at a comfortable background volume.

The overall effect was to give the impression that Lenny knew what he was doing and had been doing it for many years. It seemed to help as clients handed over their credit cards for Lenny's outrageous retainer fees.

The only thing that ruined the effect, at least in my mind, was the dark blue carpeting. It had needed to be replaced since I'd started here and had been brought up as a problem more than once. Unfortunately, at least to this

point, Lenny had been too cheap to replace it.

“Hi,” I said as I walked towards the woman. “I’m Laura Black, one of the investigators here, and this is Deborah Thompson.”

“Call me Debbie,” our receptionist said with a friendly wave.

“Adriana Kirk,” she said as we all shook hands. “I’m here to see Leonard Shapiro.”

“Hi, Adriana, I’m Sophie,” my best friend said, giving her a broad smile. “We talked on the phone a few days ago. After you’re done talking with Lenny, I’ll have some paperwork for you to fill out.”

Debbie glanced down at the phone on her desk. “Mr. Shapiro’s finishing up a phone call,” she said. “But he should be off in a minute or two.”

“You’re thinking about divorcing your husband?” I asked.

“Well, I’m hoping it won’t come to that,” she said, sounding downhearted, her smile fading. “But something seems to be going on, and I’d like to find out what it is.”

“He seems to be gone on a regular basis?” I prompted.

“That’s right,” Adriana said with a slow nod. “He’s an electrician and has always had an odd work schedule. He usually works on weekends, and it isn’t unusual for him to work two or three weekdays. Still, it occurred to me about a month ago that he’s been gone every Tuesday and Thursday afternoon for quite some time.

“And you think he may be fooling around?” I asked.

She then seemed to think about it for a moment. “I’ll be honest, I never thought he’d cheat on me, but I suspect he might be seeing someone else.”

“If he is, why don’t you simply divorce him?” Sophie asked. “You know, in Arizona, you don’t need to prove infidelity for a divorce.”

“No,” Adriana said with a small laugh. “In my case, I do.”

“Do you have a prenup with a cheating clause?” I asked, having seen it many times.

Adriana nodded her head and seemed a little embarrassed about it.

“You have to understand,” she said. “I come from a family with money.

My husband, Elliot, had a few run-ins with the law in his youth, and my parents had been against the marriage from the start. They insisted on a prenup to prevent Elliot from fleecing me.”

“Really?” Sophie asked, always wanting to learn the sordid details of our clients’ lives. “How did he take it when you told him he’d have to sign a prenup?”

“He said he understood. He told me my parents were only looking out for my best interests.”

“What sorts of crimes was he involved in?” I asked.

“Burglary, grand larceny, breaking and entering, and fencing stolen goods,” she said stiffly. “The last time he was caught, he served fourteen months in prison over it. This was when he was twenty-three.”

“How’d you meet him?” Sophie asked, her head cocked to the side.

Our client’s face softened. “After college, so maybe ten years ago, I’d bought my first house and needed some electrical work done. Elliot was the man who showed up to redo my wiring. I didn’t realize it at the time, but he was in a state program to teach trade skills to ex-cons.”

“And you started dating him?” I asked.

“There’s something about a cute guy with a toolbelt,” Adriana said with a shrug and a sad smile. “I kept coming up with new electrical projects so I could invite him back.”

“I know what you’re sayin’,” Sophie said with a laugh. “I feel the same way about pool boys.”

“After we have the meeting with Lenny, I’ll need to get some basic information from you,” I said. “Tomorrow’s Tuesday, so I’ll be able to follow him and see if I can find out what he’s up to.”



Sophie and I had the introductory client meeting with Lenny and Adriana, but not a lot of new information came out of it. Her husband, Elliot, had been acting strangely at home for the past two or three months,

which had alerted his wife to start looking into his activities.

She'd quickly noticed his consistent Tuesday and Thursday afternoon schedule, something that hadn't happened in all their years of marriage. As an independent electrical contractor, he usually randomly bounced around The Valley like a pinball.

Adriana said that Elliot had then become somewhat reluctant to share his schedule and where he would be working during the day. This had again raised red flags with our client since her husband had always been very open with this information.

Still, even with Elliot being secretive, it had been evident to our client that her husband was keeping to the same Tuesday and Thursday schedule. As expected, Lenny told me to look into it and set a sixteen thousand dollar retainer.

After the meeting, Sophie, Adriana, and I went into the conference room. Our client completed the paperwork and handed Sophie her credit card to run while we chatted about Elliot, their marriage, and her history.

"I moved here from Bozeman, Montana, when I started my finance degree at ASU," she said. "After I graduated with an MBA, I got a job here in town and ended up buying a house on Jackrabbit next to Chaparral Park. It's taken me years to get used to the heat, but now I wouldn't want to live anywhere else."

"Tell me about your husband and his job," I said.

"Elliot has always been into electronics," she said, sounding somewhat wistful. "He was one of those kids who was constantly putting together a computer or ripping apart a video game to see if he could improve it."

"He sounds like a bright guy," I said.

"He'd thought about going to school to become a computer engineer," she nodded. "But then he got in with a bad crowd, and he ended up spending time in prison over it."

"That must have been hard on him," I said.

She nodded. "After he got out, Elliot jumped at a chance to become an electrician. From what I can tell, he's pretty good at it and can handle even the most difficult jobs. He sometimes has to meet with the engineers and architects who designed the electrical systems to point out where they got it

wrong.”

Sophie took off for the back offices after saying goodbye to our client and Debbie. I told Adriana I’d keep her informed and gave her a card with my cell and office numbers. All in all, she seemed to be in a positive mood when she left the office.

I chatted with Debbie for a few minutes, then went to the back cubicles. Gina was gone, as was usually the case these days, and Sophie was working on her computer, editing a document.

“Is that Gina’s report?” I asked my best friend.

“Yeah,” she said as she let out a breath. “But you know Gina. She’s great at making detailed notes. Over the weekend, she emailed me her daily reports summarizing her investigations into Barrett Knight for the last two weeks.”

“But isn’t that what you want?” I asked, somewhat confused. “I thought that detailed notes helped you when it came to making the final reports.”

“Oh, sure,” she agreed. “I need everything you can give me. But now I’ve got to take Gina’s forty pages and reduce it to about ten pages of relevant material for Lenny, along with a one-page executive summary. I read and reread the notes so many times that I end up knowing the cases pretty well before I’m done.”

“I’ve always wondered how you can remember everything Gina and I have been up to,” I said with a laugh.

“I guess,” Sophie said and shrugged. “After going over everything so many times, it’s sorta hard to forget.”

“When you’re done with Gina’s report, can you dig into something for me?” I asked.

“What? You mean Elliot Kirk?” she asked, a slight smirk on her lips. “I already punched him into the secret software. Since it’s been working so well for me lately, you might get your answer by the end of the day, tomorrow at the latest.”

“You’re amazing,” I beamed.

“I know,” she said with a laugh. “What are you doing tonight?”

"I'm heading to the Tropical Paradise and having dinner with Max."

"At the resort?" she asked. "Why not his house? You said that Beatrice is a great cook, and after the cupcake thing, she seems to like you."

"We're mostly only going to his house on the weekends," I said. "We've tried to do dinner at his place during the week, but he gets fidgety being away from the office. Plus, he likes to be at his daily nine o'clock wrap-up meetings in person rather than trying to do it over the computer, at least during the week. What are *you* doing tonight?"

"Well, after not seeing Milo over the weekend, I was hoping to see him for dinner. But something came up at work, and now he's busy until late."

"That's a bummer," I said, feeling bad for her, especially since I'd been the one to keep her out of town for the last couple of days.

"Yeah," she said with a nod and a sad laugh. "I wish these gangsters would learn to keep better hours. Hopefully, he'll get a night off soon. He has responsibilities when it comes to me. I'm a woman with needs, you know?"

"Oh, I know all about your needs," I laughed. "I saw you with that cowboy in the bar the other night. I was afraid you were going to climb him like a tree."

"I don't know what's wrong with me," she said with a shake of her head. "But I'm worked up all the time. And I swear it's only getting worse."

"Still?" I asked. "I figured it would start to get better when you had a full-time guy to be with."

"Well, that had been the idea, and don't get me wrong," she said, holding up her hands. "I do love having Milo as a boyfriend, and being exclusive has its benefits. But these scheduling conflicts of his are wreaking havoc with my urges. I've started thinking about having him meet me in the parking lot at lunch a couple of times a week for a quickie, you know, to hold me over until we can have a real date."

"But you drive a Volkswagen convertible," I pointed out. "What are you going to do? Put the top down and hang your legs over the side?"

"I know," she admitted. "Milo's car isn't any bigger. But I've got to figure out something before I start to go bonkers."

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Chapter Three



At four-thirty, I left the office and drove back to my apartment. I parked my convertible in the lot at the back of the building, put up the top, and went in through the rear entrance.

Located on Miller Road, about half a mile east of Old Town, my apartment building had started as a business-oriented hotel back in the early nineteen seventies. It consisted of five floors surrounding a central covered atrium, and I imagine it had been quite lovely when it was new.

By the mid-nineties, the hotel had closed. If I had to guess, I'd say it was likely because it was too far from Old Town Scottsdale and the downtown financial district to attract many business clients.

The building was sold and converted into condominiums, but this phase of its history only lasted until the next financial crisis. The unsold units were redesignated as apartments, and the building was sold again.

This time, the buyer was a woman who had initially purchased her unit as a condo. She had liked the location and didn't want to see the new owners doing anything to disturb the business she had established there.

This woman turned out to be Suzie Lu. I'd met her several times, and she seemed like a pleasant, if somewhat reserved, woman of Asian descent. She worked as a professor of computer engineering at Arizona State University, a fifteen-minute drive to the south in Tempe.

As I later discovered, the side business Suzie ran out of her apartment was as a high-end dominatrix named Mistress McNasty. Her client list included many wealthy businessmen, academics, and politicians from Scottsdale and extending throughout the Phoenix metro area, also known as The Valley of the Sun, or simply The Valley.

A couple of months ago, we arranged for Suzie's apprentice, Countess Carla, the Cruel, to have weekly sessions of discipline and obedience training with Lenny. We knew it had been a secret fantasy of his for some time, and the weekly appointments seemed to calm his mood and improve his overall outlook. Both were things he desperately needed.

I took the elevator up to the third floor and walked down to my apartment. As I unlocked the door and went in, Marlowe, my gray and white tabby, looked up from where he'd been napping on a pillow on the couch.

His eyes followed me as I walked through the living room. But once it was clear I was headed for the bedroom and not the kitchen, he closed his eyes and laid his head back on the pillow.

I dug through my closet and eventually found a pleasant but somewhat modest mid-length sapphire blue dress that Max always seemed to like. Since I assumed we'd only have time for a quiet dinner and maybe a few stolen kisses, I wasn't overly worried about trying to entice him into something more.

I locked the apartment door and started to walk down to the elevator when Grandma Henderson's door opened, and she stuck her head into the hallway. I think she listens for the sound of the safety chain as I slide it from my door and then again as I lock the deadbolts. This seems to give her enough time to catch me before I get too far down the hallway.

"Why, Laura," Grandma said in her always cheerful voice. "I haven't seen you in a couple of days. I hope your trip to the mountains was nice. Marlowe pretty much spent the entire weekend with Bob and me."

"Did he seem a little sad that I wasn't home for the weekend?" I asked, somewhat hopefully.

Grandma thought about it for a moment. "Um, not really. Once he figured out that only one of us was going to feed him, he pretty much stuck close to the food."

"That's okay," I said. "As long as he had a nice time."

"Don't forget," she reminded me. "Bob and I won't be here next weekend."

"Aren't you going to Pensacola?" I asked.

“Yeah,” she said, sounding a little unsure. “We’re leaving on Thursday and won’t be back until late on Tuesday.”

“Is something wrong?” I asked. “I thought you were looking forward to the trip.”

“Well, I had been,” she said. “But for the past few days, Bob’s been on the internet looking up housing and real estate prices there.”

“Is he thinking about buying something?” I asked.

“That’s what I’m worried about. He grew up in Florida and still has some family in the area. This is only supposed to be a long weekend to visit relatives and friends, but I’m afraid he’s using this trip as a way to ease me into moving there with him.”

“Wow,” I said. “What do you think about that?”

“Well, I guess I’m not opposed to moving, as long as it’s somewhere it doesn’t snow. But I’d like it to be my choice and not something that’s crammed down my throat.”

“I can see that,” I agreed. “Let me know how it goes. I’d hate to lose you as a neighbor, and Marlowe would be devastated. But if it’s the right thing for you and Bob, we’d understand.”

After saying goodbye to Grandma, I took the elevator to the ground floor and walked out the back of my apartment building to the parking lot. I then texted Max to let him know I was on my way.

After lowering the top on my Miata, I drove west to Scottsdale Road and then north to the Tropical Paradise. Built in the eighties, the property was among the first of the city’s new mega-resorts.

It had centered on the concept of setting up a modern hotel, with two championship golf courses, surrounded by hundreds of prime residential building sites. Along with some of the other resorts they had started to build on Anne McCormick’s cattle ranch, the Tropical Paradise had become a blueprint for the forty or so other destination properties that have made Scottsdale into the golfing capital it is today.

I pulled into the resort through the main entrance and drove past the massive fountain and tropical foliage display. I had some time, and it was a beautiful day, so I pulled into guest parking and walked up the hill to the hotel’s main entrance.

As I entered the cavernous tropical-themed lobby, I was surprised to see Carson walking toward me. The tall, blond, muscular man with a short haircut gave me a half-smile as I held out my hand and we shook.

Through various adventures over the last several months, I'd gotten to know the big ex-military man reasonably well. With Gabriella now working directly for Johnny Scarpazzi on the "other side" of the business, Carson had quietly filled in as Max's new assistant and bodyguard.

From what I'd gathered, my boyfriend had hired Carson directly from the service, where he'd been in one of the elite special forces units. Carson had never said which branch of the military he'd been in and always politely deflected my questions whenever I tried to ask. Over the past several months, I'd come to think it was likely the same group that Max and Gabriella had served in.

"Hi, Carson," I said, glad to see him. "Are we heading up to the roof? I know the way. You didn't need to get me."

"Hello, Miss Black," Carson said as he shook his head. "Not tonight. Max asked me to bring you up to the steakhouse."

"Really? He's never taken me there before," I mused. "With the big open patio, I've always assumed it was too exposed."

"Times change, Miss Black," he said, still with the ironic half-smile. "Times always seem to change."

Carson led me to a staff elevator down a hallway behind the main reception desk and then up to the third floor. After going through a couple of back passageways, we ended up in the spacious open kitchen of the restaurant.

Anthony's Prime Steakhouse was a high-end eatery and had been listed as one of the top steakhouses in Scottsdale for as long as I can remember. I'd never been here before, but Milo had taken Sophie not too long after they'd started seeing each other. She'd talked about it for weeks, giving it enthusiastic reviews.

The entire kitchen area was in motion in what looked and sounded like semi-organized chaos. Behind the counter was a distinguished-looking chef with a thick handlebar mustache in a white jacket and tall hat.

I watched for several moments as he efficiently grilled thick steaks and

colorful seafood over a glowing bed of smoking charcoal. Servers were coming and going, gathering orders and running them out, all while having abbreviated conversations with the cooks.

I'd paused for another few moments to take in the scene, amazed at what a complicated operation the kitchen was. Carson waited patiently but eventually gave me a look, and we started to move again.

He led me down a short, dim hallway and then through a red-leather-covered door into the lounge. We went through the bar and then into a large and elegant dining area.

It was busy for a Monday night, with almost all the tables occupied by couples or business groups. Looking at the women, I was glad I'd opted for a dress and not the pants and blouse I'd contemplated.

We went out to the sunset patio, an expansive terrace overlooking the main pool, several blocks of hotel rooms, hundreds of palm trees, and part of the Peregrine golf course. Beyond that, the patio offered panoramic views of downtown Scottsdale and Camelback Mountain to the south, with Mummy Mountain and Piestewa Peak to the west.

The big man led me to a round table on the terrace. It could have seated five or six people comfortably but was set for two, with both seats looking out over the city.

"I texted Max when I saw you walking in from the guest lot," Carson said. "He said for you to get a drink, and he'll be here as soon as possible. I'll be in the back if something comes up or you need anything."

"Thanks, Carson," I said. "It's always great knowing you have our backs."

"Roger that," he said, fading back into the main dining room.

A server stopped by and introduced herself as Madison. I glanced at the cocktail menu and ordered a Macallan 12-year Sherry Oak scotch with one ice cube for myself and one neat for Max. She was extremely efficient and brought the drinks within a few minutes.

Our table was in the corner of the patio, which held maybe a dozen other couples and small groups. Rather than a brick or wooden barrier at the edge of the terrace, there was a substantial-looking five-foot-high glass wall. Since we were on the third floor, the views through the glass down to

the main pool and the surrounding areas were breathtaking.

There was a white stucco wall against our backs and another partial one to the left. This would block the table from the main dining room and the hotel rooms to the side.

Even then, I thought being at such an exposed location would be somewhat risky. That's when I noticed two low planters, complete with short tropical plants, set directly against the glass.

I had to hand it to whoever had designed the space. Even if the planters contained nothing more than dirt, I imagined they were thick enough to stop a high-caliber bullet.

When did I start thinking in terms of stopping snipers?

I heard Max arrive before I saw him. There was a sudden uptick in volume as several people at a table in the lounge started talking loudly at once.

I'd experienced this several times before whenever Tony had walked through a restaurant or a bar at one of his resorts. I was still getting used to it happening with Max.

I glanced into the dining room, where my boyfriend had made it nearly halfway out. He then stopped at a table to shake hands and spend a few moments chatting with whatever important person was sitting there.

Max was tall and solid, with a body that made him look more like a swimmer than a football player. When I'd first met him over a year ago, he had somewhat reminded me of a younger version of the wrestler turned actor, Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson.

Now, I can't think of him as anything but Max. His easygoing smile, intense eyes, and charismatic personality have always driven me to want to be with him.

Until four or five months ago, Max had been the number two man in Scottsdale's largest criminal organization. With the retirement of Anthony "Tough Tony" DiCenzo, the group had split into two companies.

The legitimate real estate and resort management side fell to Max. According to Tony, Max had always been able to handle such a large and growing business, and he now seemed to thrive in it.

The criminal side was completely removed and given to Johnny Scarpazzi. I'd also gotten to know Johnny over the last year and knew he'd be great in the position.

The only disappointing thing about Max no longer being involved on the gangster side was that I didn't often see Gabriella anymore. The former Eastern European assassin and I had started to grow somewhat close over the past year, and I found that I missed her company.

Of course, now that Max was completely legitimate, it had opened up more opportunities for us to be together in public as a couple. Gina had some concerns that Max could still be a target of law enforcement, but those worries faded more with every passing month.

"You look great," Max said as I stood to give him a hug. I would have loved to give him much more than a simple embrace, but a public restaurant with many eyes on us probably wasn't the best place.

"The restaurant is beautiful," I said. "Thank you for bringing me here."

"It's no problem," he said as we sat. "I've been meaning to get you up here for some time."

"I was a little concerned that the table seemed somewhat exposed, but I see precautions were made. Were those your ideas or Tony's?"

"You're right," he said with a chuckle. "This is Tony's table. When I started working here, he had already installed bulletproof glass all along the patio's edge, but it was so thick that it distorted the view, and he wanted something better."

"I take it you helped him out?"

"I changed it all over to tempered glass. It's not bulletproof, but it did make it easier for guests to better see the sunset panoramas the steakhouse has become known for."

"Is that when you added the flower boxes?" I asked.

Max nodded and gave me a knowing smile. "That's right. Inside each of them is a two-inch-thick composite-armor plate."

"Two inches?" I asked. "That seems a little like overkill."

Max again chuckled and shook his head. "Not really, it's what you'd need to stop a black-tipped fifty-caliber round from coming through."

“It looks like your set-up would prevent a shooter from lining up a shot anywhere on the resort. But what about farther out? From the way Gabriella talked when we were in Vail, hitting a target from half a mile out isn’t a big deal.”

“True, it could be done. But you’d need a trained sniper like Major Malakov to make a shot like that.”

“Still,” I said, looking out over the city. “Doesn’t that possibility make you pause, at least a little?”

“Not really,” he said, giving me a knowing grin. “Tony and I had this same discussion several times while we were sitting here. If there was a determined sniper after you, occasionally eating at a random restaurant would be the least of your concerns.”

I picked up a menu and started to go over it. Everything looked amazing. “What should I get?” I asked.

“If you’re unsure,” he said as he pointed. “They have a tasting menu for two.”

I found the section Max had indicated and read off the dinner selection. *“Crispy calamari with dill dipping sauce, black truffle French fries with garlic aioli, parmesan risotto with seasonal mushrooms, mesquite charcoal-grilled prime filet mignon with Béarnaise sauce, grilled Maine lobster tail, and a warm chocolate cake with caramel-raspberry drizzle.”*

“Well?” he asked. “What do you think?”

“It sounds like enough food for three or four people,” I laughed. “But I’m willing to try to get through it if you are.”

Max ordered for us, and we chatted and sipped our scotch as we watched the sun go down over Piastewa Peak. I’d always heard the patio was one of the best places in Scottsdale to see the fiery, iridescent sunset colors that Arizona is known for. After seeing it for myself, I had to agree.

Dinner was perfect, and Madison had brought over the warm chocolate cake when Carson walked up to the table. His usual happy attitude was gone, replaced with a severe voice I hadn’t heard before. We both picked up on it right away.

“Carson?” Max asked. “Is there a problem?”

“Boss,” the big man said. “We just had an unauthorized breach into the computer system. Elana would like to meet with you as soon as possible.”

Max blew out a breath and paused as he considered what to do. He did this whenever an unexpected problem came up.

“Alright,” he said. “Tell her I’ll be there in ten minutes. Let Oscar Cox and Beth Bishop know about the meeting and ask them to attend as well. If they’ve already left for the day, they can do it over video. Let’s not make this into a bigger crisis until we learn what we’re dealing with.”

Carson nodded and then took off. The look on Max’s face was one that I’d seen a few times before. He was in his problem-solving mode. I had to admit that it looked super sexy on him.

He looked over at me and started to talk. I knew what he was about to say, so I helped him out.

“Thanks for dinner,” I said, leaning over and kissing him softly. “It was wonderful. I’ll have the cake boxed up, then go home and fight Marlowe for it. Go and take care of your problem.”

Max nodded and gave me his sweet half-smile. “Thanks for understanding. It looks like I’ll be busy with this for a while, but I’ll call you in the morning.”

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Chapter Four



I woke to the alarm and prepared for my day of following Elliot Kirk. From the information provided by Adriana the day before, he was supposedly scheduled to work on a new office building project starting at seven. She didn't know if this was true, but it seemed like a reasonable place to start.

Although I admired Elliot's willingness to be at work so early, getting up while it was still dark outside was a pain. Marlowe seemed to agree as he lay on the bed, his eyes following me as I dressed.

I drove to Adriana's house, a well-maintained split-level ranch off of Jackrabbit Road with a bright green artificial grass front lawn. I arrived a little after six. The sun was peaking over the horizon, and it promised to be a beautiful spring day.

I was pleased to find Elliot's white panel van parked in the driveway. A cartoon picture painted on the side of the vehicle showed an electrical spark wearing a blue hard hat, yellow gloves for hands, and a light bulb for a nose.

The spark had two big eyes and a broad, friendly smile. *Kirk Electric: No Job Too Big, No Job Too Small* was stenciled next to the spark in an Old English font, along with a local phone number.

I parked down the block and waited. I then spent half an hour sipping coffee from *The Big Pig*, my oversized insulated travel mug.

At roughly six thirty, a tall, thin, good-looking man came out of the house, matching the picture Adriana had said was her husband. He wore dark blue pants and a gray uniform shirt. It appeared he had the company logo embroidered over his left breast pocket.

I guessed his age to be about forty, roughly four or five years older than our client. As I watched, he got into the van and took off down the road.

We made it to the construction site for a new office building going up along Scottsdale Road at McDowell a few minutes before seven. According to Adriana, her husband said he'd worked at this job site, off and on, for the past several weeks.

Elliot parked his van beside several other construction vehicles in a small dirt lot next to the building. He opened the back of the van, strapped on an oversized tool belt, and disappeared into the building.

I parked in the lot of a medical office next to the job site, positioning my Miata so that I had a good view of the building's entrance and the electrical van. Once I was set, I quickly darted inside the medical building and found a bathroom.

Feeling much better, I went back out to my car and made myself comfortable. Since it was Tuesday, I hoped whatever Elliot was doing would happen soon.

I got a call from Max a little after nine. "Hey," I said. "Did you figure out what happened with your computer system?"

"It turns out the hackers were able to gain entry into the network with a simple email phishing attack," he said with a frustrated sigh.

"I've heard of that," I said. "Someone sent a decoy email and had people click on a harmful link?"

"The hackers sent important-looking emails to most of my top people yesterday afternoon. The email claimed it was from our HR department, asking them to click a link to complete a form. Unfortunately, when they hit the button to open the link, it let the hackers into the system."

"How many of them fell for it?" I asked.

"It was sent to eighteen senior staff members. Unfortunately, two of them clicked on the link. Both reported it as suspicious, but it was too late by then."

"Could you trace it back to see what damage they were able to do?"

"Unfortunately, the hackers had already dismantled the link by the time the IT group looked into it. We then examined the records and learned that

someone had used the information to get into the system and copy some of our files.”

“Do you think it could be the government or law enforcement snooping into your company?”

“The IT department thinks it was a smaller group of hackers. Maybe another business or perhaps a criminal organization. It could have even been teenagers doing it for fun.”

“Did you figure out what they took?”

Max snorted out a short laugh. “That’s the strange part. They didn’t even try for any of the sensitive financial or banking files. Fortunately, those have separate firewalls that would have made it tough for them to get into, even after the phishing attack.”

“So, what did they get?” I asked.

“We’ve narrowed the attack down to a section of the servers that stores the architectural information on the building and construction side.”

“Building and construction? Like how you built the roof and the walls of the resort? That doesn’t seem like something anyone would want.”

“Not only the walls but also the plumbing, ventilation, lighting, elevators, and sewer systems. We have thousands of files on virtually every property we’ve ever built, going back to the early projects from the eighties and nineties.”

“And you have no idea what files they copied?”

“Unfortunately, they covered their tracks well. We might never know what they took or why they took them.”



I ended up watching Elliot’s van until ten thirty. By this point, I was getting hungry, and after drinking the entire pot of coffee, I needed to go to the bathroom again.

After thinking about what sounded good, I headed over to the Filiberto’s Mexican on McDowell and Hayden. I ended up with two carne

asada tacos, chips, and a large horchata to drink.

I returned to the construction site a little before eleven and was relieved that the white *Kirk Electric* van was still there. I slowly munched the chips and daydreamed about Max while I kept watch over the parking lot.

My relationship with Max had steadily evolved over the past year, and growing close to him had been wonderful. Things then kicked into a delightful new phase when Tony had split the business a few months ago.

In addition to being out in public more often as a couple, Max had started inviting me to his house for dinners or even entire weekends. I found that I was looking forward to these weekends more and more as time passed.

Sleeping in Max's bed had been fantastic, but I was keeping myself grounded and tamping down my expectations for the future. It wasn't like I'd thought about moving in with him, or anything. Although, if I were being completely honest, the curtains in the kitchen did look a little shabby and could stand to be replaced.

Elliot walked out from the construction site at ten minutes to noon and got into the van. I discreetly followed as he led me east on McDowell. He did a drive-through at Taco Bell and eventually ended up at Casino Scottsdale.

Growing up in The Valley, casinos weren't the big deal they are today. If somebody said they were gambling, you knew they were likely driving to Las Vegas, the Black Castle, or maybe Laughlin, Nevada, for the weekend.

As I got older, everything changed. There were now almost a dozen casinos within an hour's drive of the city. Elliot had pulled into the parking lot of one of the nicest ones.

Casino Scottsdale had a massive gaming floor for gambling and featured a luxury hotel tower and a tropical-themed water park, complete with a lazy river and a huge poolside bar. I'd stayed here a few times over the years when prices during the warm summer months dropped to something approaching reasonable.

As with the last time I'd been here, I was a little shocked at seeing how many cars filled the parking lot. The number of day gamblers who seemed to be at the casino on a regular basis was apparently much higher than I had

initially thought.

Elliot parked the van in a side lot next to several other construction and maintenance vehicles. He didn't get out right away, so I went to look for a parking space.

I drove up and down the aisles for almost three minutes, eventually parking in an overflow lot that must have been a hundred and fifty yards from the main entrance. As I walked through the lot, I remembered I had a pass in my bag that would allow me to use casino valet, free of charge, for the next year.

I had gotten it when I'd recently set up a safety deposit box at the casino to store my jewelry. I told myself that I'd make sure to use the parking pass if I was ever over here again.

I made it through the doors of the casino as quickly as I could, then looked around for Elliot. If he was working in an area not accessible to the public, I knew I'd never find him. Fortunately, after walking around the gaming floor for about ten minutes, I spotted him in one of the bars.

Instead of wearing the expected toolbelt and gray button-down uniform top, he'd apparently left the hardware in his van and changed into a gold and black aloha shirt.

This is promising.

Not wanting to stand there staring into the lounge, I sat at a nearby slot machine and slipped in a ten-dollar bill. I figured if I played slowly, I could legitimately keep track of Elliot's movements and not rack up too much of a gambling expense for Lenny.

I felt my phone buzzing in my purse. I was wearing a new pair of open-ear Bluetooth headphones, and I answered by pushing a button on the side.

"Hello?" I asked. One disadvantage of the headphones was that I never knew who was calling until I answered.

"Hey, it's me," Sophie said. "Well? It's past noon already. Did you find out what Elliot Kirk was up to?"

"Not yet," I said. I knew it looked like I was talking to myself like a crazy person, but I was slowly getting used to the feeling of using the headphones. "He had lunch at Taco Bell, then went to Casino Scottsdale."

“Oooh, I love the hotel there,” Sophie moaned. “What about our guy? Did he check into a room? Did you see who the paramour was?”

“Not yet. He came in and headed into the *Velvet Tango Room*.”

“Oooh, I love that bar,” Sophie moaned again. “They do the most amazing cocktails. They’re a little pricey but well worth it, as long as someone else pays for them. If Lenny’s buying, be sure to try their Moscow Mule. They’re strong as hell, and they serve them in real copper mugs. Is he getting chummy with any of the ladies in there?”

“It’s too soon to tell for sure. He seems to know several people over here. Right now, he’s having a beer and chatting with a group of four men.”

“Do any of them look familiar?”

“Maybe,” I said, glancing into the bar without trying to be too obvious. One of the guys looks like a drug dealer I’ve run across a few times before.”

“Does your drug dealer have a name?” she asked.

“Um, it was Rock Bottom, or something close to that. Honestly, I think his weird name is the only reason I can remember him.”

“Seriously?” Sophie said with a laugh. “That sounds more like a porn name than a drug dealer. What’s he look like?”

“Um, not bad. I think you’d approve.”

“Go on,” she said, sounding interested.

“He’s in his mid-twenties and cute, but his skin’s a little pale, and he could comb his hair. It’s longer and a little messy. He has porkchop sideburns, like something you’d see from a few years ago.”

“How’s his tush?” she asked. “You know I like a guy with a bit of a bubble butt.”

“Um, it looks okay. But he also has some sort of neck tattoo. Words or something.”

“Seriously?” Sophie asked. “Who the hell tattoos words on their neck? Where’d you meet him?”

“Nowhere specific, but I’ve seen him around a couple of times. The last time was when Max and Señor Largo broke up that drug packaging

facility south of Curry Road four or five months ago, the one being run by Scottsdale General and Lillian Abbot.”

“What was he doing there? Was he one of the main guys?”

“He was one of the street pushers Lillian and Benny had hired to help distribute the narcotics. Max and Largo had left them all zip-tied to a table to make it easy for the police to round them up. Honestly, I figured he’d still be in jail.”

“What about the other three guys? Anything notable?”

“One looks like a college professor, complete with a tweed jacket with brown leather patches at the elbows. The other one reminds me of a cross between Jerry Garcia and my Uncle Mike.”

“I didn’t know you had an Uncle Mike,” Sophie said.

“He’s an ex-flower-child hippy on my mom’s side and lives in Boulder. He teaches chemistry at the University of Colorado. This guy looks a lot like him. Long gray hair, a scruffy gray beard, and little round wire-frame glasses.”

“He sounds more like Gandalf from Lord of the Rings,” Sophie laughed. “What about the last one?”

“He’s big and creepy,” I said. “He’s in his early forties, has a black mustache, a buzz cut, and a face that only a mother could love.”

“So, don’t ask that one out on a date,” she laughed.

“You’re telling me. He must be a long-term bodybuilder. He’s got that Neanderthal caveman brow ridge thing going on over his eyes and a dark unibrow.”

“Too many steroids will do that to you,” Sophie pointed out.

“He has on a black polo, and the sleeves are stretched to the point I’m surprised the seams are still holding. His biceps and forearm muscles are huge, and they have those thick veins visible on the outside.”

“Oh, that’s *nasty*,” Sophie moaned. “I don’t mind if my men are strong, but it gets to the point where some of those gym guys overdo it.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “It’s easy to go overboard on a good thing.”

“Well, keep your eyes open,” she said. “A bar at a fancy casino sounds

like the perfect place to pick up a woman. Have you gotten anything new on Moogy yet? Did you figure out where the apartment or the condo could be?"

"I'm still working on it," I grumbled. "The cabin was easy since all we had to do was find a place he owned in the mountains. The apartment is going to be tougher, and the condo could be almost anywhere."

"Well, do what you can," Sophie said. "We only have until Wednesday for the date at the apartment and Saturday for the condo."

"Speaking of the weekend," I said. "Since it's Debbie's birthday, do you want to do something with her?"

"Sure," Sophie said, again sounding interested. "What were you thinking of?"

"Something low-key. Maybe we could all go out to dinner, then to one of the clubs for an hour or two on Friday. Nothing too late."

"Milo's working on Friday," she said. "I'd thought about going out with the Cougars or maybe giving Danielle a call, but going out with you and Debbie would be fun."

"I wonder if Gina would want to come along?" I mused. "Since she started seeing Jet, she almost never goes out with us. We could even ask Gabriella. Now that she works exclusively for Johnny, I've only seen her a couple of times this year."

"Wasn't the last time at the party Tony threw after she took out that Viktor guy?"

"Yup. She was pretty banged up then, but that was a few weeks ago. Maybe you could ask Milo to see if she's out and about again."

"Sure, I'll ask him about it. He's become a little more chatty lately about things going on at work. But do you think Gabriella would go out with us, even assuming she's healed up?"

"I don't know," I said. "But I've wanted to try to be better friends with her for a while. I get the feeling that she sometimes gets lonely. Let me ask Debbie if she'd like to meet a couple of new people. If she's good with it, we can call around and see who else could make it."

"I love the idea," Sophie said. "Plus, it's been a while since we've had

a girls' night out with anyone but the Cougars. Is Elliot still with the four guys?"

"No, they went to a table, and he stayed at the bar. Right now, he's talking to a tall woman in a hot-looking red dress."

"That's encouraging," Sophie said. "What does she look like?"

"Late thirties, maybe five-ten, a hundred and forty pounds. She's a brunette with short hair and too much makeup. She's wearing gold loop earrings and has a big tattoo of a lavender lotus blossom on the upper part of her back, between her shoulder blades."

"Okay," Sophie seemed to be taking mental notes. "What else can you tell me about her?"

"It's hard to say for sure. She has a nice-looking figure, although her boobs look a little too big and round to be real. She might have also gotten a Brazilian butt lift."

"Go figure," Sophie laughed. "I've always worried about my tush being too big and bubbly, but now, a phat-ass is all the rage."

"It's a crazy world," I admitted.

"Okay, this should be easy," Sophie said. "Do you think she's Elliot's mistress?"

"It's possible, but the body language seems a little off. They're together but keeping a space between them."

"Is she giving off a girlfriend vibe? Anything like that?"

"Not really. It looks more like they're having a friendly chit-chat. I don't get any sort of romantic feelings between them at all. She's talking, and he's listening, but he's barely looking at her."

"Well, talking with a sexy woman at a bar is a good sign," Sophie said. "Maybe she's a hooker. Make sure to get a video of them together at the lounge. That way, if you catch them walking out of an elevator, you've already established a prior connection."

"I was thinking that as well. But I must be thirty feet from them. It's going to be difficult to be subtle about it."

"I hope they hurry up and get a room," Sophie said. "I know how much Lenny hates it when the only pictures you can get are of the couple doing

the perp-walk from the elevator and then leaving the hotel. Still, it's usually enough to get a confession from the spouse."

After I disconnected with Sophie, I set my phone's camera to maximum zoom and took a thirty-second video of Elliot and the Woman in Red. I'd been hoping he'd lean over and kiss her or maybe reach over and hold her hand, but they barely looked at each other while I was recording.

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Chapter Five



Feeling somewhat discouraged, I spent another five minutes sitting at the slot machine, discreetly watching the couple in the lounge. A bartender had brought them each a Corona, but nothing else of note happened. Sophie's idea that the woman was a hooker was starting to make sense.

I'd only played the slot machine once a minute or so, at the minimum of twenty-five credits a spin, but even at that, I quickly ran out of money. To keep myself looking legitimate, I fed another ten-dollar bill into the machine, giving me a thousand more credits.

The slot machine featured a farmer, his wife, his dog, and several cartoon cows flying in laser-equipped spaceships. The game was fun, even though I could only pay attention to it halfway. I told myself I'd need to come back sometime when I wasn't working and play it.

Suddenly, as if on cue, several people in the bar stood and walked out to the casino floor, most of them holding drinks, all of them headed in my direction. I quickly turned, as if studying the slot machine, and hit the play button.

The reels spun, and this time, they went on spinning. The cows kept shooting at the reels with their lasers, and the machine played a blast of happy music each time.

As my credit counter continued to rise, I started to get a sinking feeling. Sure enough, when it was over, there was a police siren sounding from the machine, and the words *50 Free Spins* flashed across the screen.

Crap.

This was precisely what I hadn't wanted to happen. As the people from the bar filed past me, several, including Elliot, offered congratulations. I

nodded and kept my eyes fixed on the screen, hoping no one would remember my face if they saw me later in the day.

I wanted to get up and follow Elliot and the Woman in Red as they disappeared through the casino. They seemed to be going toward the elevators at the back of the gaming floor that went up to the guest rooms.

Unfortunately, the slot machine was waiting for me to complete the bonus game. I hit a button to activate the feature, and the machine began to spin the reels.

The music was dramatic, like an old police movie mixed with a science-fiction film from the nineteen fifties. As I glanced down at the screen, my counter racked up credits as fast as I could count.

I needed to follow Elliot and his potential paramour, but it would have looked weird if I'd simply gotten up and left a winning machine. Security might even want to track me down and discuss my actions.

I sat and watched the slot as it continued to play out the free games. Even more frustrating, I picked up another seven free spins at one point during the bonus game. All in all, it took four or five minutes before the words *You Won \$82.75* flashed on the screen.

I hit the cash-out button and waited for the machine to spit out a claim ticket. I was thrilled I'd won over eighty dollars, but I'd completely lost sight of Elliot, the Woman in Red, and the rest of the crowd that had emptied out of the bar.

I went in the direction I'd seen the people go, but no one in the casino looked familiar. Feeling frustrated that I'd lost my guy so soon into the first day, I walked toward the back of the gaming floor.

I'd stopped at the elevators leading up to the guest rooms when I spotted a flashing neon sign on the wall that read: *Sonoran Poker Room*. Curious, I went down a short hallway until I began to hear the low murmur of many voices.

When I got to the entrance of the cavernous room, there were twenty or twenty-five tables, each with nine or ten players clustered around. As I looked over the crowd and noted several familiar faces, I understood that this was where the group from the bar had ended up.

A pleasant-looking woman with a Casino Scottsdale polo sat at a long

table with forms and brochures scattered across it. She finished helping a man who seemed to be signing in and looked up at me.

“Can I help you?” she asked.

“Um, maybe,” I said. “What’s going on today?”

“We’re about to start our afternoon poker tournament. It’s held twice a week, on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons at one o’clock. It features no-limit Texas Hold’em and costs \$125 to buy in. That will get you a seat at a table and ten thousand in tournament chips.”

“How much do you get if you win?” I asked.

“The prize structure is listed in the brochure,” she said, handing me a flyer. “But if you make it to the final table, there’s a thousand-dollar guarantee.”

After thanking the woman, I went into the room to look around. I counted twenty-one tables that were lined up in seven rows of three. There was also a larger and more elaborate table that seemed to be set aside from the others in the front of the room.

All but four of them and the fancy table up front were full, with nine players each. The majority of the players were men, but I also counted at least a dozen women in the room.

I quickly found Elliot sitting beside the woman in the red dress at one of the tables. The four men he’d been talking with at the bar were also there.

The tournament started, and I was fascinated to see so many people playing poker at once. A snack bar with a small seating area was set up along the side of the room, near where Elliot and the woman sat.

I wandered over to the counter, got a Diet Pepsi and some nachos, and then grabbed an empty table to watch the action. There was no music, but the constant low murmur of voices filled the room.

As play went on, I tried to get impressions of the men Elliot had been talking with at the bar. The one I’d labeled as the Professor was in his mid-thirties. He had blond hair combed to the side, was of average height and weight, and wore black-framed glasses.

He seemed to take the game seriously, never smiling or laughing. His

eyes constantly scanned the cards and the other players at the table. But other than stating his bets, he didn't do a lot of talking.

This contrasted with the old hippy who had reminded me of my Uncle Mike. He wore a jean jacket with brightly colored Grateful Dead patches.

This man seemed to be having a quiet conversation the entire time. I didn't see him talking with anyone else, so he must have only been talking with himself.

I was still somewhat puzzled by Rock Bottom. The man was apparently good-natured and seemed friendly enough, often having short conversations with the players around him. But I still couldn't understand what the drug dealer was doing with the afternoon poker crowd.

I looked at him a few times, but I wasn't close enough to read the words inked on his neck. I was curious about what it could be. It must have been important to him to have it permanently tattooed on his neck.

I was pretty sure he'd been arrested in Tempe for distributing narcotics. Either he was still awaiting trial and was currently out on bail, or maybe he'd copped some sort of plea deal and was out on probation.

The big, muscular guy still looked nasty. He never smiled or had any sort of expression other than a scowl. The fact that he looked like a caveman didn't do a lot to help his appearance.

Whenever he lost a hand, he looked like he was on the verge of getting pissed and starting a fight. I decided to stay as far away from him as possible.

From what I could tell, Elliot and the woman seemed comfortable playing in the tournament, like they had been doing this for some time. During the first hour, they had each won a couple of small hands, and their stacks of chips seemed about average for their table.

By the time there was a break, at roughly two o'clock, three of the people at Elliot's table, including the Caveman, had dropped out of the tournament. Each of them had run out of chips after playing several bad hands in a row.

Elliot took off, presumably to the bathroom. I thought this was somewhat unusual since this was the second time he'd left the tournament. He'd also headed out about half an hour into play. Rather than leave

through the main exit, he'd used a door on the side of the room.

Maybe he has a weak bladder?

Elliot returned, and the tournament restarted a few minutes later. The table had gotten through four or five more hands when Elliot got up and excused himself again.

As with the previous two times, he went out through the side exit. I'd noticed a few other people were also using this door and figured it must be closer to the bathrooms.

Thinking Elliot's behavior seemed somewhat odd, I got up and followed him out of the room. He'd had a good head start, and by the time I got out into the hallway, he had disappeared.

From this side exit, there were only two ways he could go. I wasn't sure which way led to the bathrooms, so I went down the hallway to the left.

Going in this direction led to a pair of substantial white doors with a sign that read: *Authorized Personnel Only*. Sitting next to the doors was an armed security guard. He eyed me suspiciously as I looked over the entryway.

"I'm looking for the bathrooms," I said, injecting a touch of a helpless woman into my voice.

The guard didn't seem very sympathetic, only lifting his arm and pointing down the hallway in the direction I'd come from.

