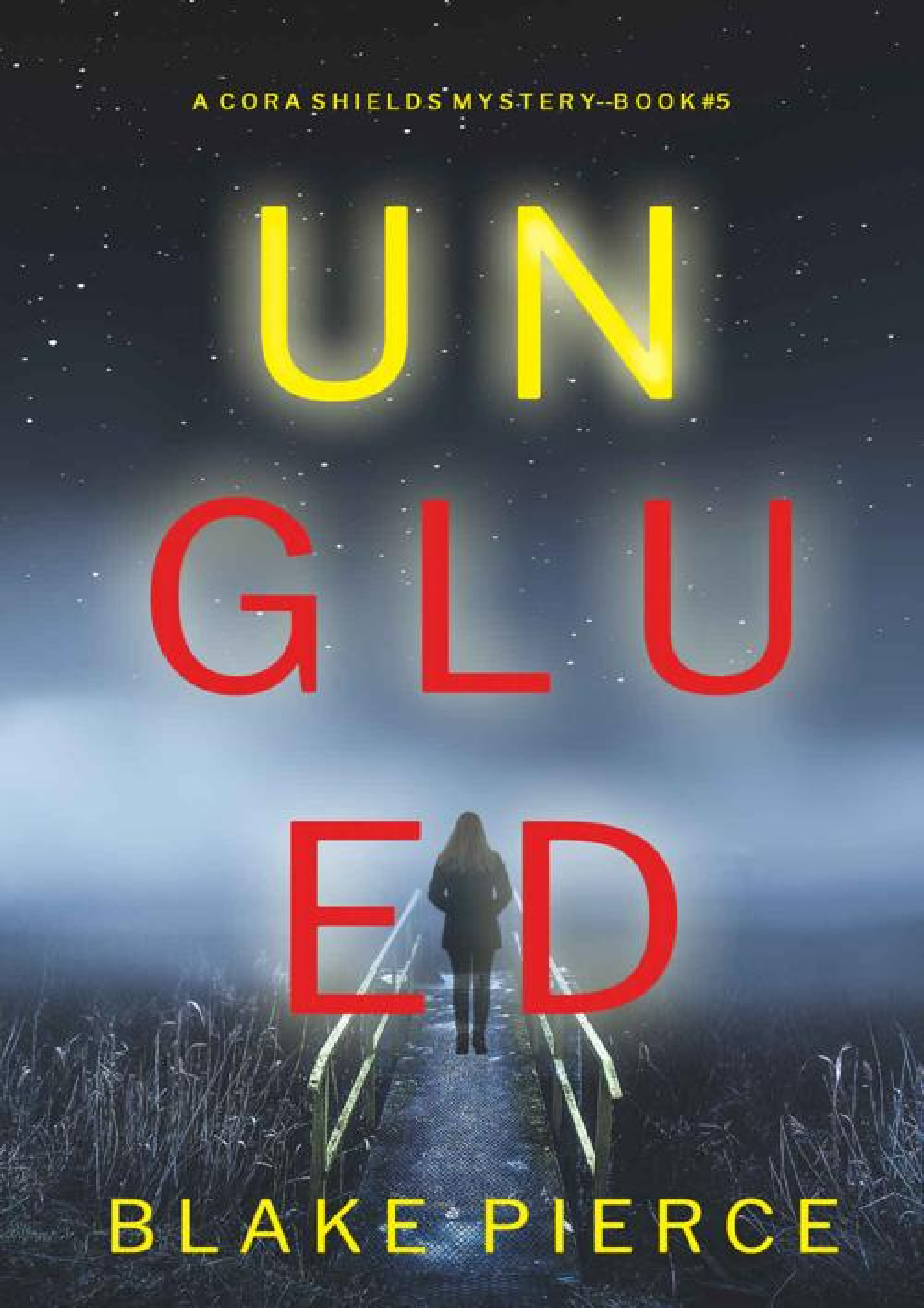


A CORA SHIELDS MYSTERY-BOOK #5

U
N
G
L
U
E
D

A person is walking away from the viewer on a narrow, paved path that stretches into the distance. The path is flanked by tall grasses. The scene is set at night, with a dark, starry sky above and a misty or foggy atmosphere. The overall mood is mysterious and atmospheric.

BLAKE PIERCE

UNGLUED

(A Cora Shields Mystery —Book Five)

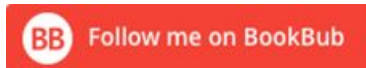
BLAKE PIERCE

Blake Pierce

Blake Pierce is the USA Today bestselling author of the RILEY PAGE mystery series, which includes seventeen books. Blake Pierce is also the author of the MACKENZIE WHITE mystery series, comprising fourteen books; of the AVERY BLACK mystery series, comprising six books; of the KERI LOCKE mystery series, comprising five books; of the MAKING OF RILEY PAIGE mystery series, comprising six books; of the KATE WISE mystery series, comprising seven books; of the CHLOE FINE psychological suspense mystery, comprising six books; of the JESSIE HUNT psychological suspense thriller series, comprising twenty-eight books; of the AU PAIR psychological suspense thriller series, comprising three books; of the ZOE PRIME mystery series, comprising six books; of the ADELE SHARP mystery series, comprising sixteen books, of the EUROPEAN VOYAGE cozy mystery series, comprising six books; of the LAURA FROST FBI suspense thriller, comprising eleven books; of the ELLA DARK FBI suspense thriller, comprising fourteen books (and counting); of the A YEAR IN EUROPE cozy mystery series, comprising nine books, of the AVA GOLD mystery series, comprising six books; of the RACHEL GIFT mystery series, comprising ten books (and counting); of the VALERIE LAW mystery series, comprising nine books (and counting); of the PAIGE KING mystery series, comprising eight books (and counting); of the MAY MOORE mystery series, comprising eleven books; of the CORA SHIELDS mystery series, comprising eight books (and counting); of the NICKY LYONS mystery series, comprising eight books (and counting), of the CAMI LARK mystery series, comprising eight books (and counting), of the AMBER YOUNG mystery series, comprising five books (and counting), of the DAISY FORTUNE mystery series, comprising five books (and counting), of the FIONA RED mystery series, comprising five books (and counting), and of the new FAITH BOLD mystery series, comprising five books (and counting).

[ONCE GONE](#) (a Riley Paige Mystery—Book #1), [BEFORE HE KILLS](#) (A Mackenzie White Mystery—Book 1), [CAUSE TO KILL](#) (An Avery Black Mystery—Book 1), [A TRACE OF DEATH](#) (A Keri Locke Mystery—Book 1), [WATCHING](#) (The Making of Riley Paige—Book 1), [NEXT DOOR](#) (A Chloe Fine Psychological Suspense Mystery—Book 1), [THE PERFECT WIFE](#) (A Jessie Hunt Psychological Suspense Thriller—Book One), [IF SHE KNEW](#) (A Kate Wise Mystery—Book 1), [MURDER \(AND BAKLAVA\)](#) (A European Voyage Cozy Mystery—Book 1), [LEFT TO DIE](#) (An Adele Sharp Mystery—Book One), [A MURDER IN PARIS](#) (A Year in Europe—Book 1), [CITY OF PREY](#) (An Ava Gold Mystery—Book One), and [HER LAST WISH](#) (A Rachel Gift FBI Suspense Thriller—Book One) are each available as a free download on Amazon!

An avid reader and lifelong fan of the mystery and thriller genres, Blake loves to hear from you, so please feel free to visit www.blakepierceauthor.com to learn more and stay in touch.



Copyright © 2023 by Blake Pierce. All rights reserved. Except as permitted under the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, no part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed or transmitted in any form or by any means, or stored in a database or retrieval system, without the prior permission of the author. This ebook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This ebook may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then please return it and purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author. This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, events, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictionally. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental. Jacket image Copyright Leenart used under license from Shutterstock.com.

BOOKS BY BLAKE PIERCE

FAITH BOLD MYSTERY SERIES

SO LONG (Book #1)

SO COLD (Book #2)

SO SCARED (Book #3)

SO NORMAL (Book #4)

SO FAR GONE (Book #5)

FIONA RED MYSTERY SERIES

LET HER GO (Book #1)

LET HER BE (Book #2)

LET HER HOPE (Book #3)

LET HER WISH (Book #4)

LET HER LIVE (Book #5)

DAISY FORTUNE MYSTERY SERIES

NEED YOU (Book #1)

CLAIM YOU (Book #2)

CRAVE YOU (Book #3)

CHOOSE YOU (Book #4)

CHASE YOU (Book #5)

AMBER YOUNG MYSTERY SERIES

ABSENT PITY (Book #1)
ABSENT REMORSE (Book #2)
ABSENT FEELING (Book #3)
ABSENT MERCY (Book #4)
ABSENT REASON (Book #5)

CAMI LARK MYSTERY SERIES

JUST ME (Book #1)
JUST OUTSIDE (Book #2)
JUST RIGHT (Book #3)
JUST FORGET (Book #4)
JUST ONCE (Book #5)
JUST HIDE (Book #6)
JUST NOW (Book #7)
JUST HOPE (Book #8)

NICKY LYONS MYSTERY SERIES

ALL MINE (Book #1)
ALL HIS (Book #2)
ALL HE SEES (Book #3)
ALL ALONE (Book #4)
ALL FOR ONE (Book #5)
ALL HE TAKES (Book #6)
ALL FOR ME (Book #7)
ALL IN (Book #8)

CORA SHIELDS MYSTERY SERIES

UNDONE (Book #1)
UNWANTED (Book #2)
UNHINGED (Book #3)
UNSAID (Book #4)
UNGLUED (Book #5)
UNSTABLE (Book #6)
UNKNOWN (Book #7)
UNAWARE (Book #8)

MAY MOORE SUSPENSE THRILLER

NEVER RUN (Book #1)
NEVER TELL (Book #2)
NEVER LIVE (Book #3)
NEVER HIDE (Book #4)
NEVER FORGIVE (Book #5)
NEVER AGAIN (Book #6)
NEVER LOOK BACK (Book #7)
NEVER FORGET (Book #8)
NEVER LET GO (Book #9)
NEVER PRETEND (Book #10)
NEVER HESITATE (Book #11)

PAIGE KING MYSTERY SERIES

THE GIRL HE PINED (Book #1)
THE GIRL HE CHOSE (Book #2)
THE GIRL HE TOOK (Book #3)
THE GIRL HE WISHED (Book #4)
THE GIRL HE CROWNED (Book #5)

THE GIRL HE WATCHED (Book #6)

THE GIRL HE WANTED (Book #7)

THE GIRL HE CLAIMED (Book #8)

VALERIE LAW MYSTERY SERIES

NO MERCY (Book #1)

NO PITY (Book #2)

NO FEAR (Book #3)

NO SLEEP (Book #4)

NO QUARTER (Book #5)

NO CHANCE (Book #6)

NO REFUGE (Book #7)

NO GRACE (Book #8)

NO ESCAPE (Book #9)

RACHEL GIFT MYSTERY SERIES

HER LAST WISH (Book #1)

HER LAST CHANCE (Book #2)

HER LAST HOPE (Book #3)

HER LAST FEAR (Book #4)

HER LAST CHOICE (Book #5)

HER LAST BREATH (Book #6)

HER LAST MISTAKE (Book #7)

HER LAST DESIRE (Book #8)

HER LAST REGRET (Book #9)

HER LAST HOUR (Book #10)

AVA GOLD MYSTERY SERIES

CITY OF PREY (Book #1)
CITY OF FEAR (Book #2)
CITY OF BONES (Book #3)
CITY OF GHOSTS (Book #4)
CITY OF DEATH (Book #5)
CITY OF VICE (Book #6)

A YEAR IN EUROPE

A MURDER IN PARIS (Book #1)
DEATH IN FLORENCE (Book #2)
VENGEANCE IN VIENNA (Book #3)
A FATALITY IN SPAIN (Book #4)

ELLA DARK FBI SUSPENSE THRILLER

GIRL, ALONE (Book #1)
GIRL, TAKEN (Book #2)
GIRL, HUNTED (Book #3)
GIRL, SILENCED (Book #4)
GIRL, VANISHED (Book 5)
GIRL ERASED (Book #6)
GIRL, FORSAKEN (Book #7)
GIRL, TRAPPED (Book #8)
GIRL, EXPENDABLE (Book #9)
GIRL, ESCAPED (Book #10)
GIRL, HIS (Book #11)
GIRL, LURED (Book #12)
GIRL, MISSING (Book #13)
GIRL, UNKNOWN (Book #14)

LAURA FROST FBI SUSPENSE THRILLER

- ALREADY GONE (Book #1)
- ALREADY SEEN (Book #2)
- ALREADY TRAPPED (Book #3)
- ALREADY MISSING (Book #4)
- ALREADY DEAD (Book #5)
- ALREADY TAKEN (Book #6)
- ALREADY CHOSEN (Book #7)
- ALREADY LOST (Book #8)
- ALREADY HIS (Book #9)
- ALREADY LURED (Book #10)
- ALREADY COLD (Book #11)

EUROPEAN VOYAGE COZY MYSTERY SERIES

- MURDER (AND BAKLAVA) (Book #1)
- DEATH (AND APPLE STRUDEL) (Book #2)
- CRIME (AND LAGER) (Book #3)
- MISFORTUNE (AND GOUDA) (Book #4)
- CALAMITY (AND A DANISH) (Book #5)
- MAYHEM (AND HERRING) (Book #6)

ADELE SHARP MYSTERY SERIES

- LEFT TO DIE (Book #1)
- LEFT TO RUN (Book #2)
- LEFT TO HIDE (Book #3)
- LEFT TO KILL (Book #4)
- LEFT TO MURDER (Book #5)

LEFT TO ENVY (Book #6)
LEFT TO LAPSE (Book #7)
LEFT TO VANISH (Book #8)
LEFT TO HUNT (Book #9)
LEFT TO FEAR (Book #10)
LEFT TO PREY (Book #11)
LEFT TO LURE (Book #12)
LEFT TO CRAVE (Book #13)
LEFT TO LOATHE (Book #14)
LEFT TO HARM (Book #15)
LEFT TO RUIN (Book #16)

THE AU PAIR SERIES

ALMOST GONE (Book#1)
ALMOST LOST (Book #2)
ALMOST DEAD (Book #3)

ZOE PRIME MYSTERY SERIES

FACE OF DEATH (Book#1)
FACE OF MURDER (Book #2)
FACE OF FEAR (Book #3)
FACE OF MADNESS (Book #4)
FACE OF FURY (Book #5)
FACE OF DARKNESS (Book #6)

**A JESSIE HUNT PSYCHOLOGICAL SUSPENSE
SERIES**

THE PERFECT WIFE (Book #1)

THE PERFECT BLOCK (Book #2)
THE PERFECT HOUSE (Book #3)
THE PERFECT SMILE (Book #4)
THE PERFECT LIE (Book #5)
THE PERFECT LOOK (Book #6)
THE PERFECT AFFAIR (Book #7)
THE PERFECT ALIBI (Book #8)
THE PERFECT NEIGHBOR (Book #9)
THE PERFECT DISGUISE (Book #10)
THE PERFECT SECRET (Book #11)
THE PERFECT FAÇADE (Book #12)
THE PERFECT IMPRESSION (Book #13)
THE PERFECT DECEIT (Book #14)
THE PERFECT MISTRESS (Book #15)
THE PERFECT IMAGE (Book #16)
THE PERFECT VEIL (Book #17)
THE PERFECT INDISCRETION (Book #18)
THE PERFECT RUMOR (Book #19)
THE PERFECT COUPLE (Book #20)
THE PERFECT MURDER (Book #21)
THE PERFECT HUSBAND (Book #22)
THE PERFECT SCANDAL (Book #23)
THE PERFECT MASK (Book #24)
THE PERFECT RUSE (Book #25)
THE PERFECT VENEER (Book #26)
THE PERFECT PEOPLE (Book #27)
THE PERFECT WITNESS (Book #28)

CHLOE FINE PSYCHOLOGICAL SUSPENSE SERIES

NEXT DOOR (Book #1)
A NEIGHBOR'S LIE (Book #2)
CUL DE SAC (Book #3)
SILENT NEIGHBOR (Book #4)
HOMECOMING (Book #5)
TINTED WINDOWS (Book #6)

KATE WISE MYSTERY SERIES

IF SHE KNEW (Book #1)
IF SHE SAW (Book #2)
IF SHE RAN (Book #3)
IF SHE HID (Book #4)
IF SHE FLED (Book #5)
IF SHE FEARED (Book #6)
IF SHE HEARD (Book #7)

THE MAKING OF RILEY PAIGE SERIES

WATCHING (Book #1)
WAITING (Book #2)
LURING (Book #3)
TAKING (Book #4)
STALKING (Book #5)
KILLING (Book #6)

RILEY PAIGE MYSTERY SERIES

ONCE GONE (Book #1)
ONCE TAKEN (Book #2)

ONCE CRAVED (Book #3)
ONCE LURED (Book #4)
ONCE HUNTED (Book #5)
ONCE PINED (Book #6)
ONCE FORSAKEN (Book #7)
ONCE COLD (Book #8)
ONCE STALKED (Book #9)
ONCE LOST (Book #10)
ONCE BURIED (Book #11)
ONCE BOUND (Book #12)
ONCE TRAPPED (Book #13)
ONCE DORMANT (Book #14)
ONCE SHUNNED (Book #15)
ONCE MISSED (Book #16)
ONCE CHOSEN (Book #17)

MACKENZIE WHITE MYSTERY SERIES

BEFORE HE KILLS (Book #1)
BEFORE HE SEES (Book #2)
BEFORE HE COVETS (Book #3)
BEFORE HE TAKES (Book #4)
BEFORE HE NEEDS (Book #5)
BEFORE HE FEELS (Book #6)
BEFORE HE SINS (Book #7)
BEFORE HE HUNTS (Book #8)
BEFORE HE PREYS (Book #9)
BEFORE HE LONGS (Book #10)
BEFORE HE LAPSES (Book #11)

BEFORE HE ENVIES (Book #12)

BEFORE HE STALKS (Book #13)

BEFORE HE HARMS (Book #14)

AVERY BLACK MYSTERY SERIES

CAUSE TO KILL (Book #1)

CAUSE TO RUN (Book #2)

CAUSE TO HIDE (Book #3)

CAUSE TO FEAR (Book #4)

CAUSE TO SAVE (Book #5)

CAUSE TO DREAD (Book #6)

KERI LOCKE MYSTERY SERIES

A TRACE OF DEATH (Book #1)

A TRACE OF MURDER (Book #2)

A TRACE OF VICE (Book #3)

A TRACE OF CRIME (Book #4)

A TRACE OF HOPE (Book #5)

CONTENTS

PROLOGUE

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

PROLOGUE

Tammy made eyes at the man across the bar wearing the baseball cap. A guitar case rested on the ground under his stool, and he occasionally shot the glance back, his baby blue eyes lighting up when noticing her attention.

Tammy smiled bashfully, smoothing her hair, and tugging at the small napkin beneath her ice-cube filled glass, wondering if that was the best place to write her number. It was a bit old-fashioned to write a number on a napkin, she supposed.

She straightened a bit, shooting a quick glance towards the bartender, who had also been making eyes at her.

He had a kind face, a pleasant smile. But there was something in those eyes that she didn't quite like. A sadness, but also a suspicion. Watchfulness.

And Tammy wasn't the sort to go out with a cynical man.

She had made mistakes in her life. She knew that. And she preferred not to think about it too much.

She turned away from the bartender, the napkin now in hand, and she reached for a pen in her purse.

But she needn't have bothered. She shot another quick, coy glance across the bar; the man with the baseball cap standing next to the guitar case had gotten out of his seat and was moving over to her. He leaned against the counter, giving her a long look. His smile was a bit too white, and yet it suited his handsome, tanned features.

He had a square jaw, and a farseeing quality about his gaze.

A faint scar traced behind his ear, but was hidden by curls of dark hair.

"Mind if I buy you a drink?" he said, conversationally.

She smiled, but tried to hide it just as quickly. She smoothed her bangs again, brushing them out of the way, behind an ear, and shrugged a single shoulder. "I guess," she said conversationally.

"What's your poison?"

"Oh, you pick."

He smirked. She smiled back. He hesitated, glancing at the bartender, who was shooting nervous looks toward the two of them. Jealous? Tammy couldn't tell. She had that way about her. Men often wanted her attention. They always had. And now she was realizing that the bartender was paying just a bit too much of it.

She hesitated, glanced at the guitar case, and then said, "Do you play?"

"After a fashion. Hey, what you think about getting out of here?" he said, waving a hand toward the door.

Now, the bartender was scowling. She winced, hesitating. Normally, she made it a rule not to follow strangers out of a bar. He was handsome, but she wasn't stupid.

She shrugged, and said, "I mean, I'm only just getting to know you. What about that drink first?"

The handsome man hesitated. For a brief moment, it almost seemed as if his features were flickering into a frown.

But then he shrugged, and said, "You know what, I actually think I have to go. I'll see you around." He tipped his hat at her, gave her that dreamy smile, then turned, moving across the tiled floor toward the door, and she had no qualms about watching him leave.

Those jeans fit in the exact right way.

But as he strolled away, she realized the bartender was still watching her.

She hesitated and wondered if she ought to say something. Men weren't supposed to just stare at women in public. But then she sighed.

The only good talent in this place had just walked out the door with a guitar case in hand.

Maybe it was time she got out of there too. She was still under the legal limit. Best to get going. Maybe she could see what was streaming online. Not exactly what a girl wanted to do on a Saturday night. Ice cream and television. But at least she was out and about again. It had been a while since her last breakup. And an equally long while since she had taken a break from her original profession.

Mistakes had been made. And she desperately hoped she wouldn't repeat them.

Now, she got to her feet, didn't look back at the bartender, deciding she didn't want to encourage him, grabbed her purse, and hurried toward the door as well.

The handsome man with the guitar case was gone. She pushed out of the door, and a small bell tinkled overhead. She stepped onto the concrete sidewalk; a chilly breeze swept toward her from the night. Saturday night was either one of the most fun times of the week, or the most depressing in Tammy's estimate. It all depended on if you had someone to spend it with.

She strolled toward her small sedan, which she had traded for her Mercedes. A change in lifestyle meant a change in car. At first, she had regretted it, but she was beginning to grow more comfortable with a laid-back approach to life.

"Hey, I think you dropped these."

She shot a quick look back, hesitant.

The man with the guitar case was smiling at her again, and holding up a pair of keys.

She wrinkled her nose. "Those are for a Toyota," she said, shifting onto her back heel. "I drive a Honda."

The man hesitated; he gave a look back toward the bar. The two of them were standing by a concrete portion of the wall. No windows, and no one could see them.

He really was quite tall. And large. A couple of tattoos joined that scar behind his cheek, giving her another pause. Perhaps she should have been a bit more careful about who she had been talking with.

She glanced toward the car, reaching for her pocket. And that's when the hand closed around her wrist.

Panic. Fear. She tried to yell. She had faced situations like this before. She lashed out, kicking him between the legs. He grunted, doubling over. She turned, sprinting. Not to the car. That would've been stupid. No, away. To traffic. To someone who could see her. She raced toward the main street. Behind the strip mall, it would take her a good hundred paces to round the building.

And he was coming after her, fast. She glanced over her shoulder, panicked. He was limping, grunting, his face red.

She hoped it had hurt him.

She continued sprinting. And then he called out.

A name. Not *her* name. Another name. A male name.

She didn't look where she was going. And collided with an open car door.

The pain was instant. Her head ricocheted back. Blood poured down her nose, and she stumbled a bit.

Now, gasping behind her, the handsome man caught up, and she heard him say, "Don't ruin the merchandise."

Suddenly, he was speaking with a faint accent. She hadn't detected the accent earlier.

European?

Her mind was spinning. The panic, the fear, the pain was accompanied by the *tap tap tap* of blood drops against the asphalt.

The car door was slick, black, and smooth. The man standing inside the open car door, one leg still inside the vehicle, matched the look of his car.

Wearing a black suit, black tie, and sunglasses.

It was night, but he was still wearing sunglasses.

He was also tapping something on his hip.

Gasping, shaking her head, wanting to scream, she realized what he was indicating. A gun, lodged into his waistband. Placed so she could see it. Tapped so she could fear it.

Suddenly, strong hands grabbed her from behind. Another door opened in the back of the car. She tried to yell, but those same hands clapped over her lips. She was shoved, and sent stumbling towards the vehicle.

Smooth, quick. She was placed in the back seat. She tried to scream. No one had seen anything. And no one would hear her now.

The doors slammed, the tires squealed. Fast, quick, like a well-oiled machine. Whoever these guys were, they had done this before.

She could hear the two figures in the front seat muttering now, both of them speaking with that same thick accent.

The handsome man was in the back seat, holding her tight, one hand around her neck, and he lowered his voice, whispering in her ear, "Maybe you and I can take that ride together anyway," he muttered. "I hope you like water."

She frowned, breathing heavily. Panic flared through her. Fear accompanied it. Small prickles of terror pawed down her spine. But she tried not to show it. She knew men like this. Men who liked control, power. In her previous line of work, she had known how to play them.

And so she just hung her head, demure, docile. She gave a quick nod, furtive. And at the same time, she eyed him from the corner of her eye. Wondering if she might slam her elbow in his junk, she moved towards the door.

No. Not yet. She'd have to wait.

But what had he meant about liking *water*?

The car turned. And suddenly, she realized they were heading towards the docks. Docks that loaded shipping containers. She'd seen them on the way in. A dockside town.

Now, panic flared. Why were they heading to the docks?

“What is this?” she began to say, the fear finally taking control.

But a hand lashed out, catching her in the temple, and dark spots danced across her vision. A second later, everything went quiet.

CHAPTER ONE

Cora slammed her phone against the splintered, wooden table in the small forest workshop that Gabriel Finch had introduced her to.

Now, the aforementioned man, built like a linebacker and wearing that stupid newsboy cap of his, perched on his blonde hair, was frowning at where her phone's screen had cracked.

He pointed. "You broke your phone."

She looked up, breathing heavily, nostrils flared. Cora shook her head, wagging her finger side to side. For a moment, she almost lost control. She wanted to yell, to punch the phone, to throw it across the room.

For a moment, her hand tensed, pressed against the splintered table, her mind flitted back... to *other* things. Recent events. Distant events. All of them an amalgam, and all of them bloody.

Others dead. Friends dead. Johnny dead.

A flash of memory. A concrete barrier stained in red. And she bit her lip as pain flared through her shoulder from an old military wound, drawing her back.

She looked up again, scowling. "Tell me from the start," she said, in a voice far calmer than she actually felt. "How did you find out your dad was flirting with my little sister?"

Gabriel's face was pale. His lips were pressed in a thin, grim line. He watched her, and she could see his own anger lurking in his eyes. She didn't blame him. If her father had done something like this, she wasn't sure she would ever see the world the same again.

But also, it wasn't her father. It was her sister.

Rose. Gone. Missing. The only clues that had been found were love letters written and left at the tree where Gabe and

Rose used to meet.

Gabriel had once dated her sister, back in high school. Back when Rose had disappeared.

Rose had been a teenager. By the sound of things, Gabriel's old man had been coming on to her. Sending her love letters.

"The handwriting matches," Cora said, firmly. "I checked with the expert myself."

Gabriel nodded once. His large arms crossed over his chest. His cap was tilted, hiding his face in the shadow. "I told you it did," he said, grim.

"I guess I didn't want to believe you."

They both watched each other across the splintered table. Both standing on old, worn, wooden floorboards. She spotted scuff marks on the ground. Gabe's hands were stained with sawdust and calluses. His flannel shirt matched. He had vaguely smelled of sandalwood when he first entered the room. Now, across the room, he didn't smell like anything at all except fear and frustration.

It was leaking out of his pores.

"I found it in the yearbook," he said simply. "I remembered it. Found it. It matched. I checked other letters. Also matched."

Cora sighed, massaging her nose. "Yearbook?"

"My dad used to teach. Was also the coach."

Gabriel Finch was speaking matter-of-factly, and it seemed as if he didn't want to say anything else. It also seemed as if he wasn't quite there, as if his mind was wandering.

She stared forlorn at her smashed phone, picking it up, staring at the spiderweb cracks across it. She wondered what Johnny might think of that.

But then her mind drifted. She wasn't sure it mattered at all what Johnny might think. Johnny couldn't think anymore. Couldn't do anything. Normally, she figured he would tease her over breaking her own phone. Tease her over *anything*. He liked to tease.

She scowled at her fingers, one of them missing. A recent injury.

“So where is he?”

“I don’t know.”

“What do you mean you don’t know?”

“What’s the word that all those pop psychologists are using these days? Estranged. My old man split. No good deadbeat. He’s gone.”

Cora stared at him. “Your mom’s gotta know. Someone knows where he is.”

Gabriel frowned at her. “My mom has nothing to do with this. You leave her out of it.”

“You agreed to meet,” Cora said. “I thought that meant you had something useful.”

“I do. He’s involved. I don’t know how. I wish he wasn’t. He’s my dad. But he was involved. He had no right to send those letters to your sister. He’s a pervert but... but I don’t know if he’s anything else.”

Cora said, “Someone has to know where he is.”

“I checked. Cops. Friends of mine. He’s not in the DMV. He has no listed address. He’s gone.”

Cora stared. “What do you mean he has no address?”

“I mean exactly that. He moved out, never listed again. No state of residence. Driver’s license expired. He’s gone.”

“Dead?”

Gabriel Finch’s face went pale. “Christ. I don’t know. Look, I have to get going. Family emergency.”

He glanced down at his phone.

The screen glowed, illuminating his features beneath his cap. Handsome features. Worried features. Pale features.

Cora stared at him, and she couldn’t help the natural suspicion creeping into her gaze. “Hang on,” she said

conversationally. “You can’t just go. What sort of emergency? Your dad? Did you tell everyone else?”

“I didn’t tell *anyone*. Just you. You think I want people to know that my dad’s a pervert?”

Cora sighed. She scratched at the back of her head. “I don’t know. I don’t know what you want to tell people, Gabe. I wasn’t expecting the coach from my high school to be hitting on my sister. What sort of weird family do you have?”

The moment she said it, she winced, frowning. “Sorry,” she said just as reflexively. “I’m sorry.”

To her surprise, though, he didn’t lash out. He was just watching her. “I know it’s not easy for you,” he said softly. “I am sorry. I’m humiliated. And I’m sorry. I’m looking for him. The moment I find him, I’ll tell you.”

“Oh, you better believe I’ll be looking too,” Cora shot back.

“Good,” he said.

“Do you really mean that? If your dad’s involved, you’re not gonna like what I do.”

Gabriel’s face went pale again. Instead of answering, he pretended as if he hadn’t heard. He stared at his phone again, the screen still glowing, tapping feverishly with his thumbs, and shaking his head as he did. “I’m sorry, but I really do have to get going.”

He began to move around the table, toward the door. But Cora sidestepped, blocking his way. He was taller, larger, but she didn’t back down. She glared at him, and extended her hand. “Let me see.”

He jerked his phone back, glaring. “Hell no.”

“I’m not stepping away until you let me see. For all I know, you’re texting your dad, and telling him to get out of Dodge, so I don’t put a bullet in his head.”

Again, he pretended as if he hadn’t heard what she was saying. Or at least, intentionally decided to ignore it.

He said, “It has nothing to do with my dad. It’s just a family emergency. A cousin. It’s nothing. Now please, move.”

Cora did not.

She’d driven through the night. Exhausted, tired, wounded, bruised, and deeply, deeply sorrowful. Johnny was dead. Shot because of her inability as a partner.

She’d failed him.

She wasn’t going to fail her sister too. There were too many people that she’d failed. Her parents, her old SEAL teammates, Johnny.

The only chance she had left of some sort of redemption was Rose.

She thought of the FBI. Of Agent Saul Brady. Of Maurice. Of Perez. So many broken relationships in her rearview mirror. She wasn’t sure that would ever change. Sometimes, she guessed, there were just people that couldn’t handle change.

Weren’t quite built for it.

Gabriel Finch was still glaring at her, but must have spotted something in her eyes. He shrugged, and said, “Don’t touch it, but you can see it.”

Cora said, “Sexy. Show me.”

He turned the phone, and she stared at the glowing screen. He swiped a couple of times, and she watched as the text cycled past. And then, he paused, allowing her to read the chain message. Indeed, there were a few recipients. Labels like *Mom. Gabby. James.*

First name basis. Familiar names. Familial names, perhaps.

“Who’s Madison?”

He lowered his phone now, jamming it into his pocket. “Can I leave?”

She stepped aside. He tipped his hat in a sort of sarcastic gesture, and then marched past her, moving toward the door.

He paused though, in the doorway, for only a brief second. He hesitated, glancing back at her, opening his mouth, closing it again, and shaking his head and moving back to the door.

“What?” she called after him.

He just shook his head, waved a hand, and continued toward his truck which was parked by the side of the road, amid the trees.

For a moment, Cora just wanted to let him go without intervening... But the two of them were in this together, and until she could locate Gabe’s father, she had to make sure he didn’t tell anyone what the two of them were up to.

She bit her lip, considering her options, then released a frustrated sigh, moving back through the door, out onto the dusty path and hastening to catch up with Gabe.

He paused by his truck, hand resting on the metal handle, and looked at her, quirking an eyebrow.

“What?” he said.

“I’m coming,” Cora replied, moving around the side of the truck to reach the passenger-side door. There was a flash of headlights, and the *clicking* sound of locks. When she reached out, trying to pull the handle, though, the door remained closed.

“No you’re not,” Gabe said, scowling over the flatbed of his truck. “What the hell are you talking about?”

