

SHENANDOAH SHADOWS NOVELLA 8

CHASED



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BROWN STREET BOOKS

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HOT AIR RUFFLED RYAN HAYES' hair. Shards of window glass showered over him, and the tall flames that shot from his car's engine bay lit the night sky. He kept his head lowered. Moments earlier, when the explosion detonated and the driver's side door flew loose from his car and sailed through the air, Ryan had hit the pavement, wrapped his arms over his head, and covered his face with his forearms.

He stayed curled in a protective ball on the ground until his jagged breathing regulated and his drumming heartbeat slowed. Then he swallowed hard and pushed himself up with trembling arms to survey the damage. His car was a blackened husk. The fire danced wildly from the hood and dark smoke rose in the air.

He scabbled on the ground until his hand connected with his key fob. He grabbed the square of molded black plastic, barely bigger than his thumb, and shoved it into his pocket as he staggered to his feet and gaped at the wreckage of his sedan. Ryan stood for a long time and watched his car burn, mesmerized by the licking flames.

Then his hearing came back, all at once, as if someone had ripped a pair of thick earmuffs from his ears. A faint, persistent ringing accompanied the return of sound. He swiveled his head, looking for the source of the noise—an alarm? Eventually, he realized it was coming from within his head. Tinnitus from the blast, most likely.

The thought—a hypothesis he formed by considering the evidence at hand—unjammed his frozen mental processes. As Ryan’s brain came back online, he realized three things he needed to do: One, get away from the scene—now. Two, talk to Jake. Three, and most important of all, stay away from Leilah Khan until he figured out who wanted him dead and why.

He backed away from his car, turned to cut through the parking lot, and headed into the woods. They were the very same woods he and Leilah had run through approximately twelve hours earlier as they’d fled a car wreck and three armed men. As he raced away from the Potomac Private Services campus, Ryan pulled out the prepaid cell phone he’d purchased earlier in the day—a day that was shaping up to be the most eventful twenty-four hours of his life.

It had been one helluva day. Terrifying and exhausting, true. But, thanks to Leilah, also thrilling and exhilarating. At the moment, he allowed, the terror and fatigue were winning.

He keyed Jake’s cell phone into the flip phone’s number pad and jogged through the trees. The overcast sky, thick with clouds, muted the starlight, rendering the woods dark and shadowy. He hewed close to the deer fence. As long as he kept the fence to his left, the road would be to his right.

“West,” Ryan’s boss answered on the second ring.

Jake’s tone was tired and unwelcoming. Ryan didn’t care.

“It’s Hayes. Someone blew up my car.”

The fatigue vanished from Jake’s voice. “Where? How?”

“In the parking lot at work. I was the last to leave, so I locked up. Waited for Omar and Leilah to roll out, then hit the remote starter while I was walking toward the Accord.”

“Why? What made you use the starter? Do you usually?”

Ryan thought. “In the winter, mainly. To get the heat going before I get in.”

“It’s April.”

“Nothing gets past you. It’s forty degrees and windy. I figured I’d earned a warm car after the day I had.”

Jake grunted. “Fair. So, you hit the button to start the engine and the car exploded?”

“That sums it up.”

“Huh. So someone wired an explosive device to your ignition. Most likely.”

“My car was on campus all day.”

“I’m aware. Where are you now?”

“I took off. Standing around seemed like a bad idea.”

“Leaving was the right call. Where’d you go?”

“I’m headed toward the driving club. Not for any good reason. Just because it’s nearby and I can stay off public roads.”

Even as he explained his reasoning, Ryan realized his plan was a terrible one.

Jake gave voice to the problem. “Don’t go there. Assuming the bomber is the same person who sabotaged Leilah’s brakes, they have access to the driving club.”

He was right. Ryan stopped in his tracks. His heart thudded in his chest, and his mind raced as he regrouped, scrambled to make a new, less stupid plan.

Jake went on. “You know that old vegetable stand out on the side of the highway?”

He knew it. “Sure. It’s part of that farm you bought.”

“You can jump the fence in the old cow pasture and follow the tractor path down to the stand. It’s right by the shoulder of Old Mill Road. Wait for me there. I’m coming to pick you up.”

“I don’t want to involve you in—”

“Tough. I’ll be there in fifteen.”

He frowned. “It’s at least a thirty-minute drive from your place.”

“I said what I said.”

Relief coursed through Ryan’s body at the prospect of Jake’s assistance. Then another thought struck him. “Wait, what if I can’t get into the structure? What’s the backup spot?”

Jake laughed. “You’ll be able to get in. Olivia kicked the lock off the door when she and Trent were on the run from the FBI. That’s actually how I ended up buying the property. The absentee landlord sent me a bill to repair the lock on that falling-down shack and I took the whole place off his hands.”

Despite his predicament, Ryan grinned. “Classic. See you in fifteen, and thanks, Jake.”

“Don’t mention it. Stay frosty.”