I turned and went the indicated way, eventually finding the bathrooms. A little way farther down the hallway were some upholstered living room chairs.

I sat on one of these and waited for four or five minutes. When Elliot didn't come out of the men's room, I figured I'd missed him and returned to the poker room.

By the time I was back at my seat at the snack bar, Elliot hadn't returned to his table, but he came through the side doors about two minutes later. I still didn't know how I'd missed him.

Elliot was an aggressive gambler, and after another forty minutes of play, he had won three games in a row. He then went all-in with what must

have been a relatively weak hand, lost, and had to drop out.

I was curious how his leaving would affect the Woman in Red. I was looking for signs they were planning a romantic rendezvous for later in the afternoon. But all she did was shake her head and tell him it was bad luck and that he should have won the hand.

Elliot got up and left the room, this time through the front entrance, without kissing her or even giving her a friend zone hug. The woman's eyes followed him out of the room, but she otherwise didn't seem too bothered by his leaving.

Since the Woman in Red had been the only potential dating partner Elliot had shown interest in, I decided to stay with her. She won the next hand but lost the next five and ran out of chips about half an hour after he did.

She waved goodbye to the other people at the table, including the Professor and Uncle Mike. Along with the Caveman, Rock Bottom had been among the first to lose all his chips and retire. He'd disappeared shortly after the first tournament break.

I followed the woman as she wove through the tables and out into the hallway. My hope was she'd hook up with Elliot, and they'd head to a room.

I kept back several paces, but it was apparent she wasn't looking for a date. She casually walked to the gaming floor and then to the exit.

I kept track of her progress as she walked through the parking lot, eventually getting into a four or five-year-old white Lexus sedan. I was close enough to catch the license plate and repeated it several times to myself, punching it into my phone as soon as she drove away.

When I got to my car, I looked over to where Elliot had parked. To my surprise, his white van was still there.

Huh?

Hoping he hadn't decided to meet a different woman after the tournament and head up to a room, I hurried back into the casino. I spent almost an hour circling the bars, the gaming floor, and the hallways. I even went out to the poolside bar and the water park.

I berated myself for how stupid I'd been. Elliot had dropped out of the

tournament relatively early, and going to an event that was held twice a week would be the perfect cover for meeting up with a mistress later in the afternoon.

As I searched the building, I made sure to keep an eye on the elevators. If Elliot came down with a woman, I'd take a video of them as they left through the parking lot. It wouldn't be ideal, but it might be enough to end the assignment.

It was close to five o'clock when I spotted Elliot. He was walking down one of the side hallways towards an exit close to where he'd parked.

To my surprise, he'd changed back to his company button-down uniform shirt and had the toolbelt strapped around his waist. He had a couple of grease smudges on his shirt, apparently from working somewhere dirty.

I followed him outside, but he only loaded his toolbelt into the van and took off. After following him for a few minutes, it was apparent he was heading home.

As he pulled into his neighborhood, I peeled off. On the way back to my apartment, I called Sophie. "Hey, it's me."

"Well, did Elliot and the red dress woman ever go to a room?"

"All they did was play in a poker tournament. I think we have the answer to where our client's husband goes every Tuesday and Thursday afternoon."

"That's damn disappointing," Sophie said. "I don't know how happy the client's going to be. She's spending a pile of money on this, and he's not even having an affair. She sorta sounded like she was ready to dump his ass. At the very least, I bet she'll be pissed that he's gambling away the family fortune."

"The cost to play in the tournament is only a hundred and twenty-five dollars," I pondered. "Sure, that's a chunk of change since he comes here twice a week, but it's not anything that's going to break the bank, even if we assume he loses everything each week."

"Is he any good?" Sophie asked. "Maybe he uses gambling as a second income?"

"I don't know a lot about poker," I admitted. "His betting seemed a

little aggressive, but maybe that strategy sometimes works out.”

“Gambling always seemed a little dumb to me,” Sophie said. “Every time I walk into a casino, I lose everything I shove into a machine.”

“Do me a favor?” I asked. “I followed the woman out to the parking lot and got her plates. Would you run the numbers and let me know who she is? Maybe run a secret software deep dive on her?”

“No problem. Tell me more about our potential femme fatale. Do you think they’re going up to a room after playing poker? Even occasionally?”

“I honestly don’t think so. At least they didn’t openly show a lot of affection towards each other.”

“Did he at least hang with her after they were both out of the tournament? Like drinks in the lounge or out by the pool?”

“That’s one of the weird things about this,” I said. “After dropping out, Elliot went to his van and changed into his electrician’s outfit. I think he spent the last couple of hours working somewhere in the casino.”

“Did you get pictures of him at the poker tournament? Even if he’s not having an affair, you know Lenny’ll want me to put together a ten-page report for the client, with tons of pictures. That will generate a buttload of billable hours for me to write it and for him to review it. We’ve got that big retainer to chew through and not a lot to report.”

“Unfortunately, I was mainly waiting for Elliot to take off with the woman. I took a few pictures of them, but nothing good enough for a proper report. If I’d known this would only be a gambling thing, I would have documented it better. I’ll need to come back on Thursday and take some proper pictures and videos. Then you’ll be able to make a beautiful report.”

“Please do,” she said. “By Friday, I’ll have Lenny breathing down my neck. By the way, the secret software report came back on Elliot Kirk. I put it on your desk, but it sounds like you probably won’t need it now.”

“Thanks, but I think you’re right. Hopefully, we can wrap this one up on Thursday.”

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Chapter Six



I woke up the following day a little after eight. I then lay in bed and petted Marlowe while I contemplated what to do next.

It was apparent that Elliot wasn't having an affair but was instead spending a couple of days a week playing poker. I'd need to follow him again tomorrow afternoon to confirm my suspicions. Still, there was nothing in his interactions with the people at the casino that indicated he was romantically involved with anyone.

I motivated myself to get up and get ready for the day. I then plopped down on the couch and flipped through Moogy's report, looking once again for anything that could even vaguely be described as an apartment.

A little after ten, I gave up on Moogy and called Sophie. When she picked up, she seemed to be in a cranky mood.

"Hey," she said, sounding annoyed. "What's going on?"

"Don't tell Lenny, but I'm at an impasse. Moogy's meeting Hannah tonight at an apartment, and I still have no clue where it is. My brain's getting fried staring at these reports. I'm thinking lunch would probably help. Are you in the mood?"

"Yeah, getting out of here sounds like a *great* idea," she said with a long sigh. "What do you have in mind? Tacos down the street, or do you want to try somewhere different?"

"Would you mind if we did Dos Gringos?" I asked. "I haven't been there in a couple of weeks, and I'm starting to miss it."

"I'm good with that, as long as you don't mind that I start day drinking. They have a Wednesday two-for-one lunchtime special on Coronas, and I'm thinking that would hit the spot. Work today is super annoying, and a

couple of beers to go with the chips and salsa sounds like a pretty good idea.”

“Is Lenny driving you nuts again?” I asked.

“Yeah,” she said with a sad laugh. “I know I shouldn’t let him get to me, but I’m seriously looking forward to tomorrow. He’ll be with Countess Carla all morning. When he comes back, he’ll be too wiped out to assign me anything else or even come back to bug me—hopefully, for the rest of the day.”

“That should make things easier. But is that all that’s bothering you?”

“Well, I guess I still sometimes miss working up in the front offices,” she admitted. “Whenever the job started to get me down, I’d stare out the big front window at the goofy tourists and snowbirds walking up and down the street. I’d then sort of zone out for a while. Working here in the back, I have to get on my phone and scroll videos to do that.”

“Why don’t you see if Debbie wants to come along,” I said with a laugh. “Then scroll some videos, zone out, and I’ll be there about eleven fifteen.”

“Yeah, it would be good to have her along. It turns out she isn’t any more thrilled about Lenny’s antics than we are. It’s sort of fun to hear someone else bitching about our boss.”

“Did you ever get anything back on the Woman in Red?”

“Oh, yeah,” Sophie said. “I was going to tell you. The license plate you gave me opened everything up. I got the preliminary report back a little while ago. Her name’s Monica Marshall. She’s thirty-nine, lives in a nice house in North Scottsdale, and owns a general contracting business called *M&M Design and Build*.”

“I guess that could explain how they know each other. Maybe she hired Elliot at some point to work on one of her construction projects?”

“That’s possible,” Sophie said. “I’ll know more when the deep dive report comes in. It should be here sometime this afternoon or tomorrow morning.”



I got to the office a little after eleven. When I went through the back door, Sophie was at her desk working on a report. Judging by the loose sheets of pink and purple notebook paper scattered around her desk, it must have been for Gina.

“Hey,” I said. “It looks like you’re in the middle of things. Do you want to wait a while for lunch?”

“No, I’m good,” she said with a laugh. “I need to print this out, and then I’ll be ready. Debbie’s coming with us.”

Sophie typed in a few commands, and paper started churning out of her printer.

“Are you still planning on going back over to Casino Scottsdale tomorrow?” she asked. “Don’t forget, I’ll need four or five decent pictures of Adriana’s husband playing cards to make a good report. Get a few pictures of the poker hall as well so she can get a better sense of what he’s been up to.”

“I’ll get you what you need,” I said with a nod. “Although, I’m still sort of hoping Elliot will take a girlfriend up to a room. I always feel a little bad when the client spends money with us only to find out it’s nothing major.”

“You know, they have all sorts of specialty rooms at the hotel there,” Sophie reminisced. “I once stayed in the Forbidden Fantasy suite. It had a heart-shaped bed with red satin sheets, a huge double shower, and a hot tub big enough for five people.”

“That does sound romantic,” I said, as my mind drifted to spending an entire weekend in a place like that with Max. “But what about the room made it forbidden?”

“Well, there was an eyebolt in the ceiling above the bed with a couple of red velvet ropes attached to it, along with several leather restraints attached to the walls. There were even some long pink silk scarves tied to the bedposts.”

“How’d you end up in the Forbidden Fantasy suite?” I asked. “It sounds a lot like Suzi Lu’s apartment.”

“Milo took me there for the weekend, maybe six months ago. He said he got a discount on the room through work.”

“Well, did he tie you up?”

“Yeah, but it’s not the same after you’ve been dating someone for a while. I know that my Pooh Bear would never hurt me on purpose. It’s better if you’ve just met the guy, and you aren’t quite sure what he’s going to do to you.”

“Seriously? You’d rather be tied up naked on a bed by someone you barely know, rather than a long-term boyfriend?”

“Oh, definitely,” Sophie said with a nod, sounding like she had a strong opinion on this. “If a new guy ties you up, he can do anything to you that his sick, twisted, perverted little mind can come up with. Not knowing what’s going to happen always adds a hot intensity to the session.”

“Didn’t you worry that you’d end up with a serial killer, and he’d slowly torture you to death?”

“Hey, I think I’m a pretty good judge of character,” she said, sounding slightly annoyed. “I always made sure to get a sense of the guy before anything like that happened. Besides, I’d never let him tie me up until at least the second or third time we were together.”

“You know, I don’t remember you and Milo getting a room there,” I said, a little miffed that she hadn’t at least mentioned something like that ahead of time.

“Well, I *did* tell you Milo was taking me to the casino for the weekend, but you were busy getting shot at, or being kidnapped, or having something else whacky happen to you then. I don’t think you were paying a lot of attention to what I was saying. Oh, I got the deep dive report back on Monica Marshall.”

“That’s great news,” I said. “Does it show anything helpful?”

“Not really, but I only had time to skim it. She’s lived here all her life and has a degree in business from ASU. She’s been married and divorced three times and is currently single. The second husband was a general contractor, and that’s when she got into the business. She has a daughter

from her first marriage who's attending ASU for a civil engineering degree. She also has dating profiles up on several of the legitimate internet sites, but nothing that indicates she was a serial adulterer or anything."

"What else does it say? Any dirt?"

"She has a fairly long criminal history, going all the way back to high school."

"Go figure. Anything specific?"

"Mostly property crime—burglary, larceny, fencing stolen goods—those sorts of things. She was also arrested for conspiracy relating to a bank heist when she was in her late twenties. It seemed to lead to her first divorce."

"Okay, a bank robbery sounds pretty hardcore."

"Yeah, but she apparently wasn't the main crook, and the charges were eventually dropped when she seemed to work out some sort of plea deal and testified against her fellow thieves. She's apparently been clean for the last few years."

"Her criminal activities sound a lot like what Elliot was into. Did you see any sort of connection between her and our client's husband?"

"Not really. She could have worked with him in the past at *M&M Design and Build*, her contracting company, but the report didn't have any former employees listed. If it's important, I could dig into that."

"Don't worry about it, at least not yet," I said. "Was there anything else?"

"Well, her credit's shit, she's in debt up to her eyes, and her contracting business is probably a few months away from going bankrupt."

"Damn. I don't think that hanging out at a casino is going to help her with that," I observed.

"Probably not," Sophie said with a snort of laughter. She then turned slightly serious. "You know I've been running these reports for a while now, right?"

"It's been maybe two or two and a half years since you got the secret software," I said. "What about it?"

"I think I'm getting pretty good at reading them, and Monica's report

seems a little off.”

“What about it seems off?”

“That’s just it. I can’t put my finger on it. Maybe it seems a little too perfect.”

“How can a report be too perfect?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “But it somehow seems too polished. Most of these reports have at least a few gaps or contradictory entries. Her’s seems remarkably complete when it talks about her history. It’s sorta like someone decided to come up with a good criminal resume and then typed it in, word for word.”

“I’ll go over it after lunch,” I said. “I’m curious about what a too-perfect secret software report looks like.”

We walked up to reception and stopped in front of Debbie’s desk. “Hey,” I said. “Do tacos at Dos Gringo’s sound okay?”

“That sounds perfect,” Debbie said with her usual smile. “I’ve been thinking about them ever since Sophie told me about it. Oh, your selfie stick came in. Don’t forget to get it when we come back.

“Thanks for doing that,” I said as I saw the package on her desk. “You never know when it will come in handy. By the way, Sophie and I were wondering if you’d like to go out Friday night for a pre-birthday dinner and then maybe spend an hour or two at one of the clubs?”

Debbie gave us both the oddest look. “Really?” she asked, sounding a little unsure. “You want to take me out for my birthday?”

“Sure,” Sophie said. “If Gina’s free, I know she’d love to come along, too. There are tons of restaurants and nightclubs around here.”

“That sounds like a lot of fun,” Debbie said in a quiet voice. “It’s been a while since I’ve done anything like that with someone other than my ladies’ group.”

“Now, this is up to you,” I said, “but would you like us to invite a couple of others along as well? It would give you a chance to meet some new people.”

“Oh, of course,” she beamed. “I’d enjoy meeting your friends. Besides, it’s always more fun for us girls to travel in a pack.”

We walked down to Dos Gringos, our favorite Baja restaurant, and got a table near the street. The server came out with a basket of chips and three bowls of salsa.

Sophie and I ordered our usuals. Debbie quickly looked over the menu but ordered the same three-pack of street tacos she'd had the last time we were here.

"Sophie was telling me about your assignment with Moogy LaFontaine," Debbie said as she used a tortilla chip to scoop up a load of salsa. "Did you ever find the apartment he's supposed to be at tonight?"

"No," I said, feeling frustrated. "Moogy doesn't own an apartment building, and we can't find his name or his company's on any apartment lease."

"You said he's currently dating a college student?" Debbie asked.

"That's right," I said. Her name's Hannah Higgins, and she's an art history major at ASU. I've only seen her once, and she was naked at the time, but from her file, she seems alright."

"And where does *she* live?" Debbie asked.

"She lives in an off-campus student apartment building on Apache," I said as I bit down on a chip. I then realized what I'd just said, and I knew my eyes grew big.

"Do you think that could be it?" Sophie asked. "It seems too easy."

"Well, it's the only apartment I've seen in the reports this week," I said as I nodded slowly. "Debbie, you're brilliant. I'll go over after lunch and check the place out. Maybe we can wrap up this assignment tonight after all."



I drove over to Hannah's apartment to check it out. After noting that it seemed rather spy-proof, I then went back to my place, happy to have a fresh report to go through.

After half an hour of close reading, I hadn't gotten any brilliant new

insights. Sophie had said the report seemed off to her, so I made sure to look at it with a critical eye.

Most deep dives contain twenty to thirty pages, and Monica's seemed about right for that. Sophie had been mainly concerned about her criminal record.

I had to admit that it seemed very thorough, perhaps even too complete. But I couldn't think how, or why, someone would want to assemble a criminal history on someone else.

Wanting to take a break, I called Gabriella. Knowing her hectic schedule, I figured it would roll into voicemail. I was mentally gearing up to leave a message when she answered.

"Hello, Laura," she said in a businesslike tone. "Is there problem?"

"Hi, Gabriella," I said. "No, nothing's wrong. We have a new receptionist at work, her name's Debbie. We're trying to get to know her better, and we're taking her out for a birthday dinner and maybe spending an hour or two at one of the clubs in Old Town on Friday night."

"That is good," she said. "Doing nice things for coworkers helps make workplace run better."

"Sophie and probably Gina will be there as well," I said. "We'd love it if you could come too."

"Do you need security for clubs in Old Town? I did not know they were so interesting."

"No, not security. We thought it would be fun to have you there as well. We've never had a chance to hang out socially."

The phone went silent for a moment, and I was afraid we'd been disconnected. Finally, she spoke. "You mean, you want me there as friend?"

"Well, sure. Now that you work for Johnny, we almost never see each other anymore. I thought it would be a good chance to catch up on what you've been up to, well, other than taking out terrorists."

"Then I will come," she said, her voice softening. "I am off Friday night and do not often go out socially. It will be good to broaden my knowledge of Scottsdale and learn about new people."

"Speaking of people," I said. "There's a possibility that Danielle Ortega

may come with us. Would that cause any sort of conflict?”

“I do not think it will be problem. She is good leader, and I respect her. However, I will inform Johnny to ensure he approves.”

“Perfect,” I said. “It will be after work on Friday. Either Sophie or I will text you the details.”

“Very good,” she said. “Unless problem comes up at work, I will be there on Friday.”

I went back to the reports, looking for something to jump out, but I’d read them so many times that my heart wasn’t in it. After maybe fifteen minutes, the happy sounds of Rihanna’s song “S & M” started playing through my phone, and I answered.

“Hey, Sophie,” I said. “What’s going on?”

“I shouldn’t have had those beers at lunch,” she laughed. “Between those and my date last night with Milo, I’m starting to get sleepy. Fortunately, it turns out Lenny’s at a hearing for the afternoon, and Debbie’s up front reading a romance novel on her Kindle. I’m thinking about taking a quick power nap.”

“Did you seriously call me to tell me you’re going to take a nap?”

“Oh, sorry, no. Have you checked out Hannah’s apartment yet? How does it look?”

“I drove over there, and it doesn’t look all that promising. It’s on the third floor at the Vista del Sol apartments at Apache and MacAllister. It’s a big group of newer student apartment houses south of campus.”

“Oh, sure. I had a friend who lived there for a while,” Sophie said. “It’s going to be pretty tough to get any sort of naughty bedroom pictures without a camera on the inside.”

“I think you’re right,” I admitted. “I’d thought about trying to mount a camera on the outside of her bedroom window, but I’d need to find a way out on the balcony. The only way I could do that would be to repel down from the roof.”

“You mean like Spiderman? Sure, what could possibly go wrong?” she laughed again. “You’d end up in the hospital, then Lenny would make me go out and take the dirty pictures.”

“Yeah, I was sorta thinking the same thing,” I confessed.

“So, what are you going to do?”

“We won’t be able to see into the bedroom, and there are multiple entrances and exits to the property. I think the best we’re going to get is Moogy and Hannah walking into the apartment and then maybe another video as they leave together, and that’s assuming we even have the right apartment for tonight.”

“That won’t make Lenny happy,” Sophie observed. “It sounds like even if we do get those pictures tonight, we’ll probably still end up at their Saturday condominium rendezvous to try to get something better.”

“Do you want to meet me over there tonight?” I asked. “I could use the company.”

“Well, if I can sneak in a power nap this afternoon, I’ll be there,” she grumbled. “I’ll be okay as long as Gina doesn’t come back to the office and lectures me again about being responsible.”

“Perfect,” I said. “I’ll meet you in the parking lot of the apartment complex after you get off. We can hang out until Moogy and Hannah show up.”

“I’ll be there,” Sophie said. “Although maybe you should bring along a sack of Five Guys for us. Some of their French fries would help with the waiting.”

“Fine,” I said, figuring this was a cheap price to have some company. “I’ll see you there.”



I made it back to Hannah’s apartment building a little after five. I drove around the parking lot and didn’t see Moogy’s Jaguar convertible. I felt a twinge of frustration when I saw that Hannah’s white Cherokee was already in a space near the building.

Damn. So much for getting a video of them entering the apartment together.

I walked up the stairs to Hannah's floor and checked out my options for hiding spaces and lighting. I eventually stashed one of my tiny spy cameras in a flower box that had a good view of the hallway in front of Hannah's apartment.

I checked out the orientation of the hallway and again felt a twinge of frustration. Once the sun went down, I knew the lighting in the area wouldn't be the best.

I had to set the video camera's resolution to its maximum sensitivity setting. It would be good enough for what I needed, but I'd only be able to record a little over three hours of video before the battery died.

I wasn't sure when Moogy would show up, but I had three other cameras charged up and ready to go for when this one was spent. I hated to get only circumstantial evidence of the affair, but it looked like this was the best I could do tonight.

I parked in a secluded space towards the back of the lot. It gave a good view of the vehicles that came and went, along with what looked like the main back entrance of the building.

After calling to discuss the logistics of dinner, Sophie said she'd pick up the Five Guys. She'd also decided that since we were both on company business, she'd expense it.

Sophie arrived a little after six thirty and climbed into the Miata. As we sat and munched the burgers and fries, we watched people coming and going from the apartment building.

Most of them seemed to be students from the university. Many of them had overstuffed backpacks and looks on their faces that spoke of a long night of homework ahead.

"Did you get a chance to ask Gina about going out for Debbie's birthday dinner on Friday night?" I asked as I stuffed some fries in my mouth.

"Oh, yeah," Sophie said with a laugh. "She thinks it's a great idea. She'll be there unless something comes up. I also called Danielle and left a message for her to call me back."

"I hope Gina can make it," I said. "Between working on her assignment and spending time with Jet, I don't think she's been out with us since

Grandma Henderson's wedding."

"Have you talked with Gabriella yet?" Sophie asked.

"I got ahold of her this afternoon, and she said she'd come with us. I'm glad I asked her. I don't think she goes out socially all that often."

"It sounds like it's going to be a fun night," Sophie said. "I'll find a place Debbie likes for dinner and work out the arrangements."

"When you send out the text with the details, don't forget to remind everyone that we'll need to dress sexy for the clubs. Otherwise, they won't let us in. The bouncers may cut us some slack since we'll get there as the clubs are first opening, but I wouldn't count on it."

"Good idea," Sophie agreed. "I'll bring something on the sleazy side and change here before we go to dinner. I'll tell everyone else to do the same. I don't want to see what happens if a bouncer tells Gabriella she can't go into a club because she isn't dressed properly. That could get ugly."

"Speaking of people getting upset," I said. "Since Gabriella will be there, we should probably mention it to Gina. Let's also make sure that Danielle knows what's happening. I've already told Gabriella, but you should mention it to Danielle."

"Do you think having everyone together will be a problem?" Sophie asked, sounding concerned. "I don't think Gina knows about Danielle's new position in the Black Death, but she already knows that Gabriella worked for Tough Tony."

"It shouldn't be a problem," I said. "This is strictly social. But let's make sure to tell everyone about it ahead of time anyway. I hate surprises."

The sunset was lovely, and then Tempe gradually became immersed in darkness. The traffic on the street dwindled, and the normally frantic pace of the area surrounding the university seemed to go down a notch.

By eight o'clock, Hannah's Jeep hadn't moved, and Moogy hadn't shown up. I went up and switched out the video camera with a fresh one. I then stopped next to Hannah's door and listened for a few moments, but it was quiet inside.

"This surveillance stuff you do is really boring," Sophie mentioned, for probably the third time as we sat and looked out over the parking lot. "I get that it's better than getting blasted by a fricking shotgun, but still."

“Duh,” I reminded her again. “Why do you think I hate getting assignments that involve nothing more than taking naked pictures of cheating spouses? Ninety-nine percent of it is sitting in parking lots, staring at some building, and the other one percent is arguing with a naked guy or getting shot at.”

“Have you ever thought about going back to school?” Sophie asked, seemingly serious. “That could broaden your job prospects.”

“You think I should spend another four years in school, so I don’t have to take naked pictures of anyone?”

“All I’m sayin’ is that your philosophy degree hasn’t helped you out all that much in the job market. But when I was reading about Monica’s daughter, I found out that an engineering degree can lead to a six-figure salary within three to five years of graduation.”

“I’m not so sure about being an engineer,” I said skeptically. “That sounds like a lot of math.”

“I’m just sayin’,” she said, shrugging her shoulders. “It seemed like you were looking for some career options.”

Moogy arrived a little after nine. His Jaguar pulled into the lot, and he parked next to Hannah’s white Cherokee.

“Did you see where he parked?” Sophie asked as she pointed. “That’s suspicious activity. Take a video of that.”

“I am,” I said as I pulled out my phone. Unfortunately, there wasn’t a lot of light in the parking lot, and I had my doubts about how well the video would turn out.

With Moogy in the apartment, there wasn’t a lot we could do but continue to wait. I knew the video camera in Hannah’s hallway would be good until a little after eleven. I hoped that Moogy would be done by then, and I would only need to climb the stairs to Hannah’s floor one more time.

By nine-thirty, Sophie had taken off. She’d wished me good luck and said she was going to go home and call Milo.

At five minutes to eleven, I trudged up the stairs and switched out the video camera. As I turned to go back down the hallway, the door to Hannah’s apartment opened, and Moogy stepped out.

We briefly made eye contact, and I froze. I was afraid he'd recognized me from the woods surrounding his cabin in Pinetop. Fortunately, after he quickly looked me up and down, lingering on my boobs for a moment, he ignored me, likely thinking I was someone who lived there.

I purposefully went in the opposite direction, and after he entered the elevator to the street, I retrieved the video camera. I'd just set it, so I knew it was working. Unfortunately, I might have blocked the view of Hannah's apartment with my body when Moogy opened the door and stepped out into the hallway.

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Chapter Seven



When I woke up on Thursday, I lay in bed and petted Marlowe until he decided it was time for his breakfast. I then dragged myself out of bed, went into the kitchen, and put on a pot of coffee.

After feeding my starving cat, I thought about organizing my day. The only thing I had to do was document Elliot as he went to the casino and gambled away \$125 in the poker tournament.

If that were the end of it, I'd send Sophie the pictures and videos. She'd make a crisp report, and Lenny would likely keep the entire retainer.

Although I didn't think Elliot was having an affair, I'd follow him as he ran out of chips and left the poker room. I'd then make sure he went to work or did something equally harmless after the tournament, rather than meet with a woman.

When I stepped outside, the door to Grandma's apartment opened, and Grandpa Bob wrestled a couple of suitcases into the hallway. He was dressed in a bright green and yellow aloha shirt and was wearing a white broad-brimmed hat.

"Hi, Bob," I said as I locked up my place.

"Hey, cookie," he said brightly. "How's my favorite private eye today? Nab any crooks lately?"

"I'm doing okay," I said, not wanting to explain what I actually did, for probably the tenth time. "Off to Florida? Do you need any help with the bags?"

"Naah, I'm okay," he said with his male bravado. "I'll stick these in the car. Then, we only have a couple of carry-ons."

“What are you going to do on your vacation?”

“It’s mostly to play a little golf and visit family and friends. Mary’s never been to the panhandle, and I’ll give her the nickel tour. I might also look around the area a little bit.”

“Grandma says you’ve been checking out the real estate there?”

“You bet I have,” he said. “You can still get a lot of house for the money down there. We’ve both been living in apartments for years and never seem to have enough room. If we combined our incomes, I think we could get a pretty nice place.”

Bob walked down to the elevator, and I went into Grandma’s apartment. She was in the kitchen cleaning the counters.

“Hello,” I called out.

“Oh, hello, Dear,” Grandma said. She sounded somewhat distracted. “I don’t think Marlowe’s here at the moment.”

“He’s sleeping off his breakfast back at my place,” I said. “How are you doing? Still a little worried about the trip?”

“To be honest, I am,” she said with a sigh. “Bob’s been on the internet again. He’s been showing me his favorite houses for sale in Pensacola and telling me how reasonable the prices are. I always worry when he starts being logical about a decision.”

“Do you think he’s serious about moving?” I asked. “Like maybe he’ll want to look at houses when you’re down there?”

“I hope not,” she said. “But I’ll go down with an open mind. I’ve never been to that part of Florida before, and I’ve been told it’s quite pretty.”

Bob came back into the apartment and grabbed the two bags that were sitting next to the couch. “Are you ready?” he asked Grandma.

Grandma looked around to make sure she wasn’t forgetting anything. We left the apartment, and Bob locked up. We then took the elevator to the ground floor and went out to the parking lot.

“Have fun down there,” I called out as I got to my Miata. “Don’t get eaten by an alligator.”

Bob merely waved over his shoulder as he loaded the bags into his car, but Grandma’s head shot up, and she gave me the strangest look.

Oops.

I drove down to the office and found Sophie in her cubicle, busily typing up some motions for the court.

“Hey,” I said. “Thanks for keeping me company last night.”

“Oh, no worries,” she said as she sat back and flexed her fingers, stiff from typing too fast. “What happened with the video? Did you get lucky and catch Moogy and Hannah smooching in the hallway outside her apartment? That would help wrap things up in a hurry.”

“Unfortunately, I didn’t get anything more than Moogy going into Hannah’s apartment and then leaving about three hours later. Moogy’s lawyers could easily undermine our theory that he was in there having an affair.”

As I suspected when I’d reviewed the video, my body had blocked much of the view of the hallway as Moogy had left Hannah’s. Fortunately, even with my butt in the way, you could still tell it had been him and which apartment he had come out of.

“Well, that sucks,” Sophie said.

“Since last night was a bust with the Moogy thing. I still need to find out where they’re going to be on Saturday.

“Have you found out anything yet?” she asked.

“According to the secret software report, Moogy owns four properties in The Valley that could be classified as condos. Three of them are deeded as joint property with his wife, and they generate income. One of them is only in Moogy’s name through his business, and as far as I can tell, he gets no income from it.”

“Do you think he uses it as a love nest?” she asked. “We’ve seen that sort of thing before.”

“It’s hard to say. It’s on Scottsdale Road. I wouldn’t think he’d have an expensive property like that sitting vacant all the time, but you never know. Punch the address into your computer. I think we’ve been there before.”

I read off the address, and Sophie typed it into her computer. When the map of Scottsdale popped up, we both leaned forward and looked at the screen. The condo was in a group of high-end units just north of the

Scottsdale Fashion Square.

“Yeah, I thought that address sounded familiar,” Sophie said. “Didn’t we catch that gym owner guy there having sex with his Pilates instructor, Angie something, maybe six months ago?”

“Yup, same place.”

“I wonder what ever happened to Angie,” Sophie mused. “She seemed nice. I think we’d halfway talked her into buying the Pilates studio from the guy, Chet something, after his divorce.”

“Yeah, she was nice,” I agreed. “Although it’s sort of hard to tell for sure when you’re talking with someone who’s naked, sweaty, and turned on. You should look her up sometime. If you do, let me know what you find.”

“You know, as I recall, you had to stash like five or six cameras there to make sure you could get a video. How are you going to do that with this one?”

“Well, the condo’s in Moogy’s name, even though he’s hiding ownership through his company.”

“Are you thinking about asking his wife about putting some video cameras over there?” Sophie asked with a slight gleam in her eye.

“It would certainly help. Let’s clear it with Lenny and then have the wife sign a blanket authorization for us to set up surveillance in all of her residences.”

“You gotta love community property,” Sophie said.

“I remember when I first tried to use cameras there that broadcast a signal, they didn’t work,” I mused, thinking back to when I’d last been in that group of condos. “There was something about the construction of the building that wouldn’t let the signals go through. I’d needed to use stand-alone cameras.”

“Oh, I remember,” Sophie said with an eye roll. “You wanted me to go over with you every day at lunch and change the batteries and memory cards. That’s when we caught Chet and Angie doing the nasty.”

“Yeah, even at the lowest resolution setting on the cameras, they’re only good for about twenty-four hours. I’ll need to break in and stash the

cameras on Saturday afternoon, then break back in on Sunday and retrieve everything.”

“Okay,” she said. “I’ll clear it with Lenny and the client, and you should be good to go on Saturday. I’ll email you a copy of the authorization in case your break-in doesn’t go smoothly, and you need to chat with the police.”



I got to Casino Scottsdale a little after twelve, remembered to use the valet, and made my way to the gaming floor. If Elliot followed his previous movements, he’d go into the *Velvet Tango Room* and chit-chat with the people there until it was time for the tournament to start at one.

I circled the casino a couple of times to make sure I wasn’t missing anything out of the ordinary, then went to the same slot machine I’d played, two days before.

I slipped in a ten-dollar bill and started playing the game. The graphics and quirky sounds drew me in, and I quickly fell into a rhythm of pushing the button and watching the reels spin. Every time there was a match, the cartoon cows in the flying saucers would shoot the reels with their lasers, and the reels would spin again.

Although I would occasionally glance into the bar, I didn’t see Elliot or any of the others from Tuesday. I was almost out of credits when I got a lucky streak and ended up with twenty-five free spins.

I hit the start button, and the familiar police music mixed in with a science fiction soundtrack started playing. When the machine stopped spinning, I had won forty-seven dollars.

Not bad for sitting here doing surveillance.

I realized I hadn’t been paying attention for the last several minutes, and when I looked into the bar, it had grown considerably more crowded. I saw that Elliot had arrived, this time in a red aloha shirt featuring surfers and green palm trees. Monica Marshall, the Woman in Red, was there again, but this time, she was the Woman in Emerald Green.

As with the last time, she and Elliot were standing at the bar. This time, they were both drinking what appeared to be the Moscow Mules in the copper mugs Sophie had told me about.

They were clearly together but not close enough to show affection. I had to wonder if he was a former employee of hers or if there was something deeper going on between them.

To help with being sneaky, I'd worn a blouse with a pocket over my left breast. By starting the video and slipping the phone into the pocket, the lens could poke out and record the video without me suspiciously holding the phone.

I set the camera to maximum zoom and discreetly took a video of Elliot and Monica for almost a minute. But to be honest, the video didn't show anything incriminating.

The other four men were there again, but this time, they were chatting in two separate groups. Uncle Mike was talking with the Caveman while the Professor was chatting with Rock Bottom.

As I was glancing at the group between spins on my slot machine, a random guy going through the bar accidentally bumped into the Caveman, causing him to spill part of his drink. The bodybuilder flashed into anger and loudly berated the man for being a careless jerk. The Caveman then got into his face, and I was waiting for him to throw a punch.

Fortunately, Uncle Mike stepped in and quickly intervened. After speaking a few low sentences to the angry bodybuilder, the situation gradually calmed down.

The clumsy man apologized again and quickly left the bar. The Caveman hadn't been wholly appeased, but the issue seemed to be smoothed over for the time being.

Uncle Mike's intervention had been a good thing. I noted the bartender had already picked up a phone, and we were about thirty seconds away from having half a dozen security officers swarm the lounge to escort the Caveman out.

Fifteen minutes before one, about half of the bar emptied out, and the group began to stroll toward the poker room. I waited until the crowd passed me by, then got my cash receipt from the game and followed.

I grabbed an empty table at the snack bar that gave me the clearest view of Elliot and Monica, who were again seated next to each other. As play started, I discreetly took a video of the entire table, including the Professor, Uncle Mike, Rock Bottom, and the Caveman.

Elliot again left the table to go out the side door about half an hour into play, but today, it was the Professor who left through the same door during the first break and then a half hour later.

Rock Bottom ran out of chips and was forced to drop out of the tournament, right after the first break, followed closely by the Caveman. Elliot seemed to be having some good luck and, along with his usual aggressive play, soon became the chip leader at the table.

Monica Marshall, the Professor, and Uncle Mike were forced to drop out as play continued. A little before the four o'clock break, Elliot had a great hand and beat the last holdout, qualifying him for the final table.

The rest of the group, except for Monica, had already left the room. She'd strolled to the snack bar, bought a bottle of water, and sat at a table not far from mine.

When Elliot came over to chat with her, I was able to hear the conversation. I was disappointed when the talk didn't turn to sex. I had halfway expected them to arrange to go up to a room after the tournament.

Instead, Monica merely wished him good luck. Elliot thanked her and said he'd see her tomorrow. As she stood to go, there was again no kiss or even a hug of friendship.

Tomorrow? Crap. It looks like I'll need to watch over Elliot one more time.

Play at the final table began, and several people who had previously dropped out gathered around to watch the action. I was about to get up and drift over with the rest of the crowd when I felt someone behind me. I turned, and it was Monica Marshall.

"Who are you, and why are you following Elliot?" she asked. From her tone, she didn't seem upset, merely curious.

"I don't know who you are," I said. "But I'm just here to watch the tournament."

"No," she said as she shook her head slowly. "You were here on

Tuesday and were watching Elliot and me, starting back in the *Velvet Tango Room*. I've been keeping track of you. Your eyes haven't left Elliot all day."

"I couldn't care less about you or your boyfriend," I said, hoping to stir a reaction from her.

"You don't seem to be a cop," she continued, ignoring my taunt. "If you were, there'd be at least two or three people running surveillance on him. Plus, if you were a cop, you'd be a lot better at it. You have all the subtlety of a kick to the face."

I wasn't sure what she wanted, so I waited her out.

"You aren't an old girlfriend or even a new mistress," she considered as she studied my face. "You didn't seem all that jealous when I talked with him Tuesday in the bar. No, if I had to guess, I'd say that someone hired you to follow him around and report back. I'd presume his wife. She's probably worried that he's out having sex with someone other than her. Am I right?"

"Screw off," I said, trying my best to ignore her.

"A word of advice," she said, sounding sincere as she bent over and got into my face. "Go ahead and watch him play at the final table. Trust me, he won't be there for long. After that, go home and don't come back. We'll be here again next Tuesday, but I don't expect to see you again."

"I'm just here to watch the poker," I said, still trying to sound as if I didn't give a damn about her gibes.

"Well," she sighed. "You do what you have to do. But you have no idea what you're messing with. You've been warned. If you continue to spy on us, I won't take responsibility for what happens to you."

"Oh, and what's going to happen to me?" I asked. But Monica Marshall had already turned and walked away.

Damn.

I followed her with my eyes as she walked through the exit doors that led out to the gaming floor. Deciding my best bet was to stay with Elliot, I got up and got in with the rest of the crowd around the final table.

A large screen on the wall listed the day's prize amounts. They started with \$1100 for ninth place, and it rose with each finishing position. The

winner of the final table would receive a cash prize of \$3500.

It's not bad for four hours of playing poker.

I watched with interest as play began. As before, Elliot's strategy was to aggressively bet whenever he felt he had a strong hand. It was hard to be sure, but I don't think he ever tried to bluff.

This had worked well with the people at the first table, but with this group of more experienced players, he quickly fell behind in the chip count. In less than half an hour, he had gone all in and was beaten by a player with a stronger hand.

Elliot was the third player to go out and won the tidy sum of \$1500. As he left, I followed him out to the gaming floor.

His first stop was to the cashier's cage to collect his winnings. I hung back, then followed him as he left the casino.

He went directly to his van, which was again parked in the side lot with several other maintenance vehicles. Two minutes later, he came out wearing his work shirt and tool belt.

Disappointed that he wasn't going to meet with a woman, I followed him back into the casino. He went down one of the side hallways and used a badge to go through a white door with a sign on it that read: *Authorized Personnel Only*.

Well, crap.

Knowing that Elliot would likely be working for a couple of hours, I went back to the poker room. Play at the final table was still going on, and I found the schedule for the next day. There was a higher-stakes tournament starting at seven in the evening.

The buy-in for this tournament was three hundred dollars, but the guaranteed minimum winnings if you made the final table was \$3000.

I was disappointed that it looked like I'd spend my Friday night watching Elliot and Monica at the casino rather than going out with the girls for Debbie's birthday. But honestly, not having a social life was only one more horrible thing about my job.

It also looked like I'd need to be a little sneakier about my surveillance. Rather than sit somewhere close where I had a good view of Elliot and

Monica, I'd need to position myself farther out.

I'd also need to consider a disguise. I hated going through the hair and makeup process required to change my look, but in this case, I didn't think I'd have a choice. If Monica thought she was being watched, she likely wouldn't even consider going up to a room with Elliot.

I returned to the gaming floor and drifted over to a slot machine that would let me keep an eye on the doorway Elliot had gone through. I made sure to pick a location that also had a view of the nearest hallway that would lead directly back outside to his van.

This new machine featured a cartoon penny that would smile and occasionally burst into flames, showering me with money whenever I had a good spin. The music was upbeat, and the action was fun.

After losing twenty dollars to the smiling penny, I switched to a machine that had a Greek Olympian theme. Zeus, Apollo, and Aphrodite would appear and give me bonus spins whenever I had a good match on the reels.

Two and a half hours later, I spotted Elliot strolling down the hallway toward the exit. As with the time before, his clothing was wrinkled and dirty, as if he had been crawling around in some seldom visited areas of the casino basement.

Luck hadn't been on my side at the Olympian slot machine, either. Even though I'd gambled as slowly as I thought safe to not draw attention to myself, I'd still managed to burn through another fifty dollars.

This put me at an overall loss for the day, but I didn't think I could expense it to Lenny. I was still up about thirty dollars over the course of the week.

I followed Elliot out to the parking lot and watched him get into his van. As with the last time, he drove straight home.

Although I was thrilled that it didn't look like I'd need to take naked pictures of anyone for this assignment, I was still somewhat disappointed. Spending several days following someone around Scottsdale because they'd fibbed to their wife about playing cards seemed like a complete waste of everyone's time.

Elliot had told Monica Marshall that he'd see her tomorrow. I knew

there wasn't a poker tournament scheduled, at least until seven in the evening, so it gave me a final hope that they'd meet sometime in the afternoon for sex.

If nothing came of it, I'd tell Lenny that this was as good as it got and wrap up the investigation. The client would be disappointed, but I hated to have Lenny bill her for endless days of me following her husband to the casino.

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Chapter Eight



I woke up early and got ready to follow Elliot for what I hoped was the last time. Since I knew there was the possibility of being gone all day, I grabbed a suitably sexy outfit for going out to the club after Debbie's birthday dinner.

I arrived at Elliot's neighborhood a little after six and was pleased to find his van still in the driveway. I parked down the street and waited for him to take off.

As with the previous time, Elliot left for work a little after six thirty and ended up at the same construction site at Scottsdale Road and McDowell. I parked at the same medical building and settled down to wait for him to take off to meet with Monica Marshall.

I sat in the car and mindlessly flipped through my phone while I kept an eye on the building. A few minutes after ten, I got a call from Max.

"Good morning," he said in his deep, sexy voice. "What are you doing today? Still running surveillance on your electrician?"

"Yeah, although so far, all he's done this week is play poker."

"I suppose there are worse things," he chuckled. "A husband sneaking out of the house to gamble doesn't sound all that bad. Men have been doing that to their wives since forever."

"Yes, but both the client and Lenny expect me to find something substantial. If all I can come up with is that he sneaks out to play cards, I don't think anyone's going to be happy."

"Did you find out where Moogy's going to be with his mistress tomorrow night?" he asked.

“We think so,” I said. “He has several properties scattered around The Valley. All of them seem to generate an income except for one. It’s in a nice condo complex just north of the Scottsdale Fashion Square.”

“You think he might be keeping that one open for his private use?”

“That’s what we’re hoping. We’re getting authorization from the wife so I can stash some spy cameras there tomorrow afternoon.”

“Hopefully, that gets you what you need,” Max said. “What are you doing tonight?”

“There’s an outside chance I’ll need to follow Elliot as he goes to another poker tournament at Casino Scottsdale. But if nothing happens tonight, I’m likely done with the assignment. If he was going to have an affair, he would have had one by now.”

“And if you don’t go to the casino?” Max asked.