Cora glared back, reaching up and rubbing a hand through the shaved side of her head. One side allowed the hair to hang to her shoulder, the other had been cut close. Her forearm displayed a few of her tattoos beneath her rolled-back sleeve, and she then lowered her hand, leaving it on the cold metal of the truck.

“I’m coming,” she said simply. “I can’t have you jawing to every Tom, Dick, and Harry.”

“Every Tom... what?” Gabe said. He snorted. “You have to be crazy if you think I’m letting you talk to my mom... my

cousins.” His eyes widened in horror as if even considering this eventuality scared him.

He was now shaking his head so emphatically, his flat cap tipped, and he was forced to catch it, readjusting it back over his dirty-blond bangs.

But Cora leaned against the back of the truck now, her eyes narrowed.

Part of her wondered if she ought to just intimidate him. Such tactics had worked in the past. But then, she studied his expression. His eyes narrowed, his face pale. His hands clenched where they were pressed against the side of the truck. His muscles were bulging, and while he wasn't a fighter, Gabriel Finch was a large man. Far larger than she was.

Cora had given up, long ago, caring about size disparities. In her line of work, training more than made up for bone density or muscle definition, but she also knew that she *needed* Gabe. If she kicked his ass, he might not want to go along with helping her anymore. He was the one who had found the clue about his own father, after all.

And so, instead of threatening him, she said, carefully, “I guess I owe you...” She trailed off, glancing at the ground, and attempting to look sufficiently chagrined.

He stared at her, cleared his throat, and then stared some more. He wrinkled his nose, his eyes fixated on her. Standing beneath the trees, the boughs creaking above, leaves tumbling about, he looked like he wanted to just throw his hands up to the air, as if tossing his cares to the horizon.

It was nearly evening, after all. And his phone, by the sound of things, was still buzzing, warning him that his cousins, his family, were growing impatient with his tardiness.

Cora continued, urgently, “I mean, it *is* my sister, but it's also *your* dad. I understand how hard that must be for you.”

She nodded slowly, trying to force a quick smile. The expression didn't quite fit her face. At the same time, though she knew she was being somewhat manipulative, she couldn't help but feel as if part of her was truly grateful. Gabriel didn't

deserve this. In a way, he didn't deserve any of it. He had once been in love with Cora's sister. He had lost someone too.

But Cora refused to act as if the two of them had lost the *same* thing. Rose had been her best friend for... *ever*. Gabe had only dated Rose a couple of years.

Now, Gabriel was frowning at her, and said, "Don't give me that crap. What do you really want? Are you worried I'm going to gab to someone? Don't." He tapped a calloused hand against his pocket with the phone. "This has nothing to do with my dad. It has to do with a missing cousin. People are worried, and I'm just supposed to stop by and mention in person that I haven't seen anything. It's nothing."

Cora hesitated, wrinkling her nose. "*Missing* cousin? What type of missing are we talking about here?"

Gabriel threw his hands out in exasperation. "It's nothing."

"Is she pretty?" Cora said, conversationally, her mind taking a dark turn.

Gabriel hesitated for a moment, but then his hands clasped together, as if he were pleading with her, or attempting to strangle air. "Disgusting. Really, gross. Let it go. My dad didn't have anything to do with this. We don't even know where he is."

Cora tried the door handle of the truck again. And again, the cold metal handle remained shut. The door locked. She huffed in frustration. She pointed a finger at Gabriel. "You *just* said you don't know where your dad is, and you don't know if he's involved. And by your own admission, he has something of a habit of going after young, pretty women."

Gabriel snorted. "Not his own niece!"

But even as he said it, he trailed off, and looked sickly pale. He hesitated, swallowed, and then, scratching at his chin, muttered, "At least, I don't think so."

Now, a very disturbed silence lingered between the two of them. Gabriel Finch looked like he wanted to run away. Or at least turn and head back into that workshop, sealing the door so she couldn't follow him.

At the same time, Cora wanted nothing more to do with Gabriel. She was tired of this back-and-forth. Tired of trying to clean up his messes. On the other hand, she knew that any lead that led her toward the man who'd taken her sister would be worth pursuing.

Finally, Gabriel shrugged. "You want to come check out the Finch household?" he said, his lip turning up, coming close to a sneer, but not quite crossing the threshold. "Be my guest. Quite literally. My mom's going to wonder if you're dating me. She's going to think you are, and then she's going to be sad. She's going to ask if you're a good Catholic girl. And when she sees your tattoos, she's going to pray. She might flick holy water on you, or something."

Cora snorted. She shook her head. "I don't believe she's as bad as all that."

Gabe glared at her. "Who said my mother was *bad*? I'm just telling you what she's like. We're going to see her in *her* home. Let me tell you, I know you're all special operations and all that, but if you insult my mom, I will throw you out of the house."

There was no humor in his voice, none of the usual mischievousness that often accompanied his commentary.

The two of them were both glaring at each other now, both refusing to back down. In the end, Cora shrugged, and said, "Whatever. Lead the way. Hell, if your cousin is missing, maybe I can help. It's kind of what I do."

She didn't voice the quiet part out loud. *And maybe*, she thought to herself, *it'll lead me directly to your old man*. At the very least, spending some time with the ex-wife of the suspect might give her some clues to where he was located.

Gabriel, on the other hand, hesitated, as if he hadn't quite considered things from this angle. The thought that Cora might be able to help his cousin seemed to strike him as interesting, all of a sudden. He nodded slowly, shrugged a single time, then said, "Fine. But we're driving with the windows down; I don't care if you're cold."

Cora just rolled her eyes.

In a way, it was nice to have an argument. Nice to have the conflict. Nice, if anything, not to think too much.

About Johnny's death... about her own parents not wanting to talk to her.

Perez, the director back at the FBI, had been attempting to get in touch with her. Maybe wanting to see if she wanted to go full-time on the freelance thing. But it was that very freelance thing that had gotten Johnny killed.

If Cora didn't speak with Director Perez ever again, she'd be just fine with it.

The doors unlocked, the lights flashing again, and the chill breeze through the trees seemed to pick up. Cora slipped into the car, inhaling the scent of Cheetos, and detecting some faint brownish powder across the dashboard. The two large containers of protein powder, the type used by bodybuilders, suggested the dust on the dash was chocolate flavored.

Neither of them spoke, both settling. Cora didn't buckle. Gabriel didn't start the engine until she did.

Finally, rolling her eyes, she buckled her seatbelt. They pulled out of the driveway, moving quickly, hastening up the trail as Gabriel followed memorized paths, heading home.

All the while, his phone continued to buzz.

Whoever was trying to reach him, or whatever was being discussed in the group message the family was all involved in, clearly was urgent.

And for the first time, Cora managed to settle a bit. Her thoughts were still on Gabriel's father, and his whereabouts, but also, part of her, felt a flicker of concern.

She shot a quick look toward Gabriel, and realized that his expression wasn't just one of irritation, but also fear.

Things with his cousin were worse than he was letting on. She wondered what had happened.

And another part of her wondered if, perhaps, in between snooping around for the whereabouts of Gabe's father, she might be able to help.

Like she'd told him, it was kind of what she did.

CHAPTER TWO

Mrs. Finch's small house looked as if it had been built a hundred and fifty years ago. Half the thing was sinking into the mud, and the other half was covered with too much white paint, as if it were attempting to conceal some blemish that would otherwise have been visible from the country road.

The scent of manure lingered faintly on the air—with good reason. A paddock of cattle lingered on the small hobby farm's land. Open fields extended behind the two-story, sinking home, and a few apple trees had been planted in the garden—one inside the paddock, half rubbed raw from where the cattle scratched their hide against the bark.

Now, Cora followed Gabe up the wooden steps. Each stair creaked where he stepped, but she spotted more than one fresh nail, suggesting someone had repaired the steps more than once. She pointed at the stairs. "You ever fall through one of those, big guy?"

Gabriel scowled at her, but didn't reply, in a way answering her question after all. Instead of answering, though, he looked at her, and paused on the top step near a pile of shoes by the door. "I'm telling you, this is a bad idea," he said hesitantly. He shot a quick look toward where he'd parked the truck on some old, dusty ground near three other vehicles that had been similarly, and haphazardly, parked.

"Don't worry about it," Cora said conversationally. She shook her head. "It's fine. It'll be fine."

He nibbled on his lip, muttered to himself a bit, then sighed, reaching out for the screen door, and pulling it open. The front door—as worn as the rest of the house seemed—was already left ajar, kept open by a sandal in the doorjamb.

Coming from inside the house, Cora heard the steady stream of voices and detected the odor of food. Meat, by the smell of it. Red meat, and lots of it.

She glanced toward Gabe.

“I warned you,” he muttered. “But fine... you worried I’ll gab? Be my guest. Shoes off at the door,” he added quickly, holding out a large hand and keeping her back.

Cora scowled at the hand, but bent double, undid her shoes, hiding the ankle holster she kept on her right leg, tucking her jeans over it, and then gestured towards Gabe as if ushering him into the house.

With another long sigh, both world-weary and concerned, Gabriel Finch entered the house, pushing through the door with a muscled shoulder.

Cora followed after him.

As they stepped into the small, well-worn house, the odor of steaks wafted toward Cora. The sound of voices grew louder, coming from a room at the end of a small hall. Artwork on the walls was of the construction paper and crayon variety. Judging by the state of the paper, though, the drawings were old.

Hell, maybe as old as the house. Or... judging by the signature of a couple of them, at least as old as her tour guide.

“Nice house,” she said as she passed one of them.

“Yeah, well, call five-year-old me Picasso,” Gabriel muttered. “Now, please, whatever you do, don’t bring up politics. Don’t bring up... you know... anything. Actually, better yet, maybe you shouldn’t talk.”

Before Cora could reply, a voice called out from the kitchen. “Gabey? Is that you?”

Gabriel glanced towards the door, but almost seemed to soften a bit at this voice. Perhaps *soften* wasn’t the right word. More like he relaxed... a burden seemed to fall from his shoulders as he rounded on the door at the end of the hall, no longer paying attention to Cora, as if he’d temporarily forgotten she was there, and picking up the pace as he moved past the rows of construction paper artwork.

Cora followed hesitantly.

A large woman appeared in the doorway, wearing a floral apron that Cora's own mother might have envied.

The woman was about a foot shorter than Gabe, but about twice as wide and very round. Her rosy cheeks were turned up, smiling widely as her hands also extended, snaring the tall woodworker in a hug. "You're too skinny, Gabey," the woman said. "I can wrap my arms right 'round you."

"Well, Mom, by the smell o' things you've got my favorite going."

"Oh yeah. Skirt steak, seasoned with lemon pepper. Mushroom soup on the side if you wanna make a risotto."

"Yeah... yeah maybe. Hey, so... is Tammy really *missing*?"

"Oh Gabey. It's horrible. I just—hang on... hello, dear. I don't believe I've had the pleasure?"

The wide, smiling woman with the kind eyes was now peering around her son, staring toward Cora with a look of interest and mild concern.

Cora shifted awkwardly, not sure if she should wave or just wait for introductions.

Gabe, though, just snorted. "Ignore her, Mom. She's not there. Come on—show me this steak."

But his mother caught his arm, frowning at him. She ignored this last comment as if she hadn't even heard it. "Is... is this your new girlfriend?" she whispered. At least, she *tried* to whisper, but her voice carried all the same. The sort of voice that had a lot of practice, Cora guessed, shouting things down these familiar hallways.

"No," Cora said curtly. At the same time, Gabe said, "Hell no."

She glared at him. He looked quickly away.

"She's just... you know. A friend."

"The Shields girl," said Mrs. Finch slowly. "Right... I remember you from pictures your mother shares in Bible study."

Cora tried not to react to this, though her mouth wanted to purse and blow air in the universal expression of long-suffering. The last thing she wanted to think about was her mother using her Bible study as an excuse to tell her small-town friends all about the screw-up that was their elder daughter.

Cora just nodded politely. “Was with Gabe talking about business,” she said quickly.

Gabriel frowned at her.

Perhaps he didn’t like that she was lying to *his* mother. Or maybe his face was just stuck like that. But Cora ignored him either way, and continued, “Yeah... we just were talking and Gabe said he got a disturbing text. I didn’t want to make him drop me off at home, so I agreed to come along. He said you make the best food in town.”

The woman smiled now, her expression easing a bit as she nodded quickly. “Well... I try, dear. I try. You’re more than welcome. We’re just waiting for Aunt Agatha, but the rest of us are all in. Come on, guys—more than enough food for everyone.”

His mother began to turn, but Gabriel reached out, catching her shoulder, and leaning in. He managed this whole *whispering* business a bit more professionally than his mother had, but Cora still thought she picked up on more than one word. Catching at least one phrase... “Tammy... really missing?”

His mother’s face paled again, and she stared wide-eyed at her son. “We’d been hoping you might have known something, Gabey.”

But Gabe just winced and shook his head. “Haven’t seen her in months.”

Mrs. Finch sighed, her impressive bosom rising and falling under that floral apron with the motion. She then tugged at her son’s arm, leading him toward the kitchen. “Well... I can’t say anyone’s gonna like hearing it, but, best they hear it from

you...” As they entered the kitchen, a new chorus of greetings and voices met Gabriel’s arrival.

Feeling like a stranger in a strange land, Cora, frowning, followed slowly, approaching behind the two Finch family members to peer through the open door.

A few other figures were seated around a kitchen table, and all of them glanced up with some interest as Cora joined. Many of them were similarly proportioned to the matriarch of the house. Wide, kind-eyed and with cherubic, wide-cheeked faces. Broad faces, too, with prickling pale or blonde hair depending on the age.

Six figures, in total, were crowded around an oversized kitchen table. Many of them having already loaded plates with coleslaw, mashed potatoes, fresh mushrooms, and strips of skirt steak seared in a pan on the stove.

The pan was still hissing as more meat had been tossed on it. A window over the sink had been opened to allow the smoke somewhere to go. And the hubbub of voices didn’t fully disguise the *sizzle* of the pan.

Cora glanced around the table at the various broad-faced figures wearing degrees of smiles tinged with worry and sadness found in the crows’ feet around the eyes or the pursing of lips into tight, thin lines. She leaned against the doorjamb, keeping back, the rough wood of the old house’s equally aged door frame pressing against her shoulder.

She studied the figures in the room beyond, but simultaneously felt an urge to retreat. These people all lived in the same town as her parents. She wondered how many of them had been clued in that *she* had been the source of much of the disturbances the previous week.

Cops shot. A judge dead. Things had gone haywire. Undoubtedly, it was still the talk of the town. Proven by the next comment from an older lady with silver hair pulled back in a ponytail. The woman had rough hands, similar to Gabe’s. She was dressed neatly in a pink cardigan and wore a golden cross dangling from her neck.

The woman's folded hands rested on the table as she said, "I bet you this all has something to do with that horrible car crash outside Farmer Deacon's northern field."

A younger woman with spiky hair and a tattoo barely visible under a sleeve said, "That wasn't a car crash, mom." This girl kept tugging at her sleeve, as if subconsciously attempting to hide her tattoo. Cora was reminded of Gabe's warning concerning his mother's aversion to ink.

"It was a full blown terrorist attack," the girl said. "I heard there was a helicopter involved."

"Poppycock," said the cardigan wearing woman. She then smiled. "Like that? Poppycock. I read it in a Priscilla Stone mystery book. It means silliness."

"Well," said the girl with the hidden tattoo, frowning under a dark fringe, "It's not silly. I'm just telling you what I heard from Kevin. Who," she added importantly, "is best friends with Deacon's son."

"That's *Mr.* Deacon, dear."

A new wave of chatter swept through the table. Other figures were nodding at Gabe, shaking his hand, or attempting to make room at the table for him to take a seat. As chairs scraped against the ground, or meat was piled on plates, Cora remained in the doorway, attentive and watchful.

She didn't know quite *why*, but standing there, it almost felt as if her stomach had sunk into her toes.

Mrs. Finch was waving a hand like a canoe paddle, attempting to sweep Cora into the room, gesturing for her to join them at the table. She had a quizzical, almost amused look in her eyes, but she didn't say anything to suggest what she was thinking as she continued to attempt to bring Cora closer.

Cora, on the other hand, stayed back, watchful, hesitant. The same sensation of a sinking feeling in her stomach only grew more intense.

She watched Gabriel settle at the table, and begin to pick at the meat on his plate, and she realized what the problem was.

She didn't belong here.

She could feel the envy.

She would never admit it out loud to anyone, certainly not to Gabe. But she could feel the longing eating at her, the desperate desire to belong. She wondered what it might feel like to have a family around a table full of food. Yes, concerned. Perhaps even facing tragedy in pain. But doing it together.

Together. What a powerful word.

She watched as hands patted Gabriel on his forearms. Or voices murmured in his ear, comforting, or catching up.

She thought of her own family, and how things had gone sideways. Part of her wanted to blame the disappearance of her sister, and in a way, she would've been right. But another part of her knew, deep down, that they had just never seen eye to eye. Her family simply hadn't been able to live under the same roof.

The disappearance of her sister had mattered. But other things mattered too.

She let out a little sigh, feeling the sensation of loneliness threatening to settle on her. She couldn't afford to continue thinking like this. Whenever she did, whenever she allowed these thoughts past the barriers she had erected so carefully in her mind, she found herself heading down a path from which it was difficult to return without a drink or pill.

She also didn't want to sit. One of the best ways to get herself in trouble, she found out over the years, was to stop moving. She had often likened herself to a shark. As a SEAL, having spent time in aquatic operations, she had grown accustomed to learning something about sharks. One of the facts she often found fascinating was that if they ever stopped moving, they would sink.

And that was how she felt.

So she remained standing, somewhat bitter, her stomach twisted, and feeling alone.

Her attention, however, was captured when Gabriel began to murmur something to one of his relatives.

Cora frowned, leaning in.

But he wasn't mentioning his father; instead, he was saying, "No, I'm sorry. I haven't seen her in a while. Probably months."

The aunt wearing the pink cardigan was shaking her head, then nodding, touching her fingers against the golden cross dangling from her neck.

Cora stared at Mrs. Finch, who was standing on her feet now, having reloaded the plate of meat, and deciding to address the room.

As the matriarch of the household stood, a slow quiet fell

Cora glanced briefly around the kitchen, her eyes landing on the fridge, then darting back. She wasn't sure where she had expected to find clues about the whereabouts of Gabriel's father, but none stood out to her yet.

Now, Mrs. Finch began to speak. "We all know why we're here. And Marge, I'm so sorry." Mrs. Finch glanced towards another woman, sitting in the back, in the shadows, her plate empty, and completely untouched. No stains of juice or food or condiments on this plate. The woman clearly didn't have an appetite. Though she looked like she ought to. Unlike the larger figures in the room, this particular woman was bone thin. She had a sickly pallor on her face. Her eyes were heavy, ringed with dark shadow. A woman who had seen too much. A woman who had wasted away with worry.

Cora just stared, and then glanced away, feeling a pang in her chest, and wondering how many nights her own mother had carried that same look.

But the woman named Marge just shook her head, held up a small, thin fingered hand, and waited.

Gabriel, receiving a glance from his mother like a receiver catching a touchdown pass, cleared his throat, swallowed some food, and said, quickly, "I was just saying, I haven't seen Tammy in ages. I have no clue where she is."

A slow murmur broke out around the table. A couple of the people who had already heard this comment from Gabe were nodding knowingly, with sage expressions as if they had known Gabe's ignorance all along.

Marge, though, just looked more scared and more worried.

Mrs. Finch moved over to the thin, pale woman's side, resting a hand on her shoulder. "It's going to be okay. We're going to find her."

More murmuring, more looks of sadness. Gabriel Finch glanced at Cora, then looked away just as quickly.

Finally, the woman named Marge spoke. Her voice was trembling, but she said, "I know she's okay. I have to know it, but it's been so long. She just doesn't listen. She's done things. Things that none of you know."

The grief, the shame in the woman's voice was palpable. The looks exchanged between other figures around the table suggested that they had long suspected whatever sordid secrets were currently being hinted at.

Marge, her voice still shaking, spoke again, but this time with a squeak in her voice as if she were trying to hold back a burst of emotion, and struggling to do so. "Tammy... She's just..." A swallow. "I'm worried about her. She hasn't been home in three nights... *Three!* That's a long time."

"She's not answering her phone," said the younger woman with the hidden tattoo, still tugging nervously at her sleeve but eager to contribute. "I've tried like a million times."

Others nodded again around the room.

"Have you checked the usual places?" asked Mrs. Finch, her hand still resting on Marge's bony shoulder.

But at the phrase *usual places*, more significant glances were cast around the table, and Marge's shoulders shook as her head ducked and she began to tremble in shame, sobbing at her empty plate, a single teardrop the only residue now marring the otherwise clean ceramic.

More concerned worrying arose in a chorus. More figures around the table were now talking openly with comments like.

“I’m sure she’s fine.”

“What if she’s not?”

“Maybe she is in jail... wasn’t she in jail last Christmas?”

“Hush—not so loud. Look at *her*.”

More eyes glanced at Marge, and the comments turned to whispered gossip out of a sense of respect for the panic-stricken mother.

Cora listened to all of it with a frown on her face. She glanced back over her shoulder, down the hall, eyes moving along the walls and wondering if she might find any clues to Gabe’s dad’s whereabouts here. She wasn’t sure how to broach the topic.

Suddenly, though, as she glanced back, she realized a silence had fallen across the room.

Everyone was looking at her.

She blinked uncomfortably, raising an eyebrow.

“Er... what?” Cora said, realizing someone must’ve asked her something. All eyes were fixated on her, and she could feel her stomach twisting nervously. She glanced briefly around the room, hesitant, and then said, “*What?*” A bit more emphatically this time.

Gabriel, standing slowly, cleared his throat, and said, “I was just telling them,” he said, with a note of warning in his tone, “That you’re something of a private investigator yourself. You find missing people, don’t you?”

She stared at him, and he stared back.

She wanted to glare, but he didn’t even blink.

A silent conversation passed between the two of them.

As much as she wanted to chastise him, she didn’t think this setting was the one to do it in.

And on the other hand, she could find her mind focusing once more. She glanced toward Marge, the woman who was now looking through tear-stained eyes, slits in her fingers giving her the ability to hide her face, while simultaneously surveying the room.

“You can find Tammy?” Marge said in a slow, hesitant voice.

Cora frowned. She had already told Gabe that this was what she did, but she had said so in order to get access to his family. Now, she wasn’t sure what she was supposed to say. She didn’t have any clue who this Tammy was, or what she had gotten herself involved with. By the sound of things, she had gone off the rails.

Missing for three days. That could mean anything.

But a note of hope had appeared in the eyes of those around the table that hadn’t been there until now.

And by the sound of things, no one had known that Cora was involved in the altercation outside Farmer Deacon’s northern field.

Cora hadn’t known it *was* the northern field. And she barely remembered who Farmer Deacon was.

She let out a faint sigh, shifting uncomfortably onto her back heel.

“Well?” Mrs. Finch said, watching her with the look of appeal. “Will you?”

“Will I what?”

“Help us find Tammy. We can pay you,” Mrs. Finch said quickly.

Gabe shot a look at his mother. “Mom, no.”

Cora frowned as well.

She thought of the state of the house. She thought of how difficult it was on a single income to raise children. But Mrs. Finch had done so. And now she was standing there, proof that people in small towns were made of stern stuff.

Cora let out a faint sigh.

Then, she shot a look back toward Gabe.

Her eyes narrowed briefly. He seemed to spot in her gaze something he didn't like, and his lips pressed tightly.

Cora looked around the room, and then said, "I don't need payment; I need information."

Gabe said, "Hang on," quickly, trying to cut her off.

But she beat him to the punch. She'd already made her decision. Initially, she'd thought any knowledge on the issue would only become an obstacle, but now, standing there... it was a wealth of information. And the way they were so intent on their own pursuit of a family member reminded Cora of her own sister.

She couldn't let the opportunity pass so, bluntly, she said, "I'm looking for Mr. Finch. Or whatever his name is. Looking for Gabe's dad. The coach from my old school."

The moment she said the words, a stunned silence hung over the room.

Everyone stared at her.

Jaws unhinged, eyes widened. And then, Mrs. Finch stood as if she had an iron rod in her spine, straight, unbending. She said, in a ghost of a voice, "*What* did you say?"

Cora grimaced, but she didn't back down. She was here for a reason. She understood that people were in pain, that compassion was important. But she also knew how much the mission needed speed. She didn't know where Mr. Finch was, or what else he was up to. Perhaps he really was involved in Tammy's disappearance.

Cora shrugged, and doubled down. "I'll help you find Tammy in exchange for Mr. Finch's location."

Gabe yelled, "No one knows where he is! I told you that, dammit!"

"Gabe! Language!" But Mrs. Finch was pointing at the door. "Cora, dear, you need to leave."

A silence fell again, and all eyes landed on the matriarch once more.

Mrs. Finch was breathing heavily, shaking her head side to side, anger in her gaze. “Leave, now!”

Cora shrugged, glanced towards Gabe, snorted once, then turned on her heel.

She’d come along to prevent him from talking about his dad. From clueing them in. And now she had gone and done just that.

It was hard to make tactical decisions without proper information.

It seemed like the right play, but now, as she walked away, down the hall, to the front door, an accusing finger directing her toward it, she wondered if she had just made a horrible decision. Someone might warn him after all.

Was Gabe right? Did no one know where to locate his father?

Or was that just what they told Gabe?

She could hear a low murmur suddenly burst out behind her, could feel the eyes on her, which could peer through the door. She could even picture them in her mind, though she didn’t look back, leaning over, to get a good look at her as she left.

Cora paused for only a moment, and then pulled her phone from her pocket. If they didn’t want to tell her where Mr. Finch was, she would have to do it the hard way.

She pushed out the door, shoving it with her elbow, taking the steps down toward the dusty driveway, lifting her phone to her ear, and as the door swung shut behind her, it sealed her off from the warmth, the scent of food, and the community within. Once more she was isolated, outside, standing on a windswept road.

There was something fitting about it all.

She dialed. The phone rang. It connected, and she said, her voice grim, “I need a favor.”

CHAPTER THREE

Agent Saul Brady's clipped voice responded over the phone. The professional, calm demeanor of her old partner was somewhat ruined by the rushed way in which he answered the phone call. "Cora? What's going on? Are you alright?"

But even as he spoke, the grizzled veteran of the FBI had a note of concern in his voice. He'd always had a soft spot where she was concerned, and Cora loved him for it.

Her feet shifted on the dusty ground, scraping aside a few stray stones, and sending them skittering over the edge of the driveway. She spotted her reflection in the glass of some of the parked cars, staring towards the vehicles, which all seemed to be in similar states of repair to the house.

The couple of acres, from which she could hear the sound of cattle, smelled even worse this close.

It was a different type of world down here. A strange world.

She wasn't sure how she felt about any of it.

Cora let out a faint sigh, closing her eyes briefly, and said, "I'm fine, Saul. How are you?"

"*I'm* not the point here. Is it true that you were working with Perez?"

Cora said, "Can't talk about it."

He didn't curse—he never did—but he got close. She waited patiently. He said, "Drat, Cora. Truly... Come on, now. Please! What's going on with you?"

She said, "Look, I just need some help, Saul. I'm sorry. Things are in a rough way."

As she spoke, she felt emotion creeping into her voice. Emotion she wasn't comfortable sharing with most people.

Again, she thought of Johnny, and her mind wandered. Pain began to surface once more. She swallowed back the warble in her voice, though.

“What’s wrong?” Brady said, the concern still in his tone.

She stood outside the old house, inhaling the scent of manure, listening to the mooing of cattle, and wishing that she could figure out exactly what was wrong and fix it. Too much pain.

There was no fixing what was broken, she decided.

“I need you to find someone for me. Last name Finch. I don’t even know his first name. Apparently he used to teach at my old school, so I guess I could find that out for you. His son’s name is Gabriel Finch. His ex-wife lives at the address I’m at. You can track the phone’s GPS.”

She shifted her phone across her cheek, and winced when the shattered screen, from where she’d smashed it against the table earlier, scraped.

Saul said, “And what are you going to give me in exchange for that information? I seem to remember telling you I didn’t want to be involved in any of this.”

“What do you want?”

“To sit down with you. A meal. I want to talk.”

Cora winced. She wasn’t sure she wanted *this* at all. Saul could be quite insistent when he got his mind set on something. Would he ask her to come back to the FBI? Was he just worried about her?

It was a small price to pay, if she was honest, and yet it felt like a large one. In the end, though, she simply said, “Deal.”

A long, relieved sigh.

Brady said, “Good. Very good. All right then, but just so we’re clear, it might take me some time to get you that. I can’t go through normal channels. For obvious reasons.”

Cora waved her hand dismissively, though he couldn’t see the gesture. “Don’t get yourself in a heap. Appreciate the

help.”

“Cora, really. Where are you?”

“Hey, Saul, sorry. Someone just showed up. I have to go. Get me that information when you can, and we can schedule that lunch.”

Cora was relieved, in part, that she wasn't lying. Mrs. Finch was standing in the doorway, staring at Cora, her expression unreadable.

Cora bid a quick farewell over the phone, though it was clear Brady still wanted to chat, and then she turned, watching Mrs. Finch, but holding her own tongue, allowing the matriarch to speak first.

Mrs. Finch shifted uncomfortably from side to side. She gave a long sigh which sent a few strands of hair rising on her forehead, and then shook her head and said, “I'm... sorry, Cora. That wasn't very kind of me.” She was standing alone on the porch, the door shut behind her, sealing them off from the house.

Just the two of them.

Alone.

Cora was used to being alone, but she wasn't used to facing down someone like Mrs. Finch.

Cora shifted, uncomfortable where she stood outside the small farmhouse. She glanced toward the woman on the porch steps, and felt the urge to speak.

But Mrs. Finch beat her to it. “I didn't mean to kick you out like that,” she said, slowly. Her voice was reserved, her eyes staring off into the distance.

But Cora cut in, quick and curt. “You did.”

Mrs. Finch frowned, hesitated, but then sighed. “Yes... I suppose I did.” A deep, rattling breath, then, “But whatever would make you ask about *him*?”

A pause, and Cora took the moment to collect her thoughts. She had never considered herself a woman who used words

over action; she admired those who felt the best way to solve problems was to talk about it, but in her experience talking only went so far. And when the talking ended, she was the person they called in to handle clean-up.

But at least now, in this moment, it did not feel as if the talking was over.

She cleared her throat hesitantly, and said with a shrug, “Something came up. Something serious. I need to find him.”

She wondered if she ought to add more details but decided this was the extent of the matter.

Mrs. Finch studied Cora, quiet, still standing in front of the door which had been closed behind her. She took a couple of steps down the porch and joined Cora on the dusty road. About five paces extended between the two of them, and neither of them moved, like cowboys from the old West facing off.

Finally, Mrs. Finch said, “I can’t say I know where he is. But I might be able to help you find him.”

Again, her emotions were shielded.

“All right. How?”

But now it was Mrs. Finch’s turn to cross her arms, and watch Cora, wearing a grim expression. “Gabriel talks a lot about you. Ever since you moved back. He says you’re good at fixing problems; is that true?”

Cora didn’t react.

“You’re good at finding people; maybe you can help us out with what’s going on in there.” She shoved a thick thumb over her shoulder, and no longer did she look jovial and cheerful, like a jolly farm wife. Now, there was a severity in her gaze. A cold, iron authority. This was a woman accustomed to leading. A woman accustomed to sacrificing, giving, and enduring *more*. Simply that. *More*—and that was the claim to authority. She was the matriarch, but she was more than that. She was the spine. The backbone.

And Cora detected no amount of give in the otherwise friendly voice.

This was not a discussion. It was a negotiation.

And as far as negotiating went, the terms were clear. *My way or the highway.*

It was exactly the sort of thing that Cora did not respond well to. She didn't like being controlled. She valued her freedom.

She had already endured one type of bond—pills, drink. And then she had found another type. Control, manipulation. People like Deputy Director Ogden.

She wasn't about to jump back into the arms of a third type.

And so she said, "No deal. I'll find him on my own."

Cora turned, and began to walk away.

Mrs. Finch didn't call out. There were no sound of pursuing footsteps, but after a few paces, the matriarch cleared her throat.

Cora turned back.

The woman didn't change her terms, didn't ask Cora what she wanted, but instead began to speak, quietly at first.

Cora had to take a couple of steps closer just to hear, and only after she had done so did she realize perhaps that had been the point. One couldn't underestimate the skill of a mother in enticing the unruly to do what she wanted.

But now, Mrs. Finch was saying, "Two weeks ago Tammy went to New York City; we told her it was a bad idea. But she's been doing things her way for a while now." There was no inflection in the matriarch's tone, no change in her expression, but somehow Cora felt as if these words had been directed toward her.

Mrs. Finch continued. "A few days ago, we lost all contact. We haven't heard from her since. We had been hoping maybe she was back in town, maybe Gabe had heard something. The two of them had always been closer than the rest of us."

“Us,” Cora said softly. “You represent an *us*?”

“I suppose I do. Is that a problem?”

Cora just shrugged. She said, “New York City is quite a distance.”

Mrs. Finch nodded slowly.

“My niece is a troubled young woman. Talented. An excellent singer. A big heart for others. I sometimes wonder if the most compassionate sorts are the ones who suffer the most. They take on everyone else’s pain. It’s easy not to hurt if you don’t care about anything.”

Again, she was watching Cora just a bit too closely for comfort.

Cora said, “I could make some calls, maybe.”

“Will that help?”

Cora opened her mouth, closed it again. She wasn’t sure why, but she wanted to give this woman the truth.