Ryan ended the call and crossed the dark road. Jake had said ‘jump the fence’ as if it was a daily activity. It might be for the rest of Jake’s employees, but not for him. *You can do this. You dunked on Omar the last time you played one-on-one.*

He *had* dunked, but he had a sneaking suspicion the old middle school basketball court near the Khan family’s home didn’t have its hoops set at regulation height. Still, how hard could it be to climb over a fence?

He slung his laptop bag across his chest, rolled his neck, and shook out his legs. It was time to find out.

RIDING in her brother's giant Suburban was akin to driving around on a couch, Leilah Khan thought as she nestled against the passenger seat headrest and allowed her tired eyes to close. Leilah's cars were built for speed, not comfort. She was accustomed to feeling every bump and curve when she drove. Ordinarily, she'd tease Omar for his SUV's stodgy performance. But she was exhausted. Too fatigued to engage in the time-honored pastime of ribbing her sibling.

Omar, however, wasn't too tired to needle her. "I can't believe you've sunk your claws in Hayes," he said. "Hope he knows what he's getting into."

She opened her eyes halfway. "My claws? What am I, a bear?"

He seemed to consider the question seriously. "No. A lion. Lioness? Tigress? Some kind of fast, ferocious feline."

She bobbed her head from side to side as she decided whether to argue the point. But the comparison wasn't inaccurate, so she accepted it. The rest of Omar's statement was pure crap, though. That, she would address.

"Listen, I know Ryan's your best friend. I'm not going to hurt him."

He side-eyed her for a moment before returning his attention to the road. "Simmer down, I'm only kidding. Well, mostly kidding."

“He was so worried about how you’d react if we got together.”

“I am worried. I just told you. I’m worried you’re going to break his heart.”

She rolled her eyes. “No, you doofus. He was worried you’d think it was inappropriate for him to make a move on your little sister. You know, some brothers are protective that way.”

The dig wasn’t entirely fair. Omar was protective of her. Or he tried to be, at least. She’d spent her entire life rejecting his efforts to baby her.

“Wait, wait. *He* moved on *you*? I would have bet a month’s pay that you made the move.”

“Gee, thanks.”

They were silent for a few seconds, then she laughed. “I guess I did. I mean, I didn’t. But he thought I did.”

Omar raised an eyebrow. “How’s that work?”

“I reached over to unfasten his harness after the ride-along. He thought I was leaning in for a kiss, so he planted one on me.”

“And the rest is history?”

“Well, after he wrestled with his conscience for a while, yeah.”

Omar sighed. “I hate to get gooey, but I’m glad you’re together. I think you’ll be good for each other. But, I’m serious, Leilah. Don’t hurt him.”

She treated him to another dramatic eye roll. “We’re not teenagers. We’re fully grown adult humans with the maturity to be honest and authentic. Nobody’s getting hurt.”

“Good.”

She mused, “Do you know what I really like about him? He’s reliable. He said he’d call me in the morning, and I don’t have to wonder if he really will. I know he will.”

He scrunched up his face. “Okay, that’s enough talk about your love life.”

“Great, let’s talk about yours. When are you going to ask Marielle out?”

He switched on the radio and turned up the volume. “What’s that? I can’t hear you over the music.”

She laughed, then decided to let him off the hook. She closed her eyes again. Later, she’d wonder if they’d have heard the detonation if the radio had been off. Or if she’d have glimpsed the fireball in the sky had her eyes been open.

But, at the moment that Ryan’s car exploded, she was half-asleep, daydreaming about seeing him in the morning. She had no way of knowing that Ryan Hayes was about to ghost her.

THE ROADSIDE STAND gave new meaning to the word ‘dilapidated.’ But Ryan was profoundly grateful for the structure’s protection and shelter. Hidden inside the shed, shielded from view by its rotting walls and collapsing roof, he felt safe. His sense of safety was, he knew, nothing but a mirage. A false promise. The person or persons trying to kill him wouldn’t be thwarted by a decrepit shack.

All the same, he indulged his feeling of security. His day had been long and harrowing, and the dark, quiet haven soothed him enough that he closed his eyes and rested his head against the splintered wood of the wall until he heard the rumble of Jake’s engine approaching. He opened his eyes in time to watch Jake pull off the road, navigate the Jeep across the shoulder and up a bumpy dirt path, and bring the vehicle to a stop directly in front of the busted door, which hung lopsidedly from its hinges.

Jake leaned across the interior compartment and pushed the passenger door open. “Get in.”

Ryan slipped from the shed and into the Jeep in one fast, liquid movement. Jake was already driving down the berm when Ryan pulled the door closed and fastened his seatbelt.

“As your lawyer, I strongly suggest you tear down that stand before it collapses on a small child or a group of nuns.”

“Noted,” Jake said with a grin. “It’s a legitimate concern given all the preschools and convents around here.”

“So what’s the plan?”