“It’s also Debbie’s birthday this weekend. The girls are all getting together to celebrate.”

“That sounds like more fun than sitting in a casino,” he said with a chuckle. “How late do you think you’ll be out?”

“If I go to the casino, I’ll likely be done by ten or eleven.”

“And if not?”

“We’ll start Debbie’s dinner as soon as everyone gets off work. Sophie’s in charge of arranging that, but hopefully, it’s somewhere close enough to walk to from the office.”

“What’s the plan for after dinner? One of the clubs in Old Town?”

“Probably,” I laughed. “Knowing Sophie, she’ll want to start at Nexxus.”

“Sounds like a late night,” he said.

“Well, everybody else may want to stay out until the wee hours, but I’ll probably be done fairly early, again around ten or eleven. Did you have something in mind for afterward?”

“Well, I should get home a little after ten,” he said in a slightly flirty tone. “If you’re done relatively early, why don’t you come over? I’d love to see you. We could sit on the couch and watch a movie or share a bottle of

wine and cuddle until you fall asleep.”

I had a lovely vision of being in Max’s protective arms as we snuggled in his big, soft bed. Thinking about spending the night curled up as the little spoon while my boyfriend pressed his body against me sent tingles of excitement and anticipation through me.

“Both sound like great ideas,” I cooed out. “I’ll let you know when I’m heading over.”

Elliot took off a little after noon, and I followed. Once again, he went through the drive-through at Taco Bell.

He sat in the restaurant parking lot, ate his lunch, and then took off towards Scottsdale Road. I had visions of him ending up with Monica at a hotel near downtown. But instead of getting a room or meeting up with a woman, he returned to the job site.

Well, damn.

Once Elliot went back into the building under construction, I parked in my usual spot. I then sat in my car, observed the building, and thought about what to do next.

I wondered if Monica could possibly meet with Elliot here at the job site. If she was a general contractor, maybe she could show up and take him to an office under construction for a quicky. But even though I kept an eye out for her white Lexus, it never showed up.

I glanced at the clock, and it was already past one. If Elliot hadn’t taken off by three or three thirty, they might meet after work at five or, worse, at the poker tournament that started at seven.

By three-thirty, I’d become frustrated by the lack of clarity. I needed to know what Elliot was going to be doing for the rest of the day.

If he was simply heading to a hotel with Monica, I could follow him and take pictures. But if he was heading back to the casino for the tournament tonight, I’d need to stop at the office first and get ready in my disguise.

I kept a makeup kit in my desk, and Gina had a nice curly blonde wig I could slip into. I knew that with a little effort, I could completely change my look.

The only downside was that it would take me at least half an hour to get ready. That was a lot of time, and I knew I might lose track of Elliot.

I'd brought along an outfit I could use as either part of my disguise or for going out with the girls. The only difference would be the shoes. The sneaky outfit called for heels.

On a hunch, I called Adriana Kirk. She answered after a few rings, and I asked her how things had been going over the past few days.

"It's been about the same," she said, sounding disheartened. "Elliot's been working the entire week, pretty much seven to five. I think he's still mostly at the construction site on McDowell. But I have no idea if he was working Tuesday and Thursday afternoon or if he was out with someone. Have you found out anything yet?"

"I'm at the building site now, and he's been working here all day," I said, somewhat evasively. "So far, I haven't seen any evidence of an affair, but I'll put everything together for the report. Do you two have any plans for the weekend?"

"Only tonight," she said with a half-laugh. "We're going to a play at the Herberger Theatre, downtown. It starts at seven thirty, so I expect that Elliot will be back home by five thirty or so."

"Are you doing anything afterward? Going out with friends or to a bar?"

"No, just the play. We usually come straight home. Um, is this part of the investigation?"

"I'm making a profile of what your husband's been up to," I said, again being somewhat evasive. "I want to be complete."

After telling Adriana that we'd talk again early next week, I disconnected.

By four o'clock, I'd been with Elliot the entire day. From what Adriana had said, it didn't seem like he would meet up with Monica after work.

Maybe I'd misheard when I'd listened to their conversation the day before, although I hoped not. I disliked few things more than an investigation that dragged on for weeks without anything of note happening.

Clients tended to get cranky when Lenny billed them ten or fifteen thousand dollars only to get a report that claimed nothing suspicious had happened. I'd usually be accused of being incompetent and missing the specific activities the client had been looking for.

At five o'clock, Elliot walked out of the construction area and climbed into his van. Hoping he'd head home, rather than meet up with a girlfriend, I followed him as he took off.

Fortunately, my fears were groundless. Elliot drove directly to his neighborhood, and I watched as his van pulled into his driveway.

This still left the mystery of the supposed rendezvous with Monica. But it did free up my Friday night to go out with the girls and have Debbie's birthday dinner.



I made it to the office a little after five-thirty. Since the black Range Rover wasn't in the parking lot, I knew Gina was still out on her assignments. Fortunately, it looked like Lenny was already gone for the night.

Sophie was in her cubicle, flipping through videos on her phone with a zoned-out expression. She'd already changed into a hot-looking, low-cut eggplant-purple dress. It ended mid-thigh and nicely showed off her black strappy sandals.

Since we had a few minutes before we had to leave, I gave her the memory cards from the videos I'd taken at Hannah's apartment on Wednesday night. Unfortunately, they showed nothing more incriminating than Moogy going into an apartment and then leaving approximately three hours later.

Sure, his actions were completely suspicious, but nothing that would hold up in court as conclusive proof of an affair. I also used the time to transfer the decent photos and videos I'd taken on my phone over the last week to Sophie. I knew she would store a copy of everything on the office server.

The pictures from my phone started with half a dozen blurry videos. I'd taken these in Pinetop as I jumped to try to get Moogy and Hannah through the window of the cabin. I sent the first two of these to Sophie.

Since they didn't show anything, I'd thought about simply deleting them. But we needed proof for the client's billing that I had driven up to the mountains and at least attempted to get incriminating evidence.

Then, I sent about forty pictures and videos of Elliot and Monica Marshall at the casino, along with his four shady associates. Finally, I transferred about twenty shots of Elliot's van as it sat in front of the construction site, along with Moogy's car as it sat in the parking lot of Hannah's apartment house next to her Jeep.

"Did you get approval from Mrs. LaFontaine for me to place cameras in Moogy's condo?" I asked.

"Oh, sure," Sophie said. "She was happy to do it, and Lenny got to bill for an hour of my time to write it up and another half hour for him to review it. You're good to go. I'll email you a copy of the authorization along with the property deed."

"Thanks for doing that," I said. "You always make my job a lot easier."

"It's no problem," she said as she smiled at me. "I only hope you can get some decent dirty pictures, and we can end this one quickly."



Our girl's night out started at Kyoto Scottsdale, a fun hibachi steakhouse a couple of blocks north of the office on Stetson Drive. It's billed as the oldest Japanese restaurant in Arizona, and we've always loved going there.

Sophie, Debbie, and I walked over from the office and arrived at a quarter after six. Gina's Range Rover pulled into the parking lot a few minutes later. Sophie had made reservations for six thirty, so we gathered in the lounge and waited for everyone to arrive.

Before we'd left the office, Debbie and I had changed into outfits that were good enough for us to get into the clubs. I'd kept it simple with my

sparkly black skirt and a low-cut cowl-neck red silky top. Sophie had called this my “bad luck outfit,” but I ignored her.

When Gabriella walked in, she barely had a limp. Seeing her in a stylish evening outfit with a black skirt and a scoop-neck neon-pink top seemed a little out of place, but I had to admit she looked good. It was better than the skin-tight black leather jumpsuit she usually wore while she was working.

She also wore makeup, gold loop earrings, a gold necklace, and a couple of sparkly rings. Her long hair was down and even had a slight bit of curl to it. She’d transformed herself into a beautiful, stylish woman, pretty much indistinguishable from any of the women you could see hanging out at the nightclubs.

I felt a weird surge of happiness and, without thinking about it, hurried over and gave her a long hug. To my surprise, she hugged me back with what seemed to be genuine affection.

I hadn’t seen her since the night of her return from killing Viktor Glazkov. Fortunately, she seemed to be on her way to a full recovery.

After her ordeal in Crimea, her leg had been heavily wrapped from being shot, and her arm had been in a sling. She’d also had a large purple bruise on the side of her face, along with a nasty-looking black eye.

A good part of her long dark hair had been missing on the right side. Gabriella had mentioned that her enemies had tried to “blow her up,” and the frayed ends suggested it might have been burned away.

She’d decided not to fix her hair and instead boldly displayed the missing chunk. Fortunately, after growing it out for a couple of months, it looked more like a fashion statement than a souvenir of battle.

“I’ve missed you,” I said as we looked at each other, still in a loose embrace. “It looks like you’re doing better.”

“It is good to see you as well,” Gabriella said, flashing her beautiful smile. “And yes, I have recovered. As you know, I have been shot many times before, and I know steps I must take to regain full functionality.”

When I introduced her to Debbie, my co-worker’s eyes grew big. I often forget Gabriella’s effect on people. The former assassin’s intensity could often be intimidating.

Roberto, Danielle's boyfriend and bodyguard, entered the restaurant and spent a few moments reviewing the security situation. He then went back outside, and two familiar, grim-looking men with full black mustaches, wearing loose sports coats, entered and took a seat near the entrance.

Danielle came in next, followed by Roberto, who discreetly trailed her by several paces. He then faded into the background while she joined our group.

All this had happened away from where we'd been standing, and I hoped Gina hadn't picked up on it. It's not like she was a cop anymore, nor would she report any suspicions she had. Still, I hated to make her feel uncomfortable by placing her in the morally dubious position of hanging out with active criminals.

As Danielle arrived, we all began to hug and laugh at seeing her again. When Gabriella greeted Danielle, she shook her hand formally and bowed in respect.

It took me a second to realize that Gabriella was acknowledging Danielle as the head of a rival criminal organization. One that her boss, Johnny Scarpazzi, had recently entered into a partnership with.

Maybe we didn't think out this evening as well as we should have.

"Why, Laura," Debbie exclaimed after she'd been introduced to Danielle, looking back and forth between us. "You two look a lot alike. It's remarkable. If I didn't know better, I'd swear you were related."

"I know," Danielle said with a slight laugh. "It's a little weird. My hair's somewhat darker, but I bet we could pass for sisters."

After everyone had arrived and been introduced, we were seated around a gleaming stainless-steel teppanyaki table. Within two or three minutes, a server came to the table, introduced herself as Yuuka, and took our drink orders.

We each ordered a *tokkuri* of hot saki, and when the ceramic carafes came out, Sophie insisted that everyone pour themselves a full shot. When everyone was ready, she held up her glass.

"*Banzai!*" she yelled as she tossed it back. Debbie and I each took a sip while Danielle, Gabriella, and Gina tapped their glasses on the table a

couple of times, then tossed their saki shots back as well.

It's going to be one of those kinds of nights.

It was then that I noticed Gabriella didn't have her big Ferrucci spy bag with her. This black leather bag was where she kept a small arsenal of weapons, including an Uzi submachine gun, a military fighting knife, and sometimes a hand grenade or two.

She was dressed in layers, and I didn't doubt she was heavily armed, but it was still a little unsettling. It was almost like seeing her naked.

I glanced around and wasn't surprised to see Roberto sitting at the bar, sipping a soda water. The two surly-looking Black Death goons were still at the table near the entrance, and both men had soft drinks in front of them.

I occasionally glanced at Gina to see if she'd noticed that Danielle had a security detail or that Roberto was at the bar. But if she had, she kept it to herself.

Debbie seemed destined to make the evening a challenge when she immediately asked Danielle what she did for a living.

"Oh, I work for a trucking company here in Scottsdale," Danielle said with a touch of pride. "I've recently been promoted to district manager."

"That must be exciting," Debbie said. "You normally don't see many women in that kind of role."

"That's true," Danielle admitted. "But I enjoy it. I came up from our company headquarters in Mexico, and I do love Scottsdale."

"Do you think you'll be staying here?" Debbie asked. "At least for a while?"

"I think so," Danielle said with a sweet smile, her eyes briefly flicking to Roberto. "I recently moved into a house on the north side of town."

"And what do *you* do," Debbie asked, now turning to Gabriella.

"I work at Scottsdale Tropical Paradise," she said in her thick Eastern European accent. "I mostly do security work, but I seem to have many duties."

At this, Danielle and Gabriella glanced at each other. They smiled with affection and had a brief, unspoken conversation.

“I could see you doing security,” Debbie said, looking her up and down. “If you don’t mind me asking, you have such an unusual accent. Where do you come from?”

At this, I perked up. I noticed Sophie did the same. I’d always wanted to know more about Gabriella’s background, but it somehow seemed a little rude to pry.

“I am from small village on Volga River, about sixty kilometers north of Volgograd. Americans know city under old Soviet name of Stalingrad. I live there until I went into army as teenager. After army, I move to Scottsdale. That was fourteen years ago.”

My eyes then flicked to Gina. She was watching the conversations around the table with interest.

Okay, so we really didn’t think this through very well.

The ingredients for our dinners came out on a stainless-steel cart, and a chef in a white hat and coat began to prep the hibachi grill. We’d gotten a wide array of food, mostly variations and combinations of teriyaki steak, chicken, scallops, and shrimp.

As much as I enjoyed the food at Kyoto, my favorite part of the dinner was the show. I always sat mesmerized as I watched the chef juggle his knives, chop the vegetables, and set the grilling food ablaze.

When he finished cooking dinner for everyone at the table, we gave him a round of applause and then chowed down. We’d told Yuuka that we were celebrating Debbie’s birthday, and she brought over a piece of cheesecake with strawberry drizzle and a lit candle. Several servers then gathered around the table, clapped in unison, and sang a Japanese version of “Happy Birthday” to Debbie.

Yuuka was efficient and made sure no one ran out of saki. As a result, I was feeling warm all over by the time we left to walk to Nexxus, a high-end nightclub on Indian Plaza, just east of Scottsdale Road.

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Chapter Nine



The club was still in the process of opening for the night, so the entrance line was short, and we were able to get in relatively quickly. Even though it was still early, the tables rapidly filled up with nicely dressed women and men.

We walked over to the club's quieter lounge side and sat on one of the couches. I enjoyed being at Nexxus before things got busy for the night. Even the music seemed to be played at a softer volume than later in the evening, giving the lounge the vibe of a fun cocktail party full of beautiful and interesting people.

As our server, Tiffany, brought over our first round of drinks, Gabriella excused herself and headed toward the bathrooms. The two big goons had gotten a seat at a table near the front entrance, and their eyes closely followed her movements.

I guess everyone in the Black Death knows who Gabriella is.

As she was returning to the couch, she stopped by and chatted with Roberto, who had made himself comfortable at the bar. From the way she pointed out the entrances to the room, I could guess that she was discussing the security situation at the club.

Sophie was seated next to Danielle, and whenever a cute guy walked by, Sophie would make some sort of comment to her in rapid-fire Spanish.

This would usually cause Danielle to giggle and return the comment in the same quick Spanish. I'd taken a couple of years of the language in high school, but I could never catch more than one or two words in any of their conversations.

We'd been there roughly half an hour, talking and laughing, when

Tiffany stopped by with a tray of tequila shots, a bowl of lime wedges, and a smaller bowl filled with coarse pink sea salt. We all let out a collective groan, and Debbie moaned, “*Oh, good Lord,*” as our server started placing them on the coffee table in front of our couch.

This is definitely going to be one of those nights.

“This is Tequila San Matias,” Danielle said as the salt and limes were passed around. “It’s produced in a village near where I grew up in Jalisco, that’s in Mexico, about halfway down on the west coast. It’s one of my favorites, and I hope you enjoy it.”

We all got ready by licking our hands between our thumbs and wrists, sprinkling on some salt so it stuck, and grabbing a shot glass.

“Happy Birthday to my new friend, Debbie!” Danielle yelled out as she tossed back the tequila.

“Happy Birthday!” We all called out as we raised our glasses.

Debbie sat for a moment as she eyed the golden liquid suspiciously. She then shrugged, licked the salt off her hand, tossed the shot back, then bit and sucked on the lime.

Her eyes got big as the liquor hit her throat, and her mouth opened wide like a fish that had been tossed on the riverbank.

“Mary and Joseph,” she gasped out as she used her hand to fan her face. “I haven’t done that in years.”

We all started laughing, and Danielle asked Debbie if she was alright.

“Oh, heavens, yes,” she beamed. “Let me buy the next round.”

Danielle caught Tiffany’s attention and made a circling motion over the table to indicate another round of shots. When the tequila arrived, everyone laughed as we again went through the ritual of salting our hands, tossing the shot, and sucking the lime.

As much as I enjoyed drinking with the ladies, I knew it should probably be my last one for the night. Max had said he’d get home a little after ten, and I didn’t want to make him wait too long before he could have me for the night.

“Danielle,” Gina started in a conversational tone. “You do know that your boyfriend is here, and he followed us from Kyoto, along with two

other guys, right?”

Uh oh.

Sophie and Gabriella had also heard the exchange, and their heads came up, their eyes flicking between Danielle and Gina. Danielle’s cheeks turned pink, and I could tell she was trying to come up with some sort of reasonable explanation.

“Oh, I know,” she eventually said. “Roberto worries about me. I think it’s sweet, and I don’t mind at all. I’ve given him permission to watch over me, and it honestly makes me feel safer when I go out.”

“Your boyfriend follows you around the bars and restaurants while you’re having a girl’s night out?” Debbie asked, a little skeptically. “If I were you, I’d either dump him as a creepy stalker or marry him.”

“At the moment, I think I’m leaning more towards marrying him,” Danielle said with a slightly drunken giggle.

This was news to us, and Sophie and I looked at each other.

“Is there anything you want to tell us?” I asked, somewhat confused, looking down at Danielle’s bare left ring finger.

“Oh, it’s nothing official or anything,” Danielle said with a dismissive wave of her hand. “It’s only wishful thinking on my part, at least so far. But I’m hopeful.”

By ten o’clock, the club had started to fill up, and the sound levels had begun to rise. We’d been drinking for almost four hours, and I’d had enough for the night. Even though my last two rounds had only been ginger ale, I was feeling warm and very mellow.

I told everyone that I was going to take off. I looked over at Debbie. She nodded that she was ready to go as well.

Gina, Danielle, and Sophie said they were going to stay. My best friend had heard from the Cougars, and several of them would be coming to Nexxus soon to start their weekend prowl. After some convincing, they talked Gabriella into staying for at least a little while longer.

As we were trying to catch Tiffany’s eye so she could bring over the most recent total, a couple of exceptionally large and very drunk guys came up to our couch. Each of them was holding a brightly colored cocktail with

fruit on the rim and a colorful plastic straw.

They seemed about the right age for the business guys who sometimes came to the club, maybe twenty-six or twenty-seven. But from the way they dressed and acted, neither one had money, or class for that matter.

The bigger of the two had long, dark blond hair pulled back in a ponytail and a scruffy five-day beard. The slightly smaller one had short dark hair, a mustache, and a goatee.

“Hey,” the bigger one said to Sophie. “Come dance with us. The music’s starting in the other room, and I need someone hot to be with me on the dance floor. You’re pretty enough, and you look like the type who’ll put out after a few drinks.”

“Yeah,” the smaller of the two chimed in, looking at Danielle’s chest as he danced in place to the lounge’s background music, trying to look cool. “Come into the main room, and let’s party. I’ll buy you a couple of drinks, and then we can all go over to my apartment. It’s not too far from here.”

“Oh, no thanks,” Sophie said, giving the man a sweet smile. She was being remarkably polite, considering the two guys were complete jerks.

“Not tonight for me either, but thank you for asking,” Danielle said, showing similar restraint.

“No,” the bigger one said to Sophie, obviously not expecting the rejection. “You’re going to dance with me. I didn’t come all the way over here to be turned down by some skinny skank.”

Uh oh.

“When Zane the Man asks a woman to dance, she’d better dance,” the smaller one said while staring at Danielle. He then tried to make his voice low and menacing. “Otherwise, you’re going to see me get very angry. You don’t want that.”

“I don’t think so,” Sophie said to the bigger one. “I didn’t come here tonight to dance with some crusty-assed bedwetting mama’s boy. Take my advice, junior, and walk away.”

“You’d better leave, Zane the Man,” Danielle said with a giggle, waving him away with a backward flick of her hand. “You’re both drunk, and you don’t know what you’re doing. But it’s okay. I’m more than willing to let it slide. I’d hate to see your face get any more messed up than it

already is.”

As I followed the building confrontation, I was also looking between Gina and Gabriella. They seemed to be in the middle of a silent exchange.

Gina shook her head in resignation and started to get up. “I’ll take care of it,” she muttered with the voice of a veteran of the Scottsdale Police Department.

“You’ll take care of what?” the smaller one asked as he looked at Gina, fire building in his eyes. “You’ll take care of... us? Do you seriously think you can take on both Big John McAfee and Zane the Man? You may be a tasty little treat, princess, but I don’t think so.”

“Yeah,” the bigger one said, now getting angry. “Sit your pretty ass down before we’re forced to put you back in your place. But don’t worry, sweet cheeks. You aren’t bad-looking for an older broad. Stick around. After we’re finished with these two, we might come back and let you have a turn.”

Gabriella reached out and lightly touched her fingers against Gina’s arm. “I know you would enjoy taking out both boys,” she said. “But would you mind if I have big one?”

Gabriella’s cheeks were glowing pink in lusty anticipation, and her breathing had quickened to the point that she was almost panting. I’d seen the look several times before. She was getting turned on by the thought that she was about to fight a man.

Gina glanced over at me, a slightly puzzled look on her face. I raised my eyebrows and nodded my head, indicating Gabriella could handle it.

“Alright,” Gina said with a shrug. “The bigger one’s all yours.”

The two Black Death goons at the table had stood and were staring daggers at the boys. Roberto had also stood and had taken a few steps toward Danielle, but glares from both Gina and Gabriella made him pause.

Danielle could sense what was about to happen and waved all three of her men to sit down. They seemed conflicted about not rushing over to protect their leader, but they did as instructed.

“It’s about time you two bitches were taught a lesson,” Zane the Man growled as he slammed his drink on our coffee table.

While Roberto and the goons looked on uneasily, Zane lunged forward, two hands extended, apparently wanting to grab Danielle by the throat. Gina casually grabbed one of his hands and spun around in a deceptively smooth motion.

Zane quickly found himself face-down on our coffee table, his arm locked behind his back, unable to move. He tried to struggle, but Gina had two of his fingers bent back to the point where I was expecting to hear tendons start to snap at any moment.

Rather than simply admit defeat and leave, Zane the Man made one more lunge to try to escape Gina's grasp and attack Danielle. Even as he called Gina a "nasty bloodsucking bitch", we heard the distinctive popping sounds of the fingers dislocating.

Ouch! That had to hurt.

Zane the Man let out a high-pitched squeal of pain. Gina released the arm, and he fell backward to the floor. He then began to sob loudly, cupping his wounded hand to his chest, still calling Gina a "big ugly bitch."

Upon seeing this, Big John threw his drink on the floor, let out a roar of anger, and lunged toward Gina. But by this point, Gabriella had already stood to face the man.

Her breathing had quickened, and her cheeks had flushed red in anticipation. As her eyes opened wide and her lips tightened into a tight circle of pleasure, she viciously kicked Big John in the guts.

The big man bent over at the waist as he let out a loud "Ooof."

Even as her body began to spasm with pleasure, Gabriella grabbed him by his long hair and kneed him hard in the face.

Damn.

There was a crunching sound as the man's nose was flattened, and he tumbled backward. Letting out a wet-sounding, gurgled moan, Big John McAfee slowly rolled to his side as he lay on the floor and began to pant and whimper in agony.

There was a collective groan from all of us on the couch. As we watched the blood start to flow from his smashed face, we grabbed our napkins and tossed them at the moaning man on the floor. A small pile of them fluttered down on his face.

Some of the other people at the surrounding tables must have seen the drama play out as well. We heard laughter, gasps of concern, whoops of joy, and even some scattered applause.

The two Black Death goons were already halfway to our couch when Danielle gave them the go-ahead to approach. With Roberto standing in front of our group, in case somebody else tried to start something, the goons effortlessly gathered up the sobbing men and delivered them to the club bouncers at the front door.

Gabriella collapsed onto the couch. Her face was still flushed and sweaty, with several strands of her long dark hair stuck to it.

She smiled broadly as her body shook and spasmed with aftershocks of pleasure. Gina and Danielle gave her a thumbs-up while the rest of us applauded her skill.

“Oh, that was very good,” Gabriella moaned out to Gina. “Thank you for letting me have him. I like this club. I hope more men will come over to bother us again soon.”

“Thank you, everybody,” Debbie said as her eyes sparkled with emotion. “This is the best birthday party I’ve had in years.”

When Tiffany came by with the bill to close out, so Debbie and I could leave, everybody reached for their bags to make good on the first part of the night. Instead, Danielle waved us away. “It’s my treat tonight,” she said. “I can’t remember when I’ve had this much fun. Thank you all for inviting me.”

“Danielle, no,” Gina started as she looked down at the bill. “We can’t let you pay for this. So far, we’ve racked up almost four hundred dollars in here, and that’s not counting the tip.”

Sophie and I looked at each other. Neither of us knew quite how to respond. Gina still didn’t know that Danielle had assumed leadership of the Black Death drug cartel, and that money was no longer an issue for her.

We’d discussed this before we’d gone out, and both thought it was probably best to keep it that way, at least until Danielle herself decided to spill the beans.

“It’s okay,” Danielle said with a sweet smile. “Like I told you, I recently got a big raise at work. It would make me happy to do this.”

I texted Max to let him know I was about to take an Uber to his house. He responded that he'd be waiting. Debbie and I ordered our cars and went outside the club to wait.



The Uber dropped me off in the circular driveway in front of Max's house. I thanked the driver, a middle-aged woman named Suzanne, and slid out of the car.

The front door opened as I walked up, and I was thrilled to see my boyfriend. He was looking me up and down with the most beautiful smile.

When I walked into the house, I felt an overwhelming desire to drag him into the bedroom. Instead, I first wrapped my arms around my boyfriend's neck, reached my lips up to his, and kissed him hard.

"Oh, I've missed you," I said when we finished the kiss. As I heard myself talking, I got the feeling I was slurring my words a bit.

I then wrapped my arms around his waist and hugged him tightly. As he held me firmly against his chest, I felt overwhelmed with love and protection.

"I was going to offer you some wine, but it looks like you've already had a few," Max gently teased. "Perhaps I shouldn't take advantage of you tonight."

"Nope. You're not getting out of this, mister," I shook my head as I poked my finger against his chest. "I've been waiting for this all week. Now is the *perfect* time for you to take advantage of me."

"How much did you have to drink?" he asked, a curious smile on his beautiful face.

"Never mind how much I've had," I told him. "You're my boyfriend, and you have responsibilities when it comes to my needs. So, gird your loins, drag me into the bedroom, and do your manly duty."

"Yes, ma'am," Max said with a grin. "I'm always willing to do my duty."

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Chapter Ten



When the phone began to ring, I was sound asleep in the dark with Max. We were curled up together on his California king, with me being the little spoon and his arm draped over my waist.

I felt Max roll over and heard him mutter, “Who’d be calling at three in the morning?”

He picked up his phone from the nightstand and checked the readout. Max quickly became alert and hopped out of bed.

“Yes,” he said as he answered, all trace of sleep gone from his voice.

The person on the other end of the phone, Carson, perhaps, gave a long explanation about some problem that had come up. As he listened, Max paced in front of his big picture window.

“And no one saw anything?” he asked in a flat tone.

He then stood at the window while he received the information. When the caller had finished describing the issue, Max blew out a long sigh and paused for a moment.

“Alright,” Max said, using a tone of command he must have developed in the military. “If you haven’t done so already, call the general manager, Albert Russell, and the head of security, Rick Dixon. Have them review the relevant videos, gather their staffs, and tell them we’ll meet in the operations room at seven to go over what we know.”

Jeez, I wonder what happened.

I turned on the bedside lamp and blinked a few times at the brightness. I was still a little groggy from the booze I’d had the night before, but fortunately, I didn’t have any indication of a hangover starting.

“Make sure we do a sweep for anything we don’t want to turn over to the authorities, then have Rick Dixon make the call to the police,” Max continued. “The detectives will scrutinize everything we do, so go strictly by the book. Don’t let anyone approach the body, even if there’s something next to it that we may want to keep private.”

Body?

“I’ll be there in about forty-five minutes. You’d better call Johnny and let him know as well. Make sure he knows we have it covered but that we’ll keep him fully informed.”

Max disconnected and then spent several moments looking out his window at the lights of Paradise Valley. I could tell he was thinking and didn’t want to disturb him.

“I’m going to need to take a quick shower and head in,” he said. I’m sorry to leave you like this. Please feel free to stay. I know Beatrice would enjoy making you breakfast.”

“What happened?” I asked as I followed him into the bathroom. “Can you say?”

“A theft was discovered a few minutes ago at Casino Scottsdale,” he said as he turned on the water and stepped into the shower. “They somehow managed to get into the vault and left with somewhere between nine and ten million dollars.”

Crap! I hope my jewelry wasn’t taken.

“You said there was a body?” I asked, raising my voice so he could hear me over the water.

“Yeah,” he said with a bark of laughter and a nod. “There must have been some sort of disagreement among the thieves. One of them was found in the locked vault. He’s dead, but there isn’t a cause, at least not so far.”

“Were any of your guys hurt?” I asked, now growing even more concerned.

“It sounds like the three guards at the vault were shot with fast-acting tranquilizer darts. Only one of them had time to pull a weapon, but it didn’t look like he was able to slow them down.”

“I assume you have cameras watching over all of that. Did anyone else

see anything?”

“It’s too soon to know for sure, but it doesn’t appear anyone noticed a problem until security brought the next cash deposit down to the vault. That’s when they saw the three downed guards and hit the panic button.”

Max stepped out of the shower, and I handed him a towel.

“Thanks,” he said as he dried himself off. “I don’t know how long this will take, but I’ll likely be at the casino for most of the day, if not the rest of the weekend.”

It was a shame he had to go in. Watching him walk around the bathroom with the water glistening on his body was starting to get me going again.

Yummy.

I briefly thought about asking him to stay long enough for a quicky. But I knew that under the circumstances, it wouldn’t be appropriate.

“Okay, I’ll take off as well,” I said. “I’m still getting used to being here with you. I’ll need to work up to being alone with Beatrice.”

“Are you sure?” he asked as he pulled on a pair of slacks. “After what you did for her, she thinks you walk on water.”

“Oh, don’t get me wrong. I enjoy spending time with Beatrice. She’s a hoot, and her cooking is the best. But I’d still feel a little odd if you weren’t here.”

“Alright,” he said with a grin. “I’ll leave a note for her in the kitchen on the way out.”

Max went to the closet and pulled out a blue button-down.

“What can you tell me about Casino Scottsdale?” I asked.

“Almost anything,” he said as he started to button his shirt. “What do you want to know?”

“I know your group manages the security,” I said as I helped him with his collar buttons. “But what are your other functions there?”

“We don’t own the resort, but we’ve been involved with the casino from the beginning. Tony built it, and we have a long-term contract to handle portions of the management and security. This could turn out to be a

major black eye for us.”

The closet door was still open, and I noticed half a dozen of my shirts and a couple of pairs of pants hanging at the end of the rack. I hadn't realized I'd accumulated so many pieces of clothing here.

I was somewhat shocked to see an aqua-blue dress that I'd been hunting for in my closet a few days earlier. I must have worn it when I'd gone out with Max and left it here the next day.

The dress was still in a plastic bag from the dry cleaners. Beatrice must have sent it out before putting it into the closet.

Max had also set aside a drawer in his dresser for the shorts, socks, camisoles, negligees, and undies that had started to accumulate over here. It was getting to the point where I probably had six or seven complete outfits ready to go.

When spending the night, I'd often bring a bag with things to wear the following day, and Max would always tell me to leave the dirty clothes. He'd assured me that Beatrice would be happy to take care of everything.

A few weeks ago, I'd asked her about leaving my laundry here. She had confided to me that it was good to have someone other than Max to take care of.

As Max finished getting dressed, I debated whether I should take my clothes home. Having several fashion options hanging in the closet had been convenient over the past few weeks, but keeping clothes in a man's house was always the first step to moving in.

I glanced into the bathroom and realized I had a designated towel rack and had claimed some of Max's extra fluffy bath sheets as my own. I even had a space in the vanity for my toothbrush, lotions, hairbrush, and makeup supplies.

Everything I'd done so far had been geared toward making my overnights with Max more convenient. And if I was being honest it was fun claiming part of his house. But as I thought about it, I wondered if there was something deeper behind it.

Am I starting to move in with him?

Max left for the casino, and I took a shower and got dressed in one of the closet outfits, including a pair of cute shoes I'd left here a couple of

weekends before. With Beatrice having a small place of her own towards the back of the property, it was the first time I'd been alone in his house. It felt a little strange but somehow comforting at the same time.

I hesitated when I looked at my small pile of laundry from the night before. After a moment, I decided I was probably overthinking again and tossed everything in the basket.

Max had offered to drop me off at the office so I could pick up my car from the night before. But I knew he was anxious to get to Casino Scottsdale and hadn't wanted to delay him.

I pulled out my phone to see if there would be any Ubers out at four-fifteen in the morning. I was surprised when there were several nearby, and I ordered one.

I got to my apartment building as the eastern horizon was beginning to glow with the start of a new day. I went upstairs and collapsed onto my bed next to Marlowe.



When I woke up, the room was bright, and I felt much better. Looking at the clock, I realized I'd slept another three hours.

Marlowe was still sound asleep at my feet, but he quickly got up when he heard me stir. He then started to purr loudly while demanding to be petted.

I faded in and out of sleep a couple of times, simply enjoying the sensation of being lazy. Marlowe cooperated at first but then reminded me that Grandma was gone for the weekend, and I needed to get up and feed him.

I kept telling him to go back to sleep, but he'd decided it was time for me to get up. When I finally decided to motivate myself to get out of bed, it was almost nine o'clock.

I fixed myself a pot of coffee and fed Marlowe a big breakfast. I then went about getting ready for the day.

I'd started to get dressed in the outfit from Max's closet when "S & M" sang out from my phone.

"Hey," I said when I answered. "How was bar hopping with the Cougars last night?"

"Jeez, I'm *never* doing that again," Sophie moaned in obvious pain. "After hanging out at Nexxus for about an hour with the ladies, Gina and Danielle took off. By the way, I'm pretty sure Gina's figured out who Danielle actually is, more or less anyway."

"I guess that couldn't be helped," I said. "Between Roberto being there the entire time and the two goons standing up nervously whenever someone came to talk with us, she was bound to figure it out sooner or later. How'd she take it?"

"She was cool about it, but she kept glancing at Danielle with that cop face she sometimes uses on us. Anyway, after Nexxus, Gabriella and I went with the Cougars down the street to Cake Nightclub."

"Very fancy," I said. "How was it?"

"The nightclub was great, but I was sort of drunk from the shots we'd had at Nexxus. I was only going to stay for one drink, you know, to be sociable, but a bunch of cute guys came over and started buying for everyone."

"How late did you stay there?" I asked, assuming the worst.

"Um, I don't know, but I'm pretty sure they were trying to kick us out and close the place down."

"So, a little after two o'clock?"

"I guess. I was pretty trashed and had Sonia use my phone to order me an Uber. After that, she took off with a hot college guy from ASU. I made it home and passed out. At least I remembered to shut my front door this time."

"How was Gabriella? Were the Cougars okay having her there?"

"Oh, my God, they loved her," Sophie exclaimed, even letting out a small, painful laugh. "I guess she already knew both Pammy and Jackie from working events with them at the Saguaro Sky. At Cake, Gabriella acted as the Cougars' gatekeeper. If she didn't like the look of a guy, she

made him move along. She now has an open invitation to come out with the group anytime.”

“After the ruckus at Nexxus, Gabriella was probably hoping to get into another fight,” I said. “She’s the only woman I know who gets turned on by beating up men.”

“Yeah, I get that feeling as well,” Sophie agreed. “Plus, there’s one more weird thing I found out about Gabriella last night. Alcohol doesn’t affect her, like not at all. I watched her down probably six or seven drinks on top of the tequila we’d had earlier, and she seemed totally impervious to it.”

“Are you going to be okay for tonight?” I asked. “I’m going over to the condo in a few minutes to stash the cameras. I mainly want to be there in person to make sure we didn’t get our wires crossed and that Moogy and Hannah are actually using the condo tonight. Do you still want to come along?”

“Yeah, probably,” Sophie moaned. “I’ve got a date lined up with Milo, but that’s not until eight. Plus, after getting shot at by that Moogy jerk, I’d like to see this one through.”

“Well, drink a real Coke with sugar and have some Advil,” I advised. “After a nap, you’ll feel much better.”

“Way ahead of you, girlfriend,” she moaned. “I took the pills about fifteen minutes ago. As long as everything stays down, I should be good to go in a couple of hours.”

“Okay, I’ll meet you at the office at six. If you still feel crappy, I’ll drive us both.”

I’d almost finished getting dressed when the theme from *The Love Boat* began to play on my phone. I broke into a broad smile and answered.

“Hey, you,” I said. “How’s your investigation going?”

“Huh,” he grunted out a laugh. “That’s usually what I ask *you*.”

“Well, what have you discovered so far?”

“From everything we’ve learned, it appears to be a rather sophisticated operation and possibly an inside job. The thieves managed to break into our security system and disable it. That included all of the cameras we had in

the vault.”

“If all the cameras went blank, why didn’t that alert your guards in the control room?”

“That’s just it,” Max said. “The screens weren’t blank. The thieves had recorded scenes in the hallway from a few days before and replayed the camera feeds on a loop.”

“I’ve seen that before in movies,” I said. “The bad guys use it to fool the guards whenever there’s a bank heist.”

“Well, it was effective in this case, and it pointed out a hole in our system. We were supposed to have a program running in the background to make sure the camera feeds were live at all times. If not, the alarms should have gone off. Unfortunately, the thieves managed to shut that down as well.”

“How did they get into the actual vault?”

“The main door was open, as it usually is. But to get to where the money was kept, the thieves had to go through two walls of bars, basically a cage within a cage. Each has a door that the central security office electronically operates. The thieves managed to bypass the normal security protocols and opened the cages remotely.”

“So, they shot the guards with tranquilizer darts, opened the cage doors to the vault, sauntered in, loaded up the money onto a cart or something, and then strolled out?”

“We’re still reviewing the outside security tapes, the ones that weren’t tampered with. But that’s the gist of it.”

I suddenly felt a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. “Um, when someone broke into your computer servers the other day, you said they only took basic architectural and building infrastructure information—plumbing, lighting, ventilation, and other things like that. Those files didn’t happen to include the electrical layout of the casino security system, did they?”

“You put that together quickly,” Max said with a touch of admiration in his voice. “It took us a while to make the connection this morning. Of course, the files on the server didn’t have the details of the security system. But they did have the complete electrical schematics of the building.”

So, someone messed up their electrical systems?

Hearing all of this started to give me a bad tickle in the back of my mind. But I decided not to make any assumptions about Elliot until I could learn more about what had happened at the casino.

"I'd like to help, unofficially," I said slowly.

"I know that tone," Max said, somewhat cautiously. "I've heard it before. Do you know what's going on?"

"Maybe," I said. "But it's too soon to say anything for sure, and I don't even want to raise any suspicions until I have more information. I'll need to track down a few leads, but once I figure out what's going on, I'll tell you everything I know."

"Alright," Max said. "I trust your instincts. But as you can imagine, there's a lot of interest in solving this quickly. I've worked with the local detective before. His name's Yas Patel. He's good, but I don't think he'll tolerate a lot of outside interference. If you discover anything, you'd probably better channel it through me or Carson."

"What have you learned about the dead guy in the vault?" I asked.

"Not a lot," Max admitted. "According to the EMTs who took him away, he died from a broken neck."

"Did he have any identification on him?"

"No, at least none that I've heard about. I'll let you know after they run his prints."

"Do you know what he looked like? Do you have a picture?"

"The cameras in the vault are still down, but I was in the cage when they took him out. He'd been a good-looking kid, maybe mid to late twenties. He had a neck tattoo that said *The Devil Doesn't Sleep*."

Mid-twenties? Neck tattoo?

"*Shit*," I blurted out. "Did he have long dark hair and big porkchop sideburns?"

"He did," Max said. "I take it you knew who he was?"

"He sounds a lot like a guy called Rock Bottom. Jeez, this is starting to stink. Let me dig around, and we'll talk as soon as I know anything."

"Please do," he said, now sounding frustrated. "At this point, I'll take

your rumors.”

“Let me ask you something,” I said. “And don’t read anything into it yet. It’s just a hunch.”

“Alright,” Max said. “What do you need?”

“The guy I’m watching this week is named Elliot Kirk. He’s an electrical contractor who seems to work a couple of hours a week at Casino Scottsdale. Could you look into the records and see what he’s supposed to be doing?”

“Sure,” Max said. “We use outside maintenance contractors at several of our properties, and it’s likely he’s one of those. Do you think he’s involved?”

“I honestly don’t know,” I said. “But I’ll let you know as soon as I learn anything from my end.”

I hung up with Max and knew I needed to get my day going. I went into the bathroom and was swiping on some mascara when the phone rang again. Looking at the readout, it was Adriana Kirk.

“Hi, Adriana,” I said as I answered, trying to sound upbeat. “How was the play last night?”

“Oh, it was fine,” she said with a distracted tone. “Look, I need to ask you about something.”

“Is everything alright?” I asked.

“Um, I’m not sure,” she said, now sounding frustrated. “Elliot seems to be missing.”

Oh no.

“Okay,” I said as calmly as I could. “When was the last time you saw him?”

“It was about midnight. He got an emergency call that something called a ‘motor control center’ in a building he’d worked on before was shorting, and they needed to have him look at it before someone got injured.”

“Is it unusual for him to get late-night emergency calls?”

“Not really,” she admitted. “Something like this comes up once or twice a month.”

“After he took off last night, when did you expect him to return?”

“It always varies according to how bad the problem is,” Adriana said. “But he’d usually be back by morning. If he was going to be late, he’d always call and let me know his schedule.”

“Did you hear from him at all?”

“No,” she said with a heavy sigh. “Nothing. Even though things are awkward between us at the moment, he still calls to let me know when he’ll be home. But he took off last night, and that’s the last time I’ve had any contact with him.”

“Did you happen to hear where he was going last night?” I asked. “If so, I’ll start looking there.”

“No, I thought about that as well, but he didn’t say.”

“Do you have any guesses about what could have happened?”

“My first thought was that he might have gotten injured. The electricity he works with can be pretty dangerous.”

“That makes sense,” I agreed.

“I’ve called all of the hospitals in Scottsdale, Tempe, and Mesa, but he hasn’t been in any of them. I’ve thought about going to the police and filling out a missing person report, but I don’t know what good that will do.”

“If you’d like to go down to the station to talk with a detective, we can ask Lenny to go down with you. The police take those reports a lot more seriously if you’re represented.”

“Let me think about it,” she said. “But if I do decide to have him come with me, what’s the best way to set that up?”

“Just call Debbie,” I assured her. “She’ll get you in to see Lenny right away.”

I asked Adriana to keep me informed and to let me know the moment she learned anything. I disconnected with the client and then sat and tried to think. Events were coming at me fast today, and I was having a hard time keeping up with everything.

I knew I needed to call Lenny and let him know about the robbery at the casino. There was now a possibility that Elliot was involved in the theft,

and I needed to see if there was a connection. I also needed to see if Lenny wanted me to broaden my assignment to look into Elliot's disappearance.

I could only guess how much pressure Max was under with the robbery and murder, and I wanted to give him solid information about who could have done it as soon as possible.

I also had to get ready for recording Moogy and Hannah tonight at the condo. This was going to be my last chance at getting a video of the two of them together, at least for a while, and I didn't want to blow my opportunity.

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Chapter Eleven



Deciding to do first things first, I called Lenny and updated him on everything that had happened. I let him know that Elliot may have been involved in the break-in at Casino Scottsdale, and now Adriana said he may be missing.