“Probably not.”

“So what could help?”

As a matter of fact, businesslike. And suddenly, it felt as if they were at the negotiating table, and Cora had some wiggle room after all.

She wasn’t sure what to say at first. Was this really how she wanted to spend her time? She had a lead. On Mr. Finch. A lead on the man who might’ve killed her sister, or who’d taken her.

But as much as she wanted to find him, there was every chance that it would be difficult to do so without hearing back from Agent Brady, or without the participation of these women.

Besides, Cora had a connection to a private airfield, thanks to Johnny.

She felt a flash of guilt. She thought about Johnny, about what *he* might do in this situation

He had been helping her. Had traveled from South America just to come join her.

She knew it wasn't right, and there was no way to absolve herself of his blood, but a small part of her hoped, wondered, if by saving a life it might cleanse her from losing one.

She could feel her mind spinning, feel her thoughts straying.

She released a fluttering sigh. "Do you know how to find your ex-husband?"

A simple nod. "I can find him. *You* won't be able to. He doesn't live at an address. Never much trusted registration of any type."

Cora sighed. "Busy holed up in the mountains? Off grid? Militia?"

But the iron mask didn't flinch.

Cora scratched her chin, sighed again, and said, "I guess that's not a very fair question, is it?"

"Do we have a deal?"

"One other thing. I want you to answer two questions completely honestly, without a lie. If I think you're lying, I will get even."

Cora didn't like the feeling of threatening this woman, but she had learned, from her time with Gabriel Finch, that there was something about this family that responded to stubbornness through ultimatum.

Mrs. Finch said, "I'll answer your questions, *after*. I'll give you my ex-husband's address, and whatever answers you want. Or... It isn't about Gabe is it?" She shook her head quickly, "Because I think he might be seeing someone."

Cora frowned. She said, "It's nothing like that. All right then. We have a deal."

Cora hesitated only briefly. It wouldn't absolve her conscience. She knew it, but she hoped in some small part that she could assuage some of the emotions she was feeling.

And so, she met Mrs. Finch's gaze, nodded once, and said, "I need to know everything: who Tammy saw, where she went, and what was going on. The only way I can help, especially if I'm supposed to travel to another city, is if you give me all the details, and hold nothing back."

"Deal. Why don't you come on in, and grab a plate. And... I should say—not everyone in there is going to have the most... *generous* interpretation of Tammy's actions. Consider yourself warned."

CHAPTER FOUR

“This is a horrible idea,” Cora said, shifting uncomfortably, and fighting for the armrest on the small plane.

Gabriel Finch, who was even larger when placed within the confines of economy class seating on the first plane to New York, just glared at her. He said, stiffly, “And do you think there was a world in which I let *you* help my cousin, while *I* stayed behind, twiddling my thumbs?”

Cora just glared. The two of them seemed to reflect this expression a lot. Finally, she dug her elbow into his ribs, he grunted, and she conquered the armrest between them.

She had an inkling of a suspicion, though, that the battle had only just begun.

Now, they were in the air. Takeoff had been similarly uncomfortable. At least this way, Gabe was able to recline his seat, and give himself some room for his legs. It didn't help that a child in front of them was occasionally glancing over and throwing peanuts at the cup holder between them, trying to score a snack-sized swish.

As another peanut bounced off Gabe's shoulder-rest, Cora glanced toward the computer screen open in front of him.

They had an email service provider webpage on display. Technically, they weren't supposed to connect to any hotspots while in the air, but Cora had decided that the urgency of the situation warranted an exception.

Plus, though she wouldn't admit it in a court of law, she was getting quite accustomed to breaking the rules for what she perceived to be the greater good.

The faint fragrance of airline food lingered in the tin can hurtling through the sky. The window shade was closed next to Cora's arm.

In the water, during choppy seas, Cora was as comfortable as a pig in filth. But there was a reason she had never joined the Airborne Division.

She could feel the anxiety prickling along her spine. Could feel her hands cold and clammy even though the nozzle above her, which distributed jets of cold air, had been closed.

Still, she refused to show Gabriel Finch that she was worried.

“I know that I should remember it,” Gabe was saying, having suffered the loss of the armrest with grace, and now turned his attention once more to the open laptop.

A stewardess was passing by, and Gabriel shifted uncomfortably, pointing the computer screen toward Cora so the stewardess wouldn’t see they were connected to the internet.

“You said you *knew* her password,” Cora said pointedly. “We need something. Your mom didn’t know shit.”

Gabriel scowled. “Don’t talk about my mom like that.”

“I wasn’t talking about her at all. Just saying she didn’t know anything about what happened to your cousin. What’s up with that? I thought it was a small town.”

Gabe shot her sidelong look, his eyes shrewd, as if attempting to determine exactly how much she already knew.

Cora didn’t react.

She had gathered as much information as she could from the family. What little they knew was that Gabe’s cousin had gone missing two weeks ago. But they had lost complete contact—no emails or phone calls, within the last few days. This, however, wasn’t the only time she had gone radio silent.

No one had said it explicitly, as if it were the one thing they refused to utter, but Cora had picked up that Gabe’s cousin had spent some time moonlighting as a lady of the night.

Cora had some experience with prostitutes. She didn’t think much of the profession one way or the other. Some of her parents’ influence, and small town values, gave her a distinct

sense of discomfort around the subject. But another part of her that realized she had been trained to kill people for a living didn't want to cast too many stones.

Regardless, the Finch family still loved Tammy.

And now, it was up to Cora to offer penance. To assuage her conscience and hopefully find out what had happened and bring Tammy home safely.

There was an angry clack of keys, and Gabe cursed, shaking his head, slamming one hand against the upright tray.

“Wait, no, let me try her first boyfriend again.”

Another flurry of fingers over the keyboard.

Cora glanced, impressed. “You type fast for a woodworker.”

He shrugged, muttered, “I once thought I might become a screenwriter. It's nothing.”

She said, “Have you written anything?”

“Wait, I'm in.” Gabe ignored the question, and she ignored that he had done so. Now, the two of them were staring at unopened emails.

Most of it looked to be spam, or promotions of some kind.

“What's that?” Cora said, pointing.

“Family email chain,” he said. “Just a bunch of dumb pictures, old photos, the occasional Bible verse.”

Cora pointed a finger at another email. “What about that?”

Gabriel clicked it. There was no subject. And the name of the sender was simply *John*.

They read through the text, and Cora said, “Looks like John was a client of your cousin's.” Gabriel shifted uncomfortably, again, displaying an entire willingness to pretend as if he hadn't known what his cousin did for a living.

But then, he exclaimed, “She turned him down. Look”

Cora glanced at the reply. *I'm not in that line of work anymore. Sorry! I can give you a reference.*

The aptly named John had never replied.

“Four weeks ago, anyway,” said Gabe. “It’s at the top of the inbox because he was a starred sender.”

“Probably a repeat customer who paid well.”

Again, Gabe didn’t say anything, but shifted uncomfortably.

Cora said, “I see a couple more but they look like they’re just ads. One’s from *you*.”

“Yeah, I sent that a few days ago. I was wondering if she knew anything about those love letters sent to your sister.” Gabe shifted sheepishly.

“I thought you said you weren’t going to look into that without me.”

“You should be glad I did. I’m the one who found out...” he trailed off, and frowned.

She was beginning to get the distinct sense that any time something that might cast aspersions against the Finch family name came up, Gabriel imitated a clamshell.

It didn’t matter. She wasn’t here for information about his old man. She’d already struck a deal on that front. Once she returned Tammy safely to her family, Cora would get what she wanted. One step at a time.

“Hang on, what’s this?” Cora said quickly.

It hadn’t been at the top of the inbox, and Gabriel said, “Looks like she’s sorted this based on read messages. Interesting. They’ve gone back and forth a few times here.”

Cora and Gabe both scanned the email quickly. They weren’t long messages. Mostly, just reminders to check her phone.

The email address wasn’t distinct either. Simply marked from ‘*your friend*.’

Cora said, “Is there any way to see where this is from? Like a location?” She hesitated, then said, “Actually here, let me use your laptop.”

“No. Get your own.”

“Really?”

Gabe sighed, shot her sidelong look. Then muttered, “Fine, just don’t break anything. You do that a lot.” She shook her head, emphatically rolling her eyes but then commandeered the computer, took the email address, and entered it into a site that Johnny had used more than once. Gabe watched, interested, as she entered the website address with a series of numerals and letters. It wasn’t accessible without a fourteen digit code. But Cora had always been good at remembering numbers. License plates, bank accounts, passwords.

She entered the email address, the way Johnny had shown her, and tried not to think too much about the last person who’d visited this website.

Memories of Johnny just hurt. She could feel the wound, deep, like a bullet left in her chest.

Things had gone cold between Johnny and Cora. For a while, she had even thought that they hated one another. But then things had started to rekindle. At the very least, though perhaps they weren’t friends, their professional relationship had been extremely beneficial. And other things had begun to develop between the two.

She shook her head, and refocused on the website.

“Well what do you know,” she said softly.

Gabriel stared at the screen, which glowed with a dull, black light. “New York,” he said quietly. “Shit. What is this website?”

“Something a friend set up. He keeps it on the open web to avoid having them track it to a private server. I don’t know all the technical jargon, but it’s reliable. I know the guy personally who coded it.”

Gabe shot her a sidelong glance, studying her, but Cora kept her expression impassive, refusing to betray any emotion. She clicked on the email, and used one of the website portals to open a mirror of the previous emails.

The program began running in the background, testing various passwords that were most commonly used. The AI logged a thousand attempts per millisecond.

After a few moments, Cora said, “It’s not a very secure email. One factor authentication. His password just uses the letters of his email address rearranged.”

“What does that mean?”

“Means it’s a throwaway account, probably. Look, see here?”

Now, they were both staring at other emails that *your friend* had sent.

There were only three email chains. One of them, they had just checked in Tammy’s account.

Two of them, though, were from months before.

Cora frowned, and said, “Write down these names. Samantha Thompson. Mikayla Garcia.”

Gabe’s fingers were in a flurry on his cell phone.

After a couple of seconds, he said, “Got it. Why? What does he say to them?”

She clicked through the email chains. But again, there wasn’t much. She murmured, “Just reminders to check their phones. Here’s one, looks like he invited her to New York as well.”

“The same way you think he invited Tammy?”

Cora nodded slowly. “Whoever this guy is, he has something of a habit of inviting women to the city.”

They drifted off in the grim silence. “What were those names again?” Cora said, as she cycled to an online search engine. One at a time, she entered the names.

After a bit, she tensed.

Gabriel Finch cursed at her side. Both of them were staring at a news article for Mikayla Garcia.

The top headline, from six months ago, read: *Woman Found Dead In River.*

“Try the other name,” Gabe said, his voice tense.

And again, they both stared at the results returned. These from only two months ago.

Local woman found strangled in an abandoned building.

“Cora,” said Gabriel shakily, his voice trembling, “What does it mean? Has he already killed Tammy? Who—who did this?”

“It’s just a throwaway account,” said Cora, slowly. “Going to have to dig further to find anything. We don’t know she’s dead. There’s nothing about her in the news. For now, she’s only been missing a few days.”

“Why? What’s he doing with her?”

CHAPTER FIVE

She listened intently for the sound of movement on the other side of the door.

She could inhale the scent of saline air. The ocean.

Why were they near the ocean?

She shivered, feeling the rock and sway of the floor beneath her, her skull pounding from where they had struck her.

It had taken her an hour, maybe more. She'd lost track of time in the dark, but she finally managed to remove her blindfold, having rubbed the ropes against a ridge of rusted metal.

And now the bindings lay on the floor, discarded next to the blindfold, which rested on the ground like a red wound.

She pushed to her feet, with wobbly steps, still listening intently but exhaling deeply, forcing herself to breathe.

She glanced through the small space, scanning the walls of the corrugated metal.

No bed, no tables, no cabinet. But a window. A very small window, not with glass, but with a sort of metal grate. A ventilation unit, she guessed.

She shivered, glancing down, and realizing she was still wearing her thin T-shirt, and slacks.

The air here was colder, though, than it had been a couple of hours ago.

Where were they?

She didn't want to contemplate this. The thought made her skin crawl and her stomach churn.

She took another step forward, feeling the blood circulating through her legs again, her wrists chafed, but also regaining some of their sensation.

The red marks along her skin beneath her hands indicated where the ropes had resisted her attempt to break free.

Now, her footsteps clanged against the metal, and through the thin corrugated walls, she thought she heard voices. She tensed, listening. Male voices. Harsh, calling at each other in a language she didn't understand.

"Dear God," she muttered. It wasn't quite a prayer, but rather the sort of thing her aunt might say in a situation like this.

Tammy had known things like this could happen in the life she'd left.

Though she still wasn't quite sure what *this* was.

She took another stumbling step forward, and reached the side of the wall beneath the vent. She reached up, and there was a good foot between her fingers and the base of the vent.

She scowled, cursing beneath her breath.

The voices had stopped, and she froze, stiffened, one arm braced against the cold metal wall, her body gently resting against the side of what looked to be a shipping container.

Another tremor went down her back.

The voices didn't resume, but the door on the far end didn't open. The door itself was locked. She had heard them locking it from the outside when they had first thrown her in here. A chain and a padlock by the sound of things.

Still, maybe worth the effort. More tapping footsteps as she reached the door. She tried the large metal lever. It didn't open. She guessed this thing was designed to open from the outside.

She turned again, staring toward the vent which was a foot higher than she could reach.

She hesitated, glancing around the room, frowning. And then her eyes landed on the bindings on the ground.

She moved towards them, snatched some of the ropes, took one of the longest spools, and approached the vent. Inhale,

exhale, steadying her nerves, and then she jumped, trying to jam the rope through the vent.

She missed. She tried again. She missed once more, and this time, her fingers caught on the rigid metal.

She hissed, yanking her hand back, and shaking it a few times.

She glared at the metal, swallowed, and tried a final time.

Another jump. And this time, she managed to gouge the rope through.

She poked the end of the cord through an inch wide gap in one of the ventilation grates, and let out a little gasp of excitement.

Now came the tricky part.

She studied the vent, glanced at her hand, curling, and then uncurling it, flexing it, like someone at the gym who had just lifted a heavy weight, and was trying to regain circulation.

She let out a fluttering little breath, took a running start, and kicked off the wall, jumping again. She managed to catch the grate, holding it with her left hand. Her right hand then maneuvered, darting up, pulling the rope through the grate.

Her fingers strained, the edge of the metal grate bit into her hand. She let out a groan of pain, but tried to hold back the sound, lest she alert anyone outside to what she was doing. She still didn't know where she was. Or even what had happened.

She pulled the rope through another opening in the grate, dragging it back. Now, as she released her grip on the metal, her fingers bleeding, she landed nimbly back on the ground near the discarded scarf that had been her blindfold; she found she had two feet of rope dangling through the grate, threaded through two metal bars, and circled back toward her. Then, she gripped both ends of the rope, exhaled slowly, tensed, and pulled with her full weight.

A couple of rusted screws rattled. But the grate didn't move.

She scowled, tried again. Nothing. She gripped the ropes with both hands, pressing her feet against the side of the wall, now, so she was dangling, legs wedged against the furrowed metal. Then, with a faint grunt, she threw her full body weight into it, pulling on the rope, her bloodied fingers now rubbing against the coarse material of the cord that had bound her wrists.

The rusted screws rattled. One of them broke. Then, the rest of them gave.

The top two screws pulled from the weathered sections of wall. They didn't fall. The bottom two, however, tapped against the ground, falling from their positions. Now, the grate opened and closed like a flap. And it was large enough for her to get through.

She let out a little breath, excitement flaring through her.

She discarded the rope, her hands bloodied, pain helping her focus for a brief moment; she thought of her family back home. She thought of her mother, her aunt, her cousin. Everyone was worried about her, she knew that much. And they hadn't been able to interact with her for a few days now. They'd be even more worried.

She felt a flash of guilt. Ashamed, in a way. She knew that she was the black sheep of the family. She wished she wasn't. She wished she had made different choices. She wished that people had given her more space to make mistakes, without making her feel like trash.

She wrinkled her nose, shaking her head. There was an expiration date on blaming one's parents and family for the choices they made themselves, though.

She let out a shuddering breath, looked up at the open flap of metal, and then she moved toward it, intent on clambering through, and making good her getaway. And that's when the door behind her creaked, and opened.

She spun around, heart in her throat.

Three dark outlines stood there. Two of them were holding machine guns. One of them cursed at her, marching forward.

His features were wreathed in shadow, and her eyes weren't yet accustomed to the light streaming in behind him, further blinding her. He had a cigarette between his lips, and the end glowed, illuminating his cheeks, and veiling his eyes in smoke. He cursed at her, and she yelled, trying to scramble toward the vent. She managed to clamber up the side of the metal, managed to grip the vent's ledge, but before she could pull through, hands grabbed at her from behind. Cursing. Something hard struck her in the back. She yelped in pain, doubling over. Feet kicked at her as she hit the ground. More cursing, again in a language she didn't know. Eastern European?

Something like that. The men were yelling, raining blows down on her. All she could do was hold her head, tuck her body, try to make herself as small a target as possible. It wasn't an unusual place to be, absorbing the blows of an enraged man.

She missed her cousin, Gabriel. He would've ripped these people to shreds. But now, she just lay there, whimpering, in pain. Absorbing each blow with a wince, a grunt. She tried to cry. Sometimes, when she cried, the more sadistic sorts stopped their punishment, having gleaned what they wanted from the situation in her tears.

But these men just continued to pummel her.

Her tears had no effect.

And she lay there, praying for it all to end.

CHAPTER SIX

Cora glanced toward the large mansion at the base of the valley.

In the distance, New York City's skyline stood tall and proud against the blue horizon; about thirty minutes north, they found themselves on a ridge at the back end of a small forest preserve. A large, black fence circled the back of the preserve, and signs in cursive type arranged every teen feet along the wall, declared things like: *private property, no trespassing*.

Gabriel Finch, meanwhile, sat on the hood of the car they had taken from the airport. They had loaned it in his name, and now, Gabe was frowning at a computer screen, the laptop still sitting on his legs.

"You're sure this is his house?"

Cora shook her head. "It's the address he gave to two of the girls. But I don't know. I don't have a way of finding out just now."

Gabe said, "I do."

She frowned, glancing back at him "How?"

"I looked it up. This place is owned by some business guy. I think he's in finance. It's on one of those YouTube channels that shows off the cribs of the rich and famous."

"Cribs? Please don't say that."

"You don't like my lingo?" Gabriel said, sarcastically.

He lowered the laptop, slipped off the hood of the loaner from the airport, and joined her at the edge of the black fence. The two of them peered down the slope, toward the man-made valley, thirty minutes from the New York City skyline. And there, settled on the perfectly manicured terrain, in three acres

of coveted territory with large trees for privacy, was a seven-thousand-square-foot home

It was three stories tall, and Cora spotted occasional movement through the windows. She also pointed toward the front door, and said, “Think it’s normal for a business guy to have private security like that?”

Gabriel Finch followed her indicating finger, and frowned. Two men with large guns stood in front of the door, both of them barrel chested, both of them with buzzed heads. Two more men were moving around the back of the house; a water feature made from a porcelain sculpture of ducks was encircled by a bed of roses.

Cora wrinkled her nose. “Wonder how much a place like this costs.”

“Thirty-five million,” Gabe said without missing a beat.

She stared at him.

He shrugged, and pointed at the laptop resting on the hood of the car.

She said, “Why would he ask the girls to meet him at his own residence?”

“Maybe he didn’t think anyone would follow the emails.”

“We always follow the emails.”

“I don’t know. You’re the professional.”

Cora paused, frowned, then said, “I guess the only way to know is to see what’s in there.”

Gabriel tensed, looking excited. “Do you think Tammy’s down there?”

“Hard to say. I don’t know.”

“If she’s not, where do you think she is?”

Gabriel was trying to keep his voice nonchalant, but she detected the fear in his words. She found her expression softening a bit, and as she turned away from the black fence,

she glanced at him, and said, “We’re going to find her. It’s going to be okay, I promise.”

Gabe watched her. He didn’t reply. They both knew that she couldn’t make a promise like that. But they both allowed the other the fantasy that she could. There was something comforting about the notion of the certainty that they would find Gabriel’s cousin alive and well.

Now, Cora turned, pointing toward the car. “I need you to help me move that.”

“Why?”

Cora ran a hand through the longer side of her hair, and she rolled her shoulders, wincing a bit from a pain that often occurred in her arm. She said, “Because, I’m going to use it to step over the fence.”

Gabriel hesitated, glanced at the fence, at the armed men, then back at her. “You’re sure?”

“Sure as shooting.”

He looked pale. “What a lovely expression,” he said.

“Don’t worry, Gabe. I mean it.” She reached out, patting him on the arm.

The tall man built like a linebacker exhaled faintly. He shook his head, then said, “You need me to go with you?”

She studied him. There were two ways she could go with this. Neither of them ended with him joining her. But she could do it by embarrassing him, or by giving him a way out. She was developing something of a respect for Gabriel Finch. He was out of his depth. They both knew it. But he was sticking to it. He had come all this way for his cousin. She had to respect and admire that sort of loyalty. So instead of embarrassing him, she said, “I need someone to stay back here. Keep an eye on the car, and be ready to get away. The getaway driver has to keep the engine running. Or else we’re both screwed.”

He looked relieved, but nodded quickly. “Perfect. I mean, okay. If I have to. You sure?”

She kept her expression solemn. “I’m sure. I’m just going to check the place out, see if I can find anything, and see if I can figure out what’s going on.”

Gabriel exhaled slowly; he winced, though, as Cora reached toward the concealed holster just within her belt, pulled her sidearm, checked it, and slid it back into place.

He looked pale again, but then frowned, and, with a grim expression, moved hastily back to his car, and began to move it toward the fence to give her a stepping stool over the barricade and into the compound.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Sometimes, Cora thought of herself as a dancer. At the very least, she liked to think she choreographed herself whenever entering a dangerous situation. And now, there was no exception.

Left foot forward, right foot followed. Lunge, push off the hood of the car. Fingers finding the top of the fence. Catch, pull, muscles straining. And then, down the other side.

She landed nimbly in the garden inside the black fence.

And that was only the start. The first few steps. The preamble. She began to move, quickly. Away from Gabriel Finch. Away from a world of words and communication.

She didn't like talking. At the end of the day, talking was for polite society. Talking, hearing each other out, giving the benefit of the doubt, was for people who could be trusted with such privilege.

But men like this, men who lured young women away from their families, were of a different breed entirely.

At least, that was how Cora saw it. She was sure her parents, her mother especially, following a Sunday service, might come home, and mention how everyone was in need of saving. She thought of Johnny, and some of the things he had often said about the bad guys. To him, anyone who pointed a gun at one of his friends was evil. And anyone who was at his side, no matter what they had done and to how many, was one of the good guys.

Everyone defined things differently. But Cora was the person they called when talking didn't work.

Two women were dead. One still missing. Who knew how many others had been caught up in this scheme. Whatever it was.

She moved through the garden, fast. Approaching the side of the house.

She glanced off to the left, behind the house, where she had spotted two guards earlier. She had timed her motions, though. Choreographed them. She watched as the two figures rounded the side of the house, moving away from her. A split second earlier, and they might have seen her.

A split second later, and the two other guards, now rotating around the other side of the house would have seen her. But now, sandwiched perfectly between the two roving units, Cora hastened to the wall. Her back pressed against the red brickwork. She inhaled the scent of begonias, which littered flowerbeds pressed. The sound of trickling water came from the water feature in the garden. The redolent flowers tinged the air, but they didn't give Cora any sense of comfort. It was more like the sickly sweet scent of poison.

She moved along the side of the house, pressing against the wall. A window above her. A back door ten paces away.

Voices coming from the window above. She had spotted silhouettes moving behind the glass. More guards? Were they denizens of the home? She kept moving.

Twenty seconds, and then the duo of guards from the right hand side, moving around the front of the house, would turn and see her.

Twenty seconds wasn't very long. But it was enough. She reached the door, sprinting now to close the distance. She breathed heavily, tried the door handle. Locked. Checked for a security light. There, blinking.

Nothing for it. She sent her elbow through the window. Reached inside. A faint chirping sound now emanated from the door. The security system had been sprung. This job wasn't about stealth. It was about gathering information. Stealth would've been useful. Stealth would've required less violence than she was now expecting. But at the end of the day, what she most wanted was to find out what had happened to those women.

Her hand darted through the glass, avoiding the jagged edges. She opened the door from the inside, and the chirping sound reverberated in her ears as she stepped through, pushing through the door.

Loud voices now. She shut the door behind her. *Click.*

The glass would give her away. But she hoped it would take some time for them to realize what had happened. Maybe they would think a bird had flown through.

No matter. She couldn't be here when they discovered the glass.

She locked the door, hoping it would add credibility to the bird theory, and then moved along a small hall.

It wasn't quite a mud room, like what one might find on a farm. But there were no decorations here. This back entrance, found on the side of the house which hadn't been facing the driveway, seemed more incidental than anything. A small shelf for shoes, and a few keys dangling from hooks on the wall. She hesitated, then snatched one of the keyrings, pocketing it, then kept going. Now, the small hall split into a T. To the left, a stairwell, moving up to the main section of the house. To the right, a door that looked like it might lead to a garage.

She paused only briefly. And then, someone began to open the door to the garage from the other side. She heard thick, rumbling voices. Heavy accents. Eastern European. She frowned and then, instead of sprinting toward the stairs, she sprinted straight at the opening door, shoulder low. The trick wasn't to give them any time to react or call out.

If she had known these were hostiles, she would have taken them down mercilessly, no holds barred.

But she didn't know what was going on here. She didn't know if these men were in on it, or if they were even involved at all. So far, all she had to go on was the email trail sent by a cryptic account, occasionally dropping this address for a rendezvous.

And perhaps that was the point. The same way Gabriel Finch had managed to look up the address, the women might

have done the same. They might have felt a sense of importance, or even safety, knowing just how wealthy the owner of this home was.

And now, all this cycling through her mind, she took a lunging step, leapt through the air, and just as the door to the garage opened, she brought her elbow arcing down like a scythe threshing wheat.

Two men. Her elbow caught the first one in the forehead. He dropped instantly, like a puppet with snapped strings.

The second one stumbled back, yelping in shock. But she was already moving. The element of surprise and sudden violence had taken the two of them off guard, and if she hesitated it would return them to equal footing. But of course, she didn't hesitate. She brought her elbow arcing back, and used the momentum of her flung arm to swing her torso in a twisting motion, and to kick out with her left foot.

Partially, this was because she didn't want to risk breaking her knuckles on the man's thick face. But also, he was distancing himself, and she had more reach with her foot.

Granted, she wasn't kicking with her foot, but rather aiming her shin. It connected with his head as he reeled back, like a log beam striking his skull.

The man's head snapped back, and he hit the ground a split second after.

Cora stood over the two men, breathing heavily, staring into the garage.

There was a camera, slowly rotating. For the moment, it faced the garage doors, angled toward the large, gray corrugated sheet of metal. But it was turning slowly. Within seconds it would point toward her.

She cursed, reached a split second decision, and snatched a water bottle off the workbench just inside the garage door. Her weapon appeared in her hand, smooth as silk, quick on the draw. She aimed, and as the camera turned, she fired a single shot, muffling the noise with a combination of her sleeve,

bunched near the opening of the bottle, and the empty water bottle itself.

It was a horrible imitation of a silencer. But it would have to do.

The bullet struck the camera, knocking it clean off its fixture. The thing fell, and only stopped after two feet, dangling by a length of red wire, and sending small pieces of glass skittering to the floor.

Inside the garage, there were three cars parked one after the other, each of them more impressive than the last. At least, they would have been impressive if Cora knew much about vehicles at all. But she had never been much of a car person.

She frowned, thinking of Johnny again.

She swallowed, shaking her head, looking along at the red, blue, and bright white vehicles left in the garage. It wasn't like the garage in a normal home. The walls weren't blank concrete. And the workbench she'd spotted earlier, she realized, wasn't full of scattered nails and hammers, and the occasional discarded washer. Rather, it had car parts. Strange car parts that she didn't recognize. There was a bottle of blue fluid, with a flammable warning on the side.

She glanced toward the rest of the garage. A small shelf of trophies in the back. Each of the trophies fashioned in the shape of a golden vehicle.

Were these race cars? She didn't think so. Then what?

Street racing?

Her eyes moved toward the bluish fluid with the flammable icon.

She really should have been paying more attention whenever Johnny went on and on about his vehicular hobbies.

She scanned through the garage, and then frowned, approaching the shelves with the trophies. There, behind the trophies, there was a corkboard. It served as something of a backdrop for the awards. Occasionally, a blue ribbon dangled

from a tack but there, among the ribbons, she spotted pictures. Photographs, Polaroids, by the look of them.

Smiling faces. The one that appeared most often was a balding man with a bright, white smile, and wearing a dark suit. He was handsome, except for the attempt at a beard. He clearly could grow facial hair, but no one in his life was honest enough to tell him.

This, more than anything, told her something about the man. It was a notable detail when one didn't have friends who were courageous enough to advise proper grooming habits.

But the man with the flimsy beard was in nearly every Polaroid, and in most of them, he had a young woman on his arm.

She scanned quickly, frowning as she did. And then she paused, leaning in. She recognized the woman. Tammy.

She'd seen pictures back on the Finch farm.

The woman was about Cora's age, and also had tattoos on her arm, but these were hidden beneath a long sleeve.

She was pretty, though not beautiful, trim, though not thin. Her eyes held intelligence, and she was smiling a bit too reservedly, suggesting it was affixed to her lips for show.

In the image, the two figures, the man with the sparse beard and Tammy, were standing in front of the same cars in the garage. Except in the picture, the cars were on the street, and their headlights were glaring. By the look of things, there were drivers inside the vehicles.

She frowned, staring at the picture, trying to determine something. Anything.

But there was nothing to go off. In the picture, Tammy looked happy enough. Safe. She was on the arm of the strange man with the beard, but other than that, nothing else stood out.

Cora stared at the images behind the trophy case, and then she began to move, hastening over the bodies that had toppled.

The camera was broken. The guards unconscious. An alarm had gone off from the back window. She was now on

borrowed time. Normally, she might have preferred to do all of this with far more caution. But now, it had been tossed to the wind.

So she broke into a sprint.

She moved back through the door, out of the garage, hastening forward. The keys jangled in her pocket, but she kept those where they were and moved up the stairwell she had spotted earlier.

As she moved, she heard voices, shouting.

The stairwell curved in a sort of U-section. She pressed her back against the wall, right at the curve. Waiting, listening. She heard loud, thumping footsteps. Angry voices. The rattle of weapons, magazines.

The threat was growing. Those weapons didn't sound like handguns.

She didn't move, waiting until she heard the figures moving around the bend in the stairwell. They descended from the upper floor, down toward the level she was on. The first man emerged.

Cora didn't have time to take stock of the situation. Instead, she had glanced in the window just above her. She had only had enough time, in the glass, to catch the reflective shapes of three figures.

No way to see how heavily armed they were. No way to see if anyone was behind them. But at least she had gathered information. Three of them.

Three was one too many to hesitate.

And she couldn't be gentle. The first one had to go down hard, so he wouldn't pop back up when she was handling the other two.

As he rounded the stairwell, she caught him completely off guard, driving her thumb into his throat.

He gasped, choking, stumbling. She brought her knee into his groin. And then she left him stumbling past her, flinging him down the stairs behind her.

The two other men, who had been careening around the bend in the stairwell, yelled out in surprise.

One of them raised his weapon. She went for him first. There was a spray of bullets. But she had managed to get in close. With knives, distance. With guns, proximity. His bullets sprayed past her hip. She felt the heat of the weapon's barrel against her skin, feeling the singe. She twisted the gun out of his hands, spraining one of his fingers, but managing to avoid snapping it off, with a final flourish.

Again, she wasn't here to permanently injure anyone. Not until she knew what was going on.

She brought the gun around, slamming the butt into the head of the second man who was still standing.

Then, she swung her elbow into the neck of the third man. It was short, brutal work. It wouldn't win any prizes in a Tae kwon do competition. It wasn't even really Muay Thai. But it was effective. The first man hit the ground at the base of the stairs, clutching his throat. The second was knocked unconscious by the butt of the gun. And the third went down, gagging. But he was still conscious. His hands reached for his neck, choking, wheezing. His eyes were wide with fright. His face horribly pale.

She clicked her tongue, shaking her head. "You're fine," she said, her voice cold. "Where's the girl?"

She left the request sufficiently vague, to allow the man's own fear, and whatever conscience he had, to fill in the blanks.

She stood above him, arms at her side, fists clenched; she had discarded the weapon off to the side, but kept it far enough away so the choking man couldn't reach it.

Her feet stood shoulder width apart.

The man groaned, staring at her, desperation in his gaze.

She gave a faint shake of her head. "You're going to be fine. At least, you *will* be if you answer my questions, otherwise, I'm going to hurt you again. *Where* are the girls?"

He just clutched at his throat, shaking his head side to side.

Then, she picked up the gun from where she'd thrown it to the ground.

There was something in his eyes that caught her attention. Behind her, the faint alarm was still chirping. Ahead of her, past this man, there was a hallway, lined with paintings and the occasional ornament set against the desk.

She ignored all of this, though, preferring to stare at the man on the ground. In his gaze she spotted guilt. It was a subtle thing. It was in the way he stared at her, still gasping, still choking; her question hadn't registered. Not really. He was still scared for his own life.

But at the mention of the girls, his eyes darted to the side.

Away from her, as if trying to flee the question with his very attention.

But she wasn't having it.

She raised the gun, pressing the barrel against his head. She let out a faint, whispering sigh, and said, "Where is she?"

The man stammered, swallowing, and he was finally regaining his breath, but he didn't reply; instead, he glared at her, his gaze defiant, fixated on her.

She shrugged, and said, "Trust me, guy, I've painted the walls with bigger brains than yours."

She then fired the gun twice.

She'd yanked it off his forehead just in time. The bullets shot past his ear, with loud retorts. Stealth wasn't an option.

The moment she fired next to his ear, he cursed, stumbling back, his head banging against the wall by the door leading to the hallway.

He stared at her, eyes open in horror. "No girls! None!"

"Where *were* they?"

The gun now pointed towards his head again. She said, softly, almost cajoling, "I'm not in the mood for another warning shot. I'll just find another thug, and try to ask him. The next bullet goes through your brain."

She felt as if he could tell she meant it; things had quickly changed from her wanting to make sure she didn't cause too much damage to a desire to get every drop of information she could.

The guilt in his eyes had flipped the switch.

And he said, "Maurice deals with that. Not us. Maurice!"

"And who is Maurice?"

A whimper, a finger jutting over his shoulder, down the hall. "Main room," he said hurriedly.

Cora glanced past him. At the far end of the hall, there was a large doorway, with golden handles on a chestnut doorframe.

She supposed she didn't have to ask which one was the main room.

She shrugged, then swung the butt of the gun, catching him on the temple, and knocking him unconscious.

He let out a deflating little sound as he toppled, but then went quiet, wheezing as he breathed against the carpet.

And she began to move again, stalking down the hall, the gun now gripped in both her hands, angled off to the side. An AR-15. No bump stock. So it would be semi-automatic.

But as far as accuracy went there were few weapons she preferred.

Now, the chirping sound continued. She paused by a window, between two oil paintings on canvas.

Other guards were running through the garden, like chickens with their heads cut off.

They were armed, and acted their part. But when push came to shove, though, their accents suggested they were imports; these were not professionals.

They played the role, dressed the style, but as the saying went, they were all hat no cattle. No training.

Why did someone hire amateur security guards?

The answer seemed obvious enough. The same reason that the Mafia did. The same reason that most criminal organizations preferred to go with trust before competence.

She stalked down the hall now, aiming her gun at the large door.

She spotted a shadow shifting under the door.

It had gone still, tense.

She frowned, aimed her gun, and called out, “Push the door open, and get back with your hands up!”

The shadow did not move.

“I have a weapon pointed at the door, and I see you standing right there.”

Instantly, a voice cursed. A deep, gruff voice. The shadow scampered away. And she fired, aiming at the lock.

Two bullets shattered the mechanism.

But she didn't go through the door.

Something about the way the shadow had been braced suggested to her that whoever was on the other side of the door was waiting with a weapon of his own.

Still, she fired another shot at the door, if only to keep the attention on the opening.

And then she went to the balcony, slipping around along the rail, using the window between the two portraits.

Two guards in the garden shouted, pointing at her. Weapons raised. But she was already moving through the second window, which led into the same room as the door she had just shot.

She shattered the window with her gun, aiming.

A man was standing against the wall, next to the door, a large hand cannon gripped tight, pointing at the frame. He was tense, wearing a bathrobe, and displaying an impressive, oiled mustache

As the glass shattered, and she shoved into his room, from the opposite direction he'd expected, he rounded sharply, yelping.

“Drop it!” she snapped. Cora kept her gun pointed center mass. She stepped hurriedly away from the window, over scattered glass. She could hear the sound of radio receivers sparking, the sound of voices rising in volume. She could hear the thump of footsteps against the stairs.

The remaining guards were coming for her. Undoubtedly, they were calling for backup. The only question was whether it was going to be the legal type, or another.

The man standing against the wall, braced to ambush whoever came through the door, was breathing in shallow puffs.

His impressive beard rested past the sleeves of a golden bathrobe, dusting his chest, which was equally hairy.

He had a belly, but also looked as if he were muscled beneath the fat.

A golden earring pierced his right ear, and a hoop circled through his left nostril.

His eyes were dark, and looked as if they were outlined in eye shadow, like some Persian king.

The room they found themselves in, from the brief glance she had afforded it, was similarly ostentatious as the appearance of its owner. The man slowly lowered his gun, staring at the weapon in her hands. He peeled himself from off the wall, turning, and facing her.

He wore white boxers beneath his golden bathrobe, and fuzzy, blue slippers.

This was not the man she had seen in the photographs downstairs.

This was not the man she had seen posing with the women in the Polaroids.

“Who are you?” said the man quietly, his voice strangely soft and sweet. The voice of a singer.

The room smelled faintly of detergent, and she spotted a scented candle plugged into an electrical socket by the bed. The bed itself was a four poster, carved from old wood, chestnut, if she was right, matching the door. The golden filigree along the headboard also matched the handles on the door.

An end table displayed etchings on the surface. A cabinet was set against the far wall, slightly open, revealing more bathrobes.

On the nightstand by the bed, there was a jewelry case, and she caught a glimpse of golden ornaments within.

The silk sheets on the bed settled beneath downy pillows, fluffed, and indented, suggesting that the man had been taking a nap.

“You had better tell me who you are first,” she said simply.

He stared at her, shook his head.

“Maurice.”

“Where are the girls, Maurice?”

He blinked. And then, to her surprise, he didn't deny, he didn't chide, and didn't change the topic. He didn't avoid the subject. He just shrugged, and said, “Not here. Who sent you?”

It was always a telling question when they asked this. *Who sent you?*

An assumption wrapped within an assumption.

The idea that someone had sent her suggested that this man was expecting someone to show up. The idea that he didn't *know who* implied that there were multiple sorts that might want him. Police, but also other criminal enterprises.

She shook her head once. “We're not here to talk about me.”

He watched her, eyes hooded.

“Who's the man in the pictures downstairs?”

Now, the man in the golden bathrobe shifted uncomfortably.

Cora heard the sound of voices, footsteps.

She moved quickly. Before he could reply, she stepped across the room with three quick motions. Her gun raised. He yelped, stumbling back. But she jerked the gun to the side, indicating he ought to push himself against the wall again. She came closer, kicking his hand cannon away, sending it skittering under the bed. And then, she grabbed at the chest by the door, dragging it across the frame.

The doors opened inward, and though the lock was shot, the temporary barricade would give them some reprieve.

She shouted through the door, at the top of her lungs, “I’ll shoot your boss if you come through!”

And then, she dragged him further away from the door, in case any of them started taking pot shots.

Now, pressed up against him, she held him by the collar of his bathrobe, twisting it until it was tight around his neck.

His hands were raised at shoulder height, spread on either side, and there was a pleading look in his eyes.

“I don’t know him.” Maurice said urgently.

Cora clicked her tongue, scowling. Up close he smelled like detergent. Sanitized. Clean. But when she looked in those eyes, there wasn’t the same freshness.

She said, “And we were getting along so well. Don’t lie to me, Maurice. The last one who lied got shot. In your case, I might aim for a kneecap first.”

“Get me out of here!” Maurice screamed suddenly, directing his voice at the door.

Cora glimpsed shadows through the door. She aimed lazily, shot a few times, and heard the sound of retreating footsteps as the guards outside the room scattered, seeking safety.

She returned her attention to Maurice. “No more outbursts. I mean it.” She lowered her gun, and rested it against his knee.

His hands were still raised, but she could see the way he had tensed, preparing to try and go for the weapon.

Sometimes, it almost felt as if men were predictable in their choices.

Granted, most people were.

He moved almost as if in slow motion. Though perhaps that was just experience talking.

He swung around, trying to catch her on the chin.

His other hand lunged for the weapon. But of course, she had already stepped back.

And so what he had meant to be a daring escape, striking his attacker, and stealing her gun, ended up being closer to a complete mess.

She stepped back, he whiffed, and snatched at the air, missing completely.

He cursed, and then she shoved his shoulder as he twisted at the waist, using his own momentum to send him tumbling to the ground.

He hit with a dull *thump*.

He turned and stared up at her, a forlorn look in his eyes.

She shook her head. "Don't try that again."

Now, voices were calling out at her from the other side of the door.

She ignored these as well.

Her attention was fixated on Maurice. "I'm only going to ask you one more time." she said, her voice firm.

The guards on the other side of the door seemed to be debating the merits of just rushing into the room.

She felt as if she could take them. But she also didn't want to shoot a bunch of armed citizens. These were amateurs. It had already been established. And she still didn't know if they were complicit in all of this. That one guard had guilty eyes.

Maurice, clearly, knew things. But he was not the man in the picture downstairs.

And so, within a second, Cora reached a decision. She bent over, snatched Maurice by the collar again, and began dragging him to the window.

She sent a couple of bullets flying toward the door again, if only to keep the men away from her, and hesitant about her movements.

She then moved quickly.

“Up, up,” she snapped. She dragged him, her muscles tense, as she pulled him, bodily towards the smashed window.

A couple of bullets shot through the gap in the door she had created.

One hit the bedframe. The other was buried in one of the pillows.

She ignored the attacks, and continued to drag the man forward.

They reached the window. They were all one floor up. It was about a twelve-foot drop to the patio.

“Land on your feet,” she advised. And then she shoved him over the railing.

He let out a yelp. Then came another *thump* as he struck the patio, having only barely managed to break his fall with his hands, and partially his face.

He let out a long, moaning groan.

Then Cora jumped over the rail as well. She hit the ground, and kept her legs loose. Her knees buckled, and she rolled forward, onto her shoulder, then back to her feet. She dusted herself off, and stared at the groaning man on the ground.

She glanced around and as she had suspected, the guards hadn't left anyone on the perimeter. Amateurs. All of them were now in the hallway upstairs, outside the room, trying to figure out where they were.

She didn't let Maurice take time to gather his breath. If he shouted for help, it would alert the armed men to their location.

Instead, she grabbed him again, he groaned, and she pulled him toward the garage.

The keys she had stolen appeared in her other hand, as she swung her stolen weapon around her shoulder on its strap. The weapon dangled against the side of her arm, and she pulled the groaning bearded man alongside, while clicking the key fob.

The garage door opened. They approached one of the spaceships.

Now, she could hear footsteps again, thumping. Shouting, but muffled through the floors. By the sound of things, the guards had figured out what she'd done.

She heard the sound of collision, and glanced sharply through the open garage door; two men had landed on the patio as well. It was taking them a few moments to regain their senses, gasping as they tried to push to their feet.

Cora didn't wait. She pulled her stolen prize by his bathrobe toward the side door and flung him in. She sprinted around the hood, slid across the rest of it, and flung herself into the front seat.

Gunshots. Spiderweb appeared in the glass. The two soldiers who had jumped off the balcony in pursuit were aiming toward the car. Then, they seemed to realize their boss was in there, and switched tactics, shooting at the tires. It took Cora a second to start the engine, moving fast before they could blow the wheels.

She grit her teeth, focusing, and said, "Hang on tight there, Maurice."

No time for seatbelts. She pulled away, leaving the garage with a loud reverberating echo of a growling engine.

The red spaceship she had stolen was a blur. It cut through the space where the two guards were standing. The bullets missed. She spotted at the end of the driveway a large gate, also chestnut and gold, just like the doors, just like the bed.

She hit a button on the side of the car, near her arm. But the gate didn't open. Instead, in the rearview mirror, as more guards streamed out of the house, she spotted the garage door slowly closing.

"Maurice?" she said, conversationally. "Those bars look solid. There's a way to open them from in here; you better tell me, or we're both going to turn into pancakes."

He let out a moaning gasp. He was bleeding from his nose, and breathing heavily.

But as they sped forward, a frail hand reached out, trembling, and pushed a button on the dashboard.

The chestnut and gold gates slowly opened.

Cora grinned, and they sped through, racing over the dusty ground, out of the driveway, up the winding path through the wooded lot thirty minutes north of New York City.

Faster she went, the engine roaring, her own heart pounding in tandem with the sound.

As they sped up, she said, "Now, here's the game we're gonna play, Maurice," she said conversationally. "You're going to tell me what I want to know, or else. So let's try this, who's the man in those photographs back in the garage?"

He just looked at her, that same panicked look in his eyes, and shook his head fiercely.

She buckled herself in, looked at him, shrugged one shoulder, then, as they were veering around a particularly sharp switchback, she slammed the brakes.

He screamed, jolting forward, his head ricocheting off the dashboard. Blood sprayed from his nose, staining the leather, staining the window.

He let out a yell, pain in his voice. She said, "That looked like it hurt. Hopefully we don't have to do it again."

And she picked up the pace again.

Her own head was dizzy from the rapid starting and stopping, but her eyes narrowed. Determination coursed

through her. Two young women were dead. Another was missing. Who knew how many others were involved.

She went faster now, tearing up the road, turning around the paths that cut through the forest lot.

Cora slammed on the brakes, and his head ricocheted off the dashboard a second time. He cursed, spluttering, blood bubbling in his nose. He screeched, his voice shrill in her ears. “What the hell? You didn’t even ask anything!”

She was picking up speed again, nodding, and said, “I was just checking if you were paying attention.”

She winced a bit, adjusting the seatbelt from where it was digging into her chest.

Her arm ached, the old wound acting up again as it often did in high stress situations.

But there was also something distracting about traveling at high speed down winding paths. It forced her mind to focus on the task at hand. It was comforting, in a way. Not quite the same sort of comfort as an adrenaline-fueled extraction in the middle of a guarded mansion, but a different type. A sort of refocusing, in the way that the trees blurred by out of the corner of her eyes. She had once heard of a therapy method, from the few times she had been willing to try the profession, about how causing motion to flicker past the peripheral vision of someone could help disrupt traumatic emotions.

From her perspective, though, by the end of this drive, the only person having to deal with PTSD concerning the car ride would be the man with the bloody nose.

Now, the engine in the spaceship was grumbling again.

She said, slowly, “Who’s the man in those photographs?”

“My cousin!” he screamed suddenly, wincing as he glanced past her leg towards where her foot was on the brake.

He was breathing heavily, wiping blood with the back of his hand, and leaving red streaks across his knuckles. He let out a moan, “I think you broke it.”

She said, “If I didn’t, I would. Now focus. Your cousin? Is he the one who has been sending the emails to those girls?”

“What emails?” Suddenly, his eyes flared. “Wait, wait,” he said hurriedly, as he could feel the speed of the vehicle slowing. “I think I remember. He has his own business. I’m *not* involved in it.”

“You sure seem involved. You keep his sports cars in your garage. They belong to him, don’t they? His face is the one behind the trophy case. And all those girls, their photos are in there as well.”

She was speaking a bit louder than she normally might, due to the racket coming from the engine. Johnny had always liked sports cars, but the noise was one of the reasons Cora didn’t.

She wondered what Gabriel Finch thought of such vehicles.

In a few minutes, they were about to find out. She was circling the gated compound now, heading back towards where she had left Gabe in their getaway car.

Now, Maurice was breathing heavily, and the look of fear had returned to his eyes.

It was the same fear that she had glimpsed when she had first brought up the man in the Polaroids.

“Let me get this straight,” Cora said slowly, “he lures these girls to your mansion, is that because you’re involved? Two of them are dead; I’m still trying to decide if you should end up in a ditch. The more you help me, the more likely I might see fit to let your greasy ass go.”

He let out a small yelp and he spat, blood having seeped down his lips into his mouth. He said, hurriedly, “Hang on, what? I don’t know—” he swallowed, and said, quickly. “Look, don’t. Okay, I’ll tell you. I’m not involved. I just let him keep them here. I didn’t know what he was doing. I swear. I didn’t ask. I didn’t want to know. He’s the one that provides those guards. I’m a prisoner in my own house!”

Cora pictured the ornate bedroom, the sports cars, the armed guards. She also pictured the way they had shot through the door, somewhat indifferent to Maurice’s well-being, it

seemed. And the man she had beat up on the stairwell had been all too willing to give away Maurice's name. She supposed it made sense that they weren't loyal to the *cousin* of the man from the Polaroids.

"So you're a middleman?" She said.

"I'm a victim. A prisoner. I can't leave. I don't have any way out of this. You should be helping me." Half the words were uttered with nasal overtones.

She said, slowly, "I suppose that is what I'm doing. Helping." She stared at him, eyes narrowed. "Would you like some more help? Tell me everything you know, and I might let you out of this alive."

"You keep making the same threats, lady."

She shrugged. "It keeps working. So?"

She picked up speed just a bit more, the pedal pressed all the way to the metal now. They were going nearly 150 mph.

Both of them pressed back in their seats. Cora's own heart was racing wildly.

After a bit, though, Maurice exclaimed, "I don't remember much. I really don't. I'm just a caretaker. While Anthony is out of town!"

"Anthony? That's his name?" She frowned, and could see him regretting those words, could see the way he wanted to take it back. But she clicked her tongue, and wagged a finger in front of his nose, extending across the divider between them. "Don't back out now. Give me what I want. Anthony, your cousin. He's out of town. Where?"

She didn't like the idea of having to head to another state, or city. But if she had to, she had to.

It was with some alarm, though, that she registered his next words.

"He's in the Czech Republic. That's where he lives. He's from there. A lot of the guys at the house; they're from there."

She stared at him.

He yelled, "Watch the road!"

She veered sharply, narrowly avoiding a branch lying in the road.

She said, slowly, "You're telling me that this guy, this Anthony, is from the Czech Republic?"

Her unwilling subject just nodded, moaning again, and touching his nose. Where he probed, a gristly sound came out.

Cora let out a long sigh. "Shit. Is that where he took her?"

"Took who?"

"I'm warning you, Maurice."

"Listen to me, you stupid whore. I don't know anything!" he was screaming now. Clearly he had been stretched to his breaking point; and now, as he yelled, blood spattered the glove compartment.

His hands had tensed. She could feel the way he wanted to dive across the seat. The same way he had tried to go for her gun.

This time, though, she couldn't retreat.

So, instead, as he geared up the courage, she simply leaned in, rapping him across the nose.

Her knuckles hit hard. There was the same gristly sound. He let loose a scream of pain, and then began blubbering. "What was that for?"

"You know what. Now tell me where I can find this cousin of yours."

"Look, you can't. He's not coming back for another couple of months. He'll come through, occasionally, try to get girls to pass through. Sometimes he comes and picks them up. Other times he has them taken to him. This time, he had a couple of girls brought to him. He has fun with them. He sells them. It's his business."

"You speak pretty cavalierly about human trafficking."

"I didn't know anything."

“You seem to know a lot.”

“Only what I’ve heard through doorways, picked up in conversations. I told you, I’m a prisoner in that house.”

“I’m not sure those fuzzy slippers and golden bathrobe tell the same story.”

He tried to sniff, but then just winced, and moaned faintly.

She said, “Don’t blow your nose—not when it’s broken like that. You’ll balloon up.”

He looked at her in horror, but lowered his hand.

She sighed faintly, and processed what he had just told her. It wasn’t an ideal situation.

But if this Anthony fellow wasn’t going to be back for months, then the only way she could figure out what had happened to Gabriel’s cousin was to go find this guy. He was the one in the picture with her. More and more, she was wondering if perhaps Tammy was dead, but she couldn’t voice it, not yet. Cora’s absolution was still possible. At least, she had to believe it was. The only other option was to admit defeat. To admit that she had allowed another person to die.

Suddenly, she found she didn’t want to be in the sports car.

She pulled sharply over to the side of the road, reached out, and snapped her fingers. “Give me your phone.”

He stared at her, swallowed, and glanced out the window at the pine needles. “You’re not going to kill me, are you?”

“Not if you give me your phone.”

Reluctantly, he reached into the pocket bathrobe, procured a device, sleek and expensive like everything else at his home, and handed it over.

“Passcode?” She said.

“1234.”

“Of course it is,” she snorted. It gave her some satisfaction, that he couldn’t make the same sound. Not with how stuffed his nose was.

She made sure the password worked, and then pocketed the phone. She then gestured at the door. “Scram,” she snapped.

He let out another little moan, but relief seemed to wash over him. He glanced at the gun still shouldered behind her, jutting over the headrest.

Then, uneasily, he reached for the door handle. Suddenly, like ripping off a band-aid, and possibly attempting to avoid any last-minute bullets between the shoulder blades, he shoved out of the door, and broke into a desperate sprint. He tripped twice. She caught a glimpse of far more of his white boxers than she ever wanted to. His bathrobe swirled about him, snagged on a branch. He tumbled into a pile of leaves. He tried to rise again, cursing and spluttering, spitting blood.

But she was already moving again, ignoring him.

Gabriel Finch was waiting. This time, no matter what, she would make sure that he stayed behind. She couldn't allow him to come with her to another country. It would involve passports. Documents. It would involve far more than she had counted on up to this point.

One of Johnny's old contacts could supply the materials. Even a private plane if they needed it. She would meet him at a private airfield.

She glanced at the phone, cycling through, and scrolled to the most recent calls.

She continued to scroll until she found the day that Tammy went missing. Five calls had been placed.

Anthony Modric. She stared at the name.

She didn't dial. The name would be enough for now. She shot a glance back through the window where the bearded fellow was scampering away through the woods.

Was he lying to her?

She decided to place a call. She clicked the number for Anthony, and waited, frowning. It took a few moments, but then the phone kept ringing. She got voicemail. A language

she didn't understand, matching the accents of the guards back at the house.

She waited a couple of seconds, took a recording on her own phone, and played it into an online translating software.

Bingo. *Czech*. Just like her frightened witness had said. She decided he was telling the truth.

He had been too scared not to. Besides, in a way it made sense. Trafficking in Eastern Europe was a well-known entity.

By the sound of things, Tammy was the next victim.

Cora scowled as she picked up the pace, heading back toward where Gabriel Finch was waiting. Her next step was already plotted. She had to find Anthony Modric in the Czech Republic. Figure out what this mobster was doing, and figure out if Tammy was still alive. And one thing was certain: Gabriel Finch would stay home.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Cora glared as Gabriel Finch led her through customs. He sauntered forward, grinning at the woman in the kiosk as he slapped his fake passport onto the counter.

The woman was middle-aged, round, and wearing spectacles perched on a pudgy nose. She watched Gabriel Finch with a look of curiosity as his million dollar smile was out in full force. Over one shoulder he had slung the backpack that they had picked up from the airport gift shop back in New York.

The layover in London had given Cora a chance to sleep but besides that, the twenty-hour flight had only given her a chance to ruminate.

She had told Gabe he couldn't come with her.

But now, standing in the security line, following their day of travel, listening to the murmur of voices around her, and inhaling the scent of body odor and lingering macaroni from the meals served on the plane, she questioned her abilities of persuasion.

Gabe was still smiling, chatting with the woman. Cora stood behind the red line marked on the concrete floor. Most of the line had been rubbed off from friction and use.

There were stickers where someone's feet were meant to go, but these looked more like arrows as the heels had also been rubbed clean.

A wet floor sign, in Czech, occupied the lane to her right.

She glanced back toward the gate they had emerged from, near baggage claim.

Security guards were standing there, bored, but occasionally shooting glances toward the international passengers filing through security.

She tried not to meet their gazes.

It had been a rush job on the passports, and the temporary visas. But Johnny's old contact had delivered. Of course, he had done so by arriving at the private airfield in a helicopter with a shark spray-painted on the side.

At least this time he had been wearing clothes.

Now, it was a test of just how good the man who had called himself Gravy Davey—as he provided a new name every time she interacted with him—was at creating fake identifications.

She flicked her gaze back toward the smudged glass of the kiosk. The airport worker was smiling now, chatting with Gabe in English, and admiring his biceps, which were flexed.

Gabe didn't seem to mind at all, but just continued to chat with the woman behind the counter. A few moments passed. And then the woman stamped his passport, and gestured for him to go through.

He turned back, smirking at Cora, and then moved further into the airport to wait for her. She watched where he came to a stop behind a large potted fern near a column as wide as most redwood trees, displaying advertisements for products that Cora didn't recognize.

She approached the woman behind the counter, and Cora was frustrated to find her hands were sweaty.

She didn't like flying, didn't like being cramped, cooped up in a tin box, hurtling through the sky, heading to an unknown country with unknown quantities.

But her mind was fixated on Anthony Modric, fixated on Tammy.

Two of the women had been killed. Rejects?

The thought made her shiver. But the way that Maurice had been speaking about his cousin, it almost sounded like whenever the mobster came through, stopping at his cousin's mansion, he would find some girls in the area, like scouting talent. Any that didn't live up to his pedigree he would get rid of.

Not a serial killer. Not *just* a serial killer, but a businessman, according to Maurice.

A monster.

But he lived in the Czech Republic, and so the customs worker now frowning at her from behind the glass stood between Cora and a chance at solving all of this.

Cora tried to flash a smile. But it didn't suit her face the same way it did Gabriel's.

So instead, she sighed, and just lifted her passport, sliding it under the slot beneath the glass.

She glanced back, and noticed a couple of the security guards were watching her, curious.

Perhaps it was on account of her strange haircut. One side shoulder length, the other buzzed. Maybe it was the tattoos.

They couldn't recognize her, could they?

She shifted uncomfortably.

The woman behind the glass examined the passport and began to frown. She said, "What brings you to the Czech Republic?"

Cora hesitated. Alarm bells were now ringing in Cora's head.

She kept her expression pleasant, though. She said, "Vacation." And then, she glanced towards Gabe. "I'm with him."

The woman frowned even more deeply. "Is he your boyfriend?" she said, in an innocent tone.

Cora began to protest, but then froze. Was this woman jealous?

She stared at Gabe; he was handsome. Tall, muscled. He had a good jaw line, though not too thick.

The woman *was* jealous. She wasn't frowning because anything was wrong with Cora's papers. She was frowning

because she didn't like the idea of anyone else being with Gabe.

Cora said, with as much dignity as she could, "He's my brother."

"You don't share the same last name."

The woman seemed less irritated now, but curious.

Cora coughed, clearing her throat. "Stepbrother. We're barely related. We don't get along," she added. The whole point had been to distance herself from any romantic association.

And it seemed to work.

The woman behind the counter smiled, nodding, stamped Cora's passports, and sent it back. Cora moved on through the kiosk, joining Gabe by the large column in the center of the airport.

As Cora approached Gabe, she shook her head side to side, muttering, "Sometimes you're unbelievable. Flirting with an airport worker?"

"Cora..." Gabe said, staring at the large pillar behind them.

"Hang on, I'm not done. Well, I guess I am. Look, we need to find a way to discover where this Modric guy lives."

"Cora," said Gabe, more firmly.

"I can think of a few ways we might be able to track him down. But honestly, if he has the sort of connections that Maurice was implying, it shouldn't be that hard. Maybe if we start asking around with –"

"Cora, I think I found him."

She frowned, and then finally glanced toward what he was pointing at.

She turned slowly, and then went still. She blinked a couple of times, opened her mouth, then closed it again. The family resemblance was unmistakable. He was far more in shape than Maurice had been. But he had the same neat, trimmed beard. The same deep, dark eyes with long eyelashes. He was a very

handsome man. Tall, fit, alluring. And he was displayed on a movie poster plastered along the column.

She couldn't read the letters. But she could read the name. It simply read *Modric*.

She stared at the poster, hesitated, and then glanced towards Gabe.

He was grinning at her. "Does this make me a detective now?"

"It makes you a pain in the ass," she replied. But then, she stared at the poster, "I guess our mobster has a bit more clout than I thought. What is he, a movie star?"

"Looks like some sort of action movie. See those explosions in the background? Couple of cars."

Cora let out a little puff of air. "Cars, right. He stars in movies?"

"Looks like it."

"In that case," Cora said, slowly, "he's probably going to be easier to find than I first thought."

Gabe shot her a look. "What do you have in mind?"

"Just follow my lead. Try not to flirt with anyone else."

"Jealous?" he said with a smirk.

"In your dreams."

Cora marched determinedly away, heading as far away from the security guards by the kiosk as she could.

She approached the sliding glass doors, which led out to a busy street, visible by the traffic rushing past.

There was one way she figured they'd be able to find this street-racing, mobster movie star of theirs.

Whatever clout he had, she didn't care. He was involved in the deaths of two women. And he had kidnapped Gabe's cousin.

There was a reckoning coming.

The taxi driver nodded, bobbing his head politely, adjusting his cap, and pointing through the windshield at the large movie set beyond a tall, concrete wall. The only indication that it was a movie set came in the form of construction cranes with wires dangling beneath them. Attached to a set of pulleys, sports cars in various states of destruction were hanging from the edges of thick, metal hooks. Likely being used in some sort of stunt.

The taxi driver waved his finger, and said, “This?”

So far, he had managed ten English words. And yet, with the acumen of taxi drivers world-round, the ten words he knew seemed sufficient to communicate with the two tourists in the back of his car.

Cora said, “Anthony Modric?”

The taxi driver nodded, and said something in his own language.

Cora just shrugged hesitantly. She knew a couple of other languages. Bits and pieces, at least. It had been crucial on her first tour while playing babysitter for some of the local militia groups.

But she didn’t know Czech.

Everyone, however, knew point-and-grunt.

So she did just this. She pointed towards the gates, shrugged, and said, “What is Modric? What does he do?”

Gabriel Finch was staring at his phone, cleared his throat, and then said something in broken, heavily accented words, but the taxi driver perked up. He nodded, and rattled off a response. Gabe shrugged sheepishly, and flashed his phone to show he was using a translation app.

The taxi driver hesitated, smiled, then said, slowly, with painstaking attempts at accuracy “Son of Mayor. Movies.”

Cora frowned. But Gabe, who was still on his phone, muttered from the back seat as they idled by the curb in their taxi cab. “That checks out with this article I’m trying to translate. Everything about Mr. Modric is in Czech. Some of this doesn’t make any sense; I think it was accidentally translating one of the advertisements. But it does mention that he’s the son of the mayor a few times. A movie star, son of a mayor. That’s probably how he has all the political connections he does.”

“It shows pictures of him?”

“He’s a local celebrity,” Gabe shot back. “But like I said, he’s not popular in the Western media. None of the articles say anything in English.”

Cora sighed, but glanced again as Gabe waved his phone at her, showing a picture of a smiling, handsome, and bearded face. Those long eyelashes seemed designed to prompt swooning.

She frowned at the smiling photograph on another movie poster. This one also had cars in the background.

“And so he works on this movie set?” she said, glancing at the driver. She enunciated the words slowly, carefully.

He nodded. “Yes. Movies.”

“Where is his home? Do you know where he lives?”

The driver pointed more insistently at the walls.

“No, not works. *Lives.*” Cora mimed sleeping, resting her head against her hands, folding them.

But the driver pointed more insistently.

“Sorry,” Cora said, feeling frustrated. “I’m not communicating clearly.”

But now, the driver huffed in frustration. He said, “Yes. Sleeps. Lives. Eats. Screws.”

“He does know a lot of words,” Gabe said, impressed.

But Cora said, “Wait, so you’re saying he lives on set?”

The driver hesitated. He pulled at his own phone, which had been resting on the dash attached to a suction cup adhesive, providing GPS. He held up a finger, scrolled a bit, likely entering words in the same website Gabe was using. And then, he pronounced slowly, “Producer. Money. Lives here. Works here. Producer.”

Gabe nodded knowingly, as if he had discerned this all along, and as if perhaps Cora was a bit slow on the uptake. “He lives on set, because he’s a producer.”

The taxi driver wagged his head happily. Partially, Cora felt as if his positive outlook had something to do with the meter that was still running.

But the information was far more worth it than it might have cost in a straight-up bribe.

Cora was frowning now. She spotted security guards around the perimeter of the movie set. These guards looked like they were local police. They moved with far more professionalism, and with an organization that didn’t leave blind spots the way Maurice’s mansion had.

If this was the mayor’s son, it made sense that some of the locals had come to help.

But it also troubled her.

If there were local police involved, she was going to have to be far stealthier, and the problem with this, she realized, was that the walls of the set were built like those of a prison. There were security cameras everywhere. Barbed wire on top. The gates were heavily guarded, and local police circled the compound.

The movie set was better guarded than most military bases.

She frowned, staring at the place, and pressing her teeth tightly together.

“What’s the matter,” Gabe said.

“We can’t go in the front door.”

“What do you mean?” Gabriel lowered his voice, and then glanced uncertainly at the taxi driver.

Cora, still speaking cryptically, said, “We can’t go in the front door. We’re going to have to figure something else out.”

“Like what?” Gabe said. His voice sounded panicked now.

She had to remind herself what was at stake. It was his cousin. His fear was palpable.

She gave him what she hoped was a reassuring look.

But then, she swallowed faintly, and said, “Just trust me, okay? I have an idea. But we’re going to have to see if we can find some old friends of mine.”

“What type of old friends?”

Cora glanced down at one of the tattoos visible past the edge of her sleeve. She hesitated a moment, wondering which of the old operators might still be in business.

Johnny’s contacts were based mostly in South America. But she had other friends, people from her past who could help.

She shot a quick look toward Gabe, then turned, looking through the taxi’s window in the opposite direction of the movie set. There, in the distance, she spotted buildings. A couple of skyscrapers. And one also with construction cranes nearby, but without dangling sports cars like the prop vehicles she’d spotted earlier. This particular building was only half finished. Bingo. That was the play.

She couldn’t go in the front door, so she would keep an eye out from far above. She said, slowly, “I’ll figure something out. We should go. Before we attract any police attention.”

The taxi driver was still watching them, seriously. He said, slowly, “Police?”

Gabriel shook his head. “No, that’s fine.”

The driver said, more insistently, “*Police?*”

Though he was smiling, his eyes weren’t.