As I expected, this news perked Lenny up. “How upset is our client that her husband is missing?” he asked. “Do you think she’d be willing to pay another fifteen or twenty thousand for you to look for him?”

“Possibly,” I said. “But if he’s involved in the robbery, don’t you think the police should be the ones hunting him down? I don’t want to be seen as interfering.”

“Do you have any direct evidence that Elliot Kirk broke into the vault last night and stole money from Casino Scottsdale?” Lenny asked, using his attorney voice.

“Well, no,” I admitted. “But from everything I’ve seen, it does seem pretty suspicious.”

“So, at this point, Elliot Kirk is merely a person who may have some information about the break-in,” Lenny said slowly, as if talking to a third grader. “You looking for him at his wife’s request couldn’t be seen as any sort of police interference. In fact, it may even help their investigation.”

“Fine,” I admitted. “You’re right.”

“Okay then,” he said. “Let me give our client a call and see if she’s worried enough to have you start to look for him. *Damn.*”

“What?” I asked.

“I should have asked for a larger retainer from her.”

I hung up with Lenny and thought about what to do next. I decided that I needed to get information on Rock Bottom and the rest of the people I'd been tracking all week.

I knew Sophie would be able to get a lot of it through the secret software, but I also had another source for information like this. Since it was almost noon on a Saturday, I had a good idea where my informant would be.

I walked down the stairs to the ground floor and then through the apartment atrium. In the corner of the big open space, I saw Zachary "Zero" Zaccardi sitting on the couch, watching the big screen TV. I'd noticed he was here most Saturday mornings, watching game shows.

Four other residents of the building, all seniors, were seated with him, either on the sofa or on one of several comfortable upholstered chairs. Everyone seemed mesmerized by what was happening on the screen.

They were all staring intently at *Wheel of Fortune*. Since the episode starred young versions of Pat and Vanna, it was obviously a re-run, most likely on one of the cable game channels.

Zero's a former competitive skateboarder with a pasty complexion, blue eyes, a scruffy beard, and blond dreadlocks reaching down to his shoulders. I've long suspected that he's somehow involved with local organized crime, but he's always been straight enough with me. We trade information on occasion, and Zero is usually accurate.

I sat down on the couch next to him. The faint odor of marijuana lingered around Zero. I also noticed that his eyes were slightly glassy. Ever since Arizona completely legalized recreational pot, this is something I've been seeing around town, a lot.

"Hey, Zero," I said. "Can I talk to you for a minute?"

"Oh, hey Laura, sure," he said, glancing at me. "But give me a minute, okay? I gotta see what the answer is. I'm truly stumped on this one."

On the TV, Vanna had already turned about half of the letters on the puzzle. The clue was "Movie," and the answer was obviously *The Maltese Falcon*.

Okay, so perhaps Zero wasn't functioning on all cylinders today. Even so, I didn't want to mess up his concentration. I sat with him in silence for a

moment.

On the TV, the contestant spun a \$200 on the wheel. “Hey man, buy a vowel,” Zero said to the TV as he chuckled.

“Why buy a vowel?” Mr. Conner said from the chair to Zero’s right. “The answer’s *The Millennium Falcon*.”

Mr. Conner was about two hundred years old and had been a purchasing manager at Motorola’s big semiconductor factory on 52nd Street while he was working. I was a little surprised he could even see the TV through his glasses, which magnified and distorted his eyes so much that he looked like an over-fed goldfish.

“*The Millennium Falcon* isn’t the name of a movie,” Mrs. Nottingham corrected him with a slight scoff. “That’s the name of the spaceship on *Star Trek*.”

Mrs. Nottingham was only a little younger than Mr. Conner and wore similar glasses. She’d married three husbands over the course of her life and had outlived them all.

She was continuously on the lookout for husband number four. From some brief interactions I’d had with her about a year ago, I knew she had a strong dominant streak when it came to her lovers.

The contestant on TV guessed a “J,” and the audience moaned with disappointment. The next contestant spun a \$400 on the wheel.

He guessed a “S,” and Vanna turned the letter. He then solved the puzzle, the music played, and the studio audience clapped wildly.

Mr. Conner moaned and mumbled that it was a “stupid clue.” Mrs. Nottingham beamed and gave him a little “I told you so” grunt.

I looked over at Zero, still looking at the TV screen, a blank expression on his face. After four or five seconds, he processed the information, guffawed, and smiled.

“Hey, Zero,” I said, getting his attention again, “I have a question for you. Do you know anything about a street pusher called Rock Bottom?”

Zero looked at me blankly without moving, talking, or blinking. His mouth hung open slightly, and he appeared to be in a trance.

I’d seen him do this before, so I wasn’t alarmed. I’ve come to realize

that this is simply Zero's way of thinking.

"Sure, his name's Rocky Marchetti," Zero said, coming out of the trance after maybe fifteen seconds. "He's been a player for a few years, but I don't know a lot about him."

"Why is he called Rock Bottom?" I asked.

"I don't know about that," he said with a shake of his head, causing his dreadlocks to sway back and forth. "It always sounded like a porn name to me." He then started laughing at his joke.

Huh, Sophie thought the same thing.

"Do you know what he's been up to lately? Maybe who he's been hanging out with?"

"Don't know about that either," he said.

"Do you know anybody who might know?" I asked.

"Maybe Bahoe. He gets around, and I heard him talking about Rock Bottom once."

"Butt Hole?" I asked, confused.

"Nah, man," Zero said with a shake of his head. "His name's Bah-hoe. His family's from an island, like, in the Pacific, north of Australia somewhere. He gets real upset if you call him Butt Hole."

"I'd like to talk with him," I said. "Do you know where he lives?"

"Oh, upstairs," Zero said with a happy stoner laugh. "He's my new roommate. Come on up and meet him."

This should be interesting.

Zero lives on the fifth floor, so we took the elevator. We walked down the hallway to a door covered in Pink Floyd and Grateful Dead stickers. He opened the unlocked door, and we went in.

The first thing I noticed was the lingering odor of weed and beer, like they'd had a party there the night before. The soothing Reggae beats of Bob Marley were drifting out of an ancient boom box sitting on a shelf in the living room.

The place was considerably cleaner than the last time I'd been here, several months before. The piles of empty pizza boxes and food wrappers

I'd noted during my previous visit were gone, and empty beer bottles no longer covered every exposed horizontal surface. Actually, it looked neat and somewhat orderly.

"Wow," I said as I glanced around. "Your place looks great."

"Yeah," Zero said, looking around at the tidy apartment as if it surprised him as well. "That's Bahoe. He's, like, a clean freak. He hates clutter, you know?"

Fortunately, it didn't take long to meet Zero's roommate. He must've heard us talking because he came out of one of the bedrooms about thirty seconds later.

He wore nicely fitting blue jeans and nothing else. A towel was draped around his neck as if he had just gotten out of the shower.

He was tall, well-proportioned, and had what looked like Polynesian ancestry. He must have been about twenty-five, with a broad, handsome face and long black hair pulled into a ponytail.

"Hey, Bahoe," Zero said, sweeping his arm in my direction. "Meet my friend, Laura Black."

"I'm Bahoe Santoso," he said as he shook my hand. I couldn't help but notice he had the loveliest smile.

"Good to meet you, Bahoe," I said carefully. I could see how easy it would be to slip and start calling him Butt Hole.

"Can I get you a beer?" he asked as he drifted into the kitchen.

"Um, sure. That would be great," I said as I followed.

I typically don't begin drinking so early in the day, especially after having such a late night. But I've found that people are usually more willing to talk freely if they have a drink in their hands.

Bahoe went into the refrigerator and pulled out two bottles of Beck's Dark. He glanced at me to see if I approved, and I nodded appreciatively. Glancing into the fridge, I noted half a dozen different imported beers, mainly from Germany and Belgium.

Bahoe called out to Zero to see if he wanted one, but all we got back from the living room was, "Nah, man, I'm good."

Bahoe opened the beers, gave me one, and we tapped the necks

together. After taking a sip of the delicious dark ale, we went out to the living room.

Zero sat on one end of a long, comfortable-looking couch and was halfway through rolling a joint the size of a small Cuban cigar. I sat next to Zero while Bahoe settled himself on an overstuffed chair.

“I’ve seen you in the parking lot,” Bahoe said as he sipped the beer. “You live in the building, correct?”

“That’s right,” I said. “I’ve lived here since I got divorced a few years ago. If you don’t mind me asking, how did you get together with Zero?”

“Well, I used to be involved in all sorts of criminal activity,” Bahoe said. “After I got out of the service, I was a real hoodlum, but I mainly sold narcotics.”

“Yeah,” Zero agreed, again giving me his happy stoner laugh. He picked up a lighter from the coffee table and lit up his joint. He sucked in the smoke, held it for a moment, and blew it out in a billowing cloud. “Bahoe used to be a total criminal.”

“I take it you no longer do that?” I asked, taking a sip of the beer.

Bahoe shook his head slowly. “For the first three or four years, everything was going great. I had money, and I had respect from my bosses. If I’d kept it up, I could have been going somewhere. Then, one day, I tried some of the harder drugs I was selling.”

“Oh, no,” I moaned, knowing where this was headed.

“Yeah,” Bahoe nodded. “It’s the usual story. At first, it was fantastic, good as sex, maybe better.”

“I take it things didn’t work out?” I asked.

“Nah. After a few weeks, I’d become my best customer. I found I needed more and more of the drugs simply to keep me going.”

“That couldn’t have been good,” I noted.

“Fast forward maybe six months, I was broke, with no job and nowhere to live. Zero’s family took me in and helped get me back on my feet. I haven’t done any drugs in almost a year, and I’m clean. I’m even taking classes in accounting at Arizona State. Hopefully, in a couple of years, I’ll be able to take the CPA exam.”

“Aren’t they kinda strict about who they let be a CPA?” I asked, somewhat skeptically.

“Well, sure they are, but I was never convicted of anything.” He then winked at me and held up his beer. “Arrests don’t count if you’re trying to be a CPA.”

“Do you know anything about a guy called Rock Bottom? Zero says his real name is Rocky Marchetti.”

“I used to work with him, from time to time,” Bahoe said with a shrug. “I would get pills and sometimes harder drugs from him. Rocky always seemed to have a supply of high-quality merchandise. I don’t know where he got it, but we’re talking pharmaceutical-grade narcotics.”

“Do you know why he’s called Rock Bottom?”

“I hear he used to have an account on one of those internet porn fan sites,” Bahoe said with a chuckle and a shake of his head. “That was supposedly his stage name.”

Zero started laughing and pointed at me. “See, I told you so.”

Seriously? Sophie’s going to be insufferable when I tell her.

“I’m looking to get some information about what he’s been up to lately,” I said.

“I hear he got busted a few months back but then got picked up by a crew of high-end burglars,” Bahoe said.

“Why would a burglar crew want a narcotics dealer?” I asked, confused.

“Don’t know,” Bahoe said with a shrug. “But Rocky seems to have a surprising number of connections in the business. Maybe someone higher up was doing someone else a favor.”

“What can you tell me about the crew of burglars?” I asked, sipping the beer.

“Not a lot,” he said with a shrug. “I heard they were pulling some midnight jewelry store heists, things like that.”

“Do you have any names of the people on the crew?”

Bahoe looked at me skeptically. “Why would you want to know that?”

You aren't a cop, are you?"

"I'm an investigator for a law firm in Old Town. It turns out there was a heist last night at Casino Scottsdale. It looks like Rocky Marchetti was part of it. They aren't officially releasing the name yet, but I believe he was killed by someone on the crew and left in the locked casino vault."

"*Whoa*," Zero moaned out. "I heard about that on the news this morning. They said they got away with like ten million dollars."

"And they killed Rocky?" Bahoe asked.

"It looks like it," I said. "From what I understand, somebody broke his neck and left him in the vault while the rest of them took off with the money."

"Yeah, okay," Bahoe said. "That sorta makes sense. The crew leader is a guy named Seth Sullivan. I've run into him before, and trust me, the dude is seriously bad news."

"What does Seth look like?" I asked.

"Early-forties, short dark hair, stubbly beard, bodybuilder type. But I'm pretty sure he's taken too many steroids over the last few years. It's sorta messed up his head, and he's developed a terrible attitude about everything."

"What about his attitude?" I asked.

"He was always getting into fights with the people he worked with. But Seth is smart and connected. His bosses probably don't care who he smacks around as long as his crew produces."

"Do you know anyone else who could have worked the heist?"

"I don't know any of the other guys. I only heard about Rocky through the grapevine. But I'd think that everyone on that crew would have needed to be coerced into working with Seth. The man's a menace."

"Do you know about a woman connected with the gang? Late thirties, short dark hair, tall with a nice figure?"

"By nice figure, do you mean thin with big boobs and a round butt?" Bahoe asked. "That sounds like Monica."

"That's right," I said. "I have her as Monica Marshall."

“Well, I really don’t know her all that well,” Bahoe said with a shrug.

“Doesn’t matter,” I said. “What can you tell me about her?”

“I hear she used to date Seth but broke it off after he roughed her up one too many times. Now she’s Grant Martínez’s girlfriend. He’s the head of the gang, well, at least part of it, and Seth works for him.”

“I wonder how Seth feels about his ex-girlfriend dating his boss,” I said.

“It’s hard to say,” Bahoe said. “But if you saw her hanging around, she’s likely only keeping track of the crew for Grant.”

“You’re saying Grant’s not in charge of the entire group?” I asked.

“I don’t think so,” Bahoe said, scrunching up his face as he thought. Honestly, it was rather adorable. “There’s somebody else in charge of everything, but I don’t know anything about him or even have a name I could give you.”

“He sounds like a shadowy criminal kingpin,” Zero said, again giving us his happy stoner laugh. “It would probably be best to stay clear of him.”

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Chapter Twelve



I returned to my apartment and printed out a copy of the authorization for me to put surveillance devices into any dwelling owned by my client, along with a copy of the property deed. I then drove over to the condominium village, a massive grouping of high-end condos on Scottsdale Road that are six or seven stories high.

I parked in a visitor's space, put on a baseball cap to partially obscure my features, and then went around to the back of my Miata. Opening the tiny trunk, I dug around until I found my clipboard. I then crammed the two pieces of paper under the clasp.

I've found as long as you're holding a clipboard, people will assume you're somehow on official business. They'll usually leave you alone, even if you're doing some otherwise suspicious activities, like picking the lock of a condo.

Holding my clipboard against my chest like a shield, I took the elevator to Moogy's floor and rang the doorbell to his unit. I didn't think anyone was inside, but I've been fooled before. It's always awkward and embarrassing when someone opens the door while you're trying to pick their lock.

When no one answered after two rings, I took out my lockpicks and began to work. I kept an ear open for the sound of someone approaching, but the hallway was dead quiet. Gina's training once again worked, and I was able to unlock the door in about five minutes.

I walked into the unit and turned on the light. I had to stop and stare when I realized the entire living room had been converted into a movie stage.

Wow.

There was a king-sized bed against the wall with white silk sheets, surrounded by generic furniture. The walls and the window were decorated to make it look like a bedroom.

With a sinking feeling, I realized that the room was made up to be the bedroom of a girl in her teens. There were stuffed animals, dolls, posters of boy bands, and young adult books on the shelves surrounding the bed.

Several professional tripods and umbrella studio lights were stacked in one corner of the room. In the other corner was a black leather couch and a wooden desk. The walls behind the sofa were painted to resemble an office.

I went into the bedroom, but it was empty of furniture. There were only a few extra lights and a broken tripod.

A big cardboard box on the floor contained several handcuffs, restraints, floggers, ropes, sex toys, and a dozen plastic bottles of lubes and lotions. There were also half a dozen black masks, likely for the men to wear to hide their identities.

Eight or ten colorful pieces of sexy lingerie hung on the rack in the closet, along with four or five revealing outfits. I was again disgusted when I saw several schoolgirl uniforms and high school cheerleader outfits hanging on the rack.

Jeez.

I set up three of my best spy cameras. This included my small cat statue, my tissue box with the lens hidden as the center of a flower, and a new stuffed teddy bear I'd recently ordered off the internet. In this one, the camera was concealed as the middle button of his coat.

I'd set them up with a slightly lower resolution so that the batteries in the cameras would work all night, but I'd still need to return to the condo tomorrow morning and retrieve everything. The only thing that worried me was that the living room was remarkably neat and tidy.

There wasn't a lot of clutter on the shelves to hide the fact that some new things had been added. I only hoped that Moogy would be more interested in being naked with his willing college student and that he would ignore the latest additions on the shelves.

Even though I'd wanted to get out of there as soon as possible, I spent another two or three minutes taking videos and documenting the room. The

condo was in Moogy's name alone, and it was likely that his wife didn't know about it.

Of course, simply owning a place that was used to film dirty movies couldn't be used to prove you were being unfaithful to your wife. But I suspected that she would still be interested in it, nonetheless.



I returned to my apartment and called Sophie. I hoped she wasn't still asleep or that she'd at least turned her ringer off if she was.

"Hey," I said when she answered. "How are you feeling?"

"I feel so much better," she said brightly. "I slept for about two hours, then had some lunch."

"Do you still feel good enough to head over to Moogy's tonight? If so, I'd love the company."

"Yeah, I'm good," she said. "Were you able to stash your cameras? How's it look over there?"

"Well, I let myself in and set up three cameras. They'll be good all night. The videos will be on the memory cards, and I'll need to go back in tomorrow and get them."

"What do you think? Does Moogy only use the condo as a personal love nest?"

"Honestly, the place is a little creepy. It's set up as a sex crib, but I don't think it's just for him. It's full of adult toys, fetish supplies, love furniture, umbrella lights, and camera tripods."

"Really?" Sophie asked, now sounding interested.

"I'm pretty sure Moogy uses the condo to film dirty movies. They have a regular porn studio going on over there. But the truly gross part is they have the bedroom set up to look like it's the room of a teenager."

"I wonder if Moogy is planning on bringing Hannah up to the condo so he can film her as they do the nasty," Sophie pondered. "If he has all of those toys and restraints, maybe he'll tie her up and spank her skinny

college ass a little bit first.”

“It’s certainly a possibility,” I admitted.

“Damn, I should have gone with you,” she said, sounding disappointed. “It would have been interesting to see his set-up. Maybe I’ll go with you tomorrow to pick up the cameras and memory cards. It might give me some new ideas. Anyway, I’ll meet you at the office tonight, and we can watch over Moogy’s place. I’m still hoping to meet Milo later on, but you’ll have me until then.”

“Perfect,” I said. “If we leave at six, that should get us there in plenty of time to see if Moogy and Hannah are going to use the condo tonight. I appreciate you coming along. But, um, when we get to the office, could you do me a favor?”

“What now?” she asked, giving me a bit of snark in her voice.

“Could you start some secret software searches for me?”

“Jeez,” she sighed. “You do love tempting the Men in Black with all of these searches, don’t you? But you realize who will *disappear in the desert* if they decide we know too much. Me, that’s who.”

“Hey,” I said. “I’m not looking for terrorists this time, only murderers and casino burglars.”

“Oh, yeah,” she said, now becoming excited. “I was talking with Pooh Bear about the robbery this morning. It’s made all the papers, and everyone’s riled up about it. The word is that Max’s side of the company is in charge of security at the casino, and they somehow messed up.”

“Yup, they did. I want to help them figure out who did it.”

“But no pressure, huh?” Sophie laughed. “Okay, who do you want me to run deep dives on?”

“The first is Seth Sullivan. He’s the angry bodybuilder caveman type I told you about at the casino the other day. Early forties with a lot of criminal experience around town. He’s probably been arrested a few times for burglary or assault.”

“Okaaay,” Sophie said. I could tell she was entering the information into her phone. “Who else?”

“The second is Rocky Marchetti. Mid-twenties, longer dark hair, and a

neck tattoo. He was the guy I told you about who went by Rock Bottom, and you were right, it was a fan-site porn name.”

“*Ha!* I told you. But you’re saying he only *went* by Rock Bottom? What happened to him?”

“Yeah, he was found dead in the casino vault last night with a broken neck.”

“Damn, that’s a shame,” Sophie said. “After hearing about how cute he was, I’ve been halfway tempted to look him up on the internet and catch one or two of his naughty videos.”

“*Eeewww.*”

“You’re right,” she agreed. “It would be a little creepy watching a dead guy shaking the sheets with someone.”

“The third one is a local gangster called Grant Martínez. Seth was apparently head of the burglary crew, but word is they all worked for Grant.”

“So, he was sort of the *Mr. Big* of the group, huh?”

“It looks like it. One of them anyway.”

“Okay,” she said. “Who else? I might as well do everybody at the same time.”

“I’m also looking for information on The Professor and Uncle Mike. As soon as we get actual names for them, we’ll need to punch them in as well.”

“You’re going to be busy with all of this,” she said.

“That’s only half of it,” I said. “I also got a call from Adriana Kirk. She said Elliot took off last night and hasn’t come home yet.”

“So, are you thinking he’s dead, too?” Sophie asked, concern in her voice.

“I’m hoping he’s only gone into hiding. We’ll need to start a trace on his phone and his credit cards.”

“Okay,” she said. “That works. I’ll toss in a load of laundry and then head to the store. I’ll be over to the office after that.”

“I’m going to spend the afternoon going over the reports on Elliot and

Monica,” I said. “I think I need to learn as much about them as I can. I’m not sure how Elliot’s involved with the robbery, but there are too many coincidences starting to form.”

“You know, it’ll likely piss off our client if her husband gets busted again for being a crook,” Sophie said. “It’ll be hard to get spousal support if her ex is in prison. But okay, I’ll enter everyone’s name into the secret software as soon as I get over there.”



I spent the next two hours re-reading the deep dive report on Elliot Kirk. My goals were to learn if he was involved in the robbery and, if so, where he might be hiding out. I also used the time to go over the report on Monica Marshall one more time.

After going through each report in detail, I came up with precious little in the way of helpful information. Elliot didn’t own any real estate and didn’t seem to have kept any notable contacts in the criminal underworld after getting out of prison.

The only troubling thing I could find was that Elliot seemed to be deeply in debt. His credit score was in the low five-hundreds, and he carried a large balance on all of his bank cards.

From what I could tell, his finances were separate from his wife’s. Given that, it was possible she didn’t know about his money problems.

I was thinking about taking a break when the theme to *The Love Boat* started playing on my phone. I’m pretty sure I was smiling as I answered.

“Hey,” I said when I heard Max’s voice. “How’s your investigation going? Have you learned anything new?”

“Not a lot,” he admitted. “But I did get the information you were asking about. Kirk Electric handles a lot of the periodic maintenance and required electrical inspections throughout the building. Elliot has an access badge that will get him into most of the non-sensitive areas of the casino.”

“What’s considered a sensitive area?” I asked.

“Anything having to do with the storage or handling of the money,” Max said. “He wouldn’t have access to the cashiers, the counting rooms, the cages, or the vault. Do you think he’s somehow involved?”

“I’m still putting everything together,” I said. “But let’s talk about what we’ve gotten so far.”

“I can give you one of the names,” Max said. “The police ran the prints of the dead guy in the vault. His name was Rocky Marchetti, and he had a spotty criminal record. So far, that’s all they know. Although, the crazy thing is that I think I’ve met him before.”

“Do you think the police are telling you everything they know?” I asked.

“I think so,” Max said. “We have a good relationship with them, and they’re as eager as we are to learn what happened.”

“Okay,” I said. “Grab a pencil. I have some additional information. But seriously, at this point, everything I have is only rumor, so take it as such.”

“I should have known you’d have figured this out before the police,” Max chuckled. “Okay. Give me what you have.”

“Rocky Marchetti goes by the street name of Rock Bottom. He was one of the street pushers that you and Señor Largo busted a few months back at that drug distribution center while we were looking for Danielle.”

“That’s it,” Max groaned. “I knew I’d seen him before, and it’s been driving me crazy.”

“Well, Rock Bottom was apparently part of a burglary crew that’s been hanging out at the casino playing in the daytime poker tournaments for the last couple of months. The leader of the crew is a bodybuilder called Seth Sullivan. He’s apparently in a gang and reports to someone higher up called Grant Martínez.”

“All of these names are new to me,” Max said, sounding concerned. “But go on.”

“The guy I’ve been watching all week, Elliot Kirk, also seems to be involved, but I’m not sure what his role is. According to his wife, he left home last night on an emergency electrical call and never came back.”

“If he’s not in hiding somewhere, counting the money, I’d have to

wonder if he isn't likewise dead with a broken neck," Max mused.

"There's also a woman involved," I said. "Although I'm not sure how deeply she's entangled in this. Her name's Monica Marshall. She apparently used to date Seth, but now she's dating Grant. According to my source, she's likely only there to watch over the crew's activities and report back to Grant."

"Huh," he said thoughtfully. "That's a lot more than the police have. Okay, let me figure out the best way to use this. I'll let you know if we come up with anything."

"Thanks," I said. "I'll do the same. Lenny is currently working with Elliot's wife to see if she wants to pay to have me look for him."

"I get the feeling you'll look for him whether she pays Lenny for it or not," Max said as he snorted out a laugh.

"You're probably right," I said, feeling guilty. "I was supposed to be watching him. I sort of feel responsible that something might have happened."



I drove back to Moogy's condominium complex and got there a little after five-thirty. I didn't think that Moogy and Hannah would meet before the sun went down, but I thought it would be best to make sure.

In addition to an underground parking garage, there must have been close to forty parking spaces surrounding the closely packed group of buildings. It took me several minutes of driving in circles to verify that neither Moogy's Jaguar nor Hannah's Jeep were there.

I met Sophie at the office a few minutes before six. I was somewhat surprised to see that she was wearing a sexy cranberry red dress with a deep V-neck.

"Wow," I said. "Nice dress for a date. Where's Milo taking you?"

"I'm not sure," she said with a laugh. "We're going drinking with some of his buddies from work and their girlfriends. We'll probably end up in a

bar somewhere.”

“So why the dress?” I asked. “It looks like you’re going to the clubs with the cougars.”

“It’s in case we end up going somewhere nice, and Milo forgot to tell me,” she said with a shake of her head. “It’s happened before, and I don’t want to look like an idiot. Besides, Milo doesn’t mind if I dress sexy in front of his friends. I think he likes to show me off.”

“And you love making the other girlfriends jealous?” I asked.

“Well, maybe a little,” she laughed.

Before we left, Sophie punched the information into the secret software for the deep dive searches on Seth Sullivan, Rocky Marchetti, and Grant Martínez.

She also started an active search on Elliot’s phone and credit cards. If he turned on his phone, made a call, or used a card, we’d get his location.

I needed to find out as much as possible about the group. Hopefully, it would give me some leads on the identities of The Professor and Uncle Mike. Then Sophie could use her keyboard magic to help break things open.

If I were lucky, the reports would point out some possible places they could be hiding after the robbery. It would be great if I could lead Max and the police to the money, but I was more interested in finding Elliot Kirk.

His wife was a client and had been trusting me to keep an eye on her husband. True, I couldn’t be expected to stop him from committing felonies, but I could make an effort to find him after the fact. Well, that was assuming Seth hadn’t already killed him.

We drove separately and made it to the parking lot of the condominium complex at around six-forty. Sophie parked in a visitor’s space, which allowed us to see the windows of Moogy’s unit while I did another drive-through of the grounds.

Not seeing the Jaguar or the Jeep, I parked next to Sophie’s yellow Volkswagen convertible and went over to sit with her. It was a beautiful spring night, and my best friend again had the roof open.

As we chatted, Sophie reached into a sack behind her seat and pulled out a couple of small bottles containing peach margaritas. As we cracked

the lids on the cocktails and started sipping, we speculated on everything that had been going on with Elliot.

The deep dive report I had on him was extremely thorough, revealing things about his life that should have probably stayed hidden. Unfortunately, nothing pointed me in the direction of where to find him or more about the people he was with.

Moogy pulled into the lot a little after seven. I had a brief moment of fear that he might park next to us and realize we'd been the people peeping at him at the cabin the other night.

Luckily, he drove to the entrance to the underground parking garage and disappeared down the ramp. Hannah arrived about fifteen minutes later and parked maybe five spaces away from us.

Watching her climb out of her Jeep, she had a wide smile and a bounce in her step as she hurried into the building. Hannah was a tall, pretty girl with medium-length dishwater blonde hair and an athlete's body. She radiated eagerness and sexuality in a short, low-cut, burgundy dress and medium black heels.

"It looks like she's looking forward to her date with Moogy," Sophie noted.

"Yeah," I agreed. "But I have to wonder if Moogy's told her exactly what kind of date it's going to be? I know she's willingly having an affair with a married man, and I don't believe that he's going to injure her physically. But I have to wonder if we somehow should have warned her about what she's walking into."

"Well, I suppose we could still run out and stop her," Sophie said. "But that would completely mess up any chance of us getting the evidence of Moogy being unfaithful."

"I know," I sighed out. "It's one of the parts of the job that I'm not crazy about."

The lights had come on in the condo a few minutes after Moogy had arrived. The shades had been drawn when I'd been in the place earlier in the day, and I doubted Moogy was going to open the blinds before shooting his naughty movies.

Lenny called, and I put it on the speaker at a low volume. From the

road noises in the background, he was in his car.

“I met with Adriana Kirk at her house a few minutes ago,” he said. “She told me everything she told you, and I get the feeling that’s all she knows.”

“Does she want us to look for Elliot?”

“Yeah, go ahead and start the investigation right away. I called in a minor favor, and the detective will meet with us tomorrow morning.”

“Is Adriana going to be okay with spending the money?”

Lenny let out a snort of laughter. “Apparently, she wasn’t kidding when she said she came from a wealthy family. She didn’t blink when I asked for an additional twenty-thousand for the retainer, so feel free to be thorough in your investigation.”

I looked over at Sophie, and she was shaking her head in disgust. I knew I was thinking much the same thing.



We sat in Sophie’s Volkswagen and chatted while each of us sipped another peach margarita. I contemplated that this had been the second Saturday night in a row I’d been trying to get naked pictures of Moogy LaFontaine rather than spending the evening with my boyfriend. The fact that Max was busy looking into the casino robbery and wouldn’t be able to see me in any case didn’t make me feel a lot better.

Sophie took off a little before eight for her date. We agreed to meet back here in the parking lot at nine in the morning to go up to the condo and get the cameras. Sophie said she might be a few minutes late but asked me not to go up without her.

I suppose I could have gone home after Sophie left. But knowing what was likely going on up in Moogy’s place, I had the desire to make sure the ASU student was alright.

Hannah walked back to her car at a little after eleven. Even in the subdued light of the parking lot, I could see that she looked a little rough.

Her hair was a mess, and her makeup was smeared. From the way her mascara had run, she'd been recently crying. She was walking slowly with a slight limp, giving the impression of a woman who was sore and tender.

The look on her face, which had seemed so eager before the date, now looked cold, ashamed, and a little bit angry. She was carrying her heels as she walked across the parking lot and carefully climbed into her Jeep.

Damn.

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Chapter Thirteen



I met Sophie the following morning at a little after nine in the parking lot of Moogy's condo. She was sitting in her yellow convertible with the top down, sipping on a doughnut shop coffee.

She was still in her red dress with her hair up in a messy bun. She wore oversized sunglasses, and as she took them off, it looked like she still had on her makeup from the night before.

"Late night?" I asked.

"Pretty much," she moaned. "We ended up at a sports bar on the Greenbelt called Duke's with his friends and their girlfriends. It was okay, but we didn't get back to his place until after midnight. I don't think I got to sleep until after three, and I only woke up about half an hour ago."

"Well, thanks for coming over," I said. "It's helpful to have a lookout while I pick the lock. These condos are pretty quiet, but I don't want to explain myself to the police on a Sunday morning."

"I mainly came over to see the set-up of Moogy's love nest," Sophie admitted. "I was talking with Milo last night and brought up the idea that we should have a room full of sex toys, restraints, ass-slappers, shackles, and stuff."

"Isn't that what your bedroom already looks like?" I asked.

"Well, sort of," she admitted. "But I was thinking that having a separate room completely dedicated to romance would be hot."

"Sort of like a sex dungeon?" I asked.

"Exactly," she said. "That would keep the spark going in my relationship."

“Well, I saw Hannah when she came out to her car last night. I’m not so sure she had a nice time. She honestly looked a little traumatized. I don’t know exactly what we’re going to find on the videos, but I’m a little worried. Did the reports come back yet on Seth, Grant, and Rock Bottom?”

“Um,” I haven’t even looked at the secret software today,” she admitted. “I’ll look after we’re done over here.”

We walked into the condo complex, and I gave her my clipboard with the authorization letter from our client. We then got into the elevator and headed up to Moogy’s floor.

Sophie stood down the hallway as my lookout while I worked on the lock. Since I’d picked it the day before, I was able to get it open in about half the time.

“Hey,” she beamed as I pushed the door open. “You’re getting better at that. The last time I was with you, it took you forever to get the lock open.”

As we walked in, the first thing that hit us was the smell. The stench was a combination of weed, cigarettes, beer, and stale sweat.

The place was a disgusting mess. There must have been two dozen empty cans of beer and a bottle of high-end tequila with maybe an inch left on the bottom. There were also a dozen dirty plastic shot glasses, along with some dried-out lime slices on a plate.

Neither Sophie nor I said anything for several moments as we walked through the living room, taking everything in. I found two nearly full ashtrays. As I looked closer, I saw there were three types of cigarettes and the remnants of several marijuana joints.

The bed was surrounded by three camera tripods and four of the big umbrella studio lights. Next to the bed was a loose pile of fur-lined handcuffs, ropes, blindfolds, masks, and a couple of long leather slappers. The bed itself was nothing more than a mound of colorful lingerie and clothing from the bedroom closet, along with several stained sheets, towels, giant stuffed animals, and pillows that had been gathered up in the middle.

“Damn,” Sophie said as she looked around. “You’re right about the teenager vibe. I wonder if Moogy had Hannah put her hair in pigtails and put on a cheerleader outfit.”

“It looks like it,” I said as I picked up one of the stained high-school

uniforms from the bed.

“That’s just nasty,” Sophie said as she shook her head.

She then wandered to the desk in the corner of the room and went through a collection of plastic bottles containing massage oils and lubes. “Moogy had quite the party here last night.”

“I assume they have some sort of maid service or cleaning crew that’ll come over and straighten everything up before they film the next set of videos,” I said.

“From the cigarettes, I’d guess at least three people were here last night,” Sophie noted.

“I’d say at least four,” I mused. “The lipstick on the skinny cigarette butts in the ashtray looks like pink rosé. Hannah was wearing strawberry red last night. I’d say it was our college coed, another lady, Moogy, and at least one other guy over here last night shooting videos, maybe two.”

“Damn,” Sophie said, this time with a touch of admiration. “We should probably get your cameras and get out of here before anyone shows up to clean the place.”

“Good idea,” I agreed.

Unfortunately, when I went to grab my spy cameras, they weren’t where I’d put them the day before.

“Crap,” I moaned out.

“What is it?” Sophie asked.

“They’re not here,” I said, frustrated. “Moogy must have found them.”

“Well, your cameras don’t look like cameras,” Sophie pondered. “Maybe they only moved them. Let’s look around.”

We spent three or four minutes hunting through the condo. I went into the back bedroom and bathroom and started looking through the trash cans and drawers while Sophie took the living room and the kitchen.

“I found them,” Sophie eventually called out from the kitchen. She didn’t sound happy.

I hurried to join my best friend and looked where she was pointing. On the counter, there was a small pile of smashed and ripped-apart spy

cameras.

Crap.

I sorted through the mess of electrical parts, wires, buttons, plastic pieces, and batteries. Even the cute little cat had been stomped on and was nothing more than a few broken shards.

I was mainly hunting for the tiny memory cards. Even though the cameras had been destroyed, I could still get the evidence I needed from them. Unfortunately, not even the broken pieces of the cards were there.

I noticed a piece of paper next to the mess on the counter. When I turned it over, a handwritten note read:

*I know you're the same freaking Peeping Tom
bastards who were spying on me at my cabin.
When I catch you, I'm going to tie you to a chair
and pull your goddamn eyes out of their sockets.
Believe that!*

I looked over at Sophie. “*Shit.*”

“Damn,” Sophie said when I showed her the note. “You know, this guy has some serious anger issues.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “But this was our last shot at getting naked pictures of the two of them together. We’re basically back at square one.”



I drove back to my apartment and called our client. When she answered, I could tell she was having a rough time.

“Hi, Adriana. It’s Laura Black. I hear that you’ve asked Lenny to have us look into your husband’s disappearance.”

“Laura, I’m truly starting to worry,” she said. “I know Elliot’s been acting strangely for the past few months, but this is completely out of character.”

“Have you heard from him today?” I asked. “Any phone calls, texts, or emails?”

“No, not a thing,” she said.

“Does Elliot have a place he normally goes to when he wants to get away or just sit and think? Somewhere in the mountains or maybe out in the desert?”

“The detective asked me the same thing when I went in with Leonard this morning,” she said with a small laugh. “As far as I know, he doesn’t have anywhere like that.”

“Well, give me a call if something pops into your head, and I’ll go check it out,” I said. “We’ve already started the process of looking for him.”

“Thanks for letting me know,” she said. “Leonard said you have a lot of experience in this sort of thing.”

“Well, he’s right,” I agreed. “It’s not my first missing person. I’ll keep on it and let you know as soon as I learn anything new.”

After disconnecting with our client, I was at a complete loss as to what to do next. I went back to flipping through the reports on Elliot Kirk and Monica Marshall. I was still hoping that some crucial fact would jump out at me, but nothing seemed out of line.



I got a call from Sophie a little after three. From the background noises, it sounded like she was driving.

“Hey,” she said. “The secret software reports on those three guys came in.”

“That was fast,” I said. “I guess you’re still in good graces with the Men in Black.”

“I suppose,” she said. “I went over to the office and printed them out. I also looked at the search. Elliot’s phone hasn’t been on since Friday night, and his credit cards haven’t been used.”

“You went back to the office?” I asked. “That’s twice this weekend.”

“Yeah,” she said with a sigh. “I’ve been napping at my desk and screwing around on my phone a lot over the past couple of days. Maybe this

will help make up for it.”

“I’ll be sure to mention it to Lenny the next time he gives you a hard time about something.”

“Thanks,” she said. “Would it be okay if you went down to the office and picked them up? I’d drive them over to your place, but Milo wants to take me shopping and then to dinner, and I’m heading over to his place.”

“No problem,” I said. “What are you shopping for?”

“Oh, he wants to go get some sort of new tool to work on his car. I thought he already had every type of tool they made, but I guess there’s a tiny spot in his workshop that could fit one more. Did you come up with any brilliant new ideas about where we can find our client’s husband?”

“I must have gone through his and Monica’s reports a dozen times by now. So far, I’m coming up with squat. I’m hoping there’ll be something in the new reports that’ll help.”

“Okay, but don’t call me tonight unless it’s important. After going tool shopping with Milo, he’s going to need to spend the rest of the night making it up to me. I probably won’t be answering the phone unless you ring me two or three times.”

I swung by the office and grabbed the reports Sophie had put on my desk. I wasn’t looking forward to spending my Sunday evening going through the folders and learning the sordid details of each of their lives, but it looked like I didn’t have much of a choice.

I next returned to my apartment, sat on the couch, and flipped through the reports on Seth Sullivan, Rocky Marchetti, and Grant Martínez. At first, Marlowe was interested in what I was doing, and he sat on my lap as I read.

After about half an hour, he got up and wandered into the bedroom. “She’s not there,” I called out to my cat, knowing where he was headed.

Ignoring me, I heard him use the cat door on the balcony. He then must have gone over to Grandma’s to see if she had any sort of early dinner for him. When he returned a few minutes later, he had a sour look on his face.

“I told you,” I said. “She won’t be back until Tuesday.”

Feeling somewhat bad for Marlowe, I got up and dug around the cupboard, coming up with a packet of squishy nibbles as a snack to make

up for it.

I read through each of the files carefully, but after making it through the first pass, I'd come up with nothing. True, each of them was a scummy career criminal with a long history of arrests. They'd each served time in various jails and prisons throughout the Southwest, but the files didn't indicate where they could be hiding now that they'd entered the big leagues and robbed a casino.

Grant had a vacation home in Rocky Point that I thought was a vague possibility. Still, I also saw that it was currently being used as a vacation rental and was being managed by a local condo rental service.

That didn't completely knock it off the list, but it did make it less likely that it could be used as a hideout on a moment's notice. Plus, fleeing over the border into Mexico with upwards of ten million dollars didn't sound like a good idea.

I'd been especially interested in Rock Bottom's report. It showed his recent arrest at Lillian Abbot's drug warehouse and his multiple charges of drug possession and distribution. Then, it had an odd explanation about how the charges were all on hold—*deferred adjudication under special circumstances* was the term the report used.

After that point, the file went silent on his activities. There wasn't a mention of how he'd joined a new robbery gang, who was on the crew, or anything about his death.

An hour after I'd eaten the last frozen thing I had in the freezer for dinner, the theme to *The Love Boat* started playing on my phone. When I answered, Max sounded tired and a little frustrated.

"Hey," I said. "How's your investigation coming along?"

"It still seems a little strange to hear you ask me that," he chuckled, then let out a sigh. "But honestly, we aren't getting anywhere. I was hoping you had some better news for me."

"I'm gathering information on the crew involved in the robbery. They're the same names I told you about earlier. But so far, there isn't a clue about where they could be. I'm also trying to work out the identities of the last two men involved."

"I might be able to help you out with that," he said. "I've heard the

police talk about one more name today, Delbert Collins. Apparently, some of his latent prints were found inside the vault and on the cart they used to transport the money.”

“That’s helpful,” I said. “We’ll dig into it and let you know what we come up with.”

“I appreciate the help you’re giving me with this. I’m a little out of my element when it comes to gathering criminal evidence and police procedure.”

“It’s no problem,” I said with a laugh. “But yeah, you owe me. It might take you months to work off your debt.”



I got up relatively early the following day. I knew I needed to focus on Elliot and there was still the matter of restarting the Moogy assignment.

After getting dressed, putting my hair in a ponytail, and fixing myself a quick breakfast, I grabbed the report folders and drove to the office. I then strolled through the back door, plopped down at my desk, and let out a sigh.

“Hey, why do you look so glum?” Sophie asked as she glanced up from her keyboard.

“I’m worried about Elliot,” I admitted. “I’m still going through the reports, but they aren’t showing me a lot. I also need to redo the Moogy and Hannah thing. I hate to start the whole assignment over, but it looks like I don’t have a choice.”

“The last time you were in Moogy’s office, you had the chance to flip through his calendar. Did he have any sex dates written in for this week?”

“I didn’t see any,” I said, thinking back to when I had broken in, now almost two weeks ago. “He had the three appointments written in for last week, but this week was blank.”

“Maybe Moogy wasn’t so sure Hannah would want to go out with him again after he lured her over to the movie studio in the condo and made those pornos with her and those other people.”

“That’s possible,” I admitted. “I remember what she looked like when she came back out to her car Saturday night. I wouldn’t be surprised if she never wanted to see him again.”

“So, what are you going to do?” Sophie asked.

I looked at her, shrugged, and nodded my head.

“Wait, you aren’t thinking about going back to Moogy’s club and going through his calendar again? Are you?” she asked somewhat skeptically.

“I really don’t want to,” I said, “but that might be the only way. My only hope of getting a picture of the two of them naked is if they get together again. I’m going to need to sneak into Moogy’s office one more time and take a peek at his calendar to figure out where they’ll be.

“Okay,” Sophie said. “But now that he’s onto us, I get the feeling it’s going to be a lot tougher to sneak into his office.”

“Probably,” I said. “But that’s where Moogy seems to write the locations of his love rendezvous. Hopefully, he has some dates with either Hannah or maybe a new girlfriend written in for this week.”

“Do you want me to come along and be the lookout again?” she asked. “I don’t mind doing that.”

“Thanks,” I said, “but I don’t think I’ll need you this time. If it’s like before, I should be able to get in and out within about five minutes. Having two people hanging out in the back hallway might seem a little suspicious.”

“Well, be careful,” she warned. “That Moogy guy doesn’t seem all that stable, and we’ve pissed him off. That threat of his to pull our eyes out seemed pretty real to me.”

“I got that feeling, too,” I sighed.