Gabriel began to protest again, but Cora sighed, fishing into her wallet, and pulling out a hundred dollar bill.

She placed it on the dash between them. The taxi driver grinned. Gabe said, “Oh.”

The driver shook his head, “No police.”

“No police,” Cora replied. “Now I’ve got another spot you need to take us to. Go fast. I don’t know if we have much time left.”

The driver adjusted his phone back on the suction cup dangling from the windshield, and allowed Cora to redirect him once more.

They were heading back toward the city. But she pulled her phone, glancing down, and then placed a call. It connected on the third ring.

As the driver sped away from the movie set and Gabriel glanced in the rearview mirror, a troubled expression on his face, the voice on the other end of the line said, “Password?”

Cora snapped, “Shut up, Donovan. It’s Cobra. I need a favor. Are you still in Europe?”

“Cobra? Shit. Europe’s a big place, numbskull. How are you doing?”

“Forget about that. Where are you? How far are you from the Czech Republic?”

“Pretty far. But I’ve got some guys. Say, is what I’m hearing about Johnny true?”

Cora’s stomach twisted. She refused to look at either of the men in the car. She said, “Just shoot me an address. I’ll pay for whatever it is. No tab.”

A faint chuckle on the other end, and then the voice said, “Sounds good. Hang tight for details.”

She settled back in the seat, and as the address was texted, she showed it to the taxi driver who programmed it into his GPS; but as he did, Cora couldn’t help but notice the look of concern on his features.

He was shaking his head side to side as he checked and double checked the address, clearly not impressed by their

current destination.

CHAPTER NINE

The darkening skies only added to the eerie atmosphere as Cora and Gabe moved up the dilapidated stairs of the rundown duplex in the seedy part of town. The taxi driver had refused to come all the way with them. He'd dropped them off two streets away, giving them directions to complete the last leg of their journey.

And now, Cora understood why.

Through the cracked and shattered windows, where most of the glass had been taken, she spotted where figures were huddled on the sidewalks by the curb where the taxi driver had refused to come.

She watched as cars passed by, and figures emerged from alleys depositing parcels through the open windows. The exchanges happened quickly, with practiced precision. This was a professional rig.

Cora could feel her stomach twisting. She felt nerves, discomfort, and some small amount of guilt.

In a way, all of this had started with a trip to a similar curb, and an interaction with a drug dealer.

Her own choices had set her feet on a strange path.

But it was stranger still to look out the window of the old, broken down duplex and watch as figures in another country, halfway around the globe, conducted themselves in the same way she had.

Most of the buildings along the street were old and worn. In a couple of cases, they were burned out husks, completely scorched.

Cora turned, glancing back up the stairwell of the old, rundown duplex.

Graffiti lined the walls, and strange symbols were painted on the ground. The railing was missing. Outlet boxes had been ripped from the walls. Light fixtures were gone. There was no illumination, only further casting the dark building into shadow.

It all troubled her.

She moved up the stairs, slowly, but shooting looks back at Gabe.

His hands were jammed into his pockets, and his brow was ridged into a frown.

Gabriel was out of his element.

Cora wished the same could be said of her. There was something that bothered her about standing next to a man named after an angel. She didn't think Gabe *was* an angel. But he seemed innocent, naive. He seemed like a boy scout in some ways. He loved his mother, stuck around the small town, and worked with his hands. In his spare time, he tried to find the man who had hurt his long-lost childhood sweetheart. He'd even been willing to turn in his own father in order to find justice.

He was a strange man. Tall, muscled, and yet with boyish proclivities towards concepts of right and wrong.

And now he looked nervous.

In a way, his nerves were contagious. Cora didn't like the feeling of traversing dangerous paths with a man she wasn't sure she could trust.

Would he be able to take care of himself? Or would he expect her to do it?

She had to focus, though.

A discarded glass bottle scattered as her foot struck it on the stairs. It shattered against the wall, and rained brown pieces down on a bed of broken shards. The stairwell smelled of urine.

“Are you sure this is the address?” Gabe said, shifting uncomfortably.

“I’m sure. You good?”

He shot her a look. “I’m fine,” he said defensively.

“You don’t look fine. You look scared.”

“Why can’t I be both?”

“I can’t have you freaking out in there, Gabe. These aren’t nice people. We are here to get something, that’s it.”

“What are you getting?”

She shook her head, and said, “You let me figure that out. I’ll get it, and we’ll move on.”

Gabriel Finch sighed slowly, but said, “So what’s the plan then?” They took the stairs slowly, side-by-side, moving toward the door set at the top of the stairs. “No real plan so far,” she replied. “We have to stay at a distance. That’s it. I’ll figure something else out as we go.”

Her hand lingered in her pocket, where she still had the phone she had stolen from Maurice. She still had the number for Anthony Modric.

The vestiges of the plan were forming in her mind. But it hadn’t solidified yet. She still had to think it through.

But it was coming slowly but surely; it was all cementing in her mind.

Gabriel Finch sighed, and he said, “Just let me know what I should do. I’m worried about Tammy. He killed those other two; what if he’s already killed her?”

“They never found the body,” Cora said. “Besides, Maurice, the ass wipe back at the mansion, mentioned that he brings girls over here.”

“Why?”

“You know why.”

Gabriel rubbed his arms, coming to a stop at the top of the stairs, and shivering faintly. He didn’t look at the door, but instead glanced back, over their shoulders, peering in the direction of the broken window once more, studying the

streets beyond. The sun had dipped in the sky, and the darkness was nearly complete. The lack of lights in the hallways encased them in shadow, as if bathed in tar.

Cora said, “We’re gonna get her out, and she’s gonna be alright. It’ll work.”

This time, though, Gabriel didn’t let her say it. He said, “You don’t *know* that.”

She shook her head. “It’s not about knowing. It’s about getting out of your head, getting out of your own way.”

Cora had approached the wooden door set in the wall. At least, at first glance it had appeared wooden. But after a moment, she realized it was a veneer. Beneath, she spotted steel. Thick, solid steel. And above the door, a camera faced her, blinking. She looked at the camera, cleared her throat, and said, “Zero Beta sent me.”

And then she took a step back, showing her hands to show she wasn’t carrying a weapon.

Her handgun was jammed in her holster in the back of her waistband. She wasn’t going to enter a rat’s nest completely unarmed. But she could at least play by the rules.

They waited, and for a moment, they heard nothing.

Gabriel shifted side to side. “They could have killed her. She might not even be here. You don’t know things are gonna work out.”

Cora sighed, giving him a sidelong glance, and then said, “You know what it’s like to be tortured for months?”

It was an abrupt, direct question. She hadn’t meant it to sound as aggressive as it must have.

He just looked at her, a note of compassion in his eyes. His eyes flicked to her arm, which she so often massaged when it pained her.

He said, “No. Do you?”

She nodded, once. In fact, Johnny and she had both been captured. It hadn’t been a very pleasant time. They’d made it

through together. Then again, at that time in their lives, they hated each other.

She said, “You can tell the ones that are gonna make it.”

“What do you mean?”

“The ones that are okay with pain. They know things aren’t gonna work out exactly how they wanted. They allow themselves to let go of everything else. Just to focus on survival. Some people hang on to hopes and dreams. Other people keep their faith. Still others know the balancing act between the two. You have to have a vision. If you don’t have hope, you die. But if you’re not realistic, and you hold on to a specific goal or dream, you can’t withstand the torture. You don’t make it out in one piece; see, you don’t even know *what* pieces are gonna be remaining in order to live out the rest of your life.”

She spoke slowly, quietly. The camera light above the door was still blinking and no one had come to the door to answer yet.

Gabriel just shivered.

She looked at him, and felt a jolt of compassion. He was out of his depths. He was a big guy. Strong. Tough, too. But he hadn’t been through this sort of thing before. So she said, “There was an experiment once, and it involved rats.”

“Yuck.”

“Well, I felt given the conditions of this place, it’s an appropriate metaphor. But just hang on, listen. They would try to drown the rats. Not a very nice experiment, but not everything in life is nice. They took the rats, dumped them in a bucket of water. Then they would time how long it would take them to stop swimming. About fifteen minutes if I remember. They all drowned. All the rats. They didn’t make it past fifteen.”

“Thanks for that. I feel encouraged. Means a lot.”

“Shut up and listen. All the rats drowned except for one. That one rat they took out, just before it drowned. Right before he gave up swimming. You understand?”

“No.”

She sighed and massaged the bridge of her nose. “That one rat survived, and so later, after he recovered, they dropped it in another bucket of water.”

“That’s sadistic. What happened then?”

“You know how that first batch of rats lasted fifteen minutes?”

“Yeah”

“A lot of people might look at that and say that a rat can only swim for fifteen minutes before they die, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, that rat that they took out, the one that they gave hope to, that it would be saved, do you know how long it swam the second time?”

“How long?”

“Four hours. Get that? More than fifteen times as long as the other ones. The only difference,” she said quietly, “was that the second rat, the one they’d saved, had hope; it thought that if it went just a little bit longer, the experimenters would reach in and pick it up.”

“And did it survive?”

“I actually don’t know. I hope so. That’s not the point.”

Gabriel looked at her, and then said, “Maybe to you it’s not the point. To me that’s the whole point.”

She shrugged, watching him closely, and then sighed, “My point, Gabe, is that you gotta hope, and you gotta hold onto something. Otherwise you’ll just drown. Tammy’s gonna be okay. Say it.”

“What if she’s not?”

“And what if she is? Your stinking thinking is going to get her killed because you only have fifteen minutes of endurance. This might be a four hour mission. Figure yourself out, or otherwise it’s gonna be your fault she dies.”

It wasn't a very kind thing to say. But he was the one who had demanded to come with her. And if he wanted to come, he was going to have to be useful.

She could see it setting in. Could see it coming as fear, and could see it as clear as day, lingering behind his eyes.

She knew that look. Back in the SEALs, when they had been training, they had known the ones that would quit. They would get the same look.

One inch at a time. One step forward at a time. That was what mattered.

Gabe sighed, nodded once, then said, "All right. All right, Tammy's gonna be fine."

Cora winked at him. He smiled faintly, and then the door swung wide open. Three men with heavy guns were pointing their weapons directly at Cora and Gabe. A woman stood behind them. The woman had pure white hair, and no eyebrows. She glared at them, from behind the men. She didn't have to peer over their shoulders, though, as she was a good foot taller than all three of them. The men wore hoods, carrying the heavy weapons and glaring. But the tall, six-foot-something woman peered out at them from beneath her hairless brow. "Cora Shields?" she said softly.

Cora had turned carefully, her hands raised. Gabriel followed the gesture.

The tall, strange looking woman said, "The doctor will see you now. Come in."

The guns gestured at her. Cora swallowed. Sometimes, though she didn't mention this part to Gabe, the rat didn't even get a chance to swim. It would take a bite of the wrong cheese, then it was squished. That sort of death didn't happen over the course of minutes or hours. It happened in an instant. And the rat never even saw it coming.

CHAPTER TEN

“So you’re the doctor?” Cora said, staring across the table at the pale-haired woman.

Even sitting down, the woman without eyebrows looked to be very tall. Her body was thin, and willowy, and her eyes were wider than her face might have normally allowed.

The woman behind the table smiled, and it wasn’t a friendly expression.

“Just a small joke,” the woman said in perfect English, tinged by a faint accent. She said, “Our mutual friend said you were coming.”

Cora nodded slowly. “He said you could help me out with what I need: just a quick supply run. I’m looking for something long-range.”

The woman behind the table gestured with a manicured hand over her shoulder. She indicated a lock like that on a bank vault.

The door behind her was even thicker than the one that had led into this room.

A cramped, small room. A lumpy couch against one wall. Gabriel Finch sat on this couch, and was flanked by two men in hoods, carrying AK-47s.

The third armed man stood off to the side, near the vault door, glaring with a look of suspicion.

She returned the look, casually.

Her eyes moved back across the desk. It was clear. No papers, no paper clips. Not even dust. No etchings in the wood.

There was no window in this room. And the walls looked to be freshly painted. Cora wondered, as she glanced at the ground, if they had managed to reinforce the room with

cinderblocks. The design on the faux floorboards suggested that about half a foot of room was missing, conceded to the walls.

The room was monitored by more security cameras, visible pockmarking on the ceiling.

The arms dealer who called herself The Doctor folded her hands, resting them on the table. She had two wedding rings on the same finger. One of them with a diamond, the other with an emerald. Cora noticed this small detail, but didn't comment.

“Payment?”

“I can wire immediately,” Cora replied.

The woman nodded slowly. She didn't respond at first, but said, “We have a catalog if you'd like it.”

“That's fine. I'll take anything better than what your local SWAT team uses.”

“Interesting. Very interesting.” The woman leaned back, frowning. “I hope you don't mind me asking, but what are you doing in my city, Cora Shields?”

Cora hesitated. She didn't like that her name had been given. Then again, there was a chance that this woman had found out Cora's name through other channels. She still didn't know how the infrastructure of this place worked. It was like a waterway, like a series of interconnected rivers.

The woman behind the desk just studied Cora, careful, attentive.

Cora said, “Business. We're looking for someone. A friend. She went missing.”

The doctor nodded. “There is a fee for every body.”

Cora shrugged. “I'm hoping I get out of here without bodies. I'm not paying any fee. Not entering into any contract. You want my business or not?”

The man by the vault door tensed.

Cora noticed how Gabriel was shifting uncomfortably.

She just watched the woman with the hairless brow.

The doctor wasn't smiling; instead, she said, coldly, "You aren't a very polite guest."

Suddenly, Gabriel got to his feet. He was breathing heavily, but his hands were bunched at his sides. "We're looking for my cousin. She didn't hurt anyone. She's been kidnapped."

"Gabe, let me handle it," Cora cut in.

But then, there was a commotion.

Cora turned back, sharply, twisting in her seat. The doctor tisked in disapproval.

And one of the men had tried to grab Gabe's arm and yanked him back onto the couch. But that was where the farmer strength had shown up. Cora cursed inaudibly as she spotted the inevitable course of the subsequent actions.

Instead of pulling Gabriel to the couch, Gabe had flexed, and now the man was being lifted out of his seat.

The second man on the couch yelled, surged to his feet, and tried to slam the butt of his AK-47 into the back of Gabriel's leg.

But Gabe reacted first, lashed out, his fist colliding with this man's chin, and sending him reeling.

"Hey, stop!" Cora yelled.

The doctor just watched.

The two other men, including the one by the vault door, had their guns aimed, pointed directly at Gabriel's head.

Cora sighed. At least he hadn't lost his nerve. But he certainly had lost his mind.

And then, with a reluctant sigh, realizing if she didn't do something, there was a chance they were going to paint the couch the color of a Finch, she pulled her own weapon from her waistband, and pointed it at the doctor's head.

Cora whistled, and said, "You shoot him and I shoot her."

She said it almost casually. And in a way, it *felt* casual. This sort of thing wasn't exactly an oddity in her line of business.

Now, the room was tense. The gunmen with the machine guns were pointing them at Gabe, but were glancing towards the doctor, as if waiting for instructions.

Cora, on the other hand, kept her weapon pointed directly at the older woman's head, motionless, attentive.

A silence reigned. Gabe glared at the man who he had punched, pointed at him, and snapped, "Don't touch me."

And everyone had gone still.

Then, the woman behind the desk chuckled. She said, spreading her hands as if in invitation, "What was the merchandise you wanted again? Prompt payment. No contract. Why don't we get this this over with?"

The guns slowly lowered. Cora's followed. And then she shrugged. "I don't need much. Just three things. And we gotta make it quick."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Night had fallen and Cora picked her target.

She adjusted her prone posture on the gray, cement floor. She stared out, eyes narrowed, looking across the road spanning the path between the two structures.

She had returned to the half-built skyscraper across from the movie set. The set was now quiet. The large floodlights had been turned off, and everyone had gone home for the night.

Everyone, of course, except for those who lived within those tall, cement walls.

Police still roamed the base of the walls, strolling casually. A couple of police cars were parked around the side of the structure, hidden from sight.

The mayor's son was well guarded.

His movie set similarly so.

She kept her gaze fixated on the structures, and then she reached up, adjusting the goggles on her head.

These would come into use later.

The goggles stayed upright, pointing toward the ceiling. She didn't lower them over her gaze. These were backup. In case anyone came up the concrete steps of this large structure.

Gabe was waiting in the getaway car, behind the building.

She had left him gripping the steering wheel, pale and nervous. But less anxious than he had been before. Something about the encounter back in the armory had changed Gabe. He had punched a thug without getting shot which served as an introductory lesson to the life. A stupid life lesson, perhaps... One that was entirely avoidable, but at least Gabe had overcome his *fear*. And at that moment, Cora was far more concerned over her backup's own terror and fear than she was

of anything else. A cowardly comrade was as good as another enemy.

Cora stared at the weapon she had left resting against the wall in front of her. She didn't wear a ghillie suit. Not in this urban setting. But she wore black, and kept low. She had found a portion of the floor that extended out in a platform that would one day become a terrace. But it hadn't yet been built, which just meant fragments of rebar jutting out like teeth. And it gave her a straight shot toward the movie set below.

At this distance, even Cora, who had never trained as a sniper, was a passable shot.

She inhaled, exhaled, slowly, trying to calm her beating heart.

The shoulder stock rested against her arm. The goggles were still on her head, but she reached up, removing the leftmost lens.

The lens had been specially designed, only in the last couple of years, used for recon missions. But a sort of lens that could be adjusted, and reconfigured. Especially with this scope.

Suddenly, as she adjusted the lens onto the scope of the rifle, everything changed. Not night vision. At least, not *just* night vision. A very special invention.

It could track heat signatures.

And now, she aimed the weapon, using the scope to track motion within the movie set below. Her other hand tapped her pocket where the special *sunglasses* she'd ordered from the doctor had been left. She kept them there, hoping they wouldn't have to be used.

She'd come prepared, but preparation was only part of it.

The figures were no longer outlined like people. Arms and legs became a tangle. The abdomens like orange and yellow blobs hovering along.

She stared through the scope, attentive and careful and quiet and listening.

Three figures lay in bunks. These were closest to the gates. More guards, she guessed, or employees, as Modric would not live that close to an egress point.

There were two dogs behind a fence.

Another two figures moved around in a routine pattern. She had spotted them earlier. More guards.

She redirected her scope toward a small office building she had spotted behind the cranes and a collection of sports cars. Most of the cars, when she had been looking with only night vision, had been in a mangle of crushed metal and shattered glass. The residue of whatever stunt had been performed earlier that day.

But there, on the second floor of the office, two more heat signatures.

One of them slender, thin. A woman. And then the second one, moving about, away from a bed—this one a man.

Cora redirected the scope, aiming at the woman once more.

Not as tall as the doctor, the arms dealer, but too tall to be Tammy.

Still, Cora didn't like that there was a second unknown quantity involved in the situation.

She exhaled slowly, though, refocusing.

She kept the weapon aimed, narrowing her gaze, frowning slightly as she pointed the scope at the man on the second floor.

He was now in a small room, further back through the house.

Two sets of walls. One too many, so she would have to wait.

For this to work, he had to be as close to the windows as possible.

Of course, he thought he was safe. There were no windows that looked in on his building. She guessed that this was

intentional. Likely advised by some security officer working for the man's father.

But that was why she had chosen this particular caliber of bullet.

It would bust through concrete and anything on the other side.

That was the plan, at least.

She kept her gun aimed, and watched as the man emerged from the back room. A bathroom?

It didn't matter.

He stepped out into the main area of the second floor. It was difficult to track all of it. The heat signature though, was unmistakable.

It was as he emerged from the back room, the signature becoming brighter again, that she reached into her pocket, pulled the phone, and placed the call.

It wasn't her phone. Rather, she was using the phone she had stolen from Maurice. She had configured it to spoof as if it were from a local area code.

The doctor had been willing to throw this favor in for free.

And now, the phone began to ring.

Undoubtedly, Maurice had already warned his cousin that his phone was missing.

But that wasn't the point. The point was if he would pick up or not.

She watched, quiet, motionless, waiting patiently.

The phone continued to ring.

She watched through her scope, studying the heat signature of the man far below.

There was a chance she wasn't aiming at the right man. But now, she watched as the figure paused. One of the glowing, orange arms, visible through the wall by her scope, lifted something.

A phone?

It seemed most likely.

The phone continued to ring. But the man far below didn't answer.

She waited, quiet, and then the phone dropped the call.

She glared. This would only work if he picked up.

Of course, her plan wasn't to shoot him through the wall. No. How would that help?

But she still needed him to answer.

And so she called again—now, she was scowling.

She paused, exhaling slowly, and then filling her lungs with fresh air.

She detected the faint scent of concrete in the mixer far below. Dust itched in her nostrils.

She watched the heat signature of the man on the second floor studying his phone. And then, her heart hammered as he lifted the device, and a voice resonated in her ear.

“Who is this?”

He spoke in English. Perfect English, without a trace of an accent.

But it wasn't a lack of an accent that concerned her. If he was speaking in *English*, on an area code that seemed to match his local district, it suggested he had a pretty good idea who was calling him.

She didn't say anything, waiting, studying the heat signature beyond the walls.

Then, quietly, the man said, “You're the woman who beat up my cousin.”

She frowned. He stated it with confidence.

But he was guessing

“And you are Anthony Modric,” she said, her voice emotionless.

“What do you want from me? Money? You won’t see a penny. That’s what they call it, yes? American penny.”

She replied, “I don’t care about your money. I’m here for a girl. And I’m also here to help you out.”

He sneered. In fact, everything about his tone felt like a prolonged sneer.

She pressed on, saying, “Would you like my help, sir?”

“And how might you help me?” he spat. “You know where I am? Who I am? My cousin didn’t tell you, did he? I’m not even in New York. You’ll never find me.”

Cora smirked. She supposed that Maurice had left out the part where he had ratted out the location of his cousin. She studied the heat signature a moment longer.

Then, she said, “Here’s how I plan to help you, Mr. Modric. If you move a muscle, I’m gonna blow a hole in your chest the size of your skull. Don’t think I’m serious?”

And then she fired twice.

One bullet on either side of the man with the phone. The rifle she’d chosen packed a punch. And now, it blasted head-sized holes through the concrete wall.

This was the reason she had needed him to exit the back room.

She wasn’t sure if the bullets could go through two layers of concrete.

Now, though, she stayed quiet, staring toward the structure far below.

The heat signature had gone stiff.

And then hit the ground, all within a matter of seconds—the prone figure was breathing heavily. She could hear him hyperventilating over the phone.

He didn’t move, motionless, and then she said, “See? I just saved your life. I warned you. Now, let’s be clear, I’m faster than you are. And a bullet is faster than both of us. You try to run and I’m going to put a bullet in your head.”

“You’re insane!” He rattled something else off in his own language.

Cora noticed the other heat signatures moving. She wasn’t using a silencer. They had heard gunshots. The cops on the street were rushing forward now, pointing toward the building she was hiding in.

She had hoped it would take them a bit longer to trace the acoustics. But these men, judging by the look of them, were veterans. Old and seasoned, and assigned to protect the mayor’s son.

But she didn’t mind. Again, she wasn’t trying to stay here for hours. In and out. Fast. The noise was just part of the equation.

“What the hell?”

“Where’s Tammy Finch?”

“Who?”

She fired another bullet. This time, it punched the wall above his head. She pictured small pieces of concrete and dust raining down on him.

His hyperventilating grew worse.

“She’s not here! She’s not!”

“Who’s that girl in the bedroom? The one who’s hiding behind the bed.”

He was cursing, and the heat signature, though it still remained prone on the floor, was looking about, wildly, trying to spot where she was, or, how she could see them.

She said, “I figure you’re sort of confused right now. Don’t worry about how I can see you. I’ve got cameras everywhere. My backup is flying drones overhead. If you try to run, one of those drones will come in and blow you up. That clear?”

She didn’t really need him to believe the lie. She just needed him to fear it. There was a great difference between belief and fear.

He was rattling off what sounded like a rehearsed or memorized prayer. But she wasn't sure that would help him now either. As far as she knew, the big guy upstairs wasn't the biggest fan of human trafficking.

She said, "Who is the girl?"

"A friend. Just a friend. She works on the set with me."

"I want to hear her voice."

"You'll shoot me if I get up!"

"I'm not asking you to get up. In fact, if you get up I'll shoot you. Just call out to her. I want to hear her voice!"

He did, desperately yelling. The name he used was something like Priscilla. But with fewer vowels.

After a few seconds, a voice called back. Faint on the phone speakers, but resonant.

Cora let out a sigh.

It wasn't Tammy's voice. And the woman had been too tall anyway.

Tammy Finch was not here.

Cora said, firmly, "All right, listen to me, this is what we're going to do. If Tammy isn't there, you're going to take me to her."

"How?" he exclaimed.

She said, "You have a bunch of cars around there. I'm looking right at them; get to your feet, go get in a car, and drive out the gate. If I see anything funny, and I mean *anything*, I will kill you. If you try to warn anyone or tell a guard to get into the vehicle with you... Or if you place a call to the police..." She trailed off, and then added, "I feel like you probably get the picture at this point."

He was still hyperventilating.

She just watched, indifferent to his fear. In a way, she was banking on it.

There were so many things that could go wrong. For one, she had to keep track of him long enough for him to assume she permanently had eyes on him. The heat signature would be harder to track, if for whatever reason the exit to his building led down a stairwell, or if he tried to run for it. Or, she realized, if he was confronted by any of the other guards on the movie set, and she mixed them up. It wasn't like she was tracking features. Everyone had a similar heat signature.

Granted, the ones outside in the colder weather had a different color to them.

She just waited and then watched as the man on the ground began babbling. "Please," he said desperately. "Money, fame. Whatever you want. I'll give it to you. I'll make you a millionaire."

"If you make me ask again, I'm gonna take off your left leg."

She realized how harsh she must've sounded.

But she also realized she was sick of men like this. People who thought they could do whatever they wanted because they had power, money, connections. People who took advantage of the vulnerable. The man was muttering again, but then said, "What do you want?"

"I told you. Get to your feet, *now*."

He hesitated.

She said, "I said do it now!" She injected iron into her tone. And he cursed, rising.

She thought she could hear the sound of the police in the street below, making their way toward her lookout spot. Three shots. She'd given them three attempts to try and locate her.

But she needed to get out of there anyway. She spotted four heat signatures now cutting toward the building. They would reach the base soon. They would find the ripped caution tape eventually on the back door she had used. Good thing she wasn't trying to leave the same way she had come.

“Don’t drone me!” said the man, shivering. “I-I don’t see any drones.”

Cora said, “What would be the point of them, if you could see them? They’re above you. Now move.”

He cursed, but stumbled forward, and was now hastening towards the stairs.

She watched as he hastened down them, and reached the exit.

Two cops were rounding the side of the building, hastening as well, hoping to intersect with the man they had been charged to protect.

But she couldn’t let them meet up. So she barked, “Back door. *Now.*”

He changed direction. Occasionally, his heat signature would disappear, suggesting there were multiple layers of concrete. But for the moment, he didn’t know how she was watching—perhaps he believed there were drones. Perhaps he believed there were cameras everywhere. Or maybe he just thought someone on the inside was ratting him out. Whatever the case, she had him frightened. And frightened people were easier to manipulate.

He kept moving, and then he emerged around the back. The two cops who’d been searching the front in order to find him entered the building—heading upstairs in the direction where he had been prone only moments before.

One of them paused, and picked up a piece of rubble.

Cora then said, “Get in a car, drive through the back fence, and meet me at the parking lot you used for the extras earlier today.”

“You’re going to kill me.”

“Not if you can lead me to Tammy.” And then, she said, “I’m watching every move. Now *go.*”

She fired twice more. And this time, she hit the ground at his feet between the alley walls. She needed him to think that

she had eyes on him no matter where he went. But then, she dropped the rifle. She pushed it away, and broke into a sprint.

She would have to trust that he would obey the directive. Even without oversight. The fear was her friend at that moment. If he mustered up some courage, or thought it through, it would all be for nothing.

But now, she had her own concerns. The two more shots had helped alert the cops to where she was. They'd broken down the door far below in the skyscraper, and were moving up the stairs. She could hear their voices echoing. In the distance, she spotted flashing sirens and lights. Other police coming to intervene.

If she went back down the stairs, they would capture her. Which was why she had planned another exit strategy.

The crane she had spotted.

A tall tower of yellow painted metal, with crisscrossing support beams, rising high into the air like some giant oak tree.

She had chosen the floor she was now prone on in part due to access to this crane. Still, the windows in the back gave a direct line of sight. But it was a fifteen foot jump.

She didn't like the odds, and she hadn't told Gabe about this part of the plan.

He was still idling, behind the skyscraper, in an abandoned parking lot. Eventually, when the backup arrived, he would have to be gone too. Hopefully she would be with him.

She moved. The voices in the stairwell echoed as her footsteps pounded the concrete, racing forward.

She heard shouting. Calls. Then a gunshot. Chips of concrete exploded under her feet. She cursed, shoving through a door, which led to the open, unfinished room which faced the crane. There was no wall at the back side of this room. Wind came rushing in. Deafening her. More gunshots from behind her, but these were quickly drowned out.

She tensed, sprinting forward. Three steps. Two steps. And then she reached the ledge. The steel tower jutted out ahead of

her, fifteen feet from the drop off. She didn't have to cover the entire gap at once. Her fall could help with some of it. Momentum. But if she fell *too* far, and gained too much momentum, she'd break every bone in her body, ricochet off the structure, and fall to her death.

It wasn't a pretty picture.

Her foot caught the edge of the concrete, shoving off. Her muscles bunched. She leapt through the air with a shout, her arms extended, and she lashed out, catching air at first.

Everything was a blur. A bullet sparked off the metal support above her outstretched hands.

She was falling faster. She dangled, and given enough momentum, thought that she was going to collide with the crane.

The wind whipped around her. It screamed in her ears. And then, she struck. Hands first. A gristly sound. Pain flooded up her wrists and arms. Then her knee hit. Another jolt of pain down her leg. She gasped, breath whooshing from her lungs, as it was pummeled from her body.

The pain was intense. She could feel that her wrists, her arms, would be sore. Her palms bruised.

But she clung on. Wrapping one arm over, like a child clambering up the monkey bars.

She could hear more shouting.

Another groan released from her lips.

But she didn't have time to linger. More bullets now. Gunshots. More sparks. One whistled past her cheek.

She couldn't stay. She couldn't recover. She had to move. Nauseous, gasping. Bruised all over, she began to clamber down. She swung inside the crane, hoping to use the intersecting bars as some sort of cover from the gunfire. And then, as the man shouted above her, shooting after her, he hastened down the crane, moving from one steel platform to the next. And then, when she reached the stairs, she broke into a sprint. The clang of her footsteps reverberated, and the

impact jolted through her body, her arms, her legs. Everything ached. But at least for now, nothing was broken. She sprinted down the stairs, racing towards where she had told Gabriel Finch to wait.

And then, they would have to rendezvous with Mr. Modric.

Her phone was in her pocket, muted. As she ran, she picked it up, and yelled, “You better hurry, you’re moving too slow!”

And then she muted herself again before he could reply. She just needed him to fear that she could see him. It was all an illusion. But it had to work.

She reached the base of the crane. The cops were far above, and none of them had jumped after her. She raced forward, away from the worksite, toward the abandoned lot where she had left Gabe, hoping desperately he was still there.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Cora patted Gabe on the arm, trying to console the big man as he inhaled shakily and stared up the small hill leading to the extras' parking lot.

"I don't know about this," Gabe was muttering, shaking his head and staring through the windshield with a grim expression across his face.

"Don't know about what?"

"*This*," he retorted, pointing up the hill. "Any of this. What if he's not alone?"

Cora stared toward the parked car with the glowing headlights. The figure striding back and forth through the high beams matched the pictures they'd seen on movie posters.

Anthony Modric had arrived. Just like she'd asked.

In the distance, behind them, cops were swarming the tall skyscraper.

Cora pushed out of the car, moving one leg out into the dark. The car park that had been used for the extras was situated on top of a dump. Beyond the hill, an old junkyard pressed against the makeshift incline.

By the look of things, more than one of the cars that had been used in the stunts eventually ended up behind this parking lot. Over the edge of the hill, Cora spotted piles of rusted jalopies, and old refrigerators.

As she scanned the terrain, looking for anyone untoward, her gaze moved back to the police who were swarming the skyscraper half a mile behind them, across the road.

The headlights from Modric's car illuminated the cracked and fissured asphalt. But their car, which Gabe was driving, didn't illuminate anything. They had moved to the base of the small hill without their headlights on.

Cora held the door open, one leg out, her foot against the ground. She frowned through the windshield, up in the direction of the parking lot.

“What do you think?” Gabe said, quietly.

“It looks like he came alone but there might be someone in that car with him.”

“You didn’t watch?”

She shot him a look. For the moment, their vehicle was out of sight, at the base of the hill, without any lights, hidden in the shadows of the large movie set walls at their rear. She said, “I was a little busy running for my life.”

As if to prove the point, she extended her hands, showing her palms, which were scratched and scraped and bruised from clambering down the side of the enormous work crane.

Gabriel swallowed, but then nodded. “So where are you going?”

“I’m going to go around the back. You head up the hill, and hit your lights when you’re about halfway. We’ll see if it spooks anyone.”

“He hasn’t called the cops. Otherwise they wouldn’t all be over there.”

“True, but there are other ways he could cause trouble. Some of those guards back on the compound were private security. Probably mobsters like him. He might want to keep this thing in-house. I mentioned the kidnapping, and I mentioned your cousin.”

Gabriel tensed, his hands gripping the steering wheel. Sweat beaded on his upper lip; he reached up, wiping it away, and insistently said, “Is she still alive?”