“Actually,” Sophie confided as she lowered her voice, “I’ve been a little freaked out about having someone pull my eyes out of their sockets ever since I saw the movie *Kill Bill*, and that was back in college.”

“Seriously?” I asked. “A movie from back then still makes you lose it.”

“I swear to God,” Sophie said as she held up both hands. “The first time I saw Uma Thurman pull Daryl Hannah’s eye out of her skull, I almost lost it. I can’t even listen to that scene. Even after all these years, I still have to close my eyes and do the ‘la-la-la-la’ thing during that part.”

“Then, it’s probably best if you don’t think a lot about *Kill Bill* for a couple of days,” I said.

“When are you going to go back to the club?” she asked.

“I might as well do it today,” I said. “I’ll wait until the lunch crowd slacks off, then head over. Have you had a chance to look through the three reports you printed off for me yesterday?”

“Sort of,” she said, pointing to one of the files open on her monitor. “I’ve mostly been busy with Lenny’s stuff today and haven’t done anything more than flip through them. But all three men look like your basic criminal types.”

“That’s what I got, too,” I said as I shook my head. “I’ll need to hunt around for The Professor and Uncle Mike.”

“How are you going to do that?” she asked.

“Seth and Grant each have a long list of people listed as known associates, and I’ll start there. Rock Bottom’s list was a little shorter. Nothing jumped out, but I was going to search around this afternoon to see if I could make any connections.”

“Good luck,” she said. “Let me know if you learn any new names.”

“Thanks,” I said. “I did get a name from Max this morning, Delbert Collins. I don’t know if he has anything to do with this, but the police found his prints on the cart that moved the money, and they think he might have been involved in the robbery.”

“Okay,” she said. “I’ll do a search and see if there’s a connection with anyone on our list.”

“I’ll go through the folders again as well,” I said. “I get the feeling the police are going to look for the crooks in all the obvious places. We usually do better if we look somewhere out of the way. Have you had any luck with the search on Elliot’s phone or credit cards?”

“Not a peep,” she said, shaking her head. “I also expanded it to cover Monica, Seth, and Grant. I haven’t gotten a thing back on any of them. Of course, if they are really professional thieves, they might have switched to burner phones and are using cash while they lay low.”

I grabbed a Diet Pepsi from the breakroom fridge and sat down to start

going through the reports again. As Sophie had said, the three men seemed to be your basic criminal types.

I again reviewed their arrests and convictions but couldn't spot any pattern. Everyone on the crew, with the exception of Rocky, had a long history of burglary.

It made me wonder again why Rock Bottom was a part of this group. His main skill seemed to be selling narcotics. It made me wonder if this had been part of why he was murdered.

I wasn't surprised that neither Rocky nor Seth owned any real estate. Men with long-term criminal histories tended to be renters. Still, it would have made my job easier if there were a few out-of-the-way houses or places in the woods I could check out.

I then started going through the lists of known associates, starting with Rock Bottom's. I punched the names into Google and looked to see if they had any social media accounts or photos on the internet.

None of the people on the lists immediately stood out as significant. But, ever the optimist, I'd been hoping to make some sort of breakthrough.

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Chapter Fourteen



A little after eleven, we decided to take a lunch break, and Sophie suggested the original Carolina's Mexican, one of my favorite lunch places in The Valley. She drove us to the unassuming restaurant nestled in a formerly bustling residential area about a mile west of Sky Harbor airport.

Walking into the place was always a mixed experience. The noisy crowds and long lines were a given, but saying the décor was sparse was an understatement. Other than a simple banner with the restaurant's name hanging on the wall, no pictures or decorations were visible.

Not that this was bad or even a negative. Instead, it somehow added to the vibe of the place. It was readily apparent that no one came to Carolina's for the sophisticated atmosphere.

After the wait in line, we got our orders and found a place to sit. My stomach had been rumbling since I'd taken in my first good whiff of the food cooking in the kitchen. I'd gotten my usual, a shredded beef burro, enchilada style, smothered in green sauce and melted cheese, along with a crunchy shredded beef taco.

We'd each gotten several small cups of the best salsa in town and dumped it on our burros. From the first bite, neither one of us said a lot. We were both concentrating on the delicious food.

We ate steadily until there was nothing left. As it always did, finishing lunch at Carolina's left me a little sad and also eager for my next trip here.

We got back to the office a little after one, and I went back to reading the reports on Seth, Rocky, and Grant. It was getting to the point that I was memorizing much of the information simply by going through it so many times.

My phone rang, and I was surprised to see Grandma Henderson calling me. “Hi, Grandma,” I said when I answered. “Is everything alright?”

“Yes, Dear, everything’s fine,” she said, sounding a little annoyed. “But I wanted to let you know that we’re staying another day. I didn’t want you or Marlowe to worry when we didn’t come home tomorrow.”

In the background, I heard Bob saying something about the rain. He seemed somewhat frustrated or maybe even angry.

“No worries,” I said. “Thanks for letting me know. I’ll see you later in the week. I hope you have a good vacation.”

That was odd.

As I disconnected with Grandma, I glanced up at the clock. With a feeling of dread, I knew it was about time to go to Moogy’s.

I didn’t think I needed to do the full disguise, but I felt like I should at least try to obscure my features. I put on an Arizona Diamondbacks baseball cap and fed my ponytail through the hole in the back.

I then dug around in my drawers until I found a particular pair of oversized sunglasses. I liked using these because the tinting on the lenses was minimal. They let me see clearly when I was inside a building, but they still helped to obscure my features, at least somewhat.

I also searched through the coat rack in the back of the office until I found an old, oversized ASU sweatshirt hanging on the hook. I shook it a couple of times to help remove the dust that had accumulated on it. I then pulled it over the turquoise cotton top I’d been wearing.

Honestly, it wasn’t much of a disguise, but after everything that had happened the past week, I wanted to wear at least a little camouflage. If Moogy were there, he’d at least have to look twice before he could confirm it was me.

I walked across Scottsdale Road to the nightclub district and made my way to Moogy’s. Technically, the place was more of a restaurant that hosted bands than an actual nightclub. As such, it opened at eleven in the morning and had good lunch traffic.

When I walked in, the bulk of the midday crowd was gone. There was only a small group of dedicated day drinkers sitting at the bar, along with a few random tourists with their bags of souvenirs scattered throughout the

tables.

It had been a nice day, typical of April in Scottsdale, and my bulky sweatshirt was starting to feel warm. But I didn't want to draw additional attention to myself by stripping it off in the club.

I sat at the end of the bar and ordered a diet. I wasn't sure what they shot into the glass with the soda gun behind the counter, but it definitely wasn't Pepsi.

I sipped the nasty-tasting soda for a few minutes, then got up and casually wandered to the back hallway. This led to both the bathrooms and the office.

The last time I'd been here, the office door had been locked, but it had been a cheap model, reminding me of my bathroom lock as a kid. Simply by inserting a lockpicking tool and twisting, I'd been able to go right in. Unfortunately, when I looked at the door today, there was a shiny new keypad-encoded deadbolt lock on it.

Crap.

I took a picture of the keypad, then went into a bathroom stall and looked up the model number. According to the online owner's manual, it took a four-digit sequence to open it.

The instructions didn't say what would happen if multiple incorrect combinations were entered. It looked like you could simply keep trying until you got the correct four-digit sequence.

I pulled out my phone and called the office. "Sophie," I said quietly when she answered, "there's a new keypad lock on the office door at the club that takes four numbers to open."

"I got the feeling Moogy would eventually guess how we could keep finding out where he and Hannah were meeting," she said. "What are you going to do?"

"Could you look into the secret software report we have on him? I'm thinking it's probably either his birthday or maybe his wife's or one of his kids'. But I could be completely off, and it's something else."

"Oh, sure," Sophie mumbled, her mouth now full of something she was eating. "Let me open up the report, and I'll dig around. Give me ten minutes or so, and I'll text you the most likely candidates."

I strolled back to the bar and ordered another foul-tasting diet soda. I would have much rather had a scotch or even a beer, but I knew I needed to keep my wits as I tried to break into Moogy's office.

My phone dinged about fifteen minutes later with a list of maybe a dozen four-digit combinations. Most of the first two numbers were either zero or one, so I assumed they were important birthdays or anniversaries of some sort.

I went back into the hallway and stopped in front of the office door. I listened for several moments and tried to determine if anyone was in there.

Not hearing anything, I knocked. If the door did open, my only play would be to use the *drunken woman looking for the bathroom* excuse.

I would then have to hope that Moogy wouldn't recognize me. If he made me out to be one of the people he'd been shooting at in the mountains, I could be in serious trouble.

When no one answered the door, I pulled up Sophie's text. Fortunately, the music in the club was relatively quiet this time of day.

I listened for anyone approaching from the main room as I entered the first number sequence from the list. When I entered the fourth digit, the lock beeped at me three times, and the keys flashed red.

That's one down, eleven to go.

I tried the numbers on Sophie's list one by one. After the fifth number, I heard someone coming and hurried back into the ladies' room.

It turned out to be one of the guys in the restaurant who had only needed to use the bathroom. I stood in front of the mirror and waited for him to leave.

The man took his time, and I mentally willed him to hurry. After listening to him go at it for at least a minute, he finally finished and left the bathroom, but without washing his hands.

Gross.

I went back to the office door and continued down the list. When I reached the ninth or tenth number, the keypad beeped once, and I heard the internal mechanism slide open the deadbolt.

Finally.

I walked into the office and looked around to make sure no one was hiding. I then went to the desk and saw Moogy's calendar notebook sitting where it had been the last time I'd been in here.

I opened the book and flipped pages until I got to the current week. To my horror, instead of Moogy and Hannah's love schedule, a message was written in bright red ink.

I've got you now, you freaking Peeping Tom bastard! You've screwed up big time. I'm going to hang your eyes on my wall. Believe that!

With my heart racing, I looked around the office. On a shelf behind Moogy's desk was a high-end video camera that hadn't been there the last time. It was pointed directly at my face.

Shit.

I hurried over to it and hoped it was like my spy cameras, feeding the video images into a memory card. Unfortunately, there was a black cable leaving from the back of the camera and going into the wall.

Crap.

The computer the camera was attached to could be anywhere in the building, or the signal could even be broadcast offsite. I had no chance of getting to it and erasing the video of me going through Moogy's office.

Doing my best to stay calm, I opened the door a tiny crack and looked into the hallway. Not seeing anyone, I stepped outside.

On a hunch, I stopped and looked up toward the ceiling. As I suspected, a second video camera was mounted about halfway up the wall and pointed at the office door. That hadn't been here the last time, either.

Damn it.

Trying to be as calm as possible, I went into the bar and casually made my way to the front door. When no one followed me as I stepped into the street, I began to walk back to the law office.

The farther I got from Moogy's, the faster I walked. By the time I'd made it to Scottsdale Road, I'd nearly sprinted across it.

Five minutes later, I went through the front door to the office. Debbie was at her desk, arranging a pile of folders to be filed.

"Good Lord," she exclaimed as she looked at me. "What happened to

you?”

“Um, I’m having a bad afternoon,” I said.

“I can see that,” she agreed, looking at me with concern. “Let me know if there’s anything I can do for you.”

“Thanks,” I said. “I’ll let you know.”

I went to the back office, and Sophie looked at me with alarm. “Jeez, what happened to you?” she asked.

“I’m having a shitty day,” I said as I plopped down on my chair.

“I’ll say,” she said as she looked closer. “It looks like you got chased by a ghost.”

“I was able to get into the office,” I said. “But the whole thing was a set-up. Moogy had placed video cameras both inside and outside his office. He now has several minutes of high-definition videos of me going through his things. He’ll know it’s been me all along. He left a note and threatened to pull out my eyes again, only this time he threatened to hang them on his wall.”

“Damn,” Sophie said, shaking her head. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but I’m sort of glad I didn’t go over there with you.”

“Shut up,” I moaned. “This assignment is really starting to go downhill fast. What have you been up to?”

“Oh,” she said brightly. “You’re going to love this. I was digging around Seth’s social media accounts, and he’s posted a lot of pictures. Take a look at this guy. He could pretty much pass for Gandalf.”

Sophie pointed to her computer, and the man I’d been calling Uncle Mike was on the screen. “That’s him,” I said. “Who is he?”

“You’re going to laugh, but this guy really is Seth’s uncle. Only his name’s Leo West.”

“Go figure,” I said. “I guess if you’re going to start a criminal gang, it’s best to have family.”

“I also looked into the Delbert Collins name Max gave you,” Sophie said. “Once I found Uncle Leo, I went through his Facebook. He had Delbert in a picture and had tagged him.”

“And?”

“I’m pretty sure he’s the guy you’ve been calling The Professor. He’s about the right age, anyway.”

Sophie then flipped her computer to Facebook and brought up the posted image. Sure enough, next to a man who looked like a cross between Jerry Garcia and Gandalf the Gray was The Professor.

“That’s him,” I said, pointing to the screen.

“Good,” Sophie said. “I’ve already punched them both into the secret software. We should get the reports back tomorrow morning.”

“Alright,” I sighed. “Let me know if you find out anything else. I’ll get ahold of Adriana and see if she’s heard from Elliot. I should probably also tell her why her husband has gone missing.”

“Do you think that’s a good idea?” Sophie asked, doubt in her voice. “She freaked out when she thought he might be having an affair. If she finds out that he’s part of a burglary gang and people in the crew are getting murdered, it might send her over the edge.”

“I think she’s going to find out one way or the other,” I said. “It would probably be best if she heard it from me rather than the police.”



I drove home and called Adriana Kirk. She picked up the phone right away.

“Laura,” she said as she answered. I could hear the desperation in her voice. “Have you heard anything?”

“Hi, Adriana,” I said, trying to sound calm. “I don’t have a lot of new information so far. I was wondering if you’ve heard anything?”

“No, nothing,” she said with a sad laugh. “The only phone calls I’ve been getting are from the police, and now you, asking if I’ve heard anything.”

“We’ve started a search on Elliot’s phone and his credit cards,” I said. “If there’s activity on either, we’ll be able to figure out where he is.”

“I just don’t understand any of this,” she said, clearly frustrated. “Why would Elliot simply take off like that? You said he wasn’t having an affair, but are you sure he isn’t somewhere with a girlfriend?”

“Um, there’s something you should know about,” I said. “I don’t know anything for sure yet, but there’s a possibility that Elliot was involved in a robbery that happened Friday night at Casino Scottsdale.”

“A robbery?” she yelled into the phone. “Are you f-ing serious? Elliot was involved in a robbery?”

The phone then went silent, and I let her process the information. “Okay,” she said after almost a minute had passed. I could tell she was still upset, but she was speaking in a calmer voice. “Thanks for telling me. That makes sense now.”

“What? Did something happen?”

“A different detective was over here today asking about Elliot. He wanted to find him, but he also asked a lot of questions about Elliot’s criminal history and whether he still had any criminal associates. His questions had started to piss me off, since I couldn’t see a relationship. But now, maybe there is one.”

“Like I said, I don’t know how deeply he’s involved. He might be on the outside and not directly involved in the actual robbery, but I thought you should know.”

“No, I appreciate it,” she said quietly. “Things are a lot clearer now. I’ve had the local news on all weekend to see if they had anything on Elliot, and the robbery was the biggest story in Arizona. They said a man was murdered and found in the vault. Do you think Elliot had anything to do with that?”

“No, I think it was someone else. If Elliot was involved, I get the feeling your husband was only there for his skills as an electrician.”

I let her know that I’d call the moment I heard anything new and disconnected. I then sat for a moment, feeling terrible for Adriana and the entire situation.

After a quick dinner, I searched around on the internet for a couple of hours, looking for anything I could find on Leo West and Delbert Collins. I didn’t get a lot, but I wanted to share what I’d learned so far. I picked up my

phone from the coffee table and called Max.

“Hey,” I said when he answered. “Am I bugging you?”

“Not at all,” he said in his steady and confident voice. “We’re going to have our daily wrap-up meeting in a few minutes, but I’m glad you called.”

I love it when he’s glad I called.

“Good, I’ve gotten a confirmation on the name you gave me. Delbert Collins was on the crew, and he’s been playing poker in Casino Scottsdale with everyone else for the past several weeks. I looked up his LinkedIn profile. He’s a computer programmer specializing in business security systems.”

“A computer programmer would help to explain the hacking into our system and how they were able to disarm the alarms,” Max said.

“The other man is Leo West. Leo is Seth Sullivan’s uncle.”

“And Seth is the bodybuilder and head of the group that broke into the vault?” Max asked.

“That’s my theory,” I said. “I’ve looked up Uncle Leo’s Instagram postings, and he has a lot of guns. I’m guessing that he was the one shooting the darts at your security guards.”

“That makes five names,” Max said. “Everyone you saw last week is now accounted for. Unless there are others involved that we don’t know about, the next step is finding out where they might be.”

“Sophie’s already started her searches. She’ll look for the obvious things first. If any of them make a phone call or use a credit card, we’ll have a record of the location. Hopefully, that will help narrow down where they’re hiding.”

“I appreciate you sharing this with me,” Max said. “I’ll pass it along, and hopefully, the detective in charge will be able to make some better sense of it.”

“Do you know when you’ll get some free time?” I asked. “I know I was with you Saturday morning, but it seems like a long time since we’ve seen each other.”

“The initial rush in the investigation is over, but it’s still keeping me busy. Let’s try to set something up in a day or two.”

“That sounds perfect,” I said.

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Chapter Fifteen



I woke up early the following day and stared at the ceiling for several minutes. I had no clue where to go next with the Moogy assignment. What's worse, he might be actively hunting for me so he could tie me to a chair, pull my eyes out, and hang them on his wall.

The Elliot Kirk assignment wasn't going a lot better. He was missing, the money from the casino was gone, and I didn't have a clue where to look next. Hopefully, the files on Leo West and Delbert Collins were going to show me something new.

I eventually told myself that I wouldn't get anywhere by lying in bed. I rolled out, took a shower, and got ready for the day.

I made it to the office a little before eight and was surprised to see Gina sitting at her desk, chatting with Sophie.

"Hey, you," I said. "I haven't seen you since Friday. How are your assignments going? I hear you have two."

"I'm up to three," she said with a laugh. "I know Lenny's making a mint from J. Barrett Knight. But he's had these other three cases sitting on his desk for several weeks. I think the retainers were starting to call out to him."

"Well, good luck," I said with a laugh. "Let me know if I can help."

"I will," she said. "Although, I hear you're still working two as well. Are you doing okay with those?"

"It looks like our client's husband is likely involved in the robbery of Casino Scottsdale," I said with a shake of my head.

"I heard about that," Gina said. "Hopefully, he's only in hiding and not dead. If the police arrest him, maybe Lenny can represent him."

“Yeah, that’s the hope,” I said. “Sophie’s running searches on everyone, but nothing’s come up yet.”

“Let me know how I can help,” she said. “What about your other assignment with Moogy LaFontaine? Sophie said you were caught on a video camera as you broke into the office at his club.”

“Yeah,” I admitted. “I got nothing useful, and now I’ve got a pissed-off club owner to worry about.”

“I’d normally say the next step is to follow him around and see where he goes. But if he’s alert to your surveillance, that might be a challenge. Maybe you could put a tracker on his car? You wouldn’t know where he was going until after he got there, but you’d at least know that much.”

“It might come to that if I can’t come up with any new brilliant ideas,” I admitted.

After a few minutes, Gina took off to work on her assignments. Sophie printed out the new files that had come in on Leo West and Delbert Collins.

I grabbed a Diet Pepsi from the breakroom fridge, sat at my desk, and started to get to work. I was determined to figure out what was going on.

I first opened the file on Delbert and flipped through it. He was an Arizona native and a graduate of ASU with a degree in computer science. He worked as a computer programmer for a company in Scottsdale that specialized in setting up alarms and security systems.

The file listed some of the banks, casinos, and jewelry stores that he’d worked with since joining the company. I got the feeling if I looked up the stores that Seth’s crew had robbed over the years, the list would be a pretty close match. It made me wonder why no one had ever put that together before.

Delbert didn’t own any property and seemed to be deeply in debt. He lived in an apartment in Mesa, and his credit was crap. However, it wasn’t quite as bad as Elliot’s.

The report on Leo West revealed two things. First, he had registered close to thirty rifles and pistols. In addition to owning many guns, Leo seemed concerned with the end of the world and living off the grid.

He was involved in several doomsday groups that would sell you a year’s worth of pre-packaged freeze-dried food, install a solar-powered

electrical system, or build you an underground bunker to keep you alive “after civilization collapsed.”

I then went on to the section in the report that described his income and possessions. That’s when I noticed that he owned two houses.

I opened the map of Arizona on my computer and typed in the addresses. His main residence was a small two-bedroom in Tempe, not far from where Professor Mindy lived. He’d apparently lived in it for over ten years.

The other one was in southeast Mesa, a couple of miles east of Gateway Airport off South Mountain Road. From the map, this house was in a mixed residential and light industrial stretch of desert called Superstition Vista Ranches. He had acquired the home and the surrounding property when he’d divorced his first wife in the late nineties.

A second house in itself wasn’t all that unusual. A lot of people owned a cabin or a rental property. However, the house in Mesa was noteworthy in that it sat in the middle of sixteen acres of desert, and Leo apparently never received any income from it.

“I can’t find anything solid in the reports,” I said to Sophie as I closed the folder after reading through it twice. “But I did see that Uncle Leo has an empty house in the desert in southeast Mesa.”

“That sounds promising,” Sophie said, looking up from her computer.

“I’ll go over and check it out,” I said. “I’m out of leads and need to see everything. If that doesn’t pan out, I might need to head down for a quick trip to Rocky Point. Grant Martínez has a rental house on the beach in Las Conchas, not too far from where Jackie was staying that time we went down.”

At hearing this, Sophie perked up. “Well, if you go to Rocky Point, I’ll go down with you. A road trip sounds like a great idea. I could use a big shrimp cocktail and some cervezas from one of the restaurants down by the fish market.”

While Sophie began to work on a new set of motions for Lenny, I made my way out to southeast Mesa. The drive to the remote part of The Valley was longer than I realized, and it must have taken me forty minutes to get there.

The property was in a stretch of desert that had been divided into sixteen-acre ranches connected by a grid of dirt roads. None of the lots seemed to have any sort of zoning restrictions.

Some nice newer houses on pristine desert lots were next to houses that were halfway falling apart. Several lots contained businesses that seemed to deal in scrap metal, auto repair, trailer storage, and junk cars.

Some of the lots consisted of nothing more than a small, neglected house surrounded by several years' worth of garbage. I saw stacks of discarded household appliances, desks, filing cabinets, rusted bicycles, old motorcycles, and cars without tires or glass in the windshields.

I found Uncle Leo's house from the navigator on my phone. I slowed but did not stop as I drove by the lot. Not surprisingly, it was one of the trashier places on the street.

There was a fence around the property. It was only eight feet high, but it was made from chain-link with strips of white and green plastic woven through it, so I had a hard time seeing details of what was inside.

As I drove past the open space for the driveway, I was able to get a better peek at the house. The windows had closed blinds, and there weren't any cars parked in the driveway. As far as I could tell from the street, nobody was there, and the home felt abandoned.

Behind the house were several outbuildings. One was an open-sided carport garage, and the others were closed metal sheds of various sizes. One of which was almost as big as the house. If we'd been in farm country, I would have called it a barn.

This large building intrigued me, and I thought it would be interesting to explore. But I knew better than to walk around a potentially dangerous location without checking it out in more detail first.

A couple of junk cars sat in the courtyard next to the carport. Both seemed to be in various stages of being dismantled. I didn't see a vehicle anywhere on the property that could move under its own power.

I wasn't surprised when I saw several rows of solar cells mounted on metal poles behind the house. Knowing how Uncle Leo liked to prepare for the end of the world, I also wouldn't have been surprised if he had a year or two's worth of food stashed somewhere in the house.

I drove the two hundred yards to the end of the dirt street. It dead-ended, and there was a place to turn around.

Rather than take off right away, I parked the car and sat. I wanted to get a better feel for the area and was curious to see if anyone would drive into or out of the property.

I ended up sitting at the end of the long dirt road for about four hours. The street was empty all morning except for a group of seven or eight javelinas, which wandered through about eleven o'clock.

These pig-like animals traveled throughout The Valley to hunt for food and were each about the height of a medium-sized dog. The squadron had a couple of baby javelinas with them, and I watched them play as the group searched around the neighborhood for food.

By two thirty, I hadn't seen anyone coming or going from any of the properties, so I decided not to stay here all day. It was past lunchtime, and I was starting to get hungry.

As I drove by the house again, it still looked abandoned. I stopped the car, jumped out, and placed one of my tiny spy cameras a short way inside the fence at the driveway's entrance. I'd already turned it on and set it so it would record all night.

I would have rather used a camera that broadcasts to the internet so I could then monitor the house from my desk at the office. But without somewhere to plug in my equipment, I was stuck with using a battery-powered one.

I got back in my car before anyone could tell that I'd been up to something sneaky and took off. Once I'd made it back to Scottsdale, I stopped by an In-N-Out for a late lunch.



I got back to the office a little after three thirty. When I walked in through the back door, Sophie was sitting at her desk, flipping through videos on her phone.

"What's happening at Uncle Leo's house?" she asked without looking

up. “Anything going on over there?”

“Nope,” I said. “It looks like an abandoned property, but I set up a video camera in case someone goes in or out tonight.”

“Good idea,” she said without enthusiasm.

“You really do space out when you watch videos,” I said.

“Um, yeah,” she agreed, still looking at her phone. “It, like, puts me in a trance, and time flies by. I can easily spend an hour doing this. I love it for when work starts to get on my nerves.”

“Um, Sophie? Laura?” Debbie’s voice called out over the intercom. She sounded a little nervous. “Could you both come up here right away? There’s someone who needs to talk with you.”

I looked at Sophie, and she shrugged. “Sure,” I said as I pushed the intercom button on the phone. “We’ll be right there.”

We walked up to the front, where Agent Anderson from the unknown government intelligence service was standing in front of Debbie’s desk, waiting for us to enter the reception lobby. Another agent stood silently in front of the door to the street and appeared to be keeping watch over the room.

As with the last time we’d had a visit from the Men in Black, the agents were wearing pastel golf shirts, khaki slacks, and sunglasses. Neither man was smiling or had any other type of expression.

Through the big picture window, we could see a large, black SUV parked in front of the office. Another grim-looking man stood on the sidewalk near our front door.

It didn’t look like he was going to let anyone into the building until the agents inside were through with us. In thinking about it, I wouldn’t be surprised if they had another man stationed outside the back of our building as well.

“Miss Rodriguez and Miss Black,” Agent Anderson said in his deep, slow, monotone voice. “I assume you remember who I am?”

“Yeah,” Sophie said, giving the man some attitude. “I remember who you are. You’re the ones who put that mind control chip in my head. Did you come here to talk about how you’re going to get it back out?”

“Um, Agent Anderson,” I fumbled out before Sophie’s defiant tone got us into trouble. “What can we do for you?”

“I’d like a word, with both of you,” he said. “Shall we go into your conference room? I’m sure Miss Thompson will excuse us.”

“You go anywhere you want,” Debbie said, holding up her hands. “I’ll just sit here and wait for everyone to leave.”

I led the agent into the conference room, and Sophie followed, her eyes on the man the entire time. She closed the door, and everybody took a seat at the conference table.

“Miss Rodriguez,” Agent Anderson said to Sophie. “As you are aware, our agency has listed you as a credible intelligence source, and we’ve been closely monitoring your use of our resources.”

“Yeah,” she said, again with a cheeky tone. “I’ve done what you told me and haven’t been using the database to look up my old boyfriends or the people I went to high school with anymore.”

“Indeed,” he said. “I’ve been authorized to inform you that we continue to be impressed by the way you’ve conducted yourself with the sensitive information you’ve had access to.”

“Well, I’m glad you finally recognized I’m a team player,” Sophie said as she flipped her hair back.

There was then a moment of silence where we all looked at each other.

“Was that it, Agent Anderson?” I asked, confused as to why he was there.

“We are aware that you are currently looking into the activities of certain individuals connected to a recent robbery and murder at a local casino,” he said. “Again, this is a legitimate use of the database, and we have used your insights to alert the local authorities of the possible connections.”

“That’s right,” I said. “The husband of our client, Elliot Kirk, seems to be involved in the robbery, and now he’s gone missing. I’m checking out a house in the desert in southeast Mesa, but I still don’t have a firm location of where any of the gang members are hiding.”

“As you may have surmised, our agency does not normally concern

itself with domestic murders and robberies,” Agent Anderson said. “We generally leave those matters to the local authorities. However, in this case, we have needed to intervene.”

“Why is this one different?” I asked, not really expecting an answer.

“I’ll be as candid as I can be, Miss Black. We have an interest in the activities of a certain criminal enterprise led locally by a lieutenant named Grant Martínez. The main group is based out of Las Vegas and is overseen by a vicious man named Marcus Thorne. Again, we usually do not involve ourselves in these types of organizations. However, in this instance, we believe that this particular group is involved in activities that will directly harm our country.”

“Like how?” I asked. “Are they terrorists?”

“I’ve been authorized to inform you that we had an asset embedded in the group,” Agent Anderson said, ignoring my question. “Unfortunately, he was murdered during the robbery at the casino. We believe he was killed by the enforcer of the organization, a dangerous and unstable man named Seth Sullivan.”

“Rock Bottom was working for you?” I asked.

“He was not an employee of our agency,” Agent Anderson said, giving us a slight scowl. “Like both of you, Mr. Marchetti was simply a concerned citizen who wished to serve his country by keeping us informed on the activities of a known criminal organization.”

“This wouldn’t have anything to do with him trying to worm his way out of his latest drug bust?” I asked. “Would it?”

Agent Anderson looked at me, seemingly impressed. “As a matter of fact, Mr. Marchetti had been cooperating with us to have his sentence for drug trafficking significantly reduced and his criminal record expunged.”

“Okay,” I said. “How can we help?”

“I realize that you need to attempt to retrieve your client’s husband and possibly recover the money stolen from the casino,” he said. “However, if at all possible, do not pursue or otherwise interfere with the leader of the local group, Grant Martínez, or his current girlfriend, Monica Marshall. We wish them to stay out of the hands of local police if at all possible, and we wish no harm to come to them.”

“Is there a reason?” I asked. “I won’t have much say in what happens to them if the police are involved.”

Agent Anderson was wearing an earpiece, and he seemed to be listening to someone for instructions. “I’m not authorized to answer that question,” he finally said. “And I would ask you not to speculate on the reason.”

“Alright,” I said. “I’ll do what I can to keep them safe.”

“Very well,” he said.

The agent was apparently finished with us. Without giving us a chance to ask any questions, he stood and walked into reception.

We got up and followed. Sophie seemingly became annoyed that he was leaving and ran up to the agent.

“Hey,” she said as he headed towards the door to the street. “When are you going to take this brain-control microchip out of my head?”

Agent Anderson paused, looked down at Sophie, and gave her a little smirk. Then, without answering, both agents walked out the door.

Debbie stood, and we all watched out the window as four men got into the black SUV and took off towards Scottsdale Road. After a few moments of looking at the empty street, the office suddenly seemed eerily quiet.

“Okay, that was creepy,” Debbie said as she looked back and forth between us. “Does this sort of thing happen around here a lot?”

“More often than I’d like,” I said with a snort.

“*Damn*,” Sophie blurted out as she shook her head in disgust.

“What?” I asked.

“Gina wasn’t here, *again*,” she said, exasperated. “You know, she only halfway believed me the last time this happened. She’ll never believe me when I tell her they came back.”

We stayed up front with Debbie for a few minutes while we told her about our previous visit with Agent Anderson, well, the basics of it anyway. As I described how creepy it was that the government knew so much about what was going on in the office, Sophie’s eyes opened wide, and she gasped out.

“What?” I asked.

She was about to tell me what had her so spooked, but my phone started playing Max’s ringtone.

“It’s my boyfriend,” I said to Debbie, who’d looked somewhat confused when my phone started playing the theme to *The Love Boat*.

Sophie hurried off to the back offices, and I went into the conference room.

“Hey,” I said, happy to hear Max’s voice. “How’s your afternoon? Have the police been able to come up with anything yet?”

“So far, there hasn’t been a lot of movement,” he said. “What about on your side?”

“One of the crew I told you about, Leo West, owns a house in a remote part of southeast Mesa. I’ve spent most of the day watching the property, and it seems to be empty. Just to make sure, I’ve set up a camera and will be monitoring the home tonight. If there’s any activity there, I’ll turn it over to you, and you can alert the police.”

“I know I keep telling you,” Max said. “But I appreciate the help. I won’t tell you how many people over here are getting panicked that we won’t ever see the money again.”

“Don’t worry about it,” I said. “I only hope I can help. Have you thought about when we can get together? I’m really starting to miss you.”

“I miss you too,” he said. “With the investigation, I haven’t had a lot of time to see you this week. I was thinking we should try to schedule an actual date.”

I love it when he misses me.

“That’s a great idea,” I said. “When’s the earliest you think we can do it?”

He blew out a sigh, and I could almost hear him thinking. “Let’s shoot for dinner on Friday. That’s three days away, and hopefully, things will calm down by then.”

“That sounds perfect,” I cooed. “I hope it works out.”

I walked into the back offices and found Sophie tearing her desk apart. What appeared to be the contents of several of her drawers were in piles on

the breakroom table.

As I watched, she walked another drawer to the table and shook it out to form a new pile. Pens, pencils, paper clips, push pins, and rubber bands landed on the new mound and slid down the sides. Glancing around, the entire back-office area was a mess.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

She held her finger up to her lips. “Shush,” she whispered to me while making hand motions for me to follow her into the alley in back of the office.

I grabbed my bag, and we headed outside. “Okay, what’s going on?” I whispered after the security door had closed and locked behind us.

“I was thinking,” she said. “Exactly how did the Men in Black know you were looking for Elliot Kirk and the money from the casino?”

“I don’t know. Maybe they could tell from the searches you’ve been doing for the last couple of days.”

“Yeah,” Sophie admitted. “It could be that. Or could it be that we’ve been talking about it all morning? Once Anderson and his friends figured out that you were going to find Elliot and then you were going to pass that information on to the police, they piled in their Secret Agent mobile and flew down here to warn us away from Grant Martínez.”

“Okay,” I said. “So, what are you thinking?”

“Oh, it’s pretty obvious what’s going on,” she said as she nodded.

“What?” I asked, now totally confused.

“They have the office bugged,” she said, sounding a little frustrated. “How else could they know what we’re doing in real-time?”

“Um, maybe,” I said as I considered it. “But if they are listening to us, what can we do about it?”

“Well, I’m going to find the damn thing, then I’m gonna stomp on it,” she said defiantly. “I don’t want the government listening to everything I say.”

“But if you find their bug and stomp on it, wouldn’t they simply come over in the middle of the night and install another bug?”

“Oh, sure. They could try, but I’m thinking I could stomp on them a lot faster than they could install them.”

“Well, good luck in finding the bug,” I said as I opened the door to go back in. “Although if you could do minimal damage to my desk, I’d appreciate it. I imagine Gina would as well.”

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Chapter Sixteen



I woke up early the following day and felt eager to get something going. I quickly got dressed and got ready to head out.

I stopped by Dunkin' and got a dozen doughnuts. When I arrived at the office, Sophie and Gina were both in the back. My best friend's eyes got big, and she grabbed a chocolate cream stick.

I buzzed Debbie and told her we had breakfast in the back if she was interested. Two minutes later, our receptionist was looking through the box on the breakroom table, pulling out a chocolate cake doughnut.

"Have the phone and credit card searches on the casino robbers come up with anything yet?" I asked Sophie, taking a bite of a glazed doughnut that was still slightly warm.

"Nothing yet," she mumbled around the doughnut. "But I have the computer set to alert me if anything happens."

"Your job involves a lot of waiting," Debbie noted as she looked at me. "That must be frustrating."

"Oh," I groaned. "You have no idea."

"What's your next step?" Sophie asked.

"I need to go back out to Uncle Leo's place in the desert and grab the camera and memory card. I don't think anyone's at the house, but I've had it under surveillance all night, and I'd like to make sure."

"What will you do if you find the crooks there?" Debbie asked. "Will you try to go in and get the client's husband?"

Gina had just taken a bite of doughnut but then looked at me, shock on her face as she shook her head slowly.

“Nope,” I said, also with a shake of my head. “If I find out where they are, I’ll call some people I know from the casino, and they’ll contact the police. This gang has already killed at least once, and I don’t want to get too close to a group of desperate criminals.”

“That’s probably a good idea,” Debbie said.

“Yup,” Sophie nodded her head in agreement. “Staying far away from the outlaws is a great idea.”

Debbie grabbed another doughnut and went back to reception. I sat at my desk and began to gather the things I’d need for the day.

“What are your impressions of Moogy LaFontaine?” Gina asked as she grabbed a doughnut.

“The guy seems like a total jerk,” I said. “I can see why his wife wants out of the marriage.”

“I was telling Gina about the movie studio he’d set up at the condo,” Sophie said.

“What do you think?” Gina asked me. “Was filming the college student a one-time thing for Moogy?”

“After seeing the porn studio, I got the feeling that Hannah Higgins was only his latest victim,” I said. “It wouldn’t surprise me if Moogy would regularly meet young women at his club and start to date them so that he could exploit them later on.”

“I’m pretty sure you’re right,” Sophie agreed. “The guy is scum. Once the women start to feel comfortable around him, I imagine he eventually takes all of them up to the condo, gets them drunk or high, and records them doing all sorts of naughty things.”

“If it’s anything like the other night, they’re recorded with multiple men and maybe another woman or two,” I said. “I could see Moogy using the girls for his videos until they grew disgusted with the situation. Then Moogy probably cuts them loose and starts dating another college girl. I’m sure there’s always a steady stream of girls that would like to date the owner of a Scottsdale nightclub.”

“Well,” Gina noted, “If he finds the women at his bar, they’re likely at least twenty-one. That makes them old enough to know what they are doing. Still, I hate to see it happening to anyone.”

“Hey,” Sophie said, looking at me. “Speaking of Moogy, do you have any more videos on your phone? I’ll need everything you have for the report.”

“I already gave you everything I had with a decent image,” I said. “So far, we haven’t gotten anything other than circumstantial evidence.”

“I know,” she said, sounding frustrated. “But Lenny’s been breathing down my neck for an update. Since we pretty much have jack shit, I’m trying to shine up and piece together what little we do have. I’m mainly looking for the rest of the videos you took when we were up at Moogy’s cabin.”

“Okay, but those didn’t show anything,” I reminded her. “Seriously, I was going to erase them. I only gave you the first two videos from then for the timestamps to prove when we’d been up to the cabin.”

“Yup,” Sophie said. “That’s why I need them. I’m thinking six or seven blurry videos are better than two. I still don’t know why Moogy needed to drag his new girlfriend all the way up to the mountains to nail her. It would have been simpler if they’d gotten a room down here.”

“What happened when you tried to get the videos?” Gina asked, ignoring Sophie.

“It sucked,” Sophie said with a snort. “We first had to sneak through this freezing cold forest to get to a run-down cabin in the middle of pine forest nowhere.”

“Yeah, it did suck,” I agreed. “We heard Hannah moaning through an open window, but it was out of reach. I tried to get a video by holding the phone over my head and jumping.”

“And, when that didn’t work?” Gina asked. “Did you try anything else?”

“Yeah,” I said with a grimace, remembering back to the night in the forest. “We found an old barstool next to the back door. It looked like Moogy must have used it over the years for smoke breaks. I climbed on that and looked into the window.”

“Were you able to see anything?” Gina asked.

“I got a great view of Moogy and Hannah on the bed,” I laughed. “She was riding him like a sweaty naked cowgirl on a bucking bronco. They

were perfectly positioned for the video.”

“Okay,” Gina said with a nod. “What was next? Did you try to get a video of them?”

“That’s right,” I said, not knowing where she was going with this. “But when I lifted the phone to point it into the room, the seat of the barstool broke. I fell through it and scraped the hell out of my leg.”

“Yeah, and I almost broke a couple of ribs trying to save your sorry ass, for all the good it did,” Sophie grumbled.

“I know I didn’t get any useful video before I fell,” I said. “I reviewed the first three or four videos from when I tried to jump, but all I had was a lot of blurs.”

“I’m wondering if you were able to get any good audio of Hannah and Moogy,” Gina mused. “You said she was pretty loud. Was she calling out his name? Maybe you could make something out of that?”

“Maybe I could,” I said, thinking Gina had a good idea. “I haven’t done anything with the audio, and she was calling out his name, over and over.”

Gina and Sophie began chatting about Jet while I downloaded the rest of the videos I’d shot at Moogy’s cabin to my computer. When I told them I was ready to review the files, they came over to my desk.

The first five files were of me jumping to get high enough to see into the window. As I’d noted before, the videos were nothing but dark, blurry motion. Unfortunately, the audio was mostly Taylor Swift singing about an old boyfriend.

We could faintly hear Hannah moaning, but it was in the background. I only knew what the sounds were because I’d been there in person. Her cries of pleasure weren’t clear enough for anyone else to know for sure what they were.

“What about when you fell through the barstool,” Gina said. “Do you have the video from that one?”

I brought up the much longer video file and hit the play button on my computer. Watching the video, I found myself back outside of Moogy’s cabin, now almost two weeks ago.

The computer monitor showed the stool as I stepped on it. It then

followed my progress as I slid the phone up the wall to the window.

The audio on this video was much better. Taylor Swift had changed to a song about a different ex-boyfriend, and Hannah's moans were louder and more distinctive.

We could hear her clearly yelling in pleasure and slapping her palms on her thighs or maybe on Moogy's legs. As the video went on, I listened for her to cry out Moogy's name, but she was mostly calling out to God.

The camera traveled up the wall. There was a quick flash of light, then a loud snap as the seat of the bar stool broke. There was then a series of blurry images as I fell, and the phone tumbled to the ground.

On the video, my voice called out in panic for Sophie to hold the stool steady, followed by the louder sounds of me hitting the forest floor and her falling on top of both me and the chair.

We heard the panic in my voice rising a notch as I yelled at Sophie to get my leg out of the barstool. The video then showed my hand as I frantically felt around on the ground for my phone.

As we both got up and began to run into the woods to escape from Moogy and his shotgun, I paused the video. I honestly didn't want to relive getting shot at by a pissed-off nightclub owner.

"Jeez," Sophie said. "No wonder we got so beat up. But I don't see how this helps us. Hannah didn't call his name out once."

"Did you see a flash of light right before I fell?" I asked, pointing to the monitor. "That looked weird."

"I saw it, too," Gina said. "Play it again and see if you can slow it down."

I went back to the beginning of the video and started it again. Even though I'd played the video at half speed, the flash of light was still too quick to tell what it was.

"Interesting," Gina said. "Can you go back and go frame-by-frame?"

Now curious about what was on the video, I went to the beginning and started to advance the file, one frame at a time. Since I'd been shooting at sixty frames a second, it took almost a minute to get to the part with the bright light.

After several frames of bright, blurry images, there was a clear, high-resolution picture of a naked Hannah Higgins straddling Moogy LaFontaine in a reverse cowgirl. I flipped through the frames slowly, one at a time, and there were roughly half a dozen usable images.

“It looks like you only had the camera pointed into the room for about a tenth of a second before you fell,” Gina said. “But that gave you six or seven decent photos to choose from.”

“Well, this one shows the action clearest,” I noted, pointing to the monitor as I scrolled back and forth between the images. “But this one has the best focus.”

“Whoa,” Sophie called out as she pointed at the monitor when I’d flipped back to the most explicit photo. “Damn, Moogy’s huge. No wonder Hannah was moaning so loudly.”

“You’re not kidding,” Gina said as we all bent forward to get a better look. “It’s not just the length. It’s the sheer girth of the thing that has me impressed.”

“Maybe that’s why Moogy’s side hustle is making pornos?” I mused. “He’s certainly got the equipment for it.”

“You know,” Sophie said. “After looking at these pictures, I’m going to need to see Milo tonight. I hope he’s available and energetic because I’ll definitely have some special requests.”

“Which pictures do you think we should use?” I asked.