Cora shrugged once. “I think so. He seemed to at least let me *think* she was. Then again, I told him if he couldn’t lead me to her I was going to kill him.”

“But he sounded like he thought she was alive.”

“I think so. I didn’t get the sense that he knew where she was.”

“What? How couldn’t he know where?”

“That’s what I’m about to find out. Now do what I say: wait until you’re halfway up the hill, then put on your headlights, and come in very slow. If you see a gun, get low and hit reverse. Are we clear?”

He nodded, swallowing.

The two of them shared a look; she flashed him a thumbs up, and then moved. She shut the door behind her, and began to move around the small hill, between the junkyard and the movie set, which served, on the elevated ground the size of a soccer field, as a parking lot.

The solitary car waiting in the lot, with headlights glowing, continued to illuminate the silhouette of Modric, as he moved nervously back and forth in front of the glowing beams.

But Cora didn’t head straight toward him. Instead, she circled around, coming up the back of the small hill.

Now, her back faced the junkyard. She thought she detected the faint smell of wet dog. But she didn’t want to look too closely to see if she might antagonize any of the canines hiding behind the chain-link fence at her rear.

The ground turned sharply, and she moved up the incline, slowly, sending stones and rubble skittering as she climbed.

The hill, it looked, was made from poorly packed dirt, and it was loose where she stepped.

As she reached the top of the incline, she peered toward the waiting car, viewing it from behind now.

Anthony was still stalking back and forth.

But then he froze, staring as a figure emerged from the incline

Gabriel Finch was visible through the windshield of his car, hunched, gripping his steering wheel. The headlights were on, glowing.

Gabriel moved up the angled road, onto the asphalt, trundling toward where Modric waited.

Cora watched, chest pressed to the tarmac, face near the ground. For a moment, as Gabriel's car trundled forward, nothing happened, but then, Modric raised a hand, snapped his fingers twice, and gestured.

Suddenly the doors to the sedan were flung open.

Four men tumbled out, handguns raised. They began to shout, and open fire, shooting toward Gabriel's car. At the same time, Modric flung himself to the ground, ducking behind the car, as if expecting a sniper's bullet.

The windshield smashed, and Gabriel ducked.

Cora couldn't see if he'd been hit, but she was already moving.

As the men in business suits opened fire at Gabe, Cora emerged from behind the small hill, stepping forward, her own handgun raised.

There were two loud retorts. She dropped two of the men on the left side of the vehicle. She whirled to the right. Another shot. A third man hit the ground, having half-turned to spot her. The fourth squeezed off a shot of his own, but she had already placed the vehicle between them. His bullets skimmed off the roof of the car, but Cora emptied her clip. Two more shots into the final man's head. And two more shots into the chests of the men on the ground.

It all happened in a matter of seconds.

And then, scowling, she stalked forward, approaching the four dead bodies and coming to a halt, standing in a pool of blood, and glaring down at where Modric was cowering by the front door, his fingers scrabbling on the handle, trying to open it, but slipping, and missing in his panic. She grabbed his hand, pried it loose, and said, "Enough of that now."

He released a whimper. Cora kept her gun pointed at Anthony's head, and she met his gaze. She said, "Don't move." She shot a quick look over her shoulder, glancing

toward where Gabriel was extricating himself delicately from the shattered glass that had once been a windshield.

He flashed a thumbs up. "I'm all right," he called out. "I'm okay!"

He then glanced at the four bodies on the ground, and the spreading pool of blood. He gagged briefly, looking away, his face suddenly pale.

She felt a flash of concern for Gabe. She'd been worried, when they'd open gunfire, that he might've been hit.

She didn't consider herself particularly sentimental. But Finch had conducted himself admirably so far. Of course, in her opinion, he should have just stayed home, but he hadn't wanted to abandon his cousin. And she could understand that.

Now, as Gabriel breathed hurriedly, trying to calm himself, she returned her attention to the man lying on the ground.

He looked up at her with wide eyes ringed with eyeshadow. His beard was quivering, thanks to the tremor of his chin. "Don't hurt me," he stammered.

Sirens wailed in the distance. No doubt those gunshots would have been heard as well.

She spat off to the side, and then lowered her weapon. "The clip is empty," she said simply.

She watched him.

He looked back, glanced down nervously at her weapon, which she had now holstered.

She wanted an excuse. A reason to beat him bloody.

She wanted him to lunge at her, to fight this man who took women and used them for his own pleasure. He used them as commodities. This man wasn't just a pervert, he was a sadistic pervert. An evil man.

He hadn't denied taking Tammy. He just hadn't known where she was, as if he had accidentally misplaced the car keys.

She kept her gun holstered, and just waited for a second.

But Anthony Modric didn't lunge. He looked her in the eyes, and seemed to spot something there that frightened him. And so he stayed on the ground, quiet, motionless.

She smirked, and then, thinking of car keys, she clicked her fingers. "Yours is faster, give me your keys."

Modric's hands were trembling as he reached into his expensive-looking suit pocket.

The car was another spaceship. She didn't know the make, didn't really care. What she did care about was moving fast. And if someone spotted the car of the mayor's son zipping by, it would likely be easier to avoid detection.

And so she forced Anthony to his feet, as he held the keys.

She shook her head as he tried to extend them to her. "You're driving," she snapped. "Get in the car."

Gabriel had approached now, still breathing heavily, and refusing to look at the bodies. "One of the cop cars is coming toward us," he cautioned.

She didn't look away. She didn't need to. She could see the reflection of red and blue off the windshield.

Instead, her gaze fixated on the man who kidnapped women for a living. She said, "Hang on, don't get in the car yet. You and I are going to talk."

He stared at her, and then his eyes glanced toward the sky, likely searching for drones.

She said, "You know why you're here. Don't you?"

He just shook his head.

"Where's Tammy Finch?" Cora snapped.

Gabe went stiff. But then he growled, the large man's hands bunching into fists. He took a step over a body, avoiding it, and avoiding the pool of blood, but then lunged in, snatching at the collar of the man who'd kidnapped his cousin.

This time, Cora didn't intervene. And this time there weren't armed men in the room to help.

The farmer's strength was shown in full display again. He lifted the movie actor off the ground, bodily in the air.

Cora watched, impressed; she realized that Gabriel wasn't even wedging the man against the car to add support. And he was only using one arm.

His left arm, his bicep bulging, his forearm straining as he held the smaller man aloft in the air. His right hand was cocked back, ready to rearrange Anthony's missing smile.

The movie actor stammered, spat off to the side, and said, in a whimper of a voice, "I don't have her. I swear it! I don't even know who you're talking about!"

"I don't believe you," said Cora.

But Gabe punched the man.

There was a sound of bone hitting bone.

Anthony gasped.

When he regained his senses, shaking his head, blood was pooling down his upper lip, and dripping onto his chest.

Cora sighed faintly. "We don't believe you," she said louder, in case he hadn't heard her the first time on account of Gabe breathing heavily, like a bull facing a matador and ready to charge.

Modric could tell that the big man holding him was on the verge of losing it. He coughed, spitting blood, and desperately said, "I don't know. I don't know their names. I forgot. I deal with so many of them, so many different cities."

"So many of what?" Cora snapped.

"I'm in open relationships," he shouted, defensively. "I only get with the girls who want to get with me. That's it. I don't force them. They want to spend time with me."

"And afterwards?" Cora said. "Your cousin wasn't cagey, Anthony. He told us that you've been trafficking these women."

Anthony looked ready to deny it. But then at the look in Gabriel's eye, and another cocked fist, he stammered, "I enjoy

them for a while. They like movies. They like my house. They like wealth. But no relationship lasts forever.”

“And so when you’re done with them,” Cora said, feeling a growl creeping into her own voice, “what then? What do you do with them?”

He just shook his head. “I mean, I can’t keep them. Besides, it’s not like these are innocent princesses. I only take prostitutes,” he snapped, spitting off to the side.

Cora went quiet, sighing as another punch slammed into the man’s face.

Gabe winced, shot her a look. “Sorry,” he muttered.

She just shook her head, and waved her hand as if to say, proceed.

He dropped Modric against the hood of the car.

Anthony was still stammering, breathing heavily. Now, he looked like he was going to have a black eye and a bloody nose.

He said, “I don’t know which girl you’re talking about. But one of the more recent girls might.”

“And who’s that?” Cora snapped.

“Priscilla. Priscilla. She’s my most recent girlfriend. She came from Pittsburgh. In Pennsylvania. You know it?”

He nodded eagerly, as if somehow recollecting a piece of American geography might give them some common ground.

But neither Gabriel nor Cora reacted to this.

“Hang on,” Cora said slowly. “Priscilla? You said that name back there,” she said, pointing towards the movie set.

Now, she turned, and she spotted the police car moving across the street, along the road, now circling the trail which led toward their parking spot. It would be on them in a couple of minutes. But it was moving slowly, as if trying to spot the source of the gunshots they’d heard. For now, they hadn’t been noticed.

But they had to hurry.

Cora exhaled in frustration, and said, “You’re saying that girl back there is a prostitute? She’s also someone you kidnapped from the U.S.?”

He shrugged. “She wanted to come,” he said defensively.

“That’s it,” Gabriel growled, stepping forward again.

But this time Cora intervened. There was no time for an ass kicking. Not before the cops showed up. Instead, she shoved Modric and said, “Get in the front seat. Drive. We’re going to be in the back. Do exactly what I say, or I’m going to shoot you. Also, redirect the mirror toward your face, so I can see your expressions. Now!”

He looked at her, panicked. “Where are you taking me?”

Cora glanced at the bodies on the ground, then up at him again. “Just do what I say, or I’ll leave you here with them.”

She slotted in another magazine from her belt.

He swallowed, but then just nodded quickly, and moved around the front of the car, slipping into the front seat of the spaceship.

Cora and Gabriel got into the back. She pressed her gun against the felt of the seat. She said, “Drive. Don’t stop for anything. Wave out the window if you have to. The cops around here should recognize you. Big movie star. If you stop for anything, you die first. Now go! I want to speak with Priscilla.”

Cora supposed it probably wasn’t the smartest thing to try and break into a movie set guarded as well as this one was. Cops swarming across the street. Another cop car heading toward them.

On the other hand, the gates would open for the right key. And said key was currently trembling and cursing, bleeding from his nose in the front seat.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Cora breathed slowly, and glanced along the length of her body, where she lay in the back seat. She reached out delicately with one hand, and pushed at the top of Gabriel's head, making sure that his face wasn't jutting up, visible for anyone to see from the front seat.

The back seats of this spaceship-looking sports car left much to be desired.

For one, Cora's knees were pressed into Gabe's spine.

And the big man had twisted himself like a pretzel in order to accommodate the tight confines of his leather barriers.

The front seat, which was angled back, served to shield him from the view of the front window. The back seat was angled back to give him some breathing room. And yet still, try as he might, his head kept poking up and out, as he inhaled, drawing breath. Again, as if playing a game of whack a mole, Cora pushed his head back down once more.

She was only able to use one hand, however.

This was because her other hand gripped her weapon, which she had jammed into the back of the seat just in front of her. The cold metal grazed her cheek, but the barrel pushed into the driver's chair.

Anthony Modric, sitting in front, sat upright, tense, breathing heavily.

Cora wanted to tell him to relax. But if she said anything, they might be discovered.

Currently, the window was being rolled down.

The sound of sirens could be heard louder now as the window descended.

A deep voice barked into the vehicle, but then turned suddenly apologetic, likely because the officer in question

recognized the man in the front seat.

Anthony replied in his own language.

Gabriel Finch had his phone out, resting in the space just past his knees, hidden in the shadows of the passenger seat. His screen glowed faintly, the light dim but he was able to translate whatever Modric was saying.

After a moment, he flashed a thumbs up to Cora.

The last thing she wanted to do was to assassinate a movie star and get into a shootout with Czech cops.

But she was going to stick to her word. If Anthony betrayed them, she would drop him.

After a few stilted comments, her bet paid off. Anthony was a familiar face. The son of a mayor. A movie star. And so, after a bit, he rolled up his window and was waved through.

His headlights reflected off the police cars, and Cora only just barely glimpsed the gates to the movie set sliding open before ducking her head back out of sight; they trundled forward, entering the movie set, and only then did Cora release a long, pent up breath.

After a few moments, she sat upright, glancing through the windows to make sure the coast was clear. Once this was determined, she shot a look back over her shoulder toward where the large, rolling brown metal gate began to close again, beneath a sign declaring the name of the production company. Again, she couldn't read it.

“Good job,” she said quietly. “Now take us to Priscilla.”

Anthony was trembling horribly, but nodding as he did. He smelled of sweat, but also of cologne that had gone stale. His hands gripped the steering wheel, his knuckles white.

He led them toward the office building where Cora had first seen him.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Her head pounded horribly, and she tried to sit up.

Everything ached.

She groaned, reaching up and massaging at the gash over her eye. She blinked a few times, and glanced around the opulent room.

This was not a shipping container any longer.

Tammy released a faint sigh. Her heart pounded. Her fingers clasped at the silk bedsheets.

She was still wearing her old, ratty clothing. But she spotted a dress draped over a chair across the room.

A large door. Locked.

Otherwise, though, the room looked to be relatively luxurious.

There was even a chandelier dangling from the ceiling with glass baubles extending toward the floor like drops of dew.

As she stared at the chandelier, though, the bright lights gave her a headache, and Tammy looked away, rolling off the bed.

She let out a faint sigh as her feet hit the ground.

A soft, luxurious carpet. The scent of candles, which she spotted on the end tables on either side of the large bed.

The silk sheets bothered her. But the expensive material of the dress also bothered her.

However, the reason she knew the door was locked was the most disturbing component of all of it.

There was a padlock visible, dangling on the opposite side but visible through a slot.

The brass padlock jutted out, and the slot looked like the sort of thing where someone might slide food through it.

The bed sheets were rumpled, and she wondered if this was because she'd been moving while unconscious. She smelled of sweat and blood and fear. Her lips tasted salty; she swallowed, letting out a long breath as she took a hesitant step across the luxurious carpet.

Her legs wanted to buckle, but she willed herself to stay upright, reaching out and snatching at the wooden poster of the bed. She held tight.

Where was she?

Suddenly, she heard voices.

She tensed. But these were feminine voices. A woman?

No, *women*. More than one. She heard the sound of approaching footsteps. Soft footsteps, against the soft carpet.

And then, a piece of paper slid through the door slot; a second later, a pink tray followed, with a single bowl of soup and a cup of water.

She glimpsed a dress, swishing by. A dress made of the same material as the one resting on the chair.

Aching all over, wincing, Tammy moved toward the pink tray with the soup and the water. She ignored the food, and resisted the urge to gulp the water down. Her lips were salty, dry. She was parched. But she didn't know if they'd put anything in it.

Then her eyes landed on the note.

It was a to-do list. With seven items.

The first one simply read, *get washed*. The second one said *get dressed*.

As she continued to read down the list, each item seemed to have something to do with personal grooming.

She felt her heart skip a beat, and her stomach tightened. Anxiety settled; she wasn't sure what was going on here, but she knew a brothel when she saw one. And this bedroom, no

matter how much it attempted to look high-end, luxurious, was intended for one thing.

It was evident in the way there were toys against the cabinet on the back wall. The bookcase had a few books, including the Kama Sutra as well as a few other books in the same genre.

She glanced around, and she spotted leather gear, and then her eyes landed on the shower—no door, just an open glass display. As if she were supposed to be a fish in aquarium.

Tremors went down her spine.

Get washed, get dressed. And then what? A client?

Where was she?

She let out a frustrated sigh, and instead of complying with the letter, she began glancing around, feverishly, looking for something she could use as a weapon.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Using the same alley, and stepping over craters caused by the sniper bullets from earlier, they moved through a back door, leading into the small studio apartment in the center of the movie theater set.

Cora allowed the movie actor to take the lead.

The smarmy man was shooting nervous glances over his shoulder, his beard rustling against his suit.

Gabe came close behind, having refused to stay in the car this time.

But as they entered the building, Cora held out a hand, pressing it against Gabe's chest. "Keep an eye out, and come running if anyone's entering the building."

He stared at her, and looked ready to protest. But she gave a small, faint shake of her head.

He sighed, and nodded.

She gave an appreciative nod, and then moved into the building.

Gabriel's silhouette was cast as a shadow across the floor, thanks to the moonlight above.

The sirens in the distance added an eerie keen to the chill, wafting night air.

Cora pushed Anthony ahead of her. He stumbled, but reached the bottom of the stairs. He said, "You said you'd let me go, if I brought you to her. You said!"

Cora said, "I never said I'd let you go. I said I'd let you live if you showed me where Tammy was. But right now, it seems like you're telling me you don't know where she is."

Anthony turned, fists bunched. But she shoved him again, whirling him like a top, and sending him stumbling up two

more steps. He was shaking his head now from side to side, muttering again.

But like this, in the dark, with Cora behind him, her gun pointed at his spine, he led her up the stairs.

The two of them reached the top of the stairs, and then went still.

Cora spotted the three gunshots in the wall; she then spotted the woman.

A small, frail thing trembling, her eyes hooded.

The woman was leaning against the wall, her head resting there.

And she was bleeding.

A cut across her left wrist. And the blood pooled down her fingers, onto the ground.

Cora cursed, and sprinted forward. She yelled at Anthony, "Get against the wall, hands up!"

She watched out of the corner of her eye as he complied. But then she reached the side of the bleeding woman.

A faint pulse. Barely there.

Cora bent over, and hastily wrapped a piece of the woman's shirt around her wrist. Cora was breathing heavily now as she bound the woman's wrist, blood spilling through the binding; she doubled it, using the hem of the bed. The stretch of elastic wrapped around the first binding.

What had happened? Had one of Anthony's goons done this?

Had the girl done it?

Cora glanced up. The woman had olive skin. Her eyes were closed. Mascara poured down her face, carried by a river of tears.

"Shit," Cora cursed. "Gabe!" She called out desperately. "Gabe, I need you!"

She turned to look at the stairs, and that was what saved her life.

Modric was no longer standing near the wall. In the chaos, and in her rush to help this woman, she hadn't spotted Anthony move toward the cabinet. But she did see the gun in his hand, which was now pointed at her.

He began to fire.

The first bullets skimmed her shoulder. The second hit the bleeding woman in the chest.

He didn't get a third.

Cora's own weapon snapped up, as she was still reeling sideways, having instinctively dove away from the bullets. Two shots. One to the head, one to the chest.

Anthony toppled back, dead. Cora didn't even have time to react.

And then the sound of thumping footsteps against the stairs. Gabriel Finch reached the top, breathing heavily. He stared at Anthony, yelped, and then stared at where Cora was. "What happened? Are you okay?"

"No! We need to get this woman to a hospital. Now!"

Gabriel hesitated. "Should I bring the car, would you want me to carry –"

"She's the only link we have left to your cousin. Carry her. Hurry!"

Gabriel Finch nodded, running forward.

Cora cursed, holstering her weapon, and then she aided Gabe, lifting the other side of the bleeding woman. She tried her best to stop the blood flow, but there was no time. And they couldn't call paramedics.

This woman was on the verge of death.

They had to hurry.

As Cora desperately attempted to stop the bleeding, and Gabriel hefted the woman down the stairs. The two of them

hurried, leaving bloody streaks against the walls.

Cora wondered how far the nearest hospital was.

They would have to hope that driving in the mayor's son's car would be enough camouflage. They were out of other options.

They would have to stick to the roads if they wanted to save this woman's life. And not only was she the only connection they had to Tammy Finch. She was also another one of Anthony's victims. A woman that he had kidnapped from the U.S. A woman who had made it through his gruesome selection process of alluring females, killing the ones he didn't want, and then bringing the ones he did back overseas with him.

She shot a look back up the stairs; the man who'd caused all this was dead.

So where was Tammy?

Gabe, using one muscled arm to keep the woman aloft, as he hastened toward the waiting vehicle, had his phone in his other hand, desperately trying to search for the nearest hospital.

The sirens in the distance continued to wail—time was running out not just for Tammy Finch, but also for Priscilla.

Cora couldn't allow another body on her conscience.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Cora stalked back and forth outside the hospital room, shooting angry glances through the glass door. She'd been kicked out.

Gabe, on the other hand, had been allowed to stay. The female nurse had said that Cora was making a commotion.

All she'd been doing was trying to ask Priscilla some questions.

The woman on the bed didn't look well. But she'd regained consciousness an hour ago.

Cora continued to stalk back-and-forth, glaring into the room, at the cot and where Gabe and the nurse were chatting with one another.

Finally, after a few more frustrating moments, she knocked her knuckles against the glass.

Gabe glanced over. She gestured at him, insistently.

He hesitated, held up a finger to the nurse, who smiled at the handsome farmer, and then he approached the door. He pushed it open. "Anna says you're still not allowed back in."

Cora snapped, "How is she?"

Gabe's expression sobered. He frowned, and shook his head, and in a grim voice said, "Not doing well from what I can tell. Anna doesn't think she's going to make it."

Cora cursed. "Did she say anything? She was talking."

Gabe nodded. "I recorded everything."

Cora stared at him. He shrugged. "It seemed like the smart thing to do at the time, especially when you were yelling at the nurse that she was an idiot."

"I didn't say idiot. I just didn't understand why she was kicking me out."

“I asked her. She said you were talking too loudly to the patient. She was worried you were going to disturb the patient.” Gabriel shrugged, as if this explanation made sense.

Cora didn't say, but she suspected that it had more to do with a desire to be alone with Gabriel Finch, than it had to do with Cora's tone of voice.

An hour ago, the hospital staff had managed to stabilize the woman. A half-hour later, she had woken, and said something. Cora had asked some questions, and then had been kicked out.

This was the last link they had. The only remaining thread that tied them to Tammy Finch, and wherever she might be. If this woman died, and Anthony Modric was also dead, then Tammy's location would die with them.

Cora shot an uncomfortable look at Gabe. If they couldn't find her, they couldn't help her.

And Cora had already sworn she wouldn't return home without Tammy.

Her absolution depended on it.

She clicked her fingers and said, “Let me hear.”

“I'll text it to you—I recorded as much as I could when she was talking. That was it. She kind of kept saying the same thing.”

Cora just nodded, clicking her fingers again, “Come on,” she insisted.

He shrugged, and after a few moments, fiddling with his phone, Cora felt her phone vibrate. She glanced down at the audio attachment. She gave a quick nod of gratitude then began to say something else, but thought better of it, and turned. She had been wanting to manage expectations. To tell him that perhaps they might not find his cousin. But that flew in the face of the hope she had demanded he exhibit. Besides, it wasn't too late. Until they found the body, there was every chance Tammy was still alive.

Cora lifted her phone, downloading the attachment, watching it buffer slowly on the weak internet, and then

raising it to her ear, preparing to listen to every second of the recording.

Cora sat in the dark corner by the stairwell, illuminated by the glow from the vending machine against the wall. Her own back occupied the same wall, and the cold from the concrete crept through her shirt.

The recording was hard to hear but Gabe was right. Priscilla kept repeating the same word.

Cora went back to the portion of the audio file when she tried to question the woman. No response. Then the nurse interjected, Cora protesting, but reluctantly leaving. Then, more than a little bit of flirting between Gabe and the nurse. But every few minutes, Priscilla would say something in a weak voice. “Madagascar.”

Cora wrinkled her nose and played the word again. But each time, it sounded the same. Madagascar. Madagascar. Again, again. She kept repeating it. She wasn't saying Anthony's name. It wasn't the name of the company that produced movies.

And she didn't add any additional details. Madagascar. The country?

Cora frowned, pocketing her phone, and pushing to her feet. She moved slowly back in the direction of the hospital room, glancing toward where the nurse had emerged and was speaking to one of the receptionists.

Cora wanted to take a few minutes alone now that Priscilla had stabilized; it might be the only time. The nurse was not optimistic, neither were the doctors who had left the hour before, once they had secured the woman's vitals.

As Cora strode across the hall, keeping her head down to avoid being spotted by the nurse, there was a sudden beeping noise.

The nurse responded as if it were a gunshot. The beeping grew louder. Doctors emerged from other rooms. Three figures in white coats were sprinting toward the room with Cora's only living witness.

Gabe, who was standing near the nurse, stared toward the hospital room.

Cora broke into a sprint. She reached the window, peering in. Blood. More blood than there should have been.

Then she spotted the bandages on the ground. Priscilla had ripped her bandages off. She had used her fingers, judging by the stains on them, to tear open the sutures and the stitches. Cora's eyes bugged.

The small machine next to Priscilla's head had flatlined. No heartbeat. No activity at all.

Cora watched, as if she were trapped in a bad movie as electric paddles came out.

The defibrillator didn't help. The doctors were shouting orders at each other. One of them spotted the open wounds. He stared in the direction of Cora. Then his eyes moved to Gabe.

She could see the accusation. She hadn't been anywhere near the room. One look at the woman's fingers would say that Priscilla had done this to herself, on purpose. The same way she had cut her wrist back at the movie set.

Cora watched as the doctor began clicking his fingers, and gesturing at the nurse. He pointed at something she couldn't see at first. But then the nurse's eyes widened as she looked at Gabe, and shook her head feverishly. The doctor kept speaking.

The woman's eyes moved to Cora, though, and then narrowed into slits.

She nodded, and hastened across the floor. She snatched the phone off the wall, the sort that was used for interdepartmental communication. The sort that was used to call security.

Cora cursed. She stared for as long as she dared, through the glass, at Priscilla. The poor woman was dead. She had

killed herself. Why?

This was a silly question, Cora decided. Hadn't she almost done the same thing with all those drinks and pills?

Trauma, PTSD was painful. The horrible things that others did to a person, the horrible things that Anthony Modric had done to this woman took their toll.

But now, Cora grabbed at Gabe, and began to lead him away, moving hastily.

As she tugged at his arm, he was stammering, "What happened?"

"She's dead. They think we did it. Come on, hurry!"

"Wait, they think *we* did it?" he said, his voice shaking.

She continued to lead him forward.

He was breathing heavily as he attempted to keep up.

There was nothing she could do for Priscilla. But Tammy was still alive. And perhaps, in her dying breaths, Priscilla had given the clues Cora needed to find Gabe's missing cousin. Madagascar. What did it mean? More importantly, what had it meant to Priscilla? What was so important about it, that she kept repeating it, over and over again?

Cora's heart skipped. She kept moving, hastening.

She rushed down the steps, leading to the large hospital doors, with Gabe moving rapidly at her side.

"I need you to look something up in that translating software of yours," Cora said suddenly, shooting him a look. They were both breathing in heavy puffs. They stepped out the hospital doors, still moving.

"All right, what?"

Cora hesitated, wrinkled her nose, glancing towards where they had parked their car, and then said, "Madagascar. Priscilla kept saying it."

Gabe stared at her. "That's not something you need translated."

“What? Why? Do you know why she was saying that?”

“Is that what she was saying? Then yes. I know exactly why. Here, let me show you.” He pulled out his phone, scrolled to a page, then flashed it to her. “It’s a club.”

“Excuse me?”

“You know, a club,” he said, doing a little shimmy where they had paused in an alley behind the hospital. On the screen was an image of a large stone structure with a swooping *M* in cursive on the front. Below was a five-star review for *Madagascar: Social Club*.

Where they stood in the alley, Cora heard the whooshing sound of the opening doors to the hospital on the other side of the wall, and decided it was probably best to keep moving. They continued with pep in their step through the alley, heading in the direction where they’d parked the car.

“Club? How do you know it’s a club?”

Gabe said, “Because it was in those tourist recommendations I was looking up on the plane. *Madagascar*. It’s a famous club in the city. All the big yuckitytucks visit there. It’s known for attracting Americans.”

Cora stared at him. “You were looking up tourist attractions? I thought you were looking for information on the trafficking rings.”

Gabe shrugged. “Well, aren’t you glad I did? Madagascar is the name of a famous club. And,” he added, moving toward the exit of the alley, but pausing long enough to frown at her, “they also supply adult entertainment.”

Cora tensed. “So you think Anthony might’ve sold your cousin to this club?”

The moment she said it, she spotted the way Gabe began closing his fist, as if testing the strength of his fingers. He didn’t reject the suggestion, though, but instead, through gritted teeth, just said, “It’s a possibility.”

Cora frowned, playing the recording in her mind.

Priscilla had kept repeating the word. *Madagascar*. It made sense that she wasn't referring to the country, didn't it?

All the evidence suggested that Anthony sold his victims locally. She frowned briefly, shaking her head. And then said, "All right; how far is it from here?"

"Like I said, in the city. Like the heart of the city. And when I say that the high and mighty show up, I really mean it. A couple of presidents, according to this website, stopped in once upon a time."

"I'm guessing celebrities too? Wealthy sorts?"

"Yeah. The rich and the famous. A lot of Americans. It's where they come. Don't ask me why. It's just the hip thing to do."

Cora rolled her eyes. "The *hip* thing? Good God, let me do the talking."

Gabe shrugged. Neither of them quite smiled. Their expressions were still grim.

The two of them marched in that dark silence back to their waiting car, both of them aware that the only thread they had leading them back to Gabe's cousin was fraying.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Cora glanced sheepishly down at her black sweater sleeve; if she looked closely enough, she spotted a blood stain. There was a burn mark on the hem which she wasn't even sure how it had gotten there.

She looked up again, peering towards the stream of partygoers entering the club, and muttered, "We're a bit underdressed."

Gabe shot her a glance. "Shopping trip?"

But Cora scowled, shaking her head. The last time she'd been in Florida she'd been forced into a dress. And she refused to suffer the indignity a second time. She hesitated, reaching into the car to snatch a pair of sunglasses.

"What are those for?" Gabe asked. "Cool kid glasses won't get you in."

Cora just pocketed the glasses with green frames, shaking her head. She turned.

Now, though, as she stared at the partygoers heading into the large club, she couldn't help but shake the feeling that they were somewhat out of their element.

The women wore flashy dresses, often cut so short they left little to the imagination. The men wore designer clothing and giant wristwatches, boasting prestige and status in every glint of gold or flash of platinum.

The diamonds dangling from some of the women's ears could've fed a small country.

Cora watched it all, and listened to the music coming from inside the club. To her surprise, however, it wasn't the thumping, loud staccato of dance music she was so accustomed to. Rather, it almost sounded as if it were live music. Stringed instruments. Cellos, violins, violas.

The instruments played a mellow, beautiful tune, which carried through the open doors.

The club itself, with a large *M* in purple cursive on the front, didn't look like a club either.

It was an old, historic home. A giant stone structure, reminiscent of a castle. There were even a few sections of battlements. Stone barricades set on top of walls, through which she glimpsed the occasional partygoer walking by, or guard strolling the perimeter.

The structure itself was five times the size of any mansion she'd ever seen. It was also multiple stories tall.

A drawbridge had been lowered, over a man-made moat filled with blue water. Small jets of liquid arced into the air from this moat, catching crisscrossing lights, lasers, which illuminated the water in hues of pink and gold.

The drawbridge itself was made of an old, varnished wood, with silver filigree etched through the structure.

The guests occasionally glanced down, admiring the artistry beneath their feet as they moved across the drawbridge, past a row of ushers, and three armed guards.

No one seemed to give much attention to the guards, as if they were simply fixtures.

Cora and Gabe were once again in the parking lot. Cora was beginning to grow frustrated with how frequently they found themselves in parking lots; she didn't particularly enjoy the suggestion that the only place she was suited for was asphalt and concrete.

The cars surrounding them, however, perfectly matched the spaceship they had stolen from Anthony Modric. Perhaps this was the reason no one came toward them, to try to usher them out.

All the cars were a combination of Mercedes, BMWs, Rolls-Royce, Aston Martins, and many others she didn't have the name for.

Gabe stopped frequently, glancing at the cars, and releasing a low whistle.

He said, “They haven’t even released this one yet.” He ducked low to check under the hood like a middle school boy peeking up a skirt.

Cora shook her head in frustration, and said, “We need an invitation.”

Gabe hesitated. “Only if we go through the front doors.”

She shot him a look, then nodded in approval. “Now you’re thinking. What’s the idea?”

He hesitated, then said, “A place as big as this, there’s no way they can guard *every* entrance, is there?”

Cora nodded. “They can. A lot of money, a lot of guards. Security cameras everywhere.”

Gabe frowned.

But Cora began to move; instead of heading toward the trail of guests in their fine garb and outfits and jewelry, she moved around the back of the parking lot, towards the metal fence which read: *No entrance*.

A couple of the valets in the car park glanced in their direction, but Cora raised the keys, clicking them. The headlights on the spaceship they had stolen flashed. The presence of the expensive car seemed to assuage the valets, and they continued their work, driving a couple of BMWs into parking spots, then returning back toward the moat to retrieve more vehicles.

Cora waited until they had left before she made a stirrup out of her hands, and gestured at Gabe. “Up and over,” she said.

He frowned, and said, “I can do it on my own, thanks.”

They both shared stern looks, and then, in synchronization, double-checking that the valets weren’t watching, they both moved quickly.

As if they'd rehearsed the motion, their left foot shot forward, caught a gap in the fence, and their fingers grabbed between the chain-link. They pulled themselves up, moving hurriedly.

They moved along a dirt path that looked like it might have been used for servicing a large breaker box. Near the box, Cora spotted tracks in the dirt from a golf cart. Perhaps a maintenance vehicle. Whatever the case, the road didn't seem to be used frequently. The occasional hedge, or small, scraggy tree disguised their movements.

Flickering lights in the trees ornamented the path, but nowhere near as ostentatiously as the main entrance, suggesting this area wasn't meant to be frequented by guests.