“Let’s put all of them in the report and let Lenny decide which ones to show the client,” Gina said.

“Great idea,” I agreed.

“Yeah,” Sophie laughed. “If we give him the report before he goes out for his next session with Countess Carla, the Cruel, it will give him something extra to be disobedient about.”

Gina took off to work on her assignments while I packed up my laptop and got ready to go as well. I thought about my conversation in the back alley with Sophie the day before. As I looked around the cubicles, she had, more or less, put everything back where it was supposed to be.

“It looks better back here,” I said. “Did you ever find the bug?”

“No,” she admitted as her voice dropped to a whisper. “And I’ve looked everywhere. I’m starting to think that you’re right, and I’m imagining things.”

“Yeah, unless they’re listening directly from your mind-control chip,” I said with a laugh.

I’d said it as a joke, but Sophie’s eyes got big, and her mouth dropped open in shock.

“Oh, crap,” she said slowly as she put both hands on her head. “You’re right. They’re probably listening to me through the chip.”

“Um, I wasn’t being serious,” I said, trying to sound reasonable. “I still don’t think the government actually put a brain-control microchip in your skull.”

“No, that makes complete sense,” she said, now talking to herself and ignoring me. “I think that’s why Agent Anderson didn’t want to talk to me about taking it out. They’re using it to gather intel on what we do here at the office. It’s how they learn the background information on the searches I run with the secret software.”



I drove back out to Uncle Leo’s house in the desert. A quick glance at the property showed it to be as desolate as it had been the day before. I got out, grabbed the video camera from where it had been sitting all night, and tossed it on my passenger’s seat.

I parked again at the end of the dirt road, determined to learn if the house was occupied or not. I’d brought along my laptop and slipped the memory card into an adaptor I’d plugged into the side.

The video was a nice, clear image of the driveway and the front of Uncle Leo’s house. I boosted the replay speed to its maximum and settled down to watch.

The only things of note on the video were some car lights that had driven down the street. One was at ten thirty at night, and one was at two in the morning. Neither car had slowed as it went past the house, and neither

one went onto the property.

There'd been a partial moon the night before, and it cast enough light for me to make out the house and some of the outbuildings. The house itself remained completely dark. I figured that even with the blinds closed, I'd still get a glow from any lights inside the home that had been switched on.

I sat and pondered where to go next. I would have taken off right away, but I was completely out of leads and didn't have a clue where I could pick up Elliot's trail again.

True, Grant Martínez had the house in Mexico, and a road trip with Sophie to the beach would be a fun day's distraction. But I didn't see that lead going anywhere, and it sort of seemed like it would be a waste of time.

The more I thought about the investigation, the more frustrated I became. I went over the events of the past several days with Elliot and the robbery again, but nothing seemed significant other than Uncle Leo's house.

I'd had a hunch that the house would prove to be significant in the investigation. My main irritation stemmed from the fact that there'd been no activity at the property for the twenty-four hours I'd been monitoring it, and I was finally convinced that the place was abandoned.

The squadron of javelinas showed up at about the same time as they had the day before. They were a fun diversion, and I watched them for almost half an hour while I sat and thought.

I first detected them in my rearview mirror by the dust cloud they made as they trotted across the desert from the east. They walked past my car, ignoring it, and then ambled down the dirt road.

They spent two or three minutes at each property, rooting around any garbage they could find, searching for things to eat. The babies still looked adorable, but I'd heard enough horror stories over the years about the wild pig-like creatures to know to stay away.

After debating with myself what to do for over an hour, I was still at a loss. Deciding to document the location for my report, I put up my roof and locked the Mazda.

I then walked down the dirt road towards Uncle Leo's property. The wind had started to pick up, and my shoes kicked up small clouds of dust.

Fortunately, the mild April temperatures were cool and pleasant, barely in the eighties.

I stopped at the opening in the chain-link fence that led to the carport open garage. I examined the dirt driveway but didn't see any fresh tire tracks. The house still had the same sad and lonely look of abandonment as it had the night before.

Looking at the outbuildings behind the house, the only one that looked big enough to hold anything substantial was the barn-like white metal structure I'd noted the day before. It had an overhead garage-type door on one side, and I thought it could have been built for warehouse storage or as some sort of workshop.

Partway up the side of the building in the back was a small window that would let me look into the interior. The more I looked at the pane of dirty glass, the more I wanted to see what was inside.

I decided to take a quick peek into the building before I left. If there weren't any signs of fresh activity, I'd let Max and Lenny know that Uncle Leo's house was a dead end. We could then focus our attention elsewhere, assuming I could come up with somewhere new.

Keeping away from the house, just in case, I walked to the big building. I was disappointed when the window was about four feet over my head, but then I remembered the selfie stick that Debbie had gotten for me.

I pulled it out of my bag and attached my phone to the end. I started a video and raised the camera high enough to look inside through the window. I made sure to rotate the phone slowly to get the entire interior.

When I brought the phone down, I went to a shady spot to see what was there. Fortunately, the structure seemed to have several skylights, which added enough light for me to see the inside clearly, even through the dirty glass.

What the hell?

My heart pumping, I saw Elliot's electrical van and what appeared to be Monica Marshall's white Lexus sitting in a big open space in the center of the building.

Damn.

Knowing that I'd broken open an important clue in the mystery, I

texted Max to let him know the vehicles of two people connected with the robbery were at Uncle Leo's property. I didn't remember the address but said Sophie could fill him in with the details of where it was located.

I was zooming in on the video, trying to read the license plate on the Lexis, when I spotted what looked like a trap door in the concrete floor of the building. It was by itself in the far corner, and it looked so out of place that it got my mind racing.

I remembered that Uncle Leo was constantly preparing for the end of the world, and he was in a Facebook group that installed underground bunkers. It made sense that a large building with a concrete floor would make a great roof for such a hideout.

Thinking that a peek down into wherever the trap door led would likely give me the answers to whatever was going on here, I looked around to see if there was a way into the building.

I found a person-sized doorway in the back of the structure that would let me inside. But when I tried it, it was locked.

I looked around and noticed that the doorway was out of sight of both the house and the road. The lock appeared to be a standard residential lock, the same kind that Gina had been training me on for the past couple of years.

This might be a bad idea.

I pulled out the lock-picking tools I still had in my bag from breaking into Moogy's condo the other night and went to work on the door. I felt like I had to hurry, which only slowed my efforts, but in about ten minutes, I had it open.

I stepped inside the large garage and workshop space and looked around. Not finding anyone hiding in the shadows, I took pictures of Elliot's van and Monica's Lexis.

There was also a larger set of double metal doors in the floor with an overhead crane attached to the roof of the building. These doors were locked with a heavy padlock. But if there was some sort of bunker below the floor, they likely used this to raise and lower larger objects into the rooms below. I took a picture of the double doors along with the lock.

However, the thing that still drew my attention was the trap door. I took

pictures of it from a couple of angles.

The top part of a built-in ladder was poking out of the floor, with the hinged lid of the trap door protecting the opening. There wasn't any sort of lock on it, so I walked over and lifted the cover.

The shaft was maybe four feet by four feet and went down about twenty feet. I'm not normally claustrophobic, but looking at the ladder going down the dark hole gave me the heebie-jeebies. It looked like something from a World War Two prison camp escape movie.

I couldn't clearly see to the end of the ladder, so I used the light on my phone to get a better look and to take a couple more pictures. There appeared to be an opening at the bottom of the shaft that presumably led into the main part of the bunker.

I'd seen enough by now and knew I'd overstayed my welcome. I left the white metal building, being careful to relock the door. With any luck, no one would ever know I'd been there.

I turned and hurried back toward the opening in the fence at the end of the driveway. As I walked, I texted Max and Sophie all of the pictures of the vehicles, the trapdoor, and the shaft with the ladder.

I decided to keep my plan simple. I'd head back to my car and follow up my texts with a call to Max. I'd let him know that Uncle Leo's house was somehow involved in the robbery, and he could inform the police. I'd then sit back in the shadows and watch as people descended on the property to check it out.

If the crooks were only using the building to store the vehicles, the cops could dust for prints and hopefully gather some useful clues as to where the robbers were hiding. There was even the possibility that somebody might come back to retrieve the vehicles.

With any luck, Elliot would be found by the weekend. Hopefully, he'd be alive and could be arrested, or he might already be dead. Either outcome would close out my assignment, and I'd be out of it.

Ouch!

I felt a hard pinch in my back, and I felt around with my hand to see what was causing it. I looked behind me to see a small syringe, with red fuzz at the end, sticking in my shoulder.

Crap.

Yanking it out, I realized I'd been shot, likely with one of the darts the robbers had used at the casino. This meant that at least one of the crooks was on the property with me.

Damn.

Hoping the drug hadn't had time to enter my system before I'd pulled the dart out, I knew I had to get away from the house and back to my car. I took two more steps toward the street. Then, I felt my legs give out, and everything went dark.

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Chapter Seventeen



When I woke up, the world was spinning, and my head was pounding. Someone was talking to me in low, soothing tones.

I tried to open my eyes, but when I did, the world spun faster, and my stomach began to twist. I listened to the soft voice for several seconds, then passed out again.

When I awoke for the second time, I was lying on a cot in a room that seemed overly bright. Elliot Kirk sat in a chair next to me. His face looked concerned.

“Are you okay?” he asked. “The stuff in the darts acts quickly, but the downside is they give you a hell of a headache. Fortunately, I think you were able to sleep most of it off.”

“Yeah,” I said, somewhat groggily, blinking in the bright light. “I think I’ll be okay. How long have I been out?”

“You’ve been asleep all afternoon. Leo brought you in a little before lunch. You seemed to wake up around two but then passed out again. It’s about four in the afternoon now.”

“Alright,” I said. “Four hours isn’t too bad. Where are we?”

Looking around, we seemed to be in a storage room. There were metal shelves full of boxes and plastic containers of every sort. From the descriptions on the sides of the cartons, most of them seemed to contain survival food, clothing, bottled water, and camping gear.

“We’re in a room under a big white building out in the desert,” he said. “I’ve been down here since Saturday morning.”

“Can we get out? It’s probably best if we get as far away from here as possible.”

“No, we’re locked in,” he said with a shake of his head. “I seem to have fallen out of favor with my group.”

“Okay,” I said as I tried to take in my surroundings. There was only one door, which was made of metal. It was locked with a deadbolt and appeared to be very substantial.

“My name’s Laura,” I said, turning toward my cellmate. “Laura Black.”

On hearing my name, he flinched, and his eyes grew big. “I’m Elliot Kirk,” he said as he eyed me suspiciously. “But I get the feeling you already knew that. It’s not the first time I’ve heard your name.”

“Really?” I asked, a little spooked myself. “How do you know me?”

“I found your card and some legal papers stashed in Adriana’s desk a few days ago. Did my wife hire you to spy on me? What do you know about this?”

“Mr. Kirk,” I started, not knowing the best way to phrase it. “Your wife was worried about you. She knew something odd was going on and was only trying to figure out the best way to help.”

Seeing that he was still eyeing me suspiciously, I swept my arms wide, inviting him to take a look at his current surroundings. “Well?” I asked, somewhat sarcastically. “Was she wrong?”

“It figures,” he said with a shake of his head. “She’d sensed something was off and had been asking a lot of questions over the past couple of months. I should have known she’d want to know more. Oh, and since we may be here for a while, you’d better call me Elliot.”

“Why are they keeping you locked in here?” I asked.

“I know too much,” he said in a matter-of-fact voice. “You’re probably already aware of this, but I’m part of a group that broke into the vault and robbed Casino Scottsdale a few days ago.”

“Yeah,” I conceded. “I know about that. You and your group have been the main story around Arizona for the past few days.”

“Seth, that’s Seth Sullivan, the head of our group, killed Rocky in the vault the other night. We came out here after the robbery, and I thought things were okay. But Seth got pissed off and killed Del Collins yesterday

afternoon. He then tossed me in here, and I've been waiting ever since."

"Seth doesn't seem very stable," I observed.

"It never takes a lot to set him off. Once he gets upset, anything can happen."

"How did you get involved with a group of thieves?" I asked. "From what I could tell, your life was going okay."

Elliot grew quiet. At first, I didn't think he'd tell me anything, but then he took a deep breath and began.

"I've always had a weakness for gambling, especially cards," he admitted. "I've never told Adriana about my gambling addiction, but it's gotten me into trouble before."

"You mean when you lose, you end up owing money to someone?"

"Yeah, you'd think I'd learn," he said with a sad chuckle and a slow shake of his head. "It's what sent me to prison the last time. I had to pull robberies to pay off my gambling debts and got caught. I'd told myself that I'd never do that again, but here we are."

"What happened this time?" I asked.

"About a year ago, a big game was rolling into town. I wanted to be at the table, but there was a fifty-thousand-dollar buy-in. I was familiar with some of the guys who'd be playing and knew they were suckers. Okay, so maybe I wouldn't win big, but I figured I could at least double or triple my money."

"You got someone to lend you fifty thousand dollars?" I asked. "That sounds pretty risky."

"Yeah," he nodded. "I ended up borrowing the entry fee. But I'd done it before and always came away clean. I usually made a tidy profit from the deal. But this time, I turned out to be the game's sucker and lost everything. That's how I found myself deeply in debt with one of the local loan sharks."

"What did he do?" I asked. "Did he threaten to break your fingers or anything if you didn't pay?"

"Nothing like that, but even coming up with the weekly interest payments were a stretch for me, at least not without Adriana finding out what I'd been up to. I eventually fell so far behind with my repayments that

I knew I was in deep shit.”

“What happened then?”

“They sold my debt to a guy who wanted me to do some tasks for him.”

“By tasks, you mean robberies?”

“Yeah. His name’s Grant Martínez, and he seemed okay, at least at first. I guess he’s pretty high up in a group of criminals out of Las Vegas. Unfortunately, Grant put me on a crew led by Seth Sullivan, and the man’s a nightmare to work with. But until I paid off the debt, I was stuck.”

“What did Grant and Seth have you do?” I asked.

“There were a couple of small-time burglaries at a few businesses around The Valley, and then it was a bigger job last December at a jewelry store in downtown Scottsdale. They had me work the alarms on that one along with Del. Grant told me it was an audition for something bigger.”

“Then, after you proved you were trustworthy, they wanted you to help them rob the casino?”

“Grant somehow knew I had access to the casino’s electrical systems. I think that’s why he picked me up in the first place. I flat-out refused when he first told me about it, debt or not. I’ve worked at Casino Scottsdale for years and knew robbing the place would bring more trouble than I wanted to be involved in.”

“I assumed you were eventually blackmailed into helping them?”

“Yeah,” he said, sounding miserable. “Seth had secretly recorded me pulling the burglaries and the heist at the jewelry store. Grant Martínez showed me the videos, and he’d made it look like the entire thing had been my idea. Grant said if I didn’t play ball, they’d send everything to the police. With my record, I’d be looking at twenty years of hard time in the state prison in Florence.”

“What was your part in the casino robbery? After you sabotaged the alarms, what was left to do?”

“Everybody had a job. Mine was originally the alarms and electrical systems, but during the robbery, I was only a set of hands to load and unload the money.”

“What about the others? Did all five of you need to be there? What about Delbert Collins? What did he do?”

“Del was our software guy. He electronically unlocked the cage doors in the vault with some software on his laptop. He had also messed up the cameras and killed the alarms. Once he did that, we only needed to deal with the three guards working the vault.”

“Who took care of that part? Was it Seth?”

“No, that was Leo, Leo West. He took out the guards using a fast-acting tranquilizer dart gun. You know firsthand about that.”

“And when you’d made it into the vault?”

“Rocky, Del, and I would load up the cash and transport it out. Seth was only there to make sure we did our jobs and to handle trouble.”

“That seems pretty risky,” I said. “Aren’t there cameras everywhere, especially in the vault?”

“Well, sure. But the system relies on a central command station that monitors the building from a security office on the first floor. Del had set it up so, as far as they could see, nothing unusual would be happening down in the vault.”

“You knew how to take out the alarm systems at a modern casino? That seems like a strange skill set to have picked up in electrician’s school.”

“Oh, I didn’t have a clue how to deal with the cameras and alarms,” he said with a shake of his head. “The casino had installed a state-of-the-art system. I kept telling Seth that, but he said Del had the software covered. I only needed to deal with rewiring the cameras.”

“Well, then, how did you know how to do that?”

“I don’t know how they got them, but they gave me the complete electrical schematics of the casino security system a few days ago. I had the layout of the cameras, sensors, and alarms. My job was to knock it offline silently for a night.”

“How were you going to get out with the money? I mean, you had to walk through a working casino full of guards.”

“We had the timing of when the guards did their rounds down to the minute. We’d been studying their schedules for months. We simply picked a

time when no one would be there to stop us.”

“But still,” I said, shaking my head. “You knowingly helped a group of criminals steal from a casino? You knew there’d be repercussions.”

“I didn’t want to be involved with robbing the place, but by that point, I was in too deep to contact the police. I’d violated a dozen terms of my parole and knew they’d simply toss me back in prison. Plus, I’d heard rumors about the organization that runs security at the casino. I especially didn’t want to volunteer to be on their shit list.”

“What happened to Rock Bottom?” I asked. “Why did Seth kill him?”

“Rocky had only been with us for a couple of months, and Seth never trusted him,” Elliot said. “I always thought the kid was hilarious, but Seth grumbled that he’d been pushed at us too hard by Grant.”

“He was pushed too hard?” I asked. “What do you mean?”

“Rocky had always been a drug guy,” Elliot said. “Grant put him in with a bunch of bank robbers. It’s two different skill sets, and it seemed to set off red flags in Seth’s head. As soon as we were safely in the vault and loading money on the cart, Seth started asking Rocky all sorts of questions.”

“What kinds of questions?” I asked.

“Seth wanted to know if he was a police plant or if he was wearing a wire. Seth even lifted the kid’s shirt at one point to check for electronics.”

“You were in the vault, at a casino, while you were robbing it, arguing if a guy on your crew was a police plant?” I said with a laugh. “That doesn’t sound all that smart.”

“Well, they had an argument, which led to a scuffle. Seth then grabbed Rocky’s head with both hands. With one quick move, Seth broke his neck like a chicken.”

“What about Del? It sounds like he’d been in the group for a while. Why did Seth kill him?”

“I don’t know for sure. I wasn’t paying attention, but Del must have said something wrong to Seth yesterday. I think it was about his share of the money and how soon Seth planned on splitting it. Seth started punching Del in the face and pulled him out of the main room. I heard Del scream a few

minutes later.”

“That must have been terrible,” I said, feeling slightly sick to my stomach.

“When Seth came back, his hands had blood on them, and he shoved me into this room. That’s all that’s happened until you showed up today.”

After that, we were both quiet for a few moments. Finally, I wanted to break the silence. I also wanted to know more about the robbery.

“Why did your group play cards every week?” I asked. “I wouldn’t think you’d want to be associated too closely with the casino.”

“We wanted to get to know the layout of the place and how frequently the guards made their rounds,” he said with a shrug. “We could do that pretty easily on the gaming floor and the front hallways. But we couldn’t monitor the back hallways without causing a scene.”

As we were talking, we heard footsteps approaching our door. Elliot’s head shot up with a look of fear on his face.

We both stood and stared at each other. There was the scraping sound of a key in the heavy deadbolt lock, and the door opened.

Seth Sullivan walked in, holding my bag in one of his huge, meaty hands. From the look on his caveman-like face, he was already livid at me.

Crap.

His cheeks were red, his eyes had narrowed, and the veins on his huge biceps and forearms visibly pulsed. Even as scared as I was, seeing this completely grossed me out.

Uncle Leo and Monica Marshal were in the hallway looking into the room. Leo held a pistol with it pointed toward the ground, and Monica had a look of deep concern on her face.

“Sit down,” Seth barked out. “Both of you. If either of you get up, I’ll consider it an attack and take action accordingly.”

We both sat while Seth opened my bag, fished out my wallet, and pulled out my driver’s license. He then looked at me like I was a piece of dog crap he’d stepped in.

“Laura Black,” he sneered as he read out my name. “This says you live in Scottsdale on Miller Road. Who the hell are you? Are you a freaking

cop?”

“No,” I said quietly, trying not to enrage him any more than he already was. “I’m only here to look for Elliot. He’s been missing for days, and his wife’s worried sick.”

“You’re only looking for Elliot, huh?” Seth said with a touch of amusement. “Well, I guess you found him. Too bad for you.”

He tossed my wallet and license back in the bag and searched through until he found my phone. He then held it up for me to look at.

“Give me the code to unlock it,” he said.

“I’m not letting you into my phone,” I said, upset that he had even asked about something like that.

“Give me the passcode, or I’ll break your fingers one by one until you do,” he said in a flat, matter-of-fact voice.

Crap.

Knowing there was nothing else I could do, I gave Seth my six-digit code. I then watched helplessly as he began to look through my phone.

“It appears that someone named Hot Stuff is worried about you,” Seth sneered. “They’ve called three times since you’ve been here. The same goes for someone named Sophie. She’s called four times. Is Hot Stuff your boyfriend? Maybe your girlfriend?”

I was about to answer when Seth cut me off.

“It hardly matters,” he said. “It’s too bad, but you won’t be able to talk with either of them. I also don’t think you’ll be needing this anymore.” Smirking, he slipped my phone into his pocket.

He dug around my bag some more and pulled out my Glock. He pointed it at my face, directly at the bridge of my nose, and smiled. It was the sickest, most evil smile I’d ever seen in my life.

His breathing quickened, and I could tell he was getting excited. It appeared that the mere thought of killing me was seriously turning him on.

Shit.

My heart seemed to stop as I looked down the muzzle of my own gun. I moved my head from side to side, trying to get out of the line of fire.

However, Seth simply moved the pistol to follow my movements, all the while chuckling to himself.

From five feet away, the black opening at the end of the barrel looked huge. I knew if he pulled the trigger, I'd never even see the flash before I was dead.

"No badge, but you do have this," Seth said to me in a breathy, almost cheerful tone. "I've always wanted to shoot a cop in the face with her own gun. Guess this is going to be my lucky day."

"Um, Seth," Monica said quietly. "You know Grant wants to question her first before you kill her."

"Yeah, I know," he said, disgusted, lowering the pistol and shoving it in the waistband of his jeans. He then took my bag and flicked it against the far wall.

"When's Grant getting here?" Seth demanded to know.

"He'll be here in about half an hour," she said, still talking in low, soothing tones.

"Fine," he spat out. "But when he's done talking with this cop, it's going to be my turn. I'll use my knife and take my time with her. And I don't want to be disturbed, no matter what you hear. Do you understand?"

"Sure, Seth," she said quietly. "I understand."

Seth then turned back to me. "Did you hear that?" he asked, sounding cheerful again. "You have half an hour. I suggest you enjoy it. It'll be the last peaceful thirty minutes you'll ever have. You have a very long and unpleasant night ahead of you."

Seth left the room, and we heard him stomp down the hallway. Monica came in with a brown paper sack that she sat on a table. She then pulled out sandwiches, bags of chips, and two bottles of water.

"Here," she said brightly. "I don't know if you're hungry, but I know you both must be thirsty."

Uncle Leo had been closely watching the exchange between his nephew and myself. But when Monica came in, he drifted ten or fifteen feet down the hallway.

After Monica unloaded the sack, she looked at me and pointed into the

bag. I followed where her finger was leading and saw a shiny copper key.

I looked at her, questioning, and she pointed toward the door to our room. "Get out while you can," she whispered. "Both of you."

I nodded but then had to know what was going on. "Why are you doing this?" I whispered back. "Won't you get into trouble or maybe even killed?"

"I think I'll be okay," she said. "At least, I hope so. Just make sure you escape, or we'll all be in deep shit."

Elliot noticed what was going on between Monica and me. He looked around the room, then picked up the paper bag and began to crumple it. The resulting noise all but drowned out our quiet voices for Uncle Leo.

"That still doesn't explain why you'd want to help me," I said.

"Let's just say you have a guardian angel."

"Really?" I asked, confused. "Who?"

Monica bent forward and talked directly into my ear, her voice now barely audible. "Anderson."

Upon hearing this, I was completely shocked. I knew my eyes opened wide with surprise.

"He thinks we can trust you," she said quietly. "So, I'm putting my life into your hands by telling you this."

"Yeah, I guess you are," I softly mused. "But it's okay, I won't let you down."

Monica left and made a big deal about talking with Uncle Leo while she locked the door. I guess this was to establish she had, in fact, locked it before they later found that we had escaped.

I was thankful beyond words that Monica had left us a key. When Seth had tossed my bag on the floor, I knew it still had my lockpicking tools inside. I'd formulated a plan that involved me picking the lock, opening the door, and escaping with Elliot.

However, I knew from experience that I would have a tough time with the heavy deadbolt. I'd tried to open ones like it a couple of times for practice, but it had always been hit-and-miss. But if we already had the key, we'd be halfway there.

I waited a few minutes to make sure everyone had cleared out, then turned to Elliot. “How many people are down here?”

“It should just be the three of them. There’s a large living area down the hall. The room next to us is the bedroom.”

“Where’s the ladder up to the shed?”

“It’s right outside the door,” he said, becoming concerned. “But wait a minute. Do you really want to try to escape? If they catch us, Seth will go nuts. It will only make things harder on both of us.”

Seriously?

“Um, hello? You heard Seth. I’m dog meat in a little over an hour. How long do you think they’ll keep you alive after that?”

Elliot thought about it for several moments, then nodded. “I suppose you’re right,” he said, accepting the obvious. “I knew I wasn’t going to get any of the money we’d stolen, but I was hoping to at least get out of this with my debt gone. But after Seth killed Del, I’m sure you’re right. I’ll likely be next.”

“Alright,” I said as I grabbed my bag and hung it over my neck. “Let me listen so I can hear if anyone’s in the hallway. If not, we’re out of here.”

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Chapter Eighteen



I held my ear to the door, but the area outside of our room was deathly silent. I then slipped the key into the lock and turned it as quietly as I could. Unfortunately, it screeched loudly as the deadbolt slid into the door.

Elliot's eyes went wide, and I'm sure mine did the same. Knowing that everyone in the bunker had likely heard the lock, I eased the door open about six inches.

When no one yelled at us and no shots rang out, I pushed the door open a little farther and walked cautiously into the hallway. I made my way toward the ladder at the far end of the passageway and quickly began to climb.

Hoping Elliot was still behind me, I continued up as fast as I could. I heard movement behind me and knew my cellmate was close behind.

I heard a soft ripping sound, then a much louder *Clang, clang, clang*.

The loud sounds of something metal falling down the ladder sounded like a set of church bells. I stopped and looked down. Elliot was grabbing for his pocket where a hole had ripped on something on the ladder, and loose change was falling out.

He reached out to attempt to grab the last quarter as it bounced off one of the rungs. Elliot then looked up at me, terror on his face. We heard the sound of angry voices from farther down in the bunker and knew we'd been discovered.

Crap.

"Hurry," I said as I continued to climb. Reaching the top, I pushed open the trap door and climbed the rest of the way out.

Elliot came out a few seconds later. I frantically glanced around,

looking for escape options.

“Let’s take your van,” I said, pointing to the vehicle with Kirk Electric stenciled on the side. “You start it. I’ll get the garage door up.”

“Damn, I don’t have the keys,” he moaned as he patted himself down. “They were in my pocket, but they just fell out. That’s what sounded so loud. They’re down in the bunker.”

“Okay,” I said, beyond frustrated, closing the lid of the trapdoor. “Then let’s put something heavy on top of this. It won’t stop them, but it might slow them down.”

We both searched around, but there was nothing substantial we could pile on the lid. I picked up the first heavy-looking box I saw, and Elliot did the same. We stacked them on top of the trap door, but I doubted it would slow Seth down for more than a few seconds.

With Elliot’s van out of the picture, I knew the next best shot was my Miata. I silently hoped the crooks had left the keys in my bag.

From deep in the bunker, we heard a roar of anger from Seth. It sounded like he was getting closer, and I knew he had started climbing the ladder.

“My car’s about two hundred yards down the road,” I said. “Let’s run.”

I unlocked the back door, and we ran out into the dirt of the backyard. I could see the opening in the fence that led to the street, and I took off for it.

I was sprinting full-out past the house when something very large appeared in front of me, and I ran directly into it.

Ooof!

As I crashed into what I now saw was a man, I bounced off and landed with my butt in the dirt. I looked up to see who I’d run into.

With a sense of relief, Carson offered a hand to help me up. He was dressed in black, complete with a bulletproof vest. I also saw that he was carrying one of Max’s non-lethal but very effective beanbag shotguns.

“Sorry about that,” he said. “There are a lot of people out here, and you shouldn’t be running around. Somebody could make a mistake. Let’s get behind the house.”

Carson then looked at Elliot, who had also stopped. “Are you Elliot

Kirk?”

When Elliot nodded, Carson seemed to relax. “Who else is down there?”

“Seth Sullivan, Leo West, and Monica Marshall,” I panted out, my heart still pounding. “Seth’s after us, and he’s not far behind.”

Carson pushed a button on an earpiece and began to talk. “Miss Black and Mr. Kirk are out and safe,” he said. “Head’s up, Seth Sullivan is likely to be visible soon, and he’s to be taken.”

Even as Carson alerted the team, we heard the back door of the building fly open. Seth bolted around the corner and started to run in our direction. He was holding a pistol and had a wild, unhinged look in his eyes.

A smaller figure in black stepped around the building and blocked his path. I could see a twisted smile on Seth’s face as he lifted his huge fist and let a punch fly.

The smaller figure dodged the punch and then gave him a solid kick in the guts. This caused Seth to bend at the waist and stumble, his legs wobbly.

The figure in black then kicked the pistol out of Seth’s hand. It flew out and landed in the dirt, maybe ten or fifteen feet away.

As the slender figure in black turned toward us, I could see it was Gabriella. Her cheeks were pink, and she had a huge grin. She saw me watching her and nodded her head.

Seth quickly recovered his balance and went into a martial arts fighting stance. He lunged at Gabriella, forcing her to dodge five or six quick, fast punches.

With a yell of ecstasy, she kicked him hard in the face with a solid-looking combat boot. There was a meaty, slapping sound of leather against flesh, and Seth’s head snapped back. His knees buckled, and he crumpled to the ground.

Ouch! That had to hurt.

Seth shook his head to clear it and slowly got to his feet. His face was a mess of scrape marks and dripping blood.

He let out another roar of anger as he lunged toward his assailant. His

arms were spread out, trying to grab her.

Gabriella caught his arm and used his momentum to slam him, face first, against the side of the building. He hit hard, bounced off the wall, and landed on his back.

Seth again tried to get up and started calling Gabriella some disgusting names. She walked over and stomped a boot down hard on the center of his chest.

This took the rest of the fight out of Seth. He rolled to his side and began to cough and wheeze.

With a look of disappointment on her face, Gabriella used her boot to roll him over, so his abused face was pressed against the dirt. She then pulled out a pair of handcuffs and efficiently bound his hands together.

“I thought you said you weren’t going after Elliot without backup,” a deep, sexy voice called out. I turned to see Max walking around the corner of the house, a wide grin on his face.

I ran to my boyfriend and threw my arms around him. “Thank you for coming for me.”

“From what I saw, you were doing alright for yourself,” he said. “But I’m glad we’re here.”

Everyone then stopped as they listened to something through their earpieces.

“There’s a vehicle coming,” Max called out. “Places everybody.”

Three people who had come out to watch Gabriella and Seth fight now faded back into their hiding places as we heard an approaching car. A black BMW turned into the driveway and parked in the carport.

A man of about fifty years of age got out and walked quickly toward the white building. He stopped short when he saw Seth lying on the ground with his hands cuffed behind his back.

His eyes got big, and he turned to go back to his car. Several figures in black with beanbag shotguns came out of the shadows and surrounded him.

Quickly assessing his situation, the man stopped and raised his hands. Carson frisked him and removed a pistol. He then produced a pair of handcuffs and bound the man’s hands behind his back.

“Who are you,” Max asked as he walked up to the man.

“I’m Grant Martínez,” the man said, giving Max some attitude. “If you know what’s good for you, you’ll release me immediately. You have no idea who you’re messing with.”

Max sighed and thought for a moment. “Alright,” he said to two of his people. “Put both of them in the house and watch them closely. Add some ankle restraints as well, then make sure to cuff them to something solid.”

As soon as they were escorted into the house, Max looked over at me for an explanation. “Grant is Seth’s boss,” I said. “He’s part of a criminal ring based out of Las Vegas. The head of the group is apparently a man named Marcus Thorne.”

At hearing the men had come from Las Vegas, Max frowned and shook his head slowly. At the name of Marcus Thorne, there was a look of recognition and anger in his eyes. “As if we didn’t have enough problems,” he said, half to himself.

“When I was in the Black Castle last year,” I said, “I ran into a man named Marcus. Do you think it could be the same one?”

Max shook his head. “The man you met was likely Marcus Thorne Sr. He’s been running the operation there for almost thirty years. The one they’re talking about now is his son, Marcus Thorne Jr. He took over from his father several months ago.”

“That makes sense,” I said. “The Marcus I met with must have been eighty-five or ninety and seemed pretty frail.”

“Ever since we heard that Junior was taking over, Johnny and I have been waiting for his group to make a push into Arizona. I guess this was it.”

“What can you do to stop them?” I asked.

“First things first,” Max said. “Tell me about the situation down in the bunker.”

“There should only be two people there, Leo West and Monica Marshall. But be careful. Leo’s a gun collector and likely has some nasty surprises down there. I don’t think Monica will give you any trouble, but make sure she doesn’t get caught up in the crossfire.”

He had two men stay with Seth and Grant while he called everyone

else together. Max quickly decided that he and Gabriella would be leading the team going into the bunker.

Carson would follow, cover their rear, and act as their backup. Everyone else would stay above ground on standby.

I told Max that there was another set of doors in the floor that seemed to be for an elevator or at least another shaft to the rooms below. Fortunately, the team had a pair of bolt cutters for the lock.

Elliot and I waited outside with one of Max's men while everyone else entered the white building. We stood by nervously while waiting for something to happen.

After maybe five or ten minutes, we heard the high-pitched sound of gunfire and the slightly softer booms of the beanbag shotguns coming from inside the big building. The sounds were muffled, and I assumed that everything was happening deep underground.

Things became quiet, and I started to feel a little panicky. The security man I was with also had a concerned look on his face, which didn't help my anxiety. Finally, he held up his hand as he seemed to be listening to a voice in his earpiece.

"They've captured both of the people in the bunker," he said to Elliot and me. "The rest of the area below the building is clear. No one on our team was killed."

Killed? What about injured?

We drifted into the building and saw that the double doors in the floor were now wide open. With a whirring mechanical noise, five people came up on an elevator platform.

I was relieved to see Max, Carson, and Gabriella, along with Uncle Leo and Monica. Carson had blood slowly dripping from his arm, and the two gang members had their hands cuffed behind their backs. There were also five large boxes stacked on the platform.

Monica looked somewhat disheveled and nervous but otherwise seemed alright. Uncle Leo looked the worse for wear. From the way he was coughing and holding his hand to his chest, he'd likely taken a couple of beanbag shots.

Max walked over to talk with Elliot. "I'm not sure what part you

played in the robbery, but until we get this sorted out, I'll need to have you go with the rest of them."

Elliot seemed to be expecting this and nodded. Carson took hold of Uncle Leo using the arm that wasn't bleeding, and Gabriella escorted Monica. Max had a third man walk with Elliot.

Max told his people to go into the house and secure the prisoners. He'd be in to settle things in a few minutes.

As Gabriella walked by, she looked at me with a serious expression. Even after all this time, it was a little frightening.

"It is good to see you again," she said. "But why you not invite me here with you? You want to have all the fun yourself?"

"Sorry," I said, hoping she wasn't actually upset with me. "Maybe next time?"

Gabriella thought about it and nodded. "Very good," she said. "Next time, I come with you."

Max lingered behind as the group left the building. I pointed to the boxes piled on the elevator platform and looked at him.

"Well?" I asked.

"They already had the money loaded into the boxes," he said, a touch of humor in his voice. "That made it easy to get everything out. They have a nice setup down there. I wouldn't mind having something like that myself. Oh, these belong to you."

Max handed me my Glock and my phone. "Thanks," I said, relieved to get them both back.

I knew there was something awkward I needed to bring up, and this seemed like the best time to do it. "Um, we need to let Grant and Monica go," I said. "We can't turn them over to the police."

Max's face fell, and he gave me an odd look. It was as if he was hearing what I was saying but was having a hard time processing it.

"Look, I know that's an odd request," I continued. "But we can't let the police take them."

"You're asking a lot," he said evenly. "You know that my side wants to learn everything we can about the robbery, and the police are eager to wrap

this up as quickly as possible. I assume you have a good reason for this?”

“You know about the confidential source we’ve been using to get information on everyone the last couple of years?” I asked.

“I know what you’ve told me. I first heard about your source when you gave Tony the complete description and background on Carlos ‘The Butcher’ Valentino. Before you used your confidential source, all we had was vague guesswork.”

“Well, ‘my source’ turns out to be an extensive database associated with a clandestine part of government intelligence.”

Max’s eyes grew big, but he didn’t say anything. I could tell he wanted to know all about it.

“And, before you ask,” I said, holding up my hands, “we got it legitimately, and they’ve given us approval to use it, as long as it’s for something we can reasonably justify. But I have no idea which branch of the government they are or which intelligence service they represent. It might even be some sort of shared resource. But I’m convinced that they’re the real deal.”

“And they asked you to allow Grant and Monica Marshall to escape?”

“That’s right,” I said as I lowered my voice further. “I also have reason to believe that at least Monica is working undercover for the same agency as my contact. I don’t think they want that information getting out, but I know you’ll need it to make a decision.”

Max thought about it for a few moments, then looked at me. “Alright,” he said with a long sigh. “As long as you believe everybody’s playing for the same team, I’ll cut them loose. How do you want to play it?”

Thank you, thank you.

“I propose we split up Grant and Monica from Seth, Elliot, and Uncle Leo. We can put two in one car and three in another. We’ll then drive each vehicle to a different place, so Seth and Leo won’t be the wiser about what happened to the others.”

Max nodded. “That seems reasonable.”

“One more thing,” I said. “I don’t know if Grant knows about Monica being a spy. I’m also a little unsure about where we can take Grant so that

releasing them looks legitimate.”

“Alright,” Max said as he started thinking out loud. “I can see the issues this brings up. But this might end up helping me out with a problem.”

“Hey,” I said. “I’m all about helping.”

Max held out his arms, and I melted against him. With his bulletproof vest, he was rather knobby, but it felt great to be held by him.

“Thank you for coming to get me,” I said. “I hadn’t planned on getting that close to the group. But once I saw the vehicles in the building and the trap door in the floor, I knew I had to document everything and get it off to you as soon as possible.”

“I’ll admit that I did have a slight heart attack when you started texting me pictures of the hideout of a crew of dangerous criminals,” he said as he kissed the top of my head. “It only got worse when I texted, then called, and you didn’t answer. I think I upset Sophie a little when I called her and told her I needed to know exactly where you were, right away.”

“But she came through okay, didn’t she?”

“Yeah, she did,” Max admitted. “But I’ll still need to apologize next time I see her. I was rather worried about you, and I was somewhat insistent.”

I love it when he worries about me.

“How long were you and the team here before Elliot and I escaped?”

“Not long,” he admitted as he stroked my hair. “After I got your texts and learned the location from Sophie, I needed to talk it over with Johnny. He was willing to let me handle the rescue and lent me Gabriella and a few of his men.”

“That was nice of him,” I said. “I know it must seem a little odd having to go through someone else.”

“It was very generous of him,” he agreed. “But Johnny knows that I’m responsible for almost ten million dollars floating around Scottsdale. And you’re right. It’s odd having to ask permission from someone. But I think Johnny knew I’d be out here to get you, with or without his blessing.”

“I’m glad we escaped when we did. It looked like everyone was about to storm the bunker.”

“We were being careful and methodical,” Max said as his hand gently rubbed my back. “You’ll have to remember, we had no idea where you were. After we got here, we went into the house, but it was clear and looked abandoned. We were about to converge on the big white building and perform an entry when you and Elliot came running out.”

“We only got out because of Monica Marshall,” I said as I hugged him harder. “She arranged for us to escape. Otherwise, you and Seth’s gang likely would have had a nasty shootout. People likely would have gotten hurt or killed.”



I pulled into my parking lot and saw Grandma Henderson hauling a bag of groceries out of her car. I walked over and had her give them to me to carry.

“Hi, Grandma,” I said as I lifted the groceries. “How was your trip? Did you and Bob look at any houses for sale?”

“The trip went well,” she said with a smile as we walked into the building. “Bob hated it and complained the entire time.”

“Really?” I asked. “What didn’t he like?”

“Well, first was the humidity. I thought it was rather pleasant, and my skin loved it. But Bob said the muggy air was making him congested. He then started grumbling about how much worse it gets in the summer.”

“What else didn’t he like?” I asked, now curious, as we got into the elevator.

“Then there were the bugs,” Grandma said with a snicker. “Every time he saw an insect, it seemed to upset him, especially the flying ones. I think he’s gotten used to being in the desert and not having anything crawling around on the floor.”

“Was that it?” I asked.

“There was also the rain,” she said as she shook her head and rolled her eyes.

“He didn’t like the rain? In Florida?” I asked as we got out of the elevator and walked down the hallway. “You said he grew up there.”

“It rained for about half the days we were there,” Grandma said. “Bob had planned on playing a lot of golf with some of his old friends, but he only got to play once the entire trip.”

“So, he didn’t talk about moving down there?”

“He didn’t bring it up once. Honestly, I think he was a little relieved to get on the plane and fly back to Arizona.”

“Well, I’m sorry Bob didn’t like Pensacola,” I said as we stopped in front of Grandma’s door. “But I’m glad you aren’t going anywhere. Marlowe and I would miss you if you took off.”

“Yeah,” she said as she nodded her head slowly. “I think I’ll be around for a while longer.”

I went into my apartment and locked the door. Grabbing a Corona from the fridge, I popped the top and collapsed on the couch.

It had been a long day, and I was exhausted. I finished the beer and then stretched out on the couch.

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Chapter Nineteen



I was startled awake by the sound of my phone buzzing. Seeing it was Max, I quickly answered.

“Hey,” I said, happy to talk with him. I then noticed that it was completely dark outside. “What time is it?”

“It’s a little after nine,” he said. “I’m sorry I woke you.”

“No,” I said as I tried to rouse myself. “I’m glad you did. What’s going on?”

“I had a meeting with Johnny this evening,” Max said. “Tony was also there to advise us. Based on your information that the crooks were working for Marcus Thorne Jr. out of Las Vegas, the casino robbery was likely only a first test of our resolve.”

“How could robbing your casino be a test of your resolve?” I asked.

“We have the feeling they only wanted to see how we’d react to them coming into Johnny’s territory now that Tony’s retired. If we had simply rolled over, they’d likely start coming for us with everything they had.”

“Wow,” I said. “If that’s true, it’s pretty bold of them.”

“Yeah, it is,” Max agreed. “I’m about to have another meeting with Johnny to go over the final details. We’ve agreed that we’ll turn Seth, Leo, and Elliot over to the police. I’ve already called Detective Patel to arrange the handover for later tonight. I’ve also told him about Del Collins’s body being in Leo West’s bunker. I’ll leave it to him to work out the jurisdiction issues with the Mesa PD.”

“What about Elliot?” I asked. “He simply got in over his head and then couldn’t get out of it without going to prison for a long time.”

“I think you’re right,” Max said. “Although Seth and Leo West are in it up to their eyeballs, it appears that Elliot only participated under the threat of blackmail. I imagine a good lawyer would be able to get a lenient sentence in exchange for his testimony.”

“I was thinking the same thing,” I said. “I’ll call Lenny and let him know what’s happened. He can call Elliot’s wife and see if she’s up to having Lenny spring her husband from jail. Adriana comes from money, and I’m sure she’ll pay Lenny to get him off the hook. Well, that’s assuming she doesn’t divorce him for lying to her.”

“It sounds like Lenny will pick up a nice paycheck either way,” Max laughed.

“What about Grant and Monica?” I asked.

“Johnny agreed with Tony that this was only the opening push by Las Vegas into our territory. He’ll put the two of them in the backseat of an old sedan and drop them off in Vegas. We need to send a message to Marcus Thorne that we know what he tried to do, and we don’t appreciate his people showing up in Arizona.”

“That sounds like you’re letting him off pretty easy.”

“Maybe, but there are some informal rules with this. Marcus will know that even two of his crew coming back to Nevada was a one-time courtesy. Rocky Marchetti and Del Collins are both dead. Seth Sullivan, Elliot Kirk, and Leo West are in police custody, and two of them are looking at several years in prison. If anyone else from Marcus’s gang shows up in Scottsdale, they won’t be returned, at least not in a car.”

“What do you think will happen to Grant?”

“It sounds like he was in direct control of the operation to rob the casino. From everything you found out, it had taken Grant several months to assemble the crew and set up the heist. That’s a large expense for Marcus without getting anything back from it.”

“That doesn’t sound so good for him,” I said.

“Grant caused the group to lose face and stopped their expansion into Arizona. I imagine, at the very least, he’ll be demoted to a lesser position within the group. Who knows? His punishment might even be more severe.”

“I wonder what will happen to Monica,” I mused.

“If the information you received is accurate, I imagine she’ll try to move higher into the group.”

“Are you thinking she’ll try to latch onto Marcus Thorne now that he’s taken over his organization?” I asked.

“It’s possible,” Max said with a nod. “I only met him once, and that was a couple of years ago. But Monica’s very pretty, and she’s about the age Marcus seemed to prefer.”

Max thinks Monica’s pretty?

All I could do was shake my head. The world was such a crazy place.

After I hung up with Max, I called Lenny. I gave him the outline of how I’d found Elliot and how he’d been blackmailed into taking part in the casino robbery. I also let him know that Elliot was now in police custody.

As expected, Lenny was thrilled with the news. As far as he was concerned, the case had gone from simply getting evidence of infidelity for a divorce to the finding of a missing person and then to defending a guilty man on multiple felonies.

I could almost hear the sounds of an old-fashioned cash register going off as Lenny spent nearly twenty minutes peppering me with questions. Some of his questions were a little awkward since they involved information we’d received from Agent Anderson and that Max had been there to do the heavy lifting. But ultimately, Lenny didn’t really care how Elliot had been extracted or how much danger I’d been in.

“Perfect,” he said when he was through. “I’ll call Adriana Kirk right away. With her deep pockets, this should work out well. I’ll have him home by dinner time tomorrow. Oh, and, um, good job.”

Great.



The following morning, I pulled myself out of bed and got to work a little after eight thirty. Sophie and Gina were both at their desks when I

went in through the rear door, although I had to look twice at my best friend.

Sophie had apparently grabbed the roll of aluminum foil we had sitting in the breakroom and used it to make a hat. It went down to her ears and had a pointed top. She looked a little like a chocolate kiss.

“What are you doing with the tin-foil hat?” I asked.

“Hey,” she grumbled. “I don’t mind if the Men in Black monitor what I do with their database. But I’m not going to let them listen in on my thoughts.”

“Sophie said your government agents came back on Wednesday?” Gina asked, a touch of skepticism in her voice.

“Yeah,” I said. “I don’t think they’re using Sophie’s brain control microchip to monitor us, but they do seem to have a good idea of what’s going on here at the office. As soon as we started talking about going out to Leo West’s house in Mesa to look for Elliot, they hurried over here to tell us about Monica and Grant.”

“So, what happened at Uncle Leo’s yesterday,” Sophie asked. About ten minutes after you texted me, your boyfriend called in a huff to know where the house was located.”

“Yesterday was a totally shitty day,” I said. “While I was out taking those pictures I sent to you, Leo West shot me with a tranquilizer dart. I woke up down in a bunker with Elliot Kirk and the crooks. It turns out that Seth had killed Del Collins the day before, and Elliot had been taken prisoner. I’m pretty sure Seth was going to kill him as well.”

“Jeez,” Sophie said. “How do you get yourself in these situations?”

“Seth then threatened me with a slow and painful death. For the coup de grâce, he was going to shoot me in the face with my own gun. Elliot and I were only able to escape because Monica helped us.”

“This is the same Monica the agency asked you not to hand over to the police?” Gina asked.

“The same,” I said. “Fortunately, Max and his people were there, and they took care of Seth and Leo. They turned them over to the detective handling the casino robbery last night. They even recovered the stolen money, almost ten million dollars.”

“Damn,” Sophie said. “That shitty day was worse than usual. What about Elliot?”

“He was also handed over to the police. But Elliot was only involved in the casino robbery because Seth was blackmailing him. Lenny had a conversation with Adriana last night, and he told her the story as far as he knew it. She wants Lenny to defend him. By later this afternoon, Elliot will have been booked and had his bond hearing. Lenny should be able to spring him after Carla is through with him this morning.”

Gina was closely following the conversation and was slowly shaking her head. I could only imagine she was going over all of the violations of the various laws and police procedures that had occurred.

“Hey,” I said, looking at the clock. “Shouldn’t Lenny already be off to his weekly appointment with Countess Carla?”

“I expect him to blow through here any minute,” Sophie said. “I had the Moogy report on his desk when he came in this morning, and he’s been in his office with the door closed ever since.”

As predicted, Lenny came rushing through the back offices a few minutes later. “Can’t talk,” he said as he headed towards the back door. “I’m late for, um, golf. Oh, Jeez, never mind. You know where I’m going.”

The door closed, and the office got quiet. Sophie snorted while Gina shook her head again.

They both continued to work at their desks while I grabbed a Diet Pepsi from the fridge, plopped down on my chair, and thought about the past two weeks. We’d finished the Moogy assignment, and Lenny would go over the report with Mrs. LaFontaine. She’d then use it to break the prenup and divorce her husband.

Everybody but Moogy would be happy with the results. So, why did I still feel so crappy about the whole thing?

“What’s wrong with you?” Sophie asked, still wearing her new hat. “You look like you found out you’re pregnant.”

“It’s the Moogy thing,” I said.

Gina nodded her head. “I’ve been feeling it, too. Ever since you told me about Moogy’s latest girlfriend and what he did to her, I’ve been uneasy.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “We may have finished the assignment, but that won’t stop Moogy from exploiting the women.”

“From the set-up in the condo, he’s been filming college girls there for quite a while,” Sophie said. “But you’re probably right. Once he’s divorced, he’ll probably be twice as bad. Between his club and selling videos of college girls, he’ll probably come out on top.”

I decided to take off for the morning. My assignments were over, and I’d only wanted to stick around long enough to tell Sophie and Gina what had happened the day before.

I especially didn’t want to be there when Lenny came back from his training session with Countess Carla, the Cruel. Otherwise, I’d immediately get a new assignment.

I used the time to go to the grocery store and to get a new pair of cross trainers. I then decided to go for a quiet lunch before I headed back to the office. It was nice to be out without an assignment or a fresh threat of death hanging over my head, and I wanted to enjoy the little free time I had.



After checking to make sure Lenny’s Porche wasn’t parked under the back carport, I walked in through the security door. As soon as I stepped into the back offices, I heard the sound of a woman moaning in sexual ecstasy. As I looked around, the sound was coming from Sophie’s computer.

Still wearing the foil hat, she saw me looking, and she turned her monitor so I could see the video as well. As I suspected, there was a hard-core porno playing on it. It was a young brunette woman and an older guy wearing a black mask.

“Um, what are you doing?” I asked.

“Research,” she said.

“Research?”

We both stared at the video for several moments. I normally don’t watch these things, but the woman on the video seemed really into it.

Gina came in through the back door. She stopped, and her eyes got big as she saw what was playing on Sophie's monitor.

"Sophie's doing research," I said to Gina.

"Oh, really?" Gina asked. "What exactly are you trying to research?"

"Hey, don't judge me," Sophie snapped at both of us. She then pointed to the monitor and looked at me.

"Well?" she asked.

"Um, well, what?" I asked. "It's a dirty movie."

"The woman's in great shape," Gina noted. "But the guy could do with fewer doughnuts and more trips to the gym."

"No," Sophie said, now sounding frustrated. "Look where the movie was filmed."

The video was shot in a bedroom somewhere, likely a teenage girl's, judging from the stuffed animals and posters on the wall. It took me a few seconds to figure out what Sophie was talking about. Then it hit me.

"Crap," I said. "That's Moogy's condo."

"Yup," she said, sounding proud of herself. "I've been on the top porn sites all afternoon. It looks like Moogy's created three different accounts that he uses to upload videos of college girls. He uploaded four new videos featuring Hannah Higgins on Tuesday."

"Really?" I asked, feeling slightly creeped out. "Damn, that's disturbing."

"So far," Sophie said, "I've counted fourteen different girls in Moogy's condo going back three and a half years. He lists all of his videos in a category called *Barely Eighteen*."

"Is that Moogy?" Gina asked, pointing to the naked man in the video. "He's wearing a mask, and it's hard to tell."

"Oh," Sophie said. "In one of the videos with Hannah, she knocked his mask off while she was thrashing around and calling out to God. Here, I took a screenshot of it."

Sophie then showed us the screenshot she'd saved, and the person with Hannah was clearly Moogy LaFontaine. She then pointed out that he had a

prominent scar on his leg so that he could be identified in all of the other videos, mask or not.

“Alright,” I said. “So, the guy’s a jerk. And this video is one more thing Lenny can use to prove infidelity at the divorce hearing. But if the women are all over eighteen, then what he’s doing is slimy, but it isn’t illegal.”

“True,” Gina said. “Unless he’s selling the videos without the written consent of the girls. Then he’d likely have a legal issue.”

“That sounds easy enough,” I said. “Let me find out if Hannah signed a consent. If not, then let’s refer it to the police.”

“I happen to know a detective who would enjoy taking on something like this,” Gina said. “If Hannah’s been exploited, and if she’s willing to discuss it with the police, I’ll give my friend a call. Who knows, after it all shakes out, Lenny might be able to bring a civil case against Moogy.”



I called Hannah Higgins on a cell number Sophie had pulled up from the secret software. When she answered, she was somewhere quiet, perhaps in her apartment.

“Hi, Hannah,” I said. “My name’s Laura Black, and I’m an investigator for Halftown, Oeding, Shapiro, and Hopkins, a law firm in Old Town Scottsdale.”

“Um, okay,” she said.

“I’m looking into the activities of Moogy LaFontain. He has a history of meeting college girls at his club, dating them for a while, then taking them to his condo in Scottsdale to film them having sex with multiple men and women.”

“Alright,” she said, now with a touch of anxiety.

“I don’t know if you were aware of this. But several of the videos you made at his condo last Saturday night have already been featured on at least one of the bigger internet porn sites.”

“God, I knew it,” she exclaimed. “Moogy said those videos were only

for us to enjoy in private, but I knew he was going to sell them.”

“Do you want to tell me what happened that night?” I asked.

“There’s not much to tell,” she said in a voice barely above a whisper. “I went up to his place so we could have a quiet and intimate date. We’d been out a few times before, and he always treated me okay. It was sort of exciting to date the owner of a nightclub. But when I got there, his place was set up as a movie studio. He said he only wanted to record us so we could have a memory of us being together.”

“What happened then?” I asked.

“Well, I got pretty high and started doing tequila shots. Moogy had me go into the bedroom and change into something sexy for him. But when I came out, some other people had showed up. There were two guys and a really pretty girl, Sarah, something.”

“You didn’t think the timing of them showing up like that was odd?”

“Well, yeah, I did. But at the time, I was a little drunk and super horny. He had some excellent weed, and it sort of turned me on, so I just went with it. I ended up being with Moogy twice, one of the guys, and even the woman. It was my first time with a girl, and that part was actually pretty fun. Moogy had me put on a different sexy outfit for each new person.”

“Did he explain the mask he was wearing?”

“He said wearing a mask was a big turn-on for him. He wore it the entire time, well, except for when I accidentally pulled it off when I was climaxing.”

Hannah was quiet for a few moments then she asked, “So, what do you know about this? Were there many other girls like me?”

“Um,” I said. “So far, we’ve found fourteen others going back over the last three years. All of them were young, tall, athletic, and pretty.”

“God, I’m so stupid,” Hannah said, and I could hear her starting to cry.

“Did Moogy have you sign any sort of release form so he could sell the videos of you?”

“A release?” she sniffed. “No, nothing like that. He said the videos were only for us to enjoy later in private.”

“I’d like to stop Moogy from exploiting any more women,” I said.

“Would you mind if I had a detective from the Scottsdale Police Department talk with you? Selling your videos without your permission is definitely wrong and possibly illegal.”

“Go ahead,” she said. “I’ll talk with the police if it will stop Moogy from doing this to anyone else. I’ve been regretting what I did all week.”

“I’ll keep in touch with you,” I said. “If it turns out what he did was illegal, you may have a civil action against him.”

“Yeah, okay,” she said. “Keep in touch.”

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Chapter Twenty



I got up the following day with the relaxed feeling I only get when I'm on vacation or between assignments. Wanting the sensation to last as long as possible, I purposefully took my time getting dressed and going down to the office.

As I suspected, Lenny had another assignment waiting for me. This one involved trying to verify the alibi for a man accused of killing somebody's prized pet parrot.

These are the types of cases Gina normally does, but I wasn't going to complain too much. It beat taking naked pictures of cheating spouses.

With everything going on relating to the robbery, the capture of the criminals, and the return of the money, Max called and let me know he wouldn't be able to make our Friday night dinner date. But we did agree to meet for drinks at the Headhunter Lounge after his nine o'clock daily wrap-up meeting.

I got there a few minutes early and was surprised to find Tony DiCenzo waiting for me at the end of the bar. He stood as I entered and held his arms wide.

"Tony," I said as I hurried over and gave him a long hug. "What are you doing here?"

"Laura Black," he said in his gruff Brooklyn accent as he stepped back to look me over. "Max will be a few minutes late, and he asked if I wouldn't mind keeping you company."

"I'm so glad," I said. "I haven't seen you since Gabriella's victory party."

"From what I hear, you did pretty good for yourself this week. You

performed valuable services for both Max and Johnny.”

“Thanks, Tony,” I said. “But I was glad to do it, and I had a lot of help.”

“I understand,” he said with a chuckle. “No man is an island. But you always seem to be the tip of the spear when it comes to protecting the interests of Max and my old organization.”

I knew my cheeks were growing warm from his praise, and I didn’t know what I could say to that.

“Now, it’s no longer my privilege or my place to offer you the *official* thanks of the group. But I have been saving a special bottle of Balvenie 50-year-old scotch for such an occasion,” he said, pointing to a fancy bottle sitting on the bar. “And unfortunately, I’m not getting any younger. Would you do the honor of sharing a dram or two with me?”

“Oh, Tony,” I managed to get out as my voice quivered with emotion. “Thank you. I’d love that.”

With a look of true joy on his face, Tony picked up the bottle, broke the seal, and opened it. There were two of his new Glencairn tulip-shaped glasses on the bar, and he poured a generous, neat shot into each.

There was also a small ice bucket and a pair of tongs next to the scotch. I pulled out an ice cube and delicately dropped it into my glass.

I held the glass in my hand and gave a gentle swirl to melt the cube and release the bouquet. Holding the glass to my nose, I breathed in the delicious aroma of a fifty-year-old scotch.

Wow!

“That’s amazing,” I breathed out.

“That is something remarkable,” he said, sounding satisfied, holding the glass under his nose. “You know, I’ve always wanted to know what a three-thousand-dollar shot of scotch tastes like. Let’s find out.”



Max came into the bar twenty minutes later. By this point, Tony and I

each had three pours of the ultra-rare scotch and I was feeling a wonderful warm glow all over.

“Tony,” Max said as he walked over and gave his friend and mentor a hug. “Thanks for keeping her company while I was straightening some things out upstairs.”

“It was my pleasure,” he said as he eyed me. “Laura Black, keep up the good work. Feel free to schedule a round of golf with me sometime soon. It would be good to keep up with your activities. As I may have previously mentioned, you remind me a lot of me when I was your age.”

“I’ll do that, Tony,” I said, and I also gave him a hug. “Thank you for both the scotch and the company today.”

After Tony grabbed his bottle, which was about a third down, and left, Max and I sat at the bar. I was nursing my last shot of the wonderful scotch, and I let Max have a taste.

“That’s delicious,” he said as he smacked his lips together. “Although, I don’t think collecting and drinking rare scotch is for me. I’d only think of the other things I could have bought with the money.”

“Same with me,” I said. “But it was sweet of Tony to share his bottle with me. I think he’s been saving it for a while.”

“Well, he’s very fond of you. He also told me more than once today how brave you were to get involved like you did. Come walk with me.”

I tilted up the glass to get the last few drops, then followed Max out of the lounge. After he led me down a secluded hallway, I knew he only wanted to be alone with me. This made me smile, and I had to wrap my arms around him.

“Are things getting back to normal here?” I asked. “You got all of the money back, and the crooks are dead, in jail, or returned to Las Vegas. It sounds like things worked out okay.”

“Yes,” Max said as he wrapped his arms around me in return. “I appreciate all of the help you gave us. Unfortunately, Johnny will still need to deal with Marcus Thorne. I know I’m not on that side of the business anymore, but you saw how the two sides are still somewhat interconnected. I get the feeling Marcus may not wait long to come back to try something again.”

“But not tonight?” I asked.

“Not tonight,” Max said as he bent down to kiss me. I’d wager we’ll likely be in the clear for the entire weekend.”

“We should probably make the best of it then,” I said, pulling his face to my lips.

“We probably should,” he said as he kissed me again. “Would you like to come back to my place? I’ll even drive. I promise I won’t leave you in the middle of the night again.”

Yes!

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Epilogue



During the police investigation, it turned out that Moogy had submitted forms to the internet sites claiming that all the girls in the videos had signed releases. However, the detective quickly determined that Moogy had forged these.

Using the names on the counterfeit forms, nine of the women were found and contacted by the detective. None of them had signed any sort of video release, and none of them were aware that Moogy had sold their videos to internet porn sites.

Moogy was eventually tried, sentenced to thirty days in prison, and fined twenty thousand dollars. What hurt him more was that his name came out to the public as being a creeper, and he was ridiculed on the internet. Business at his club quickly dropped by over half.

Lenny worked with the women and put together a civil suit against Moogy. He carefully timed the suit so that Mrs. LaFontain first got her half from the divorce, and then the exploited women were able to take much of the rest, including his nightclub.

Moogy LaFontaine had threatened to tie me to a chair, pull my eyes out of their sockets, and hang them on his wall. Given the chance, I had no doubt that he would have done just that.

He was disgusting and vile in a way that few other people were. I'm not sure about Gina and Sophie, but I felt a sense of satisfaction knowing that Moogy's days of being a blight on Scottsdale were over.

In the big scheme of things, it's always hard to do something that makes a difference. But in this case, along with some help from my friends, I think we actually did. Even with all the craziness going on in the world, it helps me sleep better at night.

On the following pages, please enjoy a special preview of

Homicide Honeymoon:

A Kristy Piper Aloha Lagoon Mystery

by B A Trimmer.

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Homicide Honeymoon

A Kristy Piper
Aloha Lagoon Mystery

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Chapter One

“Play ‘Ukulele Lady!’” Vicky Archer, the slightly tipsy mother of the groom, called out to the three musicians on the small stage in the corner of the Rainbow Lounge. She then nodded to the people around her, proud to show off her deep knowledge of Hawaiian music.

Vicky was in her mid-fifties with shoulder-length fiery auburn hair. Her designer clothing was fashionable, and she wore several thousand dollars’ worth of tasteful jewelry. Her face and body were starting to show her age, but she’d probably been rather pretty in her youth.

From the start, I could tell Vicky was an attention seeker. She’d already made everyone in the lounge toast her son and his bride-to-be, twice. The second time, she’d made a painfully long speech that was more about her own accomplishments in life than about the bride and groom.

Nani Johnson, the staff ukulele player at the Aloha Lagoon Resort, looked back at Vicky with a glare somewhere between frustration and resignation. Her dark brown hair swayed as she shook her head slowly.

Although “Ukulele Lady” was about a woman from Hawaii, I’d found out it was written by a couple of guys who lived on the mainland about a hundred years ago. It was not considered a true Hawaiian song and was never played by anyone at the resort unless requested by a guest, which, unfortunately, was often.

As the trio on stage started to play, the mellow sounds of “Ukulele Lady” drifted over the lounge. Another one of the staff musicians, Pauli Keo, a slender man of Asian heritage with silky black hair, briefly looked up from his steel guitar, snickered, and shook his head.

Next to me, Leilani Alana flipped her long dark hair, turned her beautiful native Hawaiian face to me, and rolled her huge brown eyes.

“Geez,” she said with a sigh and a slow shake of her head. “I get the feeling this is going to be a really long week. Kristy, you know I don’t like to badmouth anyone, but this is the weirdest wedding party we’ve had in a while.”

Leilani was not only my assistant at the resort but was also my best friend. I’d met her almost seven months ago when I’d first taken the job as the wedding director at the Aloha Lagoon Resort on the south coast of Kauai. Over the months, she’d more or less become the younger sister I’d never had.

What had caused Leilani’s reaction was Bobby Jackson, the feral-looking, Metallica T-shirt-wearing, ten-year-old nephew of the bride, Claire Jackson. Bobby was busily using two hands to load up yet another plate of hors d’oeuvres from the lounge buffet table. I had to admire his creativity as he formed a small pyramid of food on his plate.

After looking around to make sure no one would stop him, he went into a corner of the bar and started stuffing the appetizers into his mouth as fast as he could. Within two or three minutes, he had devoured the entire plate full of food.

We then watched in shock as Bobby walked over to a service tray containing several used cocktail glasses and dirty plates. After looking over the remnants of five or six drinks, he picked up one that looked like a partially consumed gin and tonic.

Seeing what the boy was about to do, I got up and hurried over to where he stood. Unfortunately, he saw me approaching and quickly downed the remains of the cocktail in three gulps.

The boy looked up at me as I glared down at him. From his happy laughter and look of joy on

his face, he seemed to be enjoying himself.

I'd already mentioned Bobby's behavior to his mother, the bride's older sister, Shelby Jackson. Unfortunately, from her vague and somewhat evasive answer, I'd gotten the feeling she wouldn't be doing a lot to control her son.

"It's certainly not starting out very well," I admitted as I returned to the booth with Leilani. "But honestly, we've had worse."

A few weeks before, there had been the tragic murder of a groomsman at one of my weddings. What had made it even more heartbreaking was that the murderer had been someone very close to the bride.

"Yeah, you're right," Leilani agreed with a sad laugh. "Let's never do that again."

Unfortunately, we'd already refereed our first argument of the week. It had involved the groom's mother, Vicky Archer, who'd gotten into a spat with Bobby's mother, Shelby Jackson.

Although the bride, Claire, and Shelby were sisters, the two women looked nothing alike. Where Claire was medium height and slender with long ash-blonde hair, Shelby was a dark brunette with an hourglass figure and was easily three inches taller than her younger sister.

Shelby's long, straight hair with big bangs was messy, and her makeup was over the top. Her unreasonably tight and revealing outfit fell somewhat more to the sleazy side than to the sexy. She also wore big, black-plastic frame glasses, giving her a naughty librarian vibe.

The tiff had ensued when Vicky had claimed to have smelled marijuana on Shelby. The groom's mother had then made an overly loud and dramatic scene about how this was the most important week of her son's life. She'd then snarled out that she didn't want to see it ruined by someone acting so irresponsibly.

I'd hurried over to explain to Vicky that it wasn't a big deal, but she seemed to think it was somehow a matter of principle. As I'd stood between the angry women, Patrick Archer, the groom, had also hurried over to try to calm the situation. From the look of exasperation on his face, I'd gotten the feeling that he'd been expecting his mother to pull such a lame stunt.

Unfortunately, the quarrel hadn't stopped until Shelby compared Vicky's designer outfit to a *moldy douche-bag*. After this initial insult had produced a look of shock on Vicky's face, Shelby had then followed up by calling her some rather childish names, including *stinky-butt*, *twatwaffle*, and *diarrhea-face*.

Vicky's mouth had dropped open in disbelief at the schoolyard taunts, and a few snickers had been heard around the bar. She'd then stomped out of the lounge in a melodramatic huff, only to reappear ten minutes later, fluffing her hair, acting as if nothing had happened.

Each week, I usually ended up meeting at least a dozen new people, and names were always hard for me to remember, especially during the first few days. I typically gave everyone a private nickname to make it easier on myself.

The names for these two women were easy. The groom's mother became Drama Queen Vicky, and the bride's older sister was Sleazy Shelby.

Tonight was the first event of Claire's Grand Elegance wedding week. The resort offered this deluxe package to give brides the ultimate Hawaiian wedding experience.

We'd made it through the opening hour of the Aloha Reception, the first organized event of the wedding week. The reception was a nightly public event held in the Rainbow Lounge, a sizable and friendly space in the same building as the Rainbow Buffet. Afterward, our group always followed it with a casual dinner at the restaurant.

The open lanai of the bar had a beautiful view of the beach as it gently sloped down to the azure-blue Pacific. A light, warm breeze drifted through the lounge, and the sounds of the waves from the shore added to the feeling of being in a tropical paradise.

Several of the guests who'd arrived on the afternoon flight into Lihue were wearing plumeria leis. I'd come to realize that the delicate scent of the blossoms was the aroma tourists most closely associated with being in Hawaii.

The reception gave the members of the wedding party who'd flown in during the day a chance to gather and meet. It was usually a happy event filled with laughter, squealing women, and lots of drinking. The wedding ceremony was scheduled to be held on the beach during sunset on Saturday, six days from now.

Unfortunately, my usual photographer and dreamy new heartthrob, Jake Hunter, hadn't been able to make it to the Aloha Reception. He'd had some obligations with his other job, a small but successful Internet marketing company he'd been running out of his home since he'd graduated from the University of Hawaii some eight years earlier.

Although the reception officially started at five each night, I'd have my group gather closer to five-thirty. This gave everyone time to have a drink or two before the sun began to head toward the horizon, and I'd get my hour of perfect light. I always cherish this "golden hour," and I try to schedule events each night to use it to its fullest.

I'd been taking pictures of the group with my ancient Nikon DSLR camera, and Leilani had been shooting videos since the event started. Now that things had returned to normal after the spat and the celebratory atmosphere that the Aloha Lagoon Resort is known for had resumed, we were taking a five-minute break in one of the side booths of the lounge.

As we sat, Claire and Patrick, the happy couple, started slow dancing along with several other wedding party members. Pauli Keo sang in the Hawaiian language from the stage in his deep, gravelly voice. I had no idea what the song was about, but it was beautiful, nonetheless.

We'd chosen the booth to be close to the dance floor, and Leilani was able to shoot a video of Claire and Patrick dancing without having to get up. I was even able to use the telephoto function of my lens to get some decent pictures of the bride and groom as they danced, the fading glow of the tropical sunset visible behind them.

Claire Jackson was in her late twenties, as were most of the wedding party. She wore the traditional white *The Bride* sash over her green and coral aloha shirt.

She was competent, organized, and not shy about telling us what she wanted. This was always my favorite type of bride to work with.

Tall and athletic, Patrick Archer had a relatively outgoing personality and a winning smile. His dark hair was relatively short, and it seemed to complement his clean-shaven face. He freely expressed his opinions but usually gave the final say to Claire.

To be honest, this was also my favorite kind of groom. Few things were worse on a wedding planner than having the bride and groom quibbling about every detail going into the ceremony and the reception.

After the dance ended, Patrick joined the groomsmen at the bar, and Claire came over to where we were sitting. Her face had the radiant glow I've come to associate with a happy bride.

"Oh, Kristy," she sighed, giving me a warm smile. "I've been dreaming about coming here for so long, but it's even better in real life. The resort is gorgeous. Thank you so much for setting everything up."

"We're glad to do it," I said. "I'll pass along your thanks to Dorothy. She did most of the work."

Stop by the Wedding Center tomorrow before everyone heads out to the beach. You can meet with her, and we can go over the final details.”

Claire was about to say something else when her mouth dropped open, and her eyebrows shot up. It would have been almost comical, but I could tell she’d just seen something upsetting.

The look of a blissful bride had disappeared and was now replaced by a fuming woman. “What is *he* doing here?” she growled.

“Who?” Leilani and I asked in unison as we craned our necks around to see who was causing the disturbance. Our wedding planner radars had just been activated.

“It’s Marty Mason,” Claire almost spat out the words. Her eyes narrowed, and I could sense her rising anger. “My ex-fiancé.”

I followed Claire’s eyes to the bar, where a good-looking man in his early thirties was talking to one of the bridesmaids, Skye Sullivan. They were holding drinks and laughing at some joke.

Marty, our party-crasher, was tall, with short dark hair, a three-day beard, and a great-looking lean body. He exuded charm and charisma with a warm, friendly smile and bright, intelligent eyes.

Skye Sullivan smiled broadly as she gazed at Marty and sipped her mai tai. She was apparently thrilled that Claire’s ex-fiancé was here.

Skye reminded me of the flower-child hippy women I’d seen in pictures of the original Woodstock concert in the late sixties. She was medium height, pale, and bone thin, with long, straight strawberry blonde hair parted down the middle. She wore an aqua paisley peasant dress and a narrow headband with a silver charm hanging off to the side.

Skye didn’t wear a bra or a lot of makeup. The lack of cosmetics only highlighted the many freckles on her nose and cheeks. Like the other bridesmaid, she sported a pink and white *Bride’s Squad* button.

The thing that sealed the flower-child association for me was that I actually *had* seen Skye and Sleazy Shelby smoking marijuana before the reception. I often see this at my weddings, and I never interfere.

Like most of the country, Hawaii was in the process of making it completely legal. For better or worse, as long as you didn’t try to light up in the middle of a restaurant, no one ever made too much of a fuss about it anymore.

As Flower Child Skye and Marty Mason stood together and chatted, I couldn’t help but notice how Marty’s close-fitting red aloha shirt showed off the well-defined muscles of his chest and arms. The way he filled out the shirt reminded me of Jake. I glanced at Leilani and noticed she was also giving him the once-over.

“Why would your ex-fiancé be here?” I asked as I turned back to Claire.

“Oh,” she sighed with frustration. “Marty hasn’t gotten over the fact that I dumped him, even though it was almost two years ago. I’d heard a rumor that he was thinking about coming out and crashing my wedding, but I didn’t think he’d actually do it.”

“Really?” Leilani asked with intense curiosity as she leaned forward, her head cocked to the side. She started to twirl her hair with her finger, something she only does when she’s completely interested in something. “Why’d you dump him?”

Leilani loved learning all the gossip about the wedding party. The more embarrassing, the better, as far as she was concerned.

“I found out he was a jerk,” Claire said, rage in her eyes. From the way she hissed out the words, Marty must have done something dreadful.

A look of disappointment washed over Leilani’s face. I think she’d been hoping for at least a few of the juicier details.

“Claire,” I said, focusing my attention on my bride. “Having your ex-fiancé show up like this has me concerned. Flying out to Hawaii from the mainland seems like a rather extreme move. Like maybe he’s a bit overly obsessive or has some hostile intent?”

Claire shook her head slowly. “No, Marty has money, and flying out here wouldn’t be a big deal to him. I don’t think he’s dangerous, but I can definitely see this becoming a problem.”

“How would you like me to handle it?” I asked as I rested my fingertips on Claire’s arm. “I can talk with him, or if you’d prefer, I can have security escort him from the lounge.”

Claire thought about it for a moment, then she softened and blew out a breath. “No, I’ll go talk with him. I’ll remind him he wasn’t invited, and I’d appreciate it if he didn’t try to hang out with us. But sure, if he still can’t take the hint, I have no problem with security bouncing him out of here.”

Claire got up and walked across the lounge to where Marty was still chatting with Flower Child Skye. By this point, they had been joined by the bride’s mother, Jessica.

To be on the safe side, I walked behind my bride. I wanted to make sure things didn’t get out of hand.

“Marty,” Claire said as she reached her ex-fiancé. I could sense the frustration in her voice. “What are you doing here?”

“Claire, you know I couldn’t miss your wedding,” he said smoothly as he faced the bride. Again, I noticed his smile. His teeth were remarkably white. He was also wearing some sort of high-end cologne.

“Look,” Claire said, anger now in her voice. “I don’t want you here. You need to get it through your head that we’re over. We’ll never have anything to do with each other again, never. You need to leave.”

But even as she said this, the best man, Ethan Steele, stomped up to Marty. A childhood friend of Patrick’s, the best man was medium-height and broad, with a chubby round face and long, messy, dark-blond hair pulled back in a ponytail. Unfortunately, he wasn’t too bright, and I’d already come to think of him as Stupid Ethan.

Patrick also joined the group surrounding Marty. Fortunately, the look on his face was more concerned than angry. From the fuming look on Ethan’s face, we were about to have the second argument of the reception. I quickly stood in the middle of the group to prevent the situation from spiraling into a melee.

“You have some nerve being here, Marty,” Stupid Ethan snarled. His face was red with anger, and he was breathing hard. “I’ve wanted to pound in your ugly face for years. You’ve messed with me, you’ve messed with Claire, and now you’re messing with my best friend. You better leave before I kick your nasty butt down the beach.”

“Ethan,” Marty said calmly, taking a sip of his mai tai. “I’m a paying guest of this resort. Nothing says I can’t have a quiet drink in a public bar. But if you want to fight, sure. I’d be more than happy to take you on. Shall we head down to the beach? Right now?”

“Mr. Mason,” I said in my official wedding planner voice as I turned to face the man. Marty’s eyes flicked to the resort patch on my Aloha Lagoon staff polo. “I understand you’re a resort guest, but the bride doesn’t want you bothering the wedding party. You really do need to leave.”

Everybody in the group glared at each other, seemingly at a stalemate. Finally, the bride's sister, Sleazy Shelby, walked over to Marty, slid her arm around his waist, and gave him a side hug. Like Skye, she wore a pink and white *Bride's Squad* button.

"Come on, Marty," she said smoothly. "You know my baby sister doesn't want you here. It'll just cause a scene. Take me to the tiki bar on the beach and buy me a drink."

Marty glanced down at Shelby's exposed cleavage and then over at Claire. "Sure, Shelby," he said. "It'll be good catching up with you."

He set his nearly full drink on the bar and then looked at Stupid Ethan, whose face was still red with anger. "Raincheck on the fight, bro," Marty said with a wink. "But I'll be here all week. I'll let you have your chance, unless you don't think you can handle me once you sober up."

Stupid Ethan took a step toward Marty and growled a guttural curse. I shifted to stand in front of the best man, preventing him from charging at Claire's ex-fiancé. From the smile on Marty's face, he seemed amused to have a woman standing between him and the angry man.

As Sleazy Shelby and Marty left the lounge, I was surprised by the look of disappointment and jealousy on Flower Child Skye. I was even more surprised at the look of undisguised lustful longing that the bride's mother, Jessica, was giving Marty as her eyes followed him out of the bar.

Jessica Jackson was an outgoing woman in her early fifties with a body that was still fit and toned. She'd come to Hawaii with a nice tan, and her clothes were expensive. Her shoulder-length, ash-blond hair was nicely styled, and her makeup had been tastefully applied.

As Jessica watched Marty's retreating backside, her cheeks developed a pink flush, and she ran her tongue lightly over her lips. She was breathing hard, causing her oversized boobs to bob up and down.

Honestly, it hadn't been the first time I'd seen the bride's mother staring lustfully at a younger man at the reception. From what I'd gathered, Claire's father had passed away several years before, leaving the family remarkably well off.

According to Claire, her mother hadn't remarried. Instead, she preferred to casually date younger men. I was starting to think of her as Cougar Jessica.

As everyone returned from the confrontation at the bar, Shelby's son, Feral Bobby, casually drifted over and climbed onto the barstool nearest Marty's abandoned drink. He picked up the cocktail and looked like he was about to down it. I quickly started to head in his direction to try to stop him.

Fortunately, Walton, the bartender, a quiet, grandfatherly guy with medium-length gray hair and a thick gray mustache, had also noticed what was happening. He stepped up and efficiently snatched the cocktail away, even as the boy eagerly took his first sip.

"You're a jerk," Bobby grumbled at Walton as he stomped off.

Go figure, I thought. This is the weirdest family.

Chapter Two

With ex-fiancé Marty gone, the week's second issue was resolved, at least for the time being. The group quickly returned to its celebratory itinerary. The only one who didn't promptly snap out of it was the bridesmaid, Flower Child Skye.

She'd also watched as Bobby had picked up the drink from the bar and had also started to rush over to take it from him. When Walton had snatched it away from the boy, Skye had stopped and mouthed, "Thank you" to the senior bartender.

Skye then collapsed into one of the empty booths. The bridesmaid developed a melancholy look of disappointment as her glances repeatedly returned to the bar's entrance. I got the feeling she was expecting, or at least hoping, for Marty to return for her.

It made me wonder if Flower Child Skye and Claire's ex-fiancé had a history together. I'd heard that most of the group had gotten to know each other through their work, so they likely all knew each other well.

Skye also cast several glances at Feral Bobby as if watching for him to go after someone else's drink. I was thankful that someone in the wedding party seemed to be concerned about Bobby's actions.

Leilani and I walked over to Claire to see how she was doing. I also wanted to let her know it was almost time for us to head next door to the Rainbow Buffet for dinner.

As we chatted, the bride's grandmother, Giggy, came up to us. She was a tiny woman in her early seventies with jet-black hair in a loose perm. She wore oversized glasses with round black frames that highlighted her bright blue eyes.

Grandma Giggy was holding a half-full mai tai. Not that I was counting, but it must have been her third or fourth of the night.

"Who was that boy you were talking to before he went away with Shelby?" Giggy asked her granddaughter. "He looked familiar."

"That was Marty Mason," Claire said patiently.

"I thought it was him," Grandma Giggy said, now sounding annoyed. "Didn't you used to be engaged to him? He was always kind of a butthole. What was he doing here? Odds are pretty long that he just decided to show up in Hawaii for a vacation."

Throughout the reception, I'd noticed that Grandma Giggy would say whatever popped into her head. She also didn't seem to have much of a mental filter, so some of the things she said were somewhat awkward and direct.

"I don't know why he's here, Grandma," Claire admitted. "I haven't talked with Marty since we broke off the engagement, and he quit working at the company. If I had to guess, he's probably here to stir up some trouble for Patrick and me. But if not, I'd say he came to be with Shelby."

Grandma Giggy looked at her granddaughter and shook her head with disappointment. "Maybe I should straighten him out for you. I'll let him know he's starting to stink up the place, and he'd better beat it before I beat it for him."

"It's okay, Grandma," Claire said patiently. "I'll take care of it."

"Are you sure?" she asked, seemingly serious. "I still know how to deal with punks like him."

"I'm sure, Grandma," Claire said. "Besides, it's time for dinner. Help me gather people for the

buffet.”

Claire then took off, and we were about to head into the buffet as well.

“Uh oh,” Leilani moaned out. “What’s that boy doing now?”

We glanced to where Leilani was looking and spotted Feral Bobby. He was standing next to one of the tables on the far side of the lounge. The people sitting there must have been off mingling or perhaps getting more food. He had a toothy animal-like smile and was panting with anticipation as he gazed at four full cocktails sitting unattended.

“Yes!” he sang out with happiness as he grabbed one of the drinks. From the golden brown color and the cherry sitting at the bottom of the glass, I guessed it was a Manhattan.

“He’s going to slam it,” Leilani warned everyone within earshot.

I quickly stood up and rushed toward the table. But before I could get more than halfway to the boy, he’d drained the cocktail in three gulps.

Like a seasoned drinker, Bobby slammed the glass on the table and bared his teeth while making a growling sound of triumph. “Oh, yeah,” he called out while dancing in place.

His crazy eyes sparkled as they flicked around the lounge, his long, unruly blond hair framing his face. When he spotted me, he turned around, wiggled his butt at me, and laughed hysterically.

I came to a stop and found myself standing in the middle of the dance floor. With Bobby’s mother, Sleazy Shelby, gone, perhaps for the rest of the night, I looked around for someone else in the family who could control him.

I didn’t want to dump this problem on my bride, but I needed to do something. Maybe I could convince Flower Child Skye to babysit. She seemed to be the only wedding party member who was even vaguely concerned about Bobby’s behavior.

I caught Skye’s eye as she sat at one of the tables. She’d apparently been watching Bobby as well, and I nodded in his direction.

Fortunately, she seemed to understand what I was asking. She walked over to the boy, bent down, and started talking with him in low tones.

I returned to the booth, and Grandma Giggy looked over at me. “Oh, don’t worry about Bobby getting drunk,” she said with a dismissive hand wave. “That boy can’t hold his liquor. Shelby tries to make him stop, but Bobby always wants to be like the grown-ups.”

Giggy was right. The look on Bobby’s face quickly changed to panic as the whisky and vermouth hit his stomach. He frantically looked around the lounge and then ran to the edge of the lanai. He leaned over as far as he could and loudly threw up onto the flower beds below.

From the look of shock on Nani Johnson’s face, she’d apparently also watched the situation as it developed. As she mumbled something, the musicians on stage began to play a little louder, partially drowning out the sounds of the boy retching.

Bobby seemed to go at it for a long time, and when he turned around, he smiled his toothy grin as he wiped his mouth with his sleeve. This quiet period only lasted a few seconds before the look of panic returned. He hung over the edge of the lanai again, tossing up the rest of his drinks and appetizers.

Several people near where the child had been getting sick gave him looks of outrage and disgust. Flower Child Skye began to dry heave.

From the horrified look on Skye’s face, she might have also thrown up a little bit in her mouth. I was suddenly afraid we were about to have a more general problem with the wedding guests getting sick.

“That’s so gross,” Leilani moaned as she scrunched her face and wrinkled her nose. “I hope everyone else in the lounge doesn’t start to spew up.”

Cougar Jessica hurried over to make sure her grandson was all right, using a napkin to wipe the boy’s mouth. From the look of annoyance on her face, this hadn’t been the first time she’d done this.

“That boy belongs in a zoo,” Grandma Giggy said with a shake of her head. “But to be honest, his mother isn’t a lot better. Shelby may be my granddaughter, but she’s always been a tramp. Lord only knows who the boy’s father is. If I had to guess, I’d say it’s Tarzan.”

“I’ll talk with Shelby again as soon as she comes back,” I said, feeling annoyed and a little sad about the lack of parenting for the boy. “We can’t have a minor drinking at the resort without trying to stop it. If management catches wind of it, they’ll come down on us.”

* * *

I woke up early the following day, eager to get the festivities going. Monday was the first full day of the wedding week and was almost always spent at the beach. Through several frustrating experiences, I’d quickly learned that this was where most of the wedding party would end up, even if I tried to plan another event for them.

As I got ready, I looked at my hair in the mirror, trying to decide whether to wear it curly or straight. I knew I’d be seeing my boyfriend Jake today and wanted it to look good for him.

It was a mostly natural honey blonde, and for the last several years, I’d been keeping it five or six inches below my shoulders. Being in Hawaii had made it lighter overall but had also brought out some darker streaks that I thought looked good.

Eye makeup was always more of a challenge. My eyes are usually emerald green with flecks of gold, but on some days, they are more of an aqua blue. I know it’s more about what I’m wearing at the time, but Leilani swears they change color depending on my anxiety level, sort of like one of her old mood rings.

Thankfully, the rest of the previous evening had been uneventful. After the reception, the group went through the buffet line and then gathered in the Coconut Banquet Room, a private lanai off the Rainbow Lounge.

The space held about twenty people, so it was perfect for the dozen people in the wedding party. Marty Mason hadn’t reappeared to cause any more mischief, but neither had Sleazy Shelby.

Fortunately, Bride Claire and the rest of the wedding party had been able to shake off the events of the reception. The group had quickly returned to celebrating in a manner that was more in the tradition of Aloha Lagoon. The fact that most of them had been three sheets to the wind by this point had probably helped their moods as much as anything else.

The groom’s mother, Drama Queen Vicky, spent the first part of the dinner trying to assign seating for everyone in the group. It soon became obvious that she was only doing this to sit next to her son and future daughter-in-law while attempting to send the bride’s mother, Cougar Jessica, to a seat at a separate table, as far away as possible. Vicky became visibly annoyed when most of the wedding party ignored her and sat wherever they wished.