Gabe spotted the security camera first.

He pointed, and Cora noticed the direction of his indicating finger, and went still.

Near a tall, gray metal box, she spotted a rotating lens. With a curse, she pulled Gabriel behind the box, and her arm brushed against a padlock.

The cold metal grazed her skin, and she breathed in shallow puffs.

The two of them remained quiet, watching the rotating security lens.

Neither of them moved.

Gabe whispered, "Careful what you touch."

She glanced at him, frowning, then then realized he wasn't making innuendo but rather indicating the large bolt of lightning that marked the danger of being electrocuted.

She nodded, and then made stirrups out of her hands, but gestured at him.

It took him a second, but then he complied, creating a saddle with his hands, and pressing them against his knee. She then pointed up.

On top of the gray metal box.

The row of trees behind them and concrete wall which attached to the large castle prevented motion to their left. The only path was further down the service trail, right beneath the security lens.

Unless she went over.

At least, that was the plan.

Cora pushed off Gabriel's cupped hands, and he hoisted her up.

She snagged the top of the metal box, ignoring the threat of electrocution. She clambered up, scrambling on top of the structure, and then shot a look back towards Gabe; he watched her, eyes wide.

She held out her hands, keeping a finger to her lips. It wasn't always obvious if security cameras had audio. Nowadays, they were making things more compact and higher tech than ever before.

She leaned over the top of the gray metal box, peering down. She spotted a few wires, each of them attached to the base of the security camera. She couldn't be sure which of them would turn off the recording so she reached down, and yanked all of them.

The camera stopped. The blinking light dimmed.

Then, she dropped off the side of the box, landing next to Gabe.

She said, "All right, we should be good. Listen, this is what I need you to do. You're going to stay here."

He nodded. "And do what?"

"I'll call you, and then I need you to do exactly what I say. That clear?"

He frowned at her. "You're not just trying to give me some meaningless task to make me feel useful, are you?"

She shook her head. "Not this time."

"What do you mean *this* time?"

“I don’t have time for the third degree, Gabe. Just listen, okay? Do what I say. Stay here, keep your phone on.”

“And where are you going?”

She glanced along the side of the concrete structure, and nodded toward the second floor window. “I’m going to see if I can bypass an alarm. Now remember, stay here. Don’t go anywhere.”

He didn’t look happy about it, but he nodded. “If you find Tammy, call me.”

She gave a noncommittal nod, and then began to move, hastening toward the veneer of stone, and sizing up which brick would give her the best leverage to climb to the second window.

After a few false starts, and some strain on her already scratched palms, Cora clambered through the second floor window, emerging into an ornate red carpet

Ahead, she heard the sound of voices, laughter, drinking, music.

She moved forward, cautiously, all too aware that in her black sweater, she would stand out like a sore thumb.

Ahead, marble pillars lined a wooden rail.

Along the walls there were ornate paintings, and the occasional bracket where some ornament was placed. She drew nearer and peered over the rail, keeping back, sticking to the shadows provided by one of the large pillars. Below, she spotted where the guests were dancing, or interacting at the bar. It looked more like an ostentatious party than a dance club.

She spotted the band, listening to the stringed instruments vibrate and fill the hall with music.

Her attention, however, wasn’t on the guests, the dancers, the partygoers, but rather seeking out the security guards.

They wove their way through the guests, wearing black, looking casual. They had earpieces. And as one of them

passed by below, she heard him speaking in an American accent. She frowned.

And then, she spotted movement, coming along the walkway, moving toward her.

She tensed, hiding behind the pillar, listening.

Another American.

But as she heard this new voice, she felt shivers down her spine.

A guard walked directly past her, turning down the hall she'd just emerged from. His back was to her, and he had a shaved, thick head with an even thicker neck.

He looked a bit like a Pitbull from behind, and even the way he walked, those broad shoulders swinging, his hands at his side, made her think of some predator.

Her mind spun, and images from a past life floated through her thoughts.

She thought she recognized the man.

And as she heard his voice, she knew she recognized him. He was saying, "I've already confirmed with the boss about Modric. Just keep an eye on things. Extra security is showing up in an hour. Don't worry about it."

He trailed off as he moved away from her, still sauntering forward. He turned briefly, admiring one of the paintings, and as she glimpsed his silhouette, she knew those cold, blue eyes. That sharp nose.

Knew that thick brow line, like some caveman.

She had trained with him. She and Johnny had been on the same team with this guy. Evan Ruediger. Ruediger had specialized in demolitions back in the day—he had also been one of the meanest team members she could remember.

He was the sort of man who kept track of the enemies he killed. He counted civilian deaths in his tally, bragging about it to new recruits.

What was an ex-special forces American doing working security for a club like this?

She couldn't imagine the amount of money it would've taken to entice Evan Ruediger to this job. But now, he continued his path, leaving her isolated, her heart still pounding rapidly.

Cora glanced along the rail, searching for anything that might indicate the location of the missing woman.

Adult entertainment. That's what they called it on the website.

Entertainment.

Cora frowned, scanning the dance floor. And there, behind the velvet rope, between two golden stanchions, and two men with thick chests and narrowed eyes, she spotted a doorway.

A red curtain draped over the door, and she watched as the velvet rope was unhooked from a stanchion, and a man was allowed to enter through.

Money exchanged hands, and the man was grinning, sipping something from a wine glass, before leaving the drink on a tray by the door, entering through the curtain.

She had to make her way over to that door.

But as she looked at it, and the guards out front, her eyes moved up, searching the terrace section.

There was another door, above the entrance to this velvet doorway.

The second floor, beyond a wooden railing and rows of marble columns, displayed a metal door. Far less inviting and far less open to interpretation.

That was a door designed to keep things *in*.

Even the hinges were on the hallway side of the door.

And so Cora moved from behind the pillar, walking along the terrace, occasionally glancing over at the partygoers.

She approached the metal door, and frowned.

It was locked from the outside.

But she had no key.

She hesitated, glancing back, and spotting the Navy SEAL that she recognized.

The Pitbull-looking man was peering back into the crowd again, frowning at the individuals dancing below.

Ruediger had never been particularly friendly.

And clearly now was no exception.

But if anyone had a key for this room, she supposed it would be the guard on patrol. Her gaze sought out other soldiers below. More Americans. Judging by some of the tattoos, also special forces in some cases.

She wondered how difficult it might be to lure one of them up here.

But then, she thought better of it.

She really didn't want to interact with Evan; the mean-faced soldier would recognize her, no doubt. And he would cause trouble.

So instead, she glanced back at the door. And then, hesitating only briefly, she raised a hand, and knocked; the sound resounded.

She waited, listening, attempting to see if anyone would come and investigate the noise.

She heard footsteps, a low grumble.

And then silence.

A male voice, judging by the grumble.

She frowned, breathing faintly. Even if she *did* get through the door, there would be trouble on the other side. Cora turned slowly back around, and then her heart nearly leapt from her chest. "Fancy seeing you here, Cobra."

Evan was standing five paces away, glaring right at her.

She hadn't even heard him approach.

He had gotten stealthier in his old age. Ruediger couldn't have been much older than forty. But she remembered back on the teams, when they had trained together, that he had been more like a battering ram than anything subtle. But now, he'd snuck up on her and was staring right at her.

His large arms were crossed over his barrel chest. His head was shaved, and his neck was as wide as some women's waists.

A small curl of plastic extended down his left ear, attached to a radio on his shoulder. His weapon was holstered at his hip, and she noticed the way he had inclined that same leg further back, away from her, protecting it just in case she lunged for his gun.

Instinct. A defensive posture.

But the look in his eyes was one of curiosity.

There was something predatory to his gaze. The same sort of thing that existed in the eyes of children who use magnifying lenses on ants. A curiosity too. The same sort of curiosity a sadist had who peeled apart animals.

Evan Ruediger, Demolitions Expert, just watched her, his eyes hooded in his stone slab face.

"Fancy seeing you here," Cora responded, quickly. Her expression was a mask. She couldn't allow him to smell fear. Predators feasted on the emotion.

Instead, she kept her eyes straight ahead. And though the lie sounded lame, she said, "I was just looking for the bathroom, I spilled some wine on my sweater."

She raised her sleeve, indicating the bloodstain.

He looked her up and down. It wasn't an ogling, lustful look. But rather like a robot analyzing a potential threat.

She had left her weapons back in the car, having decided that they would be more of a liability than not. There were too many soldiers. Shooting her way out wasn't an option.

But now, she felt exposed and vulnerable.

He glared at her, and said, “A little bit underdressed aren’t you?”

She shrugged. “You know my style. I’m here with a VIP. Apparently it’s the hotspot for political sorts.”

Evan now looked curious. He shot a glance over the rail below. “You work in private security too?” he said.

She nodded, her expression still a mask. “The best work I could find after leaving the FBI.”

He looked at her, impressed. “FBI? Johnny mentioned you were doing work like that. How is Johnny, by the way?”

Cora just shrugged. She swallowed, wondering if he was fishing. Chances were, he knew what had happened, and was digging.

She said, “So what brings you to the Czech Republic, Evan? If I remember correctly, you swore you’d never leave home again.”

He waved airily. “Times change. Tastes change. It is what it is. So who are you with? Mind if I see your invitation?”

She shook her head. “I’m not really supposed to mention the name. He’s just stopping by, for a little fun, if you know what I mean.” She waved a hand toward the velvet room.

Evan snickered, nodding. “Got some new girls recently,” he said. Then he gave her a glance. “Couple of guys too, if you’re interested in blowing off some steam while you wait.”

She shrugged.

It made sense that he wasn’t suspecting she was here for any other reason than private security.

That was why *he* was here, after all.

And while she was underdressed, it did fit with what he knew about her from the teams.

But then, he extended a hand, snapping his fingers and saying, “I just have to check that invitation real quick. You’re technically not supposed to be up here. The bathrooms are

downstairs. But protocol says I have to see everything's on the up and up."

She hesitated, thinking desperately.

She couldn't go through this metal door. Someone was on the other side. She didn't have a key.

But the velvet room downstairs?

They were checking invitations too. Unless, of course, she had an usher take her through.

She shrugged noncommittally, and waved a hand. "We have to go speak with Arthur," she said.

"Who?"

"My client. He's already down there. He has the invitations on his phone." She had spotted the security guards by the drawbridge scanning phones for the guests.

Now, Evan looked attentive. There was suspicion in his gaze. But he didn't look away, keeping his attention fixed on her.

"I see," he said softly. Cora began to walk, confidently, striding past Evan.

As she slid past him, though, he caught her wrist.

She felt a jolt of fear. He was strong; it felt like an iron band wrapped around her arm.

She looked sharply over. He tugged, gesturing down to the other side of the hall. "Stairs over there," he said, his eyes narrowed, still watching her. "I'll take you myself. We can go speak to this boss of yours. It'll be fun to meet another American."

He released his grip on her wrist, and she lowered her hand, resisting the urge to massage the sore spot. In fact, her hands were sore, her shoulder in a constant ache. In many ways, her entire body throbbed, pulsing in small spurts of pain.

But she'd always been good at ignoring agony.

She'd always been good at focusing on the mission.

Pain was a secondary thing. It could be forgotten once accepted; pain could be ignored, or used.

Pain was an excellent source of motivation. A fuel.

Instead of getting frustrated, and wanting to give up, she could use pain to motivate her to take another step, and another. Using it like fear.

And now, the mission demanded that she enter that velvet room to find what lay beyond.

She was here for one reason and one reason only. Tammy Finch.

Her hand dropped into her pocket where she kept her phone; she touched it, making sure it was still there.

But then, she shrugged, and gestured for Evan to lead the way.

But he shook his stone slab face, smirked, and said, “Ladies first.”

She didn’t like how he said it. And she didn’t like that they were walking toward a room where other ladies, women who had no choice, had been brought against their will.

She felt a tremble down her back, but allowed Evan to lead her.

He prodded at her shoulder, and she moved towards the steps.

They descended toward the dance floor. Evan led her along the wall, keeping a distance from the other patrons. Perhaps to avoid being stepped on or bumped into, or perhaps because Cora wasn’t exactly wearing clothing that blended in with the partygoers.

The scent of body sweat and alcohol lingered, mingling together.

Evan led her to the golden stanchions with the velvet rope; the curtain swayed behind the two guards there.

They frowned as Cora approached, but their expressions became neutral, rigid as they spotted the man accompanying

her.

Evan gestured, and said, “We’ve got to speak to Arthur... what’s the last name?” he added, glancing at Cora.

She hesitated, taking a gamble.

“He’s here under a tourist visa,” she said quickly. “And part of my job is protecting his privacy. I’m sure you can understand,” she added, nodding knowingly through the curtain.

One of the guards chuckled. Evan just frowned but shrugged his wide shoulders. He glanced toward the two men. “How many new ones are in there?”

One of the guards didn’t reply. He just held up three fingers.

Evan said, “Alright, let’s go knock on some doors. You might see some things,” he added, wiggling his eyebrows at Cora. “Hopefully it doesn’t offend your delicate sensibilities.”

She glared back. “From what you know of me, Evan, do you think anything about me is delicate?”

He smirked, glanced at one of the guards, and said, “Cobra here served with me. She once spent three months being twisted and poked and cut by some real nasty types. She’s a tough one.”

Cora didn’t reply. From anyone else, this might have been perceived as a compliment. But from Evan, it just felt like more testing. Poking, prodding, anything to be used against her.

One of the golden hooks was lifted. The velvet rope was moved. And Cora was ushered through, as the curtain behind the guards was swept aside.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Cora was immediately assaulted by the scent of expensive perfume. The fragrance of vanilla, cinnamon, and rosewater wafted on the air, distributed by small fans placed strategically near rows of candles.

The candles were multi-colored, and situated at different heights on wooden tables lining the base of an ornate stairwell. The stairwell itself looked as if it were made from ivory, curling up towards the second floor, the white bones illuminated by a chandelier.

Crystal ornaments dangled from the chandelier, and occasionally, when caught by the fans, they emitted a faint tinkling sound, like windchimes.

Cora took it all in, glancing from one end of the room to the other.

And then she spotted the women. Many of them young, no older than teenagers. Others older, and clearly more experienced in the way they were able to hide the looks of emptiness in their eyes. They leaned against the railings, peering down at where Cora and Evan had arrived.

A few of them looked as if they recognized Evan, and their smiles, attempting to mask any true emotions, slipped, showing looks of fear.

Evan glanced around the room, and shook his head, “Not here for you, ladies.”

He looked at a woman who was sitting in a reading chair at the base of the staircase. This was a much older woman with silver curls. A book rested in her lap, which she thumbed through.

She hadn't looked up yet, not even when the intruders had arrived. She licked her thumb, parted a page, and peeled it to the side with a faint rustling sound.

Only when Evan growled at her did she finally look up.

“Which rooms are the clients in?” snapped the Navy SEAL.

The woman pointed upstairs, and said, “One, five and eight.”

The man gestured at Cora, and said, “Let’s find this boss of yours.”

It was a lot of effort, she thought, to attempt and verify an identity. She was beginning to wonder if perhaps Evan was on to her.

He kept watching her out of the corner of his eye, suspicious.

As he led her past the women on the stairs, the prostitutes crowded against the railing, keeping as far back as possible, desperately avoiding the man striding by.

Cora shot them sympathetic glances, and with each step up the red carpeted stairs, she felt her anger increasing.

They reached a long hallway, with more chandeliers dangling from the ceiling, spaced about twenty feet apart. There were more paintings on the walls, and a luxurious, soft carpet underfoot.

The same cinnamon and vanilla scent lingered in these halls. But there was also a musty odor hinting at what happened beyond those doorways.

Everything here was a veneer. Pretend. A promise of flesh masquerading as something more. It didn’t just scratch an itch, it provided the itching sensation, and then attempted to fulfill it. Like a drug dealer with a free sample.

This was a trade as old as time.

And yet it didn’t excuse it in Cora’s mind.

People who used others for their own pleasure, without verifying if the others were willing participants, played a role in all of it.

She scowled as they marched to the first door.

She waited, patiently.

For now, she was using her tour guide to search the rooms. When it came out that she didn't actually have a contract with some private citizen, then she would have to get violent. But for the moment, she just waited, looking. The door swung open.

A gasping sound. Yelling.

Cora shook her head primly. "That's not him." And in her mind, she cataloged the woman in there wasn't Tammy.

The door shut.

Evan chuckled, glancing at Cora as if to see whether she enjoyed the view as much as he had.

They heard more cursing from beyond the door. Evan continued on to the next room.

This one opened as well.

Neither of the women in there, who were still dressed, resembled Tammy.

Cora shook her head.

Evan glanced at her. "You're sure your VIP came down here?" He said casually, and again he was standing a bit away from her, his hip angled off, his hand resting on his weapon.

Cora just shrugged. She said, "Probably in the last room. He likes his privacy, like I said. Maybe I should go in first."

A snicker. "I bet he'd like that—stung by the Cobra." He shook his head, but this time, walked a bit off to the side, keeping a close eye on her, making sure she couldn't attack from behind.

Definitely suspicious. He didn't trust her. She didn't blame him.

The two of them strolled toward the eighth door. Cora paused in the hall, frowning, and pointing down to the far end of the long hallway. "What's that?"

This one was a metal door. But it was a different color than the one she had spotted in the hall. It looked strange.

She couldn't quite say what, but something seemed off about it.

Evan just shook his head. "Nothing. Storage."

And then he pushed open the final door.

And that's when Cora struck.

He'd been tense, waiting. But like most men, the site of bare skin seemed to momentarily dull the senses.

The two figures in the room beyond quickly covered themselves, shouting. Again, the woman wasn't Tammy. None of the women on the stairwell had been Tammy.

She wasn't here. Unless...

Cora wasn't staring in the direction of the naked flesh. Instead, when Evan paused to gape, she came in from behind, sending the side of her hand against the base of his neck, hard.

The reason magicians had an assistant, and the reason those assistants were usually beautiful, young, and scantily clad, was to draw the eye of the audience. To give a momentary distraction.

And now, Evan was distracted.

And then, he was grunting, reeling into the room. Normally, a blow like that, like an ax to the base of a tree, would have felled most men.

But Evan's neck was corded, taut, muscular.

Her hand collided with his neck, and he reeled in with a painful grunt, but he stayed standing. His gun appeared in his hand, fast. Quick on the draw. He lashed out, still dazed from the blow.

She followed up, kicking him between the legs, and aiming for the easiest target.

At the same time, her hand shot out, and caught him on the wrist, striking knuckles against the pressure points.

His gun fell from his hand, clattering to the ground.

He doubled over, groaning, and she punched him across the chin.

Even so, he'd nearly shot her.

Now, though, he crumpled, the last of his strength depleting from the blow to his glass jaw.

Another weakness she remembered from back in the day.

He was a tough son of a gun but he'd always had a wonky chin. Now, he lay in a muscled puddle on the ground, motionless, face down against the carpet.

The two figures in the bed were staring, stunned.

But Cora was already hooking the door with her foot, closing it behind her. She stooped, snatched the gun from the ground, lifted it, and aimed it toward the bed.

"Get away from her." Cora allowed acid into her voice.

The man just stared at the weapon, eyes wide. Then, in an American accent, he stammered, "You know who I am?"

"You're a man with one less hole than I'm about to add."

He blinked, staring at her, and then swallowed, sliding out of the bed, wrapping one of the bedsheets around his waist.

The woman was already getting dressed, hastily putting on clothing.

Cora waited for the woman to get dressed, before gesturing for her to move. "I'm sorry, but I can't have anyone alerting the others. Stand by the window. Close the blinds." The man was getting dressed as well, but Cora shook her head. "No, leave them. Hands up."

He stared at her, certain he'd heard her wrong. But she gestured more insistently. "I said get your hands up."

The man cursed, trying to wrap the bed sheet around his waist, but then put his hands in the air.

She hurried over. Checking his clothing for weapons and a phone. She found a knife, and also a cell phone. She took both.

And then, she snatched the handcuffs from the back of Evan's utility belt. "Cuff yourself to the radiator."

The man swallowed as he hastily complied with the directive.

The sheet around his waist was starting to slip. He had a bit of a belly and quite a bit of hair on his back. He spoke with an American accent. He didn't have the look of a celebrity—at least not any she had heard of. Which meant he was probably a businessman, or politician. She said, "Who are you?"

He glared at her. "You know who I am. Is that why you're here?"

She looked him dead in the eyes, and didn't hesitate. "I truly have no clue who you are. That's why I'm asking. I won't ask again."

His eyes bounced to the gun pointed at him, he swallowed, and she saw fear in his eyes. Perhaps it wasn't the most charitable thing, but it felt nice to know that he was experiencing the same terror that the woman had.

Now, the woman was dressed, and she was standing against the window where she had closed the blinds.

Cora said, "Hurry up, answer my question."

The man stammered, "I'm an aide to the ambassador. You know the shit storm you're kicking up? I have diplomatic immunity."

Cora snorted. "I look like a Czech cop to you?"

But if he was an ambassador's aid, perhaps he would be of some use later.

She left him handcuffed to the radiator, and then glanced at the woman, keeping her gun pointed at the man. "Do what you like to him. Just don't kill him." Then, on second thought, she added, "Actually, for your sake, it's probably best to stay in the bathroom. Lock the door, and don't come out."

The woman shot a couple of glances towards the man chained to the radiator, exhaled but then nodded, and hurried to the bathroom, shutting the door. Then it locked.

Cora checked Evan's pulse. It was still beating faintly.

She then stepped over him, moving toward the door with rapid footfalls, but then Cora paused, frowned. She couldn't allow an interruption. So she ducked over, grabbed the arms of Evan, and dragged him to the radiator. She then retrieved the key from Evan's belt, unlocked part of the handcuffs, looped them back through the radiator, and attached them to Evan's wrist. Now, the aide to an ambassador and the ex-Navy SEAL were both secured to the same radiator.

As she worked, the man with the bed sheet wrapped around his waist stared at her, breathing heavily. The same way with Maurice, she saw him slowly decide to try and attack, to take her gun while she was so close.

She glanced up, venom in her gaze. "I'm really not in the mood."

His free hand, which had been bunched, slowly uncurled. His flabby form pressed back against the radiator, and he released a small sigh.

Cora then began to move.

She took the handcuff key with the handgun as well, and then she pushed out of the door into the hallway. She immediately moved toward the metal door at the far side of the corridor.

She approached it, frowning as she did, and glancing around. She pushed the door open, finding it half an inch ajar.

She found herself staring into a bedroom. Silk sheets, another chandelier, a shower with no privacy screen. A dress draped over a chair.

Also, there was evidence of violence. Blood on the ground. One of the four posters on the bed snapped as if something large had slammed into it; a shattered dish, a bowl of soup, by the look of it, splashed against the floor. A pink plastic tray wedged against the headboard.

And there, in the wall, a bullet.

Something had happened here. They had left the door open.

Was this where they had been keeping Tammy?

Cora's heart pounded. She stared at the strange scene, bit her lip.

She glanced over her shoulder, looking back down the hall.

A woman was peering out of one of the doors, but when she spotted Cora looking, she ducked back.

It was the woman Cora had told to stay in the bathroom.

Cora hurried over to the door, which was closed again. She called out, "I'm not going to hurt you. I promise."

The door opened again. The woman poked her head out.

Cora stared at her. "Do you know who was in that room? Tammy Finch? Did you see her?"

The woman just stared at Cora, wearing a blank expression.

Cora cursed. "English?"

A faint shake of the head. The young woman was trembling.

Cora said, "All right, you know where they take people from that room?" She tried to mime as best she could.

The woman hesitated. She was wearing lingerie, and a gossamer gown.

She was shivering.

Cora wished she had a jacket so she could give it.

But then, the woman gestured at Cora, and said something in a language Cora didn't understand. She then moved into the hall, hurrying forward. The woman was heading back to the same room.

Cora shrugged to herself and followed.

The woman in the nightgown stepped daintily over the discarded bowl of soup. She approached a bookcase, and pointed.

Cora hesitated, "I should *do* something? I don't understand."

The woman hesitated, wincing in fear. Then, she reached out, and tugged at one of the books insistently.

There was a groaning sound. And then the bookcase began to swivel open.

The woman pointed to the bed, to the blood, and then down the concrete stairs that had appeared behind the rotating bookcase.

Cora's eyebrows shot up.

"Thanks," she muttered.

The young woman nodded.

Cora wasn't sure what to do. It didn't feel right leaving the woman there. Or any of them. But she couldn't save everyone. She was surrounded by soldiers in another country.

She had just chained an ambassador's aid to a radiator. But she couldn't just do *nothing*. And so she handed the gun to the woman.

"Click this to turn off the safety. Pull this to fire."

The woman accepted the gun.

Even standing there, in lingerie, shivering, exposed, it became instantly clear that this was not the first time this woman had handled a handgun. She checked the magazine, chambered it. For a moment, she looked like she wanted to refuse.

Cora said, "That aid to the ambassador—get him on a recording." Cora frowned, and then mimed lifting up her phone, and talking. "Record? Do you know this word? Record?"

The woman nodded.

Cora gave a sigh of relief. She pointed back towards the eighth room. "Get him to admit what he was doing. Get him on a recording. Video him. Then blackmail. You know this word blackmail?"

The woman wrinkled her nose. Cora knew she didn't have time. But she had time for *this*. She pulled out her phone,

going to the same translating software that Gabriel had used. She then typed in the word *blackmail*, translated it, and showed it to the woman.

Suddenly, the young woman's eyes widened.

Cora nodded, grinning. "Exactly. Get him to admit what he was doing. Then blackmail him to get you out of the country. Get money, whatever you need. And then leave. Get as many of these women with you as you can. I don't think I can do anything else. If you can, get the law involved. But the stuff goes deep, so I dunno."

The young woman's eyes narrowed fiercely.

Cora then left the gun in the woman's hand, and turned. She gave a quick nod and a thumbs up. And watched as the woman moved back through the door, stalking determinedly toward the bedroom where the men were handcuffed. The gun was clutched tightly in her right fist.

Cora only had the knife she had taken from the ambassador's aid. But it would have to do; she wasn't looking to get into a shootout.

She moved behind the bookcase, onto the concrete steps, and then began to descend into the dark searching desperately for any sign of Tammy Finch.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Cora shivered against the cold as she descended the slab-like concrete steps. The same effort spent on the rest of the club hadn't been utilized here.

The walls were bare. The floors without carpets. The only light came from naked bulbs set occasionally in the dark rafters above—the ceiling joists visible where they upheld the rooms above.

Cora moved quietly through the dark space, her shadow cast along the floor under the flickering light bulbs. She cautiously moved down the hall in what appeared to be a basement. Bottles of wine lined brackets on the wall, the glass gleaming faintly.

And then she heard sounds of pain.

Shouting. A man's voice, cursing and yelling, "Stupid American whore! We teach lesson!" Another sound of violence, more pain.

Cora scowled now, stalking forward, the knife clutched tightly in her hand.

She moved hastily past the floor-to-ceiling shelving, like a bookcase, filled with wine bottles. And peered around the corner.

She went still.

Five men surrounded a woman tied to a chair. The woman was bleeding from her face, where the largest man of the bunch had clearly just struck her. The man massaged his knuckles, spitting at the woman and sneering.

Two of the men behind her were holding her shoulders, keeping her in place for the beating.

Two other men looked bored, hands on weapons, occasionally checking their watches as if they had somewhere

better to be.

Cora watched all of it with a rising sense of absolute rage.

But now, the man who'd been punching Tammy Finch spat again and said, "Will you do as we say? Hmm? Pain or pleasure—your choice. Simple. Stupid whore." He raised his hand to hit her again.

Tammy, who Cora recognized from the photos her mother had provided, let out a gasp of pain. Blood flicked from her lips. Her hair was stringy, plastered to her face with sweat and blood. She was trembling in her chair, breathing desperately. She peered out from under the fringe of her hairline toward the men.

She stammered something. And the man who'd been ready to strike her leaned in. "What was that? You learned your lesson, hmm?"

But Tammy was shaking her head. "You wish," she said with a shaking voice. And then she spat blood in the man's face.

He reeled back, cursing and desperately wiping at his features.

And that's when Cora intervened.

Only a knife.

All five men had guns.

But she had the element of surprise, and a wine bottle she'd snatched off the shelf.

She moved in fast, and brought her knife into the neck of the nearest man. He gurgled once, then toppled.

She flung the wine bottle at the second man, standing closest to the first. This man's eyes widened in horror, and then the bottle struck him on the nose. He cursed, stumbling back, his hand darting up to clutch at his face.

But Cora was already pulling the weapon from the first man's holster. As he gurgled, her knife buried in his neck, she withdrew the gun. Aimed.

But now, the others were shouting, opening fire. The body of the first man twitched as the first salvo of bullets struck him in the chest.

Cora dropped instantly, going prone. The body toppled on her, but her own gun shot out, her arms braced against the cold, bare concrete.

And she fired back.

Two bullets hit the leg of the man who'd been punching Tammy. But another one of the gun thugs seemed to realize the threat and had dove behind Tammy, pressing the gun to her head.

Cora didn't wait for the incoming threat, though. She needed to even the odds.

Another shot as she rolled along the blood-slicked ground, her shoulders slipping off a pool of red. She fired twice, taking the final, uninjured man in the chest.

Now, one man was howling in agony, clutching his wounded leg.

Another was wiping delicately at his face, trying to pry pieces of glass from around his eyes.

And the final man had his gun pressed to Tammy's neck, hunched low, cursing at Cora, and shouting something in Czech.

She got to her feet, slowly, gun in hand. She spat to the side and snapped, "English."

The man with the gun to Tammy's neck just glared, snarling. He mimed at her to lower her gun.

"What was that?" she said, raising an eyebrow.

He mimed a second ti—

She shot him.

His hand lifted only a fraction of an inch to gesture at her, but it was enough to lift his gun from Tammy's head. He still managed to squeeze the trigger, though, even as her bullet buried in his brain stem.

His shot, however, caught the one who'd been struck by a wine bottle. This man cursed, wheeling around, clutching his shoulder.

Cora put him out of his misery with two more bullets to the chest.

She stalked towards Tammy, shoving past the man who'd been beating her. This fellow was gasping, clutching at his injured leg.

The four others were dead.

Cora was nearly empty, but she tossed her gun, stooped, and picked up another from the ground. Calmly, she pointed it at the man who'd been beating Gabe's cousin.

"No! Please—no, no! Don't—"

She shot him twice without even looking, and then she bent over, hand out, wiping Tammy's hair out of her eyes. "You okay?" Cora said softly. "Shit... probably not, huh? Well—you've got a family waiting for you back in West Virginia. We gotta go."

The woman stared at her, mouth opening closing. And then she whispered. "Cora Shields?"

Cora blinked. "You recognize me?" she asked, stunned.

They had grown up in the same town, but Cora couldn't remember having developed much of a reputation. At least, not a very *good* reputation.

She stared at the woman. She spotted a couple of tattoos, visible past the edges of Tammy's sleeves.

Cora supposed the two of them had likely gone on similar trajectories. The two of them had grown up in the same small town. They'd been born to well-meaning, but philosophically different families.

Cora felt as if she understood Tammy, just looking at her. The way she had spat blood in the face of the man who'd been beating her.

This was a woman with a rod of iron in her spine. She had survived. Up until this point, she had managed to stay alive. And it was Cora's turn to make sure she got out of here alive, to go see that family of hers.

Love, community, home had a way of healing certain types of wounds.

At least, Cora hoped.

Even as she thought it, she felt something tug at her own conscience.

Part of her wondered if she ought to take the advice herself. Standing there, staring at Tammy, amid the bodies, the blood, Cora made a vow to go speak with her parents before this was all over.

But now, she loosened the bindings on Tammy's wrists. The bristling cords rubbed against Cora's fingers. She threw them to the side, stood to her feet, and let out a faint sigh. Blood was still trickling down her nose, down her lips.

Cora reached out an arm, grabbing at Tammy shoulders, and saying, "Can you manage?"

Tammy opened her mouth to reply, but suddenly her eyes widened in horror. Cora turned sharply, yelled, and shoved Tammy, sending her tumbling over the chair, backwards. She landed behind one of the bodies. And then the bullets erupted.

One caught Cora in the arm. She spun, stumbling back. Another would have hit her in the chest, had she not used the momentum to lunge behind one of the corpses.

Two more bullets struck the dead flesh. But Cora's own gun was now rising. She fired back.

Evan was standing there, glaring, his eyes dark and deep, his brow furrowed. He had handcuffs dangling off one side of his wrist, and the other cuff was bloodied. Cora didn't want to think what this meant. But Evan stood there, with the handcuff dangling, pointing the gun, as he tried to get a good shot.

Another bullet struck the body behind which Cora lay.

And then she returned fire.

Evan darted behind the wine case. Bottles exploded. Purple liquid began to stain the wood, dripping down to join the puddle of blood on the ground.

Evan shouted, “Think you’re a badass, huh?”

Cora didn’t reply. She needed to save her breath.

Evan could keep her here as long as he wanted. He didn’t have to move. Undoubtedly, backup would be arriving any moment. They had to get out of here.

“I’m going to rip you to pieces,” Evan snapped.

Cora listened for a moment, and then she gestured at Tammy, indicating she should stay low behind the body. The two of them were both streaked in red, both of them breathing heavily. Cora fired two more shots. Two more bottles exploded. And then she lunged forward.

She couldn’t stay. They didn’t have time to wait. If they lingered, things would end horribly.

And so Cora flung herself at the shelf of wine. She slammed into it, and it toppled.

Evan had been taking shelter just behind this.

He shouted, but the case fell, crashing down on him.

She watched his gun go flying.