I had hoped the bridesmaid’s absence wouldn’t lead to friction with the other women in the group. After the lustful looks Flower Child Skye and Cougar Jessica had been giving Marty, I knew they’d be jealous that Shelby had been the one to be with him.

Cougar Jessica had borne Vicky’s interference and Marty’s absence well. She’d quickly started up a flirty conversation with one of the waiters, a kid in his early twenties. From the way she’d been laughing and batting her eyes at the man, she’d seemed to have completely forgotten about her

daughter's ex-fiancé.

Skye had seemed to take Marty being gone the hardest. She'd gone through the buffet line but had only picked at her food and had left the restaurant before everyone else had gone back for dessert.

The only distraction during dinner had been Shelby's son, Feral Bobby. After becoming so sick, I'd expected him to calm down. Instead, he'd only seemed to wind up. He'd spent the majority of dinner hysterically laughing and running in circles in an open area behind the tables.

* * *

I stopped by the doughnut shop for a box of breakfast and got to the resort right at nine. As I walked past the courtyard shops, I happened to glance into the Happy Hula Dress Boutique, which must have just opened for the day.

Flower Child Skye pulled a sheer red negligée from the rack and held it against her pink spaghetti-strap camisole top. Since she again wasn't wearing a bra, it wasn't hard to imagine how the outfit would look on her.

I was more than a little surprised to see Claire's ex-fiancé, Marty Mason, standing next to her. He was looking down at her chest as she held up the lingerie, all the while talking and making hand motions, apparently giving his opinion on the sexy garment.

Still holding the box of doughnuts, I drifted to one of the courtyard benches and watched as Marty took the negligée up to Kaley Kalua, the boutique manager, who was working the cash register. As he paid for the nightie, Skye glanced around the shop to make sure no one was watching and then reached down and gave Marty's tush a firm squeeze.

Marty grinned at the bridesmaid as he handed her the bag containing the purchase. They left the boutique, and I hurriedly turned my head to look the other way.

I heard them mumble a few low words of parting to each other. When I'd turned back, they'd each gone in separate directions.

This is the weirdest wedding party, ever.

I went into the main building through the front entrance and walked through the cavernous main lobby, a beautiful space with white marble tile and lots of tropical foliage. Traditional island music played softly through overhead speakers.

As always, the lobby was a low buzz of dozens of people talking at once. A line of maybe fifteen people was waiting to check out at the front desk while bellhops wheeled carts full of luggage out to waiting taxis and limousines.

The office was near the back of the lobby, past the concierge desk, nestled between Gabby's Island Adventures and the gift shop. Over the past seven months, I'd come to regard this as a friendly space and my home away from home.

The window display for the office consisted of a mannequin wearing a white beaded ball gown with a pink and white silk lei. Next to this was a figure in a black tuxedo with tails. According to Dorothy, both outfits had been used several times over the years as last-minute emergency replacements.

As I opened the white wooden door with *Aloha Lagoon Wedding Center* stenciled in black and gold lettering on the upper glass panel, a bell mounted on the wall above the door gave a playful jingle. This always made the brides smile and set a fun, lighthearted tone for their visits.

As in the lobby, traditional Hawaiian music played softly in the background. Dorothy had

several fragrant plumeria blossoms floating in a crystal bowl of water, which sat in the center of the glass-topped rattan conference table. The large white and pink flowers filled the office with a light, enchanting scent that I never tire of.

Lining the muted peach-colored office walls were large framed pictures of smiling couples taking their marriage vows in a lush tropical paradise. Several comfortable white wicker chairs with thick royal blue cushions were scattered about the room. An impressive floor-to-ceiling built-in bookshelf on the back wall held dozens of catalogs for everything associated with a tropical destination wedding.

A new poster-sized picture of Carly and Justin, a previous bride and groom we'd had at the resort, was on the wall behind the conference table. The happy couple were snorkeling and had been completely submerged in front of a colorful coral reef. Dozens of brilliantly colored tropical fish were swimming in the photo, looking like a scene from "Finding Nemo."

The Bride was clearly visible, written across Carly's white one-piece suit, and the black bow tie around Justin's neck was straight. They held each other in a loose but tender embrace, bubbles drifting up around them. It had been one of the pictures Jake had taken during the first week he'd worked here, and it had instantly become my all-time favorite tropical destination wedding photo.

Dorothy Campbell, the office manager, was already at her desk, typing invoices into her computer. Judging from the delicious aroma mixed in with the flowers, she'd already made a pot of her Kona coffee.

I held up the box of doughnuts and smiled. "Good morning," I sang out.

"Good morning to you," she said with a laugh.

Several wedding directors had come and gone over the years, but Dorothy had been the office manager at the Wedding Center pretty much since it opened. As a result, she knew almost everyone at the resort on a first-name basis.

Dorothy's parents had come to Kauai from Negril, Jamaica, when she was in kindergarten. She considered herself a Hawaiian native, even though she'd still retained a slight Jamaican accent. According to people at the resort, Dorothy's accent always became a little more pronounced whenever she returned from a vacation to Jamaica to visit her family.

Dorothy's curly black and gray hair hung down to her shoulders, and she was almost always in a good mood. When she smiled, she could calm even the most anxious bride.

As I've come to expect, her clothes were as neat as a button. This included her double-strand Mikimoto pearl necklace.

Dorothy once told me she'd gotten the pearls as a present from a man who'd come from Singapore. When I had pressed her for more details, she'd gotten a faraway look and sighed but had then refused to tell me anything more about him.

I grabbed a mug of coffee and plopped down on the chair behind my desk. Unlike Dorothy's spotlessly clean workspace, mine always seemed to be covered in a layer of catalogs, magazines, and photographs.

I'd been the wedding director at the resort for almost seven months and was starting to get comfortable in the position. Before that, I'd lived in Scottsdale, and planning weddings had been a college hobby that had turned into a full-time job.

After I'd gone through a divorce from my scummy ex-husband, I'd been ready for a fresh start. I had answered an ad in a wedding planners' magazine, passed several phone interviews, and was flown out to the resort for the final interview. I'd started at Aloha Lagoon three weeks later.

The bell above the door jingled, and Leilani breezed in. She had a broad smile and seemed to give off energy and positive feelings.

“Aloha, ladies,” she sang out, even as her eyes had already focused on the box of doughnuts on the conference table.

“I just made a fresh pot,” Dorothy said.

“Perfect start to the day,” Leilani said as she plucked out a chocolate cream-filled doughnut with rainbow sprinkles and took a big bite.

“Well?” Dorothy asked us as Leilani poured herself a coffee. “How’d the reception and dinner go last night?”

Leilani snorted out a laugh and rolled her eyes as she collapsed in a chair next to my desk.

“We had two arguments,” I said with a disappointed sigh. “One of which could have turned into an actual fistfight.”

“Yeah, but that’s not all that happened,” Leilani added, her mouth half-full of doughnut. From the way her eyes were wide with excitement, I could tell she loved the added drama. “The bride’s ex-fiancé showed up halfway through the reception. His name’s Marty Mason, and I think he’s staying at the resort.”

“Oh no,” Dorothy said, shaking her head. “We’ve had this happen before, and it never ends well.”

“From what I could tell,” Leilani continued excitedly, “some of the women in the wedding party were thrilled to see him. That even included Jessica, the bride’s mother, which surprised the heck out of me and was kinda creepy. The bridesmaids were more or less throwing themselves at him. Then the best man, an oaf named Ethan Steele, threatened to pound in Marty’s face if he didn’t leave.”

“What happened?” Dorothy asked as she looked back and forth between us, concern creasing her forehead.

“Marty took off to The Lava Pot with the bride’s sister, Shelby Jackson,” I said with a sigh. “It stopped the fight, but we didn’t see Shelby for the rest of the evening.”

“Yeah, I wonder if she spent the entire night with him?” Leilani mused.

“Possibly,” I said, “but I don’t think it could’ve been the whole night. I saw Marty and the other bridesmaid, Skye Sullivan, shopping in the Happy Hula boutique a few minutes ago. He bought her a naughty negligée, and she thanked him by squeezing his tush.”

“Do you think she plans on wearing the nightie for him later this week?” Leilani asked, still with the gleam in her eye.

“Either that, or they were already together this morning,” I said as I sighed and shook my head slowly.

“It makes me wonder why the bridesmaids aren’t more loyal to Claire,” Dorothy said. “It seems a little disrespectful that they’re going after her ex-fiancé during her wedding week.”

“From what I’ve been able to gather,” I said, “most of the bridesmaids and groomsmen worked together in the same office for several years, and everybody dated everyone. I get the feeling that if Marty Mason didn’t come here for Claire, he only showed up to reconnect with some of his old girlfriends.”

“This is the strangest wedding party we’ve had in a while,” Leilani laughed.

“Dear lord,” Dorothy moaned. “Are we about to have another one of *those* weeks?”

“I hope not,” I said. “But it’s definitely starting out on the wrong foot.”

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Chapter Three

The bell above the door jingled, and Claire strolled in. She was dressed for the beach in a white one-piece suit covered by a pink mesh wrap. She carried a canvas Aloha Lagoon Resort bag, and I could see a beach towel and a pink floppy hat sticking out.

“Good morning,” Leilani and I said to her.

“Claire, aloha. It’s so good to finally meet you in person,” Dorothy said smoothly as she stood, and the two women hugged.

“Dorothy, aloha, it’s great to meet you after so many emails and phone calls,” Claire beamed at her. “It feels like we’re old friends.”

“Please,” Dorothy said, “have a doughnut and a mug of coffee. I have a friend in Kona who makes a special blend for me. I hope you like it.”

Claire eyed the box of doughnuts and then shook her head sadly. “I’d love a black coffee, but the dress will be a tight fit as it is. I didn’t count on all the food I’d eat here at the resort the week before the ceremony.”

We gave her a sympathetic nod. The brides were always optimistic about how much weight they’d be able to lose before the wedding. As a result, tight gowns were a constant worry.

Leilani poured Claire a coffee while I took a seat at the conference table next to the bride and opened my tablet. “Everything for the week is set,” I said in my most confident wedding planner voice. “I don’t see us needing to make any changes.”

“Beach today, and luau tonight?” Claire asked with a broad smile.

“Just as we planned,” I said with a nod, looking at the schedule. “Sightseeing tomorrow at Waimea Canyon with dinner and karaoke tomorrow night at the Loco Moco Café. Zip-lining on Wednesday, snorkeling with Dex on Thursday, and we’ll have an informal beach and shopping day on Friday. There are Hula-Fit classes with Ruby Bell at the spa every morning from nine to ten for anyone who wants to join in. The wedding rehearsal is on Friday at five, and dinner will be at Starlight on the Lagoon right after that.

“Has everything been delivered for the ceremony and the reception?” Claire asked, a touch of anxiety in her voice.

“Everything’s arrived, and we’re ready to go,” Dorothy said as she glanced at her computer monitor. “The only thing I’d been waiting on was the stationary shipment, which came in last week. I checked it, and it was perfect. I’ve also reconfirmed our orders with the bakery for the cake and the florist. We’re using Reverend Blake as the officiant. Jake Hunter, our staff photographer, will take the photos, and Leilani will shoot the video. Everything’s set.”

“And are there any issues with the catering?” Claire asked. From the tone in her voice, she appeared to be going down a mental checklist of the things that had been worrying her.

Dorothy shook her head. “We’re going through the resort, and they’ll accept changes to the menu up to forty-eight hours before the reception. But we never have any issues with them.”

Now that her concerns had been addressed, Claire visibly relaxed and took a sip of the coffee. Her eyes lit up with pleasure, and she took another taste. I hated to spoil her good mood, but we needed to talk about the elephant in the room.

“What would you like to do about Marty Mason?” I asked with a helpful tone. “I don’t want

him to become a distraction. If you'd like, we can assign someone from resort security to stay with our group to make sure he doesn't interfere. We can also escalate it if he still can't take the hint."

"Well, we've got to do *something* with him," Claire sighed. "I knew he'd heard about the wedding, probably from Shelby, but I was hoping he wouldn't actually try to come out."

"If it's over between you two, why do you think he came all the way out here?" Leilani asked.

"According to Shelby, Marty says he loves me and still wants to marry me," Claire said quietly. "He thinks Patrick is wrong for me. But honestly, Marty's dated almost everyone here at one time or another. It wouldn't surprise me if he's only here as an excuse to hook up with one of them. I honestly don't know."

"Flying all the way to Hawaii and staying here at the resort would be a pretty expensive thing to do if it was only to have a fling with one of your bridesmaids," Dorothy observed. "Doesn't everyone already live in Chicago? He could have done it there."

"Oh, Marty has plenty of money," Claire said. "He doesn't really even need to work anymore. And knowing Marty, flying out here to hook up with someone close to me would be in character for him. Simply to punish me for dumping him, if nothing else."

"I'll talk with resort security," I said. "We'll make sure this doesn't become a distraction."

"Thanks," Claire said, again starting to relax. "I only want this week to go smoothly."

"There's no need to worry," Dorothy said in her most soothing voice. "We'll make sure everything is perfect."

Geez, I thought. I hope we didn't just tempt fate.

* * *

The wedding party was to meet at ten-thirty on the deck of The Lava Pot, the resort's beachfront tiki bar. Leilani and I made sure to arrive a few minutes early. The lunch crowd hadn't yet started to roll in, so we were able to snag our favorite table.

It was on the edge of the deck, overlooking the volleyball pits and the beach. A colorful umbrella in the center of the table provided plenty of shade. As required by management, we both wore khaki shorts and our official Aloha Lagoon blue polo shirts.

By ten-forty, everyone had gathered on the deck of The Lava Pot. There was a lot of hugging and high-fiving between Claire, Patrick, and the rest of the wedding party.

Before the group scattered, I gave everyone my standard public service message about tropical sun safety, and I cautioned everyone to make sure to wear plenty of sunblock. We then reviewed that all food and drinks for the week would be paid for from the Wedding Center account and which locations at the resort they could go to.

Even though the kitchen didn't open until eleven, Casey Dalton, the cute bartender with a pronounced English accent, had the bar open for drinks.

Casey was definitely a hunk, and all the ladies loved him. He seemed to be the kind of guy born to be a bartender—he could take an order one night and remember the guest's preference for the duration of the stay. His personality was friendly and familiar, and his style was a nice mix of flashy and classy.

When I looked in, I could see his pretty Australian wife, Samantha, chatting with him while he made the cocktails. I hadn't gotten to know her very well yet, but the resort's children's surfing instructor seemed nice.

Most of the group immediately went into the tiki bar and ordered something. Since everything was basically free for the wedding party, no one was overly worried about being frugal.

Most people chose the bar's signature drink, the lava flow. This was a delicious, blended combination of rum, strawberries, pineapple, and coconut cream. However, mai tais, shark bites, and beers from Kona Brewing were also popular with the group.

Groom Patrick, Bride Claire, and Sleazy Sister Shelby went to the closest sand volleyball pit to start a game. Flower Child Skye and Stupid Ethan soon joined them. The rest of the group wandered out to the beach to lay on a blanket or play in the surf.

Most of the wedding party had taken my advice and had doused themselves with the bottles of sunblock I always keep in my bag. Some had come prepared and had lotioned themselves in their rooms before coming out. The others had only made a half-hearted attempt or had waved off my advice completely.

This latter group had included Feral Bobby. I had implored his mother, Sleazy Shelby, to ensure the boy used sunblock. Unfortunately, neither of them had seemed all that concerned. But on the positive side, sunburnt people tended to be too uncomfortable to cause a lot of trouble.

The groom's mother, Drama Queen Vicky, waltzed up to our table in a wave of expensive perfume and the flash of several thousand dollars' worth of jewelry hanging around her neck. She then went on to give us an overly long and emotional story about a problem she was having with her room.

While Leilani was busy working with her, I called Jimmy Toki, the head of resort security. I explained the situation with Marty Mason and what had happened the previous night at the Aloha Reception. He said he would assign one of the security staff to keep an eye on our group.

A tall, skinny kid, whose name was Neville, arrived fifteen minutes later. He couldn't have been more than nineteen or twenty. He wore a black resort polo with *Security* written in large white letters on the back.

I let him know about Marty and gave him a description. The kid told me not to worry, and then he went out to the beach and started chatting with a trio of bikini-clad teenage girls.

A few minutes later, a large, confused-looking man wearing swim trunks and an aloha shirt came to the deck. He was in his mid-fifties, had a bulbous nose, and a blotchy red face. He sported a full mustache and a dark comb-over haircut. The bottom two buttons of his bright yellow and green aloha shirt strained to hold in his prominent beer belly.

"Uncle Waldo," Claire called out from the volleyball pit and ran up to the deck. She hugged the big man and appeared happy to see him. "I wasn't sure when you'd get here."

"The shuttle from the airport arrived a few minutes ago," he said with a laugh. "I tossed my suitcase on the bed and hurried down."

Claire then turned to Leilani and me. "This is my Uncle Waldo," she beamed. "He's my mom's older brother."

After we all shook hands, I let Uncle Waldo know about the open bar and the food opportunities at The Lava Pot. Seeing his pasty white skin, I offered him the bottle of sunblock, which he politely refused.

What is it with this family?

"Uncle Waldo!" yelled an excited Bobby from fifty yards down the beach. The boy ran to the deck at full speed and slammed into his great-uncle, wrapping his arms around the man.

"Hello, Bobby," the big man said. "How's my favorite nephew?"

“You should see this place,” Bobby said, his eyes big with delight. “It’s so cool. The pool even has a waterfall. I’ll show you all around.”

“All right,” Uncle Waldo laughed. “Let me settle in for a bit, and you can show me everything later on.”

Claire returned to the volleyball pit, dragging her uncle behind her, while Bobby went back to playing on the beach.

As Leilani and I watched the group start a new volleyball game, I felt something soft press against my leg and heard a clucking sound. I didn’t need to look. I knew what it was.

“It looks like your friend’s back,” Leilani said as she looked down. I could almost hear her rolling her eyes.

One of the first times I’d been to The Lava Pot, I’d fed one of the feral roosters that constantly wandered up and down the beaches and along the boardwalk. This was despite the many signs advising people not to do so.

This particular rooster was orange with a long black tail and patches of red on his wings. I’d given him part of a cookie, which had been enough to form a lasting friendship.

Now, he’d often sit at my feet, like a dog, when I was at The Lava Pot for more than a few minutes. Leilani had called him Cluck Norris, and the name had stuck.

I looked down at the rooster. He tilted his head and looked at me, making soft chicken clucking noises. “Oh, fine,” I said.

Looking around to make sure Casey wasn’t watching through the open doors, I reached into my bag and rooted around until I found a packet of crackers.

I crumbled them up and put them in a small pile on the wooden deck. With a series of satisfied clucks, the rooster happily started pecking at the mound.

“You know,” Leilani said. “If you don’t feed him, he’ll eventually stop following you.”

“I know,” I moaned. “But he’s cute. Besides, I sort of feel responsible for him.”

Leilani went into the bar to grab us a couple of Diet Cokes. When she returned, she handed me one and gave me a questioning look. “So, is Jake still coming to take pictures today?” she asked in a sing-song voice, eyebrows raised. From her tone, I knew she was about to grill me about my boyfriend, again.

“Yes,” I said calmly, not taking her bait.

“And?” she asked, giving me an innocent look.

“And I talked to him yesterday. He’ll be here about an hour before everyone goes in. He’ll then stick around tonight to shoot the luau.”

Leilani leaned forward, began to twirl her hair absentmindedly, and looked directly at me. “You’ve got to stop dancing around my questions. What’s going on with you and Jake? Are you two getting serious, or what?”

“Um, yes. We both seem to be pretty committed to the relationship,” I said, suddenly embarrassed, knowing my cheeks were turning red. “But we’re taking it slow.”

“Slow?” Leilani asked, her head cocked to the side. “How slow? Didn’t you spend the night with him like three or four weeks ago? I keep asking you about it, but you keep brushing me off. You never did give me any details.”

I let out a small snort of frustration. “Fine, but there isn’t a lot to tell. We went to his house, sat on the lanai, and we kissed.”

“And?” she asked again, her finger spinning a lock of hair almost into a knot.

“And we talked and snuggled on a chaise lounge until we both fell asleep. About an hour later, the sun came up. Jake made me a great breakfast, and then I went home.”

“That’s it?” she asked as she let go of her hair, clearly annoyed. “What’s the problem?”

“There isn’t a problem,” I explained. “We’ve both come off bad relationships, and neither of us wants to rush into anything.”

Leilani thought about it for a second, gave a knowing nod, and leaned closer to me. “You know, I bet he’s still spooked by what happened with Michelle, the woman he dated for like three years before she dumped him for the condominium developer from Oahu. Jake sulked for a solid month after it happened.”

“You told me about Michelle. She sounds like a complete loser.”

“Maybe you need to directly come out and tell Jake that you don’t have daddy issues like Michelle had. The guy she dumped him for must have been at least fifty. Maybe Jake’s worried about you pulling something like that on him?”

“Hey,” I said, slightly annoyed. “We’ll get to it. I think we’ll both know when the time’s right to take it to the next level.”

“Fine,” she sulked. “Only don’t wait too long. I can smell the hormones flying whenever you two are together.”

* * *

For the first couple of hours, our beach day was uneventful. Leilani had her video camera out and had spent a half hour filming the volleyball game and the group playing in the surf.

Members of the wedding party came to The Lava Pot in small groups for drink refills and a light lunch, then returned to play volleyball, splashed in the ocean, or relaxed on the beach. Everyone was in a good mood, and after the events of the night before, things seemed to be back on track.

Unfortunately, our luck didn’t hold out. Marty Mason showed up a little after two o’clock.

Leilani pointed him out as he stood on the boardwalk, watching the group as they frolicked on the beach. He observed the wedding party for about five minutes and then casually walked into The Lava Pot.

Claire hadn’t seemed to notice Marty’s arrival, but it was apparent that some of the others had. Flower Child Skye hurried into the bar a few moments behind Marty. Cougar Jessica followed, maybe three or four minutes later.

I caught the eye of the security guard, Neville, who was absorbed in a conversation with a blonde teenage girl in a teal bikini and waved him over. I explained that Marty was currently in The Lava Pot with a couple of women from the wedding party and wanted to ensure there wasn’t any sort of incident. The kid nodded and then went into the bar.

Twenty minutes later, Skye walked out of the tiki bar, sipping on a nearly full lava flow, and returned to her towel on the beach. From the look of disappointment or perhaps anger on her face, something must have happened.

The security guard came over to our table. “Well?” I asked.

“When I entered The Lava Pot, Mr. Mason was talking with two women at the bar, one on either side of him,” he said in his just-the-facts security voice. “Approximately ten minutes into their conversation, Mr. Mason and the older of the two women left together into the hotel. The younger woman stayed at the bar for an additional ten minutes after that.”

“What was she doing during that time?” I asked, falling into the same clipped security tone.

“She’d apparently ordered two cocktails before the older woman had arrived, but Mr. Mason didn’t have a chance to drink any of his before leaving with the older woman. The younger woman seemed to be upset over what had happened.”

“What did she do?” I asked.

“She sat at the bar and spent several minutes talking to herself and stirring one of the lava flows with the straw. She took a couple of sips of the drink but left that one on the bar and took off with the other one. She then returned to the beach.”

“Do you know where Marty and the older woman went?” I asked.

“The older woman asked Mr. Mason to come up to her room. She said she had some new jewelry she wanted to show him.”

“Geez,” Leilani barked out a laugh. “I haven’t heard that line in a while.”

“Thanks, Neville,” I said. “You can take off. I don’t expect Marty to be back for a while. I’ll give you a call if he shows up again.”

With Marty and Cougar Jessica out of the picture, things quickly settled down. I’d expected Skye to be upset after the events in the bar, but her moodiness had only lasted about fifteen minutes. She’d then popped up from her blanket and, judging from her smile, seemed to be in a great mood.

Skye then bounced over to the volleyball pit and began playing with the group. She wasn’t very good at the game, especially at serving, but she still had a massive smile and seemed to laugh the entire time. When I pointed this out to my best friend, she nodded in agreement.

“You’re right,” Leilani observed. “Her volleyball skills really went to hell from earlier in the day. I guess she can’t hold her lava flows very well.”

About half an hour before Jake was due to arrive, Feral Bobby came up to where Leilani and I were sitting. As predicted, his face, chest, and shoulders had turned bright pink.

“Would you like some lotion?” I asked. “You’re starting to get a sunburn.”

“Can I hold the chicken?” Bobby asked as he pointed at Cluck Norris, the rooster, who was still sitting under the table next to my feet.

“That’s not a pet,” I said in what I hoped sounded like a motherly tone. “He won’t like it if you try to hold him. I wouldn’t even try to touch him.”

“Wild roosters can be pretty mean,” Leilani echoed. “Don’t get too close to it.”

“I want to hold the chicken,” Bobby said with a scowl. He bounced up and down with frustration as he pointed at the rooster.

“He won’t like it,” I repeated.

Quick as a snake, Bobby reached out, grabbed Cluck Norris against his chest, and ran down the beach. His long hair flowed behind him as he made a high-pitched sound I took for laughing.

“You know, this isn’t going to end well for the boy,” Leilani said in a matter-of-fact voice as she took a sip of her latest Diet Coke.

Bobby had stopped running when he reached the boardwalk and looked down at the rooster. As soon as Cluck Norris freed his head from the boy’s grasp, he pecked Bobby’s forehead with half a dozen hard, fast jabs.

“Waaaaaahhh,” Bobby cried out as he dropped the rooster onto the sand. From the way the boy was hyperventilating, waving his arms, and dancing in place, he seemed to have lost all interest in

holding the rooster.

“Bobby Lee,” the bride’s sister, Sleazy Shelby, called out to her son in a tired-sounding voice. She was lying on a beach blanket, thirty yards away from us, wearing a red string bikini that was at least a size too small. “You leave those chickens alone. They have all sorts of diseases.”

Bobby felt where he’d been pecked on his forehead, and his fingers must have come away with a drop of blood. His eyes opened wide, and his mouth contorted with terror as he stared down at his hand.

“Waaaaahhh,” Bobby cried out again as he turned and ran down to the ocean. He then frantically dunked his head in the surf several times to wash himself off.

The rooster calmly walked back to where we were sitting and hopped onto the deck. With what sounded like several annoyed clucks, he again settled himself underneath our table.

“This is *definitely* the weirdest family we’ve ever had,” Leilani said.

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Chapter Four

“There he is,” Leilani beamed as Jake walked through The Lava Pot’s sliding doors and onto the deck. When I saw him, my breath caught. I’ve noticed this was my usual reaction whenever I viewed him.

I stood and looked him up and down. Everything about Jake was perfect.

He was tall and broad with a well-defined chest and muscular arms. He had shoulder-length, curly dark hair, which swayed in the gentle sea breeze, and clear, intense eyes the same vivid cobalt blue as the Pacific.

As he approached our table, I took two steps toward him and held out my arms. Jake wrapped his strong arms around me in a way that made me feel safe and protected.

I looked up at his handsome face, and he kissed me softly. As always, I became lost in the sensations.

I felt the urge to kiss him harder and began to let myself go. Jake responded with some apparent pent-up needs of his own.

I would have gladly stood there for the rest of the afternoon, lost in Jake’s embrace. But then I heard Leilani dramatically clearing her throat. “Okay, you two,” she laughed. “Break it up. Get a room.”

Coming back to the reality that we were standing in a public place and were both supposed to be working, I reluctantly let go of Jake. I also felt him hesitate slightly before he released me.

As I stepped back, I glanced down at my best friend. She was smiling and shaking her head.

Jake pulled his camera out of his bag and attached a flash. “Hey, Leilani,” Jake said with a grin. “How’s the group look this week?”

Leilani moaned and again shook her head. “Oh, you’re in for a special treat. This family puts the fun in dysfunctional.”

“Who’s in our wedding group?” Jake asked as he looked over the dozens of people on the beach.

“There are the five in the volleyball pit,” I started as I pointed, ignoring my best friend’s comments. “The woman in the white one-piece and the pink sun hat is Claire Jackson, our bride. Skye Sullivan is the pale, thin woman in the black string bikini with strawberry-blonde hair and the headband. And the woman in the red micro-bikini with her boobs falling out is Claire’s older sister, Shelby.”

“And the guys?” Jake asked with a snicker.

“The pale guy in the black trunks is Patrick Archer, the groom. Ethan Steele is the best man. He’s the big guy with the pudgy red face and stringy blond ponytail.”

Jake nodded, and I continued to point. “The woman on the lounge chair with the blue blanket is the groom’s mother, Vicky Archer. The older lady a few yards away from her is the bride’s grandmother, Giggy.”

“Okay,” Jake said, apparently making mental notes about who was who.

“The big guy with the mustache playing frisbee on the beach with the kid is the bride’s uncle, Waldo. And the boy with the wild hair who just caught the frisbee is Shelby’s son, Bobby.”

“Watch out for Bobby,” Leilani said in her most helpful voice. “I think he was raised in the jungle. Don’t let him bite you. I don’t want to spread any rumors, but he may have rabies.”

“Is that it?” Jake asked, also ignoring my best friend.

“No, we’re currently missing the bride’s mother. Her name’s Jessica Jackson. She was wearing a low-cut blue one-piece. I imagine she’ll be back for the luau tonight.”

“Where is she now?” Jake asked.

“She took off with the bride’s ex-fiancé,” Leilani said, a wicked gleam in her eye. “His name’s Marty Mason. They went up to Jessica’s room to ‘look at some jewelry,’” she said as she made air quotes.

“Sounds like a typical wedding week,” Jake chuckled as he took the cap off his lens. “I’ll be sure to get everyone. Let me know if there’s anything special you’d like.”

He then reached down to the rooster and held out his hand. “Hey, Cluck. How’s my favorite fowl today?” The rooster stretched his neck and rubbed against Jake’s fingers, clearly enjoying the attention.

“He’s had a busy afternoon,” Leilani said.

Jake hopped off the deck and began to take pictures. I stopped talking for several minutes to watch him as he worked.

As always, Jake’s photography style combined friendly chatting and taking the shots. Everyone on the beach seemed to be at ease with him, and he had no problems getting people to pose however he wanted. Feeling slightly annoyed, I noticed that Sleazy Shelby had gravitated toward him and had started to follow him around.

“Okay,” Leilani said with a shake of her head. “It’s getting worse between you two. You do know that, right? How can Jake kiss you like that without you wanting to drag him into a bedroom? If a guy kissed me like that, he’d better have a free weekend to spend with me.”

“It’s like I told you,” I said patiently. “We’ll know when the time is right.”

Leilani only looked at me and continued to shake her head. To add emphasis, she sighed in frustration and gave me an eye roll.

“Are you coming to the luau tonight?” I asked to change the subject.

“Nope, I thought I told you. I have a test tonight. It’ll only be you and Jake. Just remember, you’ll be in public. Hopefully, you two can control yourselves.”

* * *

The end of the first beach day was always followed by dinner at the Ohana Luau. Ohana is a Hawaiian word for family, and the resort goes all out each night to provide a show that everyone can enjoy.

I’ve found that taking the wedding group to the luau on the first or second night sets a lovely Hawaiian tone to the week’s festivities. The brides always list it as a highlight of the wedding week.

The feast was held at the Ramada Pier, an area of the resort on the beach set aside for special events. The front of the pier had a stage under a vast open roof and used the blue Pacific as the backdrop.

Timo, the daytime bartender at the Hula Hut poolside bar, worked alongside Walton, the older bartender from the Aloha Reception the night before. They were both busy serving the complimentary beer and rum punch from the polished teakwood bar at the back of the pier.

Unfortunately, Timo was widely known as the biggest gossip at the hotel, and I hoped nothing

new would come up tonight. By morning, he'd have the story spread all through the resort.

Jimmy Toki, the tall and athletic head of resort security, arrived before the guests and said he'd be the one watching over the wedding party tonight. I thanked him and let him know I owed him a favor.

As the group started to arrive, there was a low buzz of excitement as the sellout crowd gradually filled the pier. One of the tables near the stage had VIPs, but I didn't recognize any of them. I assumed they were actors or singers, judging from the number of people coming up for autographs and selfies.

Among the many tourists, I noticed five local teenagers who looked familiar. One of the group, a tall skinny boy, was a live stream blogger called Fabulous Franky. I'd come across him before, and Leilani had set up my phone to alert me whenever Franky started a broadcast.

Most of the wedding group arrived more or less on time, including Cougar Jessica. She strolled in wearing a plunging blue dress that exposed her deep cleavage.

Seemingly not to be outdone, Drama Queen Vicky arrived in a flashy scoop-neck white dress with a red, yellow, and green bird-of-paradise pattern. Tonight, she'd added several sparkly rings and gold earrings.

I noticed Flower Child Skye was giving the bride's mother, Cougar Jessica, the stink eye. The pale bridesmaid had changed into a red paisley peasant dress for the evening, along with the same macrame shoulder bag and matching headband as before. As with the other bridesmaid, she was again wearing her pink and white *Bride's Squad* button.

Uncle Waldo, Sleazy Shelby, and Feral Bobby arrived together. Waldo and Bobby seemed attracted to each other as kindred spirits, even wearing matching blue aloha shirts.

Their faces were red with sunburn, but neither seemed overly bothered by it. Whenever Waldo pointed at something, Bobby would comment excitedly, yell, and clap his hands.

I'd talked with Shelby earlier in the day about Bobby's activities. She'd said she'd seen him misbehaving and promised to keep a closer eye on her son.

Honestly, I wasn't expecting miracles from her. I only hoped she would keep Bobby from raiding the cocktails at the tables.

The only two who were late were Claire and Patrick. When they finally arrived, she was wearing her white *The Bride* sash and had added a sparkly silver tiara. They went directly to the bar, and I could see that Claire seemed upset.

"Aloha," I said as I walked over to my bride and groom, still waiting on drinks, making sure we weren't close enough for Timo to eavesdrop. "Is everything okay tonight?"

Claire let out a long, frustrated sigh, shook her head, and took a big sip of her rum punch as Walton handed it to her. "This Marty thing is driving me nuts. I don't know what I'm going to do about him."

"Jimmy Toki is the head of security here at the resort," I said in my most confident wedding planner voice as I pointed to the big man standing next to the stage. "He'll watch over the luau tonight to make sure things go okay."

Claire still seemed troubled but nodded her head to show she understood. "I'm going to sit down," she said as she rested her hand on Patrick's arm. "I'll probably slam this first one," she said as she held up her drink. "Would you mind getting me another rum punch when you come over? I'm seriously thinking about getting drunk tonight."

As the bride found the group's table, Patrick and I drifted back to the bar to get the requested drink. "Kristy, you've got to do something about this," Patrick said in a firm but quiet voice. "I've known Marty for years, and he's here to break up the wedding."

"Are you sure?" I asked. "So far, all he's done is hang out with the women."

"I've worked with him since I first started at the company," Patrick said. "I've seen him break up several couples. Plus, I know he's still upset that Claire broke off their engagement."

"But wasn't that like two years ago?" I asked. "Why is he still holding a grudge against her?"

"That's always been his way," Patrick said with a sigh of frustration. "He'll keep pushing and causing problems until Claire gives up on getting married or someone gets hurt."

We reached the front of the line, and Patrick ordered another rum punch. "Jimmy will keep things from getting out of hand," I said. "But if Marty still causes issues, we'll have him removed."

Patrick nodded as he took the fresh drink from Walton. "All right," he agreed. "But the guy's a real jerk. He has been the entire time I've known him. I'm still worried we'll need to resort to stronger measures before this is over."

He then turned and walked to his waiting fiancée at the table. I was about to take off as well when Walton stopped me.

"Hey, Kristy," he said, leaning towards me over the bar. "I need to talk with you."

"Sure, Walton," I said, a little surprised. Over the last seven months, we hadn't had a conversation longer than an occasional short chat while standing at the bar, along with several friendly "hellos" as we passed each other at the resort. "What's up?"

He glanced around the bar, his eyes falling on Timo. The short bartender had an innocent round face and sharp eyes that constantly flicked back and forth over the crowd.

"I'd rather not talk here," Walton confided. "Too many people are listening."

"Okay, but do you want to give me a hint?"

"Last night at the Aloha Reception, I saw something that looked, well, a little odd."

Timo had glanced over to where we were talking. I saw him begin to casually drift over to be able to listen to what we were saying.

Walton must have also noticed Timo coming our way. "Let's talk about this tomorrow," Walton said, "I'll stop by your office, and we'll have more time to go over what happened."

I wanted to tell him to continue the story tonight, but Timo had walked up next to Walton, his eyes flicking back and forth between us. I knew Walton couldn't say another word without it becoming public knowledge.

A three-piece steel drum group started playing on stage. The gentle music seemed to give the people on the pier a peaceful and positive feeling, judging by the relaxed expressions washing over their faces.

The wedding party then spent the next half hour making extensive use of the bar while Jake took photos of the group in the light of the setting sun. I was again a little annoyed when Sleazy Shelby and her mother, Cougar Jessica, took turns coming on to him. Thankfully, it didn't seem like Jake was doing anything to encourage them or flirt back.

The man on stage announced that dinner would begin shortly and asked everyone to take their seats. Our group then settled at the long family-style table that had been reserved for the wedding party.

There was a bit of confusion as Drama Queen Vicky again tried to assign seating for the entire wedding party. Vicky thought she should sit next to her son and the bride while she directed Cougar

Jessica to a spot in the far corner.

Jessica didn't think much of the idea, instead nudging Skye out of the way to sit next to the bride. The Flower Child rolled with it and instead sat next to Stupid Ethan. From the smile on his face, as he checked out her low-cut peasant dress, he didn't seem to mind.

When Cougar Jessica settled in the seat next to her daughter, Claire did everything but turn her back on her mother. Upon seeing this play out, Vicky let out an overly loud and dramatic sigh and stared daggers at Jessica, making it clear that this was precisely the situation she'd been trying to avoid.

The distressed look on my bride's face was one I often saw at weddings. Claire was intensely unhappy, but she was doing her best to put on a brave face and not let anything spoil her week.

Claire and Patrick gave each other knowing glances, and she grabbed his hand for support. Both seemed determined to make the evening happy and festive for the group, even if they were personally miserable.

From the stage, a native man in a colorful skirt blew a long, loud note using a conch shell, signaling it was time for everyone to go through the buffet. The highlight of the dinner was the succulent pulled pork called *pua'a kālua*. This came from a whole pig, which had been roasting all day in an in-ground barbeque pit in a field by the kitchen called an *imu*.

Things went well as everyone went through the buffet line. The only exception was when Bobby downed Stupid Ethan's nearly full rum punch while the big man was back at the line getting seconds. Bobby had turned pale as the alcohol hit his stomach, but fortunately, he didn't throw up.

I knew I'd need to talk with Shelby about him, again. Unfortunately, Shelby's eyes were already glassy from having three or four rum punches on top of the weed she and Skye had been smoking. I doubted she'd be a lot of help tonight.

On the stage, Nani Johnson, the resort's ukulele player, started her set. This was the part of the luau I liked the most.

Nani had a singer with her tonight, which added another layer of enjoyment to her playing. From the attention the crowd was giving her, they also seemed to be loving her music.

"What the hell?" I heard the angry voice of my bride.

I glanced over to where she was looking, towards the shadows on the far side of the bar. Marty, Sleazy Shelby, and Flower Child Skye were standing close in a circle, each holding a rum punch. All three were smiling and laughing in the flickering light of a nearby tiki torch.

Claire was on her feet in an instant. She stomped towards them, rage on her face, her tiara sparkling.

Not again.

I got up and quickly followed my bride to the bar. On the other side of the venue, I saw Jake and Jimmy Toki both taking in the situation and starting to move as well. Skye stared daggers at Claire as the bride rushed up to them.

"You went up to my mother's room, Marty?" Claire shouted so loudly I was sure most of the guests at the luau heard the exchange. "Seriously? You need professional help. You're sick, as in clinically disturbed. You do know that, don't you?"

"Oh, please," Marty answered as he downed the rest of his drink. "She only wanted to discuss why I was here in Kauai. I told her Patrick Archer was only a temporary rebound for you and would never work out."

"I don't believe you, Marty," Claire spat out. "You're a liar, and you've always been a jerk. You lied to me the entire time we were engaged. I'll never believe another word you say, never."

At this point, Stupid Ethan had also arrived and quickly got into Marty's face. The best man was holding a rum punch, and judging from how he swayed, it wasn't his first or even his third.

Patrick was standing next to Ethan, breathing hard with anger. Sleazy Shelby and Flower Child Skye both saw what was happening and backed off several paces.

"Marty, you'd better leave before I smash in your nasty face," Ethan bellowed, slurring half the words.

"Are you always this drunk, Ethan?" Marty asked in a slightly amused voice. "Between being ugly, drunk, and stupid, it's no wonder you can never keep a girlfriend."

The best man's face contorted with anger. Still holding the rum punch in one hand, he pulled his meaty fist back and swung a roundhouse punch at Marty's head. But the swing was slow with Ethan's alcohol-fueled rage, and Claire's ex-fiancé easily avoided it.

Marty responded by giving Ethan a light fingertip shove to the chest, which caused the best man to take three stumbling steps backward before he tripped over his feet and fell on his rear, spilling the entire rum punch on his chest and face.

I glanced up at the stage, and Nani Johnson was giving me the stink eye. Fortunately, being the professional she was, she hadn't missed a beat.

Ethan got up with surprising speed, rum punch dripping from his hair and hatred blazing in his eyes. Fortunately, Jimmy Toki had arrived and quickly stepped between them.

Jake was next to me, taking pictures of the encounter, which annoyed me more than it probably should have. But I doubted Claire would ever reflect on this scene as a cherished wedding memory.

As the situation stabilized, Jimmy told Marty that he would need to leave the Ramada Pier for the night. The head of security then warned Claire's ex-fiancé that he'd be removed from the hotel property and permanently banned if he returned.

As Jimmy escorted Marty off the pier, I stayed with Claire to make sure she was all right. My bride was so upset that she was shaking with anger.

"He's such a jerk," Claire fumed as she went to Timo at the bar to get another rum punch. I could see the bartender taking in the situation with a gleam in his eye. "It's my wedding week, and Marty's using it to seduce my sister, my friend, even my mother. Dating him was the worst mistake I ever made."

Claire headed to the table, but I knew she'd be too upset to eat anything. I only hoped nothing else would happen tonight to make the situation worse.

I followed my bride to the table as people finished their dinners. Jake soon joined me, taking an empty seat next to mine, camera in hand. He was close enough that his sensual cologne began to distract me in a primal way.

Twenty minutes later, there was enthusiastic applause as Nani Johnson completed her set. Several performers then began a light comedy skit while the stage was prepared for the Aloha Lagoon Hula Wahines.

This ten-minute-long act usually became an informal intermission, where most people took a bathroom break, grabbed a fresh drink from the bar, or got an extra dessert. Tonight was no exception. Most of the people in our group got up and wandered off.

"Hey," I said to Jake in my most flirty voice as he sat next to me. "After the luau, can I take you to The Lava Pot? I'll get you a lava flow, and you can tell me everything you've been up to

lately.”

“Well, I should go home and work on a marketing presentation,” Jake said as he leaned over and kissed me softly. “But it’s a gorgeous night, and I’d much rather be with you. Maybe we can take a stroll along the beach after the drink?”

“I’d love that,” I cooed out as I leaned against him.

The comedy skit on stage finished, the lights dimmed, and the audience settled. The Aloha Lagoon Hula Wahines assembled and positioned themselves for their first dance routine.

The sudden and frantic sounds of a woman desperately screaming for help pierced the air. It seemed to come from the back of the pier or maybe on the beach, near the kitchen and the bathrooms.

Fear shot through me, and time seemed to stop. I broke away from Jake and tried to listen. There was a moment of confused silence in the crowd, and then everyone started talking at once.

I instinctively looked at my group to see who was missing. But in my heart, I already knew who it was.

Oh no.

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About the Author



Halfway through a successful career in technical writing, marketing, and sales and having four beautiful children, author B A Trimmer veered into fiction. Combining a love of the desert derived from many years of living in Arizona with an appreciation of the modern romantic detective story, the Laura Black Scottsdale Series was born.

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