Her shoulder struck the wood. Her arm was throbbing in pain, she realized the bullet had gone through her bicep.

She groaned, exhaling.

Just another scar. That was what she had to tell herself. Just another scar.

And then the Pitbull began to move. He yelled, grunting as he shoved the shelf up, lifting Cora with it. She tried to fire through the wood. Splinters erupted. A hand lashed out around the side of the shelf, catching her wrist. They fought over the gun. Evan extricated from where one of the other bodies had served as a barrier, keeping the shelf from crushing him completely.

Now, Cora and Evan fought, both desperately fighting for the weapon. Both breathing heavily.

Cora could tell he was stronger than she was. And so she had to rely on speed and technique. But her arm was bleeding. She was shot. Evan was dazed, and he still had the handcuff dangling from one wrist. But otherwise, he was regaining his senses, coming like a freight train. Glass bottles smashed underfoot as they fought, desperately trying to gain the advantage. Cora lashed out, catching him in the face with the side of her foot. But she absorbed a blow to her stomach from a fist like a sledgehammer.

Back and forth they went, like hammers, dancing over glass, over bodies. The ex-Navy SEAL met each of her blows with one of his own.

They defended attacks in the same way. Went on the aggressive at the same time.

And they were both wearing each other down.

Pain exploded along her jaw as his fist collided with her chin. Her head snapped back, and she gasped at the ceiling. A fist drove into her stomach and then he slammed his shoulder into her, trying to pin her against the wall.

At the last minute, she twisted at the hips, grabbing his arm, and flinging the attacker over her hip. She'd intended to break his wrist, but he twisted mid-air, and managed to sweep her leg.

The two of them hit the ground in a tangle of limbs and rapid motions, both of them breathing heavily, desperately.

Slipping in blood and wine, under gray ceilings, neither of them with enough breath to spare to exchange a word.

Cora wrapped her hands around his thick neck, and he was trying to gouge at her eyes. But his neck was too strong. Her arm refused to move—bloodied and gunshot as it was.

She gasped and jerked her head to avoid his jamming thumbs.

But then he slipped his grip to her throat.

She flailed, kicking out. Once, twice. She hit him with her knee, but this time only caught his abdomen. He felt like steel under her knee.

And he kept squeezing... and squeezing.

She tried to buck him off, but he pressed down determinedly, a horrible, oppressive weight crushing her to the floor.

The blood clung to her hair. Her back was soaked in wine.

She kept fighting. Her one arm was too numb now, and she wasn't able to move it. So she struck him with her other hand. Again and again.

But each blow was growing weaker.

And the pressure on her throat was mounting. He was like a black blur above her. She could no longer quite make him out. Dark spots danced across her vision as the oxygen was depleted.

“Die Cobra... See you in hell.” He chuckled.

And then *crack! Crack!*

Two gunshots.

He stiffened. Went limp. His hands lost their grip, and his eyes blinked before glazing over.

Another gunshot.

And he slumped on top of her.

Cora gasped desperately, inhaling deeply. For a moment, she just lay there, swallowing air, filling her lungs, and then she shoved the man off her, groaning as she did. Tammy stood over the Navy SEAL, a gun clutched in her trembling hands. Bruised, battered, and injured, wearing ratty, tattered clothing, Tammy Finch let out a gasp.

“Oh God!” she yelled. “Holy shit. What did I do?”

“Saved my life,” Cora said, and her voice sounded raspier than usual. She massaged her neck, wincing, but then stumbled towards Tammy, grabbing at her arm.

“We need to go. *Now!* Someone’s going to have heard those shots. If we wait too long, this place will be swarming.”

She remembered what Evan had said about extra security arriving eventually.

They had to move...

But now, she could hear voices. The ceiling joists above them were shaking. The sound of yelling. She heard voices on the radio receivers dangling from the shoulders of the bodies. She stooped, snatched one, affixed it to an ear. The first channel was in Czech, but she tossed this radio, moved to the one that Evan had.

Americans were calling out orders.

“Basement two!” Someone was saying. “Move—move! Police incoming. Shots fired!”

Cora shivered in horror. She lowered her hand from where it had been pressing against her ear, looking around desperately. The only exit was the one they’d come through.

So she cursed and said, “Alright... Alright, I have an idea.”

And then, she reached into her pocket, removing the sunglasses she’d taken from the car, which Gabe had given her grief over.

But these glasses weren’t for seeing in the sun.

They were for seeing in the dark.

She moved, placing the glasses over her eyes, and then grabbing Tammy’s hand. “Follow my lead!” she yelled.

And then she pulled her phone from her pocket.

And placed *the call*.

Gabe picked up on the first ring.

“Do you have her?”

“Yes! Now listen.”

“I want to hear her!”

“Is that Gabe?” Tammy gasped.

“Tammy!” Gabe yelled. “Tammy, are you okay?”

“Gabe, focus! We’re being hunted. Do exactly what I say. See that pretty machine that Modric drove?”

“The car? Yeah?”

“I need you to drive it through the chain-link fence and slam it into that big breaker box.”

A pause. “The one with the lightning bolt warning on the side?”

“Yeah. Slam it into it. Jump out of the car or something before impact. I dunno. Just destroy the damn thing. Can you ___”

“On it.”

It was testament to Gabe’s loyalty to his cousin that he didn’t even hesitate.

She heard the sound of running footsteps. Then gasping. Then an engine starting. Then a muttered prayer.

Now, the voices had reached the concrete stairwell.

Cora moved as if she had choreographed the dance before. She heard the engine, the sound of tires. A crashing of metal. And then a desperate yell. A second later, the sound of the phone died.

And the lights followed.

A sudden collective gasp. She could hear it from above, the partygoers in the room above them. Could hear even from the soldiers on the stairwell. Everything went dark. The lights in the room, the lights in the hall, and undoubtedly the lights from the chandeliers.

Cora moved. She didn’t know if they had a backup generator. She didn’t know how long it would take to turn it on. But now, she was the only one who could see. The green glasses affixed to her eyes. She moved quickly, hastening up the steps, racing past one soldier, who was groping at the walls, trying to find purchase. She brushed past his back. Her arm was bleeding. But there was no time to stop the blood

flow. She was in pain, aching, breathing raggedly, her throat constricted.

But she pulled Tammy along behind.

To her credit, the woman didn't speak. Didn't ask questions. She just followed, trusting.

It was a strange thing that someone would be able to trust after all this. Then again, she didn't have much of a choice.

Cora moved. She spotted three more soldiers, blindly groping around in the room at the top of the stairs. One of them, she shoved, sending him tumbling down the stairs. The others froze at the sound of the shout. She kept moving. More soldiers in the hallway. These had flashlights. The beams of light cut through the hall. Prostitutes were being escorted back toward the stairs, out of the rooms. The men were being escorted as well.

Loud shouting, protesting. A momentary pandemonium.

Cora cursed. She hesitated, peering around the side of the door. A flashlight beam arched towards her. She jerked back. Tammy was now whispering, unable to control herself, "What's going on?"

Cora just made a shushing sound.

There were going to have to run. If anyone spotted them, it would be over. But they didn't have to make it back down the hall, or even back down the stairs. They wouldn't have to cross the dance floor. She remembered the window. The one where she had asked the woman in the eighth room to close the blinds. She spotted where the man shaped like the ambassador's aid, with a bathrobe now, instead of a sheet wrapped around his waist, was being escorted down the hall, blind. More flashlights were now flooding the rooms. Now or never. Other figures were coming towards her. A voice was shouting up from the stairs where he'd been pushed.

"Now," she whispered.

She tugged Tammy's arms. There were only ten steps to the room. Only ten steps between them and freedom.

They hastened forward.

Five steps. Tammy was close behind her. Three steps. Then suddenly a flashlight darted towards them. A shout.

But Cora was covered in blood. Two women. Two women, coming from the room where they apparently tried to break prostitutes.

And so while there was a shout of warning. No one suspected that she was the cause. No one called out, warning that it was a woman who had shot these men.

She could hear more voices. More shouting. The bodies were being discovered.

Now, the man who had spotted them with his flashlight, was following them into the room.

Cora waited behind the door. He entered. The flat of her good hand caught his neck. He choked. Her thumb caught his throat. He dropped. She kicked him in the head. And then, she pulled her glasses off.

No point, now. They were heading outside. They reached the window. She slammed her elbow into it. More blood. More pain. But at this point, pain and Cora were synonymous.

She peered out the window. Second floor. No trash cans, no conveniently placed mattresses. A fifteen foot drop on the cold concrete.

Cora was breathing heavily. She wondered if she ought to call Gabriel Finch.

She stared at the woman, and said, "Don't go tense. You'll break your knees." Tammy nodded. Cora climbed through the window first, using her working arm. Blood was trailing behind her. She felt lightheaded, dizzy.

And then, she said, "Try to roll." And she jumped.

She hit the ground. Her ankle popped. She held back a scream of pain, but rolled onto her shoulder. She left a streak of blood behind. Tammy jumped next. But Cora had regained her feet, and she reached out. She caught Tammy under the arms. She didn't stay standing, though. She wanted to break

the fall, not Tammy's collarbone. And so, as she caught Tammy, Cora dropped. Absorbing some of the force, and then falling to the ground.

The two of them lay there, both breathing heavily.

"You okay?"

Tammy nodded. They got to their feet. Cora was limping, bleeding.

She spotted a flash of headlights.

She stared. And then, she cursed. It wasn't a car she recognized. A Mercedes. Maybe one of the valets?

She began to turn, trying to drag Tammy in the other direction. But then the front door opened, and Gabriel Finch shouted, "No, this way!"

Cora spun around. Mouth agape.

Gabe was gesturing at them. He stood tall, scowling. He was breathing heavily, but when he spotted the state of them, his jaw unhinged. He shoved away from the car, sprinting towards them.

"Did you mug a valet?" Cora gasped

But before Gabe could reply, Tammy spotted him, and a small sob escaped her lips. She cried out, "Gabriel!"

And at that moment, he really did look like a guardian angel.

He caught his cousin in an embrace, but then stepped back, handling her gingerly. "Are you okay?" he whispered. "Are you alright?"

Tammy nodded, sobbing, and leaning against him.

Cora released her grip. "It's going to be okay," Gabe was murmuring hurriedly. "It's all going to be okay."

"You can't know that," she sobbed.

"I... it's like this rat..." Gabe trailed off. "Just hurry. They haven't blocked the road yet. We can make it. Let's go!"

Cora limped along behind, binding at her wound, finally, using pieces from the hem of her already blood-soaked shirt.

She breathed slowly as she did. “Gabe,” she said as they moved. “We need to go back to the doctor’s.”

“The... right... shit. The hospital.”

“No,” Cora snapped. “The *doctor’s*.”

“Oh... oh... okay.” Gabe nodded, helping Cora into the car, into the backseat, then rushing around the side to help Tammy into the front.

She was still crying, but smiling as she glanced at Gabe.

He put the car in gear, peeling out of there and joining a procession of other partygoers who were fleeing in their luxury vehicles.

Behind them, Cora watched as guards emerged, heading to block off the parking lots.

But too late.

They were too late.

Cora released a soft sigh, bleeding on the seats.

“Where are we going?”

“A quick stop,” Gabe said. “To get... to get Cora some help. Shit, you look horrible.”

“Just drive,” Cora said.

“Then home,” Gabe added, looking at his cousin. “I promise.”

She began to cry again.

And Cora closed her eyes, exhaling and breathing easier with each mile they distanced from the club, from the guards. From all of it.

By the time they reached the highway, the sirens in the distance were little more than background music.

Cora’s vision went blurry.

And darkness came quick.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Cora rubbed at her arm, glancing down at the bandage, and wincing. The doctor had done a decent enough job. Now, her feet struck the slanted wooden gangplank, and she inhaled the odor of the ocean. Two weeks was a long time.

The bandaging was good enough. She had flat-out refused pain pills.

But two weeks out in the open water, smelling of fish, hadn't made things easier.

She stepped down the gangplank, leading from the docks to Floridian shores. The fishing boat the doctor had placed them on blared its horn in farewell. Or, perhaps, to warn the dockworkers to unload the shipping containers a bit more quickly.

Ahead of her, Gabriel and Tammy Finch were moving slowly, both of them inhaling with shaky breaths as they tasted American air for the first time in weeks.

Tammy was no longer crying, but she refused to let go of her cousin's arm, holding on as if he were some mooring rope.

Now, as she stepped off the gangplank onto the Floridian dock, she was whispering, "How mad is Mom?"

"Not that mad—you're fine," Gabe said.

"How mad is not that mad?"

"Just... she's the one who wanted you home. Chill, Tams. I promise. It'll be fine."

Tammy shook her head. She paused, as if her legs had gone weak. The two weeks had done wonders for the bruises along her face. The cuts along her cheek. Mostly healed, now.

Tammy was pretty, though not beautiful. But she had flint in her eyes, and in Cora's view, that was what mattered most.

But at the mention of her mother or her aunt, this small woman who'd spat blood in the face of a thug looked as if she'd seen a ghost. Still... from what Cora had seen back on that farm, with those women, they would be eager and delighted to have Tammy back.

It would be hard, perhaps. But Tammy still had a home.

Tammy exhaled slowly, but continued forward. They had enough money for the ride back to West Virginia.

The doctor had been more than happy to accept the Mercedes in place of a fee.

Cora moved behind the two figures. She didn't join them. She stayed back a few paces, watching them. Her arm was bandaged, her ankle in a brace. Most of the shallow, superficial cuts had been handled.

But overall... things were looking up.

She smiled under the sun, and picked up her pace, following the two figures as they moved toward the waiting taxi.

Gabe glanced back at her, holding her gaze for a moment. He mouthed, over his cousin's head, "*Thank you.*"

She winked.

He grinned.

And the three of them approached the taxi that would finally take them home.

EPILOGUE

Tammy was sleeping in the back seat. Gabriel Finch was next to her, leaning against a window, his face warming the cool glass.

The taxi driver kept glancing at the GPS, noting their estimated ETA. It had been a long drive, but now Cora recognized the landscape. The flat farmland, the fields stretching out before them. Old, single-family homes.

Legacy homes.

Homes that had history full of joy, love, but also pain and heartache.

Cora remembered the oath she'd made back in that basement, staring at Tammy.

And so Cora reached into her pocket, pulling out her phone, lifting it, staring at the screen. She sighed slowly, placed a call.

It was late. The night stretched before them now.

And she reached her parents' voicemail.

Cora adjusted the seatbelt and leaned against the cool window in the front passenger seat. She paused, wanting to hang up, but then she thought better of it and decided to leave a voicemail.

She cleared her throat, hesitant, frowning. She opened her mouth, paused, unsure what to say, then said, "Hey... Mom, Dad... Umm... It's me. I just... I wanted to say..." She frowned, staring out at the farmland. Staring at the fields. She sighed. "Sorry, I guess. I didn't... Well... I probably haven't ever really made things easy on you guys. So yeah. Sorry. Really sorry."

She puffed air and hung up, feeling her cheeks warm.

She glanced into the rearview mirror and cringed when she spotted Gabe watching her.

“What?” she snapped.

The taxi driver had some music crooning through the cabin, and pretended as if he wasn't paying attention to his passengers.

“What?” Cora said more insistently.

Gabe just watched her. “Thanks,” he said slowly. “Really.” He glanced at his cousin, winced, and repeated, “Thank you.”

She sighed and nodded once. “Mhmm.”

“I can tell you where he is.”

She blinked. “What?”

“My old man. I know where he is.”

She frowned now. “How? I thought you said you didn't know.”

“I didn't, but Mom told me before we left.”

Cora's frown deepened. “I thought she said *she* didn't know.”

“Yeah, well... she has her guesses. And she ruled out a couple of them while you were talking to Tammy's mom. She's ninety percent sure he's up in an old cabin. A hunting cabin he used to use. It's supposed to be abandoned, but she thinks he's there.” Gabe shrugged. His voice was grim, his eyes held a dark, lingering quality.

He didn't quite want to meet her gaze.

She'd preferred the thank you.

But now *this*.

“Where's this cabin?”

“Already texted you,” he said quietly.

Cora glanced at her phone. An address from Gabriel. She stared at it, committing it to memory. “He's there?”

“Yeah. I think so. Mom thinks so, at least. Mom's not usually wrong.”

Cora nodded slowly, staring. The screen illuminated her features. She shot a look into the backseat again. “You know... things might not go well with him.”

Gabe just shook his head, sighed. “I don’t wanna know,” he said softly. He closed his eyes again and rested his face against the cold glass. “You do what you have to. Just... I don’t want to know.”

Cora stared as he pretended to drift off again.

She frowned, staring through the windshield now, gripping her phone tightly.

Gabe’s father had been sending letters to her sister before she had disappeared. Gabe’s father was a bad man.

Cora’s hand bunched around her phone now, and she glared through the windshield as they headed home.

He was a bad man, perhaps, but she specialized in dealing with bad men.

And Gabriel’s old man would be no exception.

NOW AVAILABLE!



UNSTABLE

(A Cora Shields Mystery—Book 6)

In this action-packed mystery thriller by #1 bestselling author Blake Pierce, Cora Shields, 30, former Navy Seal turned FBI Special Agent, is fired from the FBI for breaking one rule too many. But when a former friend-turned-prostitute comes to Cora for help, swearing that neglected prostitutes are being abducted by serial killers, Cora cannot turn a blind eye—and finds herself in the race of her life to save a woman from a killer’s hands before it’s too late.

“A masterpiece of thriller and mystery.”

—Books and Movie Reviews, Roberto Mattos (re Once Gone)

UNSTABLE (A Cora Shields Suspense Thriller—Book 6) is the sixth novel in a new series by #1 bestseller and USA Today bestselling author Blake Pierce, whose bestseller Once Gone (a free download) has received over 7,000 five star ratings and reviews.

On the outside, Cora Shields is a total badass. A Navy SEAL veteran and a top agent in the FBI's Behavioral Analysis Unit, Cora has a reputation for doing whatever it takes to catch a killer. What no one knows, though, is that she's a wreck on the inside, addicted to painkillers and deeply depressed.

Sometimes, cases need to be pursued outside the law.

With no backup, Cora is finally free to act, to bend as many rules as she needs to, at any cost, to bring killers down.

She has found her new calling.

But will it also be her undoing?

A page-turning and harrowing crime thriller featuring a brilliant and tortured vigilante, the CORA SHIELDS series is a riveting mystery, packed with non-stop action, suspense, twists and turns, revelations, and driven by a breakneck pace that will keep you flipping pages late into the night.

Future books in the series are also available.

“An edge of your seat thriller in a new series that keeps you turning pages! ...So many twists, turns and red herrings... I can't wait to see what happens next.”

—Reader review (Her Last Wish)

“A strong, complex story about two FBI agents trying to stop a serial killer. If you want an author to capture your attention and have you guessing, yet trying to put the pieces together, Pierce is your author!”

—Reader review (Her Last Wish)

“A typical Blake Pierce twisting, turning, roller coaster ride suspense thriller. Will have you turning the pages to the last sentence of the last chapter!!!”

—Reader review (City of Prey)

“Right from the start we have an unusual protagonist that I haven’t seen done in this genre before. The action is nonstop... A very atmospheric novel that will keep you turning pages well into the wee hours.”

—Reader review (City of Prey)

“Everything that I look for in a book... a great plot, interesting characters, and grabs your interest right away. The book moves along at a breakneck pace and stays that way until the end. Now on go I to book two!”

—Reader review (Girl, Alone)

“Exciting, heart pounding, edge of your seat book... a must read for mystery and suspense readers!”

—Reader review (Girl, Alone)



UNSTABLE

(A Cora Shields Mystery—Book 6)

Did you know that I've written multiple novels in the mystery genre? If you haven't read all my series, click the image below to download a series starter!



Blake Pierce

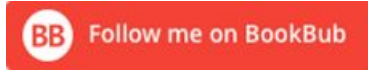
Blake Pierce is the USA Today bestselling author of the RILEY PAGE mystery series, which includes seventeen books. Blake Pierce is also the author of the MACKENZIE WHITE mystery series, comprising fourteen books; of the AVERY BLACK mystery series, comprising six books; of the KERI LOCKE mystery series, comprising five books; of the MAKING OF RILEY PAIGE mystery series, comprising six books; of the KATE WISE mystery series, comprising seven books; of the CHLOE FINE psychological suspense mystery, comprising six books; of the JESSIE HUNT psychological suspense thriller series, comprising twenty-eight books; of the AU PAIR psychological suspense thriller series, comprising three books; of the ZOE PRIME mystery series, comprising six books; of the ADELE SHARP mystery series, comprising

sixteen books, of the EUROPEAN VOYAGE cozy mystery series, comprising six books; of the LAURA FROST FBI suspense thriller, comprising eleven books; of the ELLA DARK FBI suspense thriller, comprising fourteen books (and counting); of the A YEAR IN EUROPE cozy mystery series, comprising nine books, of the AVA GOLD mystery series, comprising six books; of the RACHEL GIFT mystery series, comprising ten books (and counting); of the VALERIE LAW mystery series, comprising nine books (and counting); of the PAIGE KING mystery series, comprising eight books (and counting); of the MAY MOORE mystery series, comprising eleven books; of the CORA SHIELDS mystery series, comprising eight books (and counting); of the NICKY LYONS mystery series, comprising eight books (and counting), of the CAMI LARK mystery series, comprising eight books (and counting), of the AMBER YOUNG mystery series, comprising five books (and counting), of the DAISY FORTUNE mystery series, comprising five books (and counting), of the FIONA RED mystery series, comprising five books (and counting), and of the new FAITH BOLD mystery series, comprising five books (and counting).

[ONCE GONE](#) (a Riley Paige Mystery—Book #1), [BEFORE HE KILLS](#) (A Mackenzie White Mystery—Book 1), [CAUSE TO KILL](#) (An Avery Black Mystery—Book 1), [A TRACE OF DEATH](#) (A Keri Locke Mystery—Book 1), [WATCHING](#) (The Making of Riley Paige—Book 1), [NEXT DOOR](#) (A Chloe Fine Psychological Suspense Mystery—Book 1), [THE PERFECT WIFE](#) (A Jessie Hunt Psychological Suspense Thriller—Book One), [IF SHE KNEW](#) (A Kate Wise Mystery—Book 1), [MURDER \(AND BAKLAVA\)](#) (A European Voyage Cozy Mystery—Book 1), [LEFT TO DIE](#) (An Adele Sharp Mystery—Book One), [A MURDER IN PARIS](#) (A Year in Europe—Book 1), [CITY OF PREY](#) (An Ava Gold Mystery—Book One), and [HER LAST WISH](#) (A Rachel Gift FBI Suspense Thriller—Book One) are each available as a free download on Amazon!

An avid reader and lifelong fan of the mystery and thriller genres, Blake loves to hear from you, so please feel free to

visit www.blakepierceauthor.com to learn more and stay in touch.



BOOKS BY BLAKE PIERCE

FAITH BOLD MYSTERY SERIES

SO LONG (Book #1)

SO COLD (Book #2)

SO SCARED (Book #3)

SO NORMAL (Book #4)

SO FAR GONE (Book #5)

FIONA RED MYSTERY SERIES

LET HER GO (Book #1)

LET HER BE (Book #2)

LET HER HOPE (Book #3)

LET HER WISH (Book #4)

LET HER LIVE (Book #5)

DAISY FORTUNE MYSTERY SERIES

NEED YOU (Book #1)

CLAIM YOU (Book #2)

CRAVE YOU (Book #3)

CHOOSE YOU (Book #4)

CHASE YOU (Book #5)

AMBER YOUNG MYSTERY SERIES

ABSENT PITY (Book #1)

ABSENT REMORSE (Book #2)

ABSENT FEELING (Book #3)

ABSENT MERCY (Book #4)

ABSENT REASON (Book #5)

CAMI LARK MYSTERY SERIES

JUST ME (Book #1)

JUST OUTSIDE (Book #2)

JUST RIGHT (Book #3)

JUST FORGET (Book #4)

JUST ONCE (Book #5)

JUST HIDE (Book #6)

JUST NOW (Book #7)

JUST HOPE (Book #8)

NICKY LYONS MYSTERY SERIES

ALL MINE (Book #1)

ALL HIS (Book #2)

ALL HE SEES (Book #3)

ALL ALONE (Book #4)

ALL FOR ONE (Book #5)

ALL HE TAKES (Book #6)

ALL FOR ME (Book #7)

ALL IN (Book #8)

CORA SHIELDS MYSTERY SERIES

UNDONE (Book #1)

UNWANTED (Book #2)

UNHINGED (Book #3)

UNSAID (Book #4)
UNGLUED (Book #5)
UNSTABLE (Book #6)
UNKNOWN (Book #7)
UNAWARE (Book #8)

MAY MOORE SUSPENSE THRILLER

NEVER RUN (Book #1)
NEVER TELL (Book #2)
NEVER LIVE (Book #3)
NEVER HIDE (Book #4)
NEVER FORGIVE (Book #5)
NEVER AGAIN (Book #6)
NEVER LOOK BACK (Book #7)
NEVER FORGET (Book #8)
NEVER LET GO (Book #9)
NEVER PRETEND (Book #10)
NEVER HESITATE (Book #11)

PAIGE KING MYSTERY SERIES

THE GIRL HE PINED (Book #1)
THE GIRL HE CHOSE (Book #2)
THE GIRL HE TOOK (Book #3)
THE GIRL HE WISHED (Book #4)
THE GIRL HE CROWNED (Book #5)
THE GIRL HE WATCHED (Book #6)
THE GIRL HE WANTED (Book #7)
THE GIRL HE CLAIMED (Book #8)

VALERIE LAW MYSTERY SERIES

NO MERCY (Book #1)

NO PITY (Book #2)

NO FEAR (Book #3)

NO SLEEP (Book #4)

NO QUARTER (Book #5)

NO CHANCE (Book #6)

NO REFUGE (Book #7)

NO GRACE (Book #8)

NO ESCAPE (Book #9)

RACHEL GIFT MYSTERY SERIES

HER LAST WISH (Book #1)

HER LAST CHANCE (Book #2)

HER LAST HOPE (Book #3)

HER LAST FEAR (Book #4)

HER LAST CHOICE (Book #5)

HER LAST BREATH (Book #6)

HER LAST MISTAKE (Book #7)

HER LAST DESIRE (Book #8)

HER LAST REGRET (Book #9)

HER LAST HOUR (Book #10)

AVA GOLD MYSTERY SERIES

CITY OF PREY (Book #1)

CITY OF FEAR (Book #2)

CITY OF BONES (Book #3)

CITY OF GHOSTS (Book #4)

CITY OF DEATH (Book #5)

CITY OF VICE (Book #6)

A YEAR IN EUROPE

A MURDER IN PARIS (Book #1)

DEATH IN FLORENCE (Book #2)

VENGEANCE IN VIENNA (Book #3)

A FATALITY IN SPAIN (Book #4)

ELLA DARK FBI SUSPENSE THRILLER

GIRL, ALONE (Book #1)

GIRL, TAKEN (Book #2)

GIRL, HUNTED (Book #3)

GIRL, SILENCED (Book #4)

GIRL, VANISHED (Book 5)

GIRL ERASED (Book #6)

GIRL, FORSAKEN (Book #7)

GIRL, TRAPPED (Book #8)

GIRL, EXPENDABLE (Book #9)

GIRL, ESCAPED (Book #10)

GIRL, HIS (Book #11)

GIRL, LURED (Book #12)

GIRL, MISSING (Book #13)

GIRL, UNKNOWN (Book #14)

LAURA FROST FBI SUSPENSE THRILLER

ALREADY GONE (Book #1)

ALREADY SEEN (Book #2)
ALREADY TRAPPED (Book #3)
ALREADY MISSING (Book #4)
ALREADY DEAD (Book #5)
ALREADY TAKEN (Book #6)
ALREADY CHOSEN (Book #7)
ALREADY LOST (Book #8)
ALREADY HIS (Book #9)
ALREADY LURED (Book #10)
ALREADY COLD (Book #11)

EUROPEAN VOYAGE COZY MYSTERY SERIES

MURDER (AND BAKLAVA) (Book #1)
DEATH (AND APPLE STRUDEL) (Book #2)
CRIME (AND LAGER) (Book #3)
MISFORTUNE (AND GOUDA) (Book #4)
CALAMITY (AND A DANISH) (Book #5)
MAYHEM (AND HERRING) (Book #6)

ADELE SHARP MYSTERY SERIES

LEFT TO DIE (Book #1)
LEFT TO RUN (Book #2)
LEFT TO HIDE (Book #3)
LEFT TO KILL (Book #4)
LEFT TO MURDER (Book #5)
LEFT TO ENVY (Book #6)
LEFT TO LAPSE (Book #7)
LEFT TO VANISH (Book #8)

LEFT TO HUNT (Book #9)
LEFT TO FEAR (Book #10)
LEFT TO PREY (Book #11)
LEFT TO LURE (Book #12)
LEFT TO CRAVE (Book #13)
LEFT TO LOATHE (Book #14)
LEFT TO HARM (Book #15)
LEFT TO RUIN (Book #16)

THE AU PAIR SERIES

ALMOST GONE (Book#1)
ALMOST LOST (Book #2)
ALMOST DEAD (Book #3)

ZOE PRIME MYSTERY SERIES

FACE OF DEATH (Book#1)
FACE OF MURDER (Book #2)
FACE OF FEAR (Book #3)
FACE OF MADNESS (Book #4)
FACE OF FURY (Book #5)
FACE OF DARKNESS (Book #6)

**A JESSIE HUNT PSYCHOLOGICAL SUSPENSE
SERIES**

THE PERFECT WIFE (Book #1)
THE PERFECT BLOCK (Book #2)
THE PERFECT HOUSE (Book #3)
THE PERFECT SMILE (Book #4)

THE PERFECT LIE (Book #5)
THE PERFECT LOOK (Book #6)
THE PERFECT AFFAIR (Book #7)
THE PERFECT ALIBI (Book #8)
THE PERFECT NEIGHBOR (Book #9)
THE PERFECT DISGUISE (Book #10)
THE PERFECT SECRET (Book #11)
THE PERFECT FAÇADE (Book #12)
THE PERFECT IMPRESSION (Book #13)
THE PERFECT DECEIT (Book #14)
THE PERFECT MISTRESS (Book #15)
THE PERFECT IMAGE (Book #16)
THE PERFECT VEIL (Book #17)
THE PERFECT INDISCRETION (Book #18)
THE PERFECT RUMOR (Book #19)
THE PERFECT COUPLE (Book #20)
THE PERFECT MURDER (Book #21)
THE PERFECT HUSBAND (Book #22)
THE PERFECT SCANDAL (Book #23)
THE PERFECT MASK (Book #24)
THE PERFECT RUSE (Book #25)
THE PERFECT VENEER (Book #26)
THE PERFECT PEOPLE (Book #27)
THE PERFECT WITNESS (Book #28)

CHLOE FINE PSYCHOLOGICAL SUSPENSE SERIES

NEXT DOOR (Book #1)
A NEIGHBOR'S LIE (Book #2)

CUL DE SAC (Book #3)
SILENT NEIGHBOR (Book #4)
HOMECOMING (Book #5)
TINTED WINDOWS (Book #6)

KATE WISE MYSTERY SERIES

IF SHE KNEW (Book #1)
IF SHE SAW (Book #2)
IF SHE RAN (Book #3)
IF SHE HID (Book #4)
IF SHE FLED (Book #5)
IF SHE FEARED (Book #6)
IF SHE HEARD (Book #7)

THE MAKING OF RILEY PAIGE SERIES

WATCHING (Book #1)
WAITING (Book #2)
LURING (Book #3)
TAKING (Book #4)
STALKING (Book #5)
KILLING (Book #6)

RILEY PAIGE MYSTERY SERIES

ONCE GONE (Book #1)
ONCE TAKEN (Book #2)
ONCE CRAVED (Book #3)
ONCE LURED (Book #4)
ONCE HUNTED (Book #5)

ONCE PINED (Book #6)
ONCE FORSAKEN (Book #7)
ONCE COLD (Book #8)
ONCE STALKED (Book #9)
ONCE LOST (Book #10)
ONCE BURIED (Book #11)
ONCE BOUND (Book #12)
ONCE TRAPPED (Book #13)
ONCE DORMANT (Book #14)
ONCE SHUNNED (Book #15)
ONCE MISSED (Book #16)
ONCE CHOSEN (Book #17)

MACKENZIE WHITE MYSTERY SERIES

BEFORE HE KILLS (Book #1)
BEFORE HE SEES (Book #2)
BEFORE HE COVETS (Book #3)
BEFORE HE TAKES (Book #4)
BEFORE HE NEEDS (Book #5)
BEFORE HE FEELS (Book #6)
BEFORE HE SINS (Book #7)
BEFORE HE HUNTS (Book #8)
BEFORE HE PREYS (Book #9)
BEFORE HE LONGS (Book #10)
BEFORE HE LAPSES (Book #11)
BEFORE HE ENVIES (Book #12)
BEFORE HE STALKS (Book #13)
BEFORE HE HARMS (Book #14)

AVERY BLACK MYSTERY SERIES

CAUSE TO KILL (Book #1)

CAUSE TO RUN (Book #2)

CAUSE TO HIDE (Book #3)

CAUSE TO FEAR (Book #4)

CAUSE TO SAVE (Book #5)

CAUSE TO DREAD (Book #6)

KERI LOCKE MYSTERY SERIES

A TRACE OF DEATH (Book #1)

A TRACE OF MURDER (Book #2)

A TRACE OF VICE (Book #3)

A TRACE OF CRIME (Book #4)

A TRACE OF HOPE (Book #5)