Jake's grin evaporated and he got down to business. "I'm taking you to my cabin. Chelsea's getting you a go-bag ready. We'll feed you and pump you full of coffee. Then you can take her car and get the hell out of Dodge."

"Cut and run? That's the plan?" He frowned. "I'm no logistician, but how am I going to get to the bottom of this if I'm on the run?"

"How do you plan to get to the bottom of this if you're dead?" Jake countered.

Ryan nodded and stared out at the dark farmland rolling by. He didn't like it, but Jake was right. They drove in silence for a long while, then he said, "Okay. What about the cops?"

"What about them?"

Ryan eyed his boss. "We probably should have reported the break-in at the storage facility, and we definitely need to report the bombing."

Jake palmed the wheel as he turned off the highway and onto the steep, narrow road that cut through the side of the mountain and led to his cabin. "I hear you. But until we know who we're dealing with, we need to limit local law enforcement involvement."

A frown creased Ryan's lips. "I know you had your differences with Joe Markham, but the department cleaned house after his death."

"Differences. You're hilarious."

Chief Markham had tried to kill Jake and Chelsea and had been buried alive in a collapsing cave for his efforts.

"*Strong* differences. You think the department's still dirty?"

Jake thought for a moment, then shook his head. "No. But I think we don't know what we're dealing with. And we do know the Shenandoah Falls PD isn't equipped to do much more than issue speeding tickets, break up domestic disputes, and investigate purse snatchings." He lifted one hand from the steering wheel to ward off the protest Ryan was about to make.

“In the morning, I’ll call the station. That rookie, Halloran, he’s not a complete potted plant. I’ll talk to him.”

“And say what?”

“I’ll tell him the barn was broken into but that nothing was stolen.”

Ryan shot him a sidelong glance.

“What? They didn’t take anything. They moved a steel road barrier to another area of the campus.”

“To crash Leilah’s car.”

“Sure, but that’s not for me to report. That’s for her to report—if she wants to.”

“Someone tampered with her brakes, Jake.”

“And we’re pulling all the security footage from her garage and the driving club. Her chief mechanic is going over the car. I trust Keisha to do the crash forensics more than I trust the Shenandoah Falls police. Don’t you?”

“She has the expertise,” Ryan grudgingly agreed.

“Right. If it makes you feel better, once Keisha’s examined the car and we’ve looked at all the footage, I’ll ask Leilah to call Halloran.”

Ryan grunted. “And the car bomb?”

The motion-sensing lights blared to life as Jake approached his long driveway. Ryan knew that, inside the cabin, the small monitor in the kitchen would be displaying video of the Jeep drawing near.

“I’ll mention it, in passing. We’ll play it off like a training exercise in disarming improvised explosive devices that got out of hand. I sent a team out to douse the fire and tow your sedan to our garage. We need to keep your name out of the news.”

“Won’t whoever tried to blow me up wonder what happened?”

“Sure will. And the radio silence might flush them out.”

Jake circled the house and parked in the back. Ryan raised an eyebrow. The cabin was perched on a rise with a three-hundred-and-sixty-degree view. The nearest neighbors were several miles away down in the valley. There were no prying eyes to see him get out of the Jeep. The fact that Jake was taking the precaution made Ryan feel worse, not better. If his unseen enemies had eyes on Jake's fortress of solitude, the situation was even grimmer than Ryan believed.

They exited the Jeep and jogged up the back stairs to the wraparound deck. Another burst of bright halogen light pierced the darkness as the rear floodlights switched on.

"Did Cyrus Ahmadi play me?" Ryan asked. The thought had been rattling around inside his brain ever since he'd watched the Accord combust. The billionaire had both the human resources and the capital to get to Ryan anywhere—even Jake's heavily secured home.

Jake pressed his index finger against the reader on the keyless lock and shook his head. "I don't think Ahmadi's our guy. My sense is he's exactly what Olivia and Leilah think he is—a creep who views women as objects. Leilah's made it clear that she'd rather chew her arm off than be with Ahmadi. So, getting rid of you doesn't help him. He'll have to find a new woman to obsess over."

The fingerprint reader confirmed his identity with a soft beep, and the lock disengaged. He shouldered the door open. "No, this, whatever this is, isn't about Leilah. It's about you, brother."

Ryan trailed him into the cabin's open, airy kitchen. Chelsea flew around the big center island and grabbed Ryan by the arms.

"Are you sure you aren't hurt?" She studied him with wide, worried green eyes.

"I'm fine. Just shaken up."

Jake dropped a kiss on the crown of his fiancée's head. She released Ryan and planted a hard kiss on Jake's mouth in return but didn't linger.

“Okay, job one is getting some coffee into you two. Although I’m not sure Ryan needs the caffeine.”

Jake shook his head as he pulled three mugs down from the open shelving. “That adrenaline buzz is gonna fade soon, and he’ll crash hard.”

Chelsea poured the coffee and Jake plunked a tray of cheese, nuts, and jerky onto the island.

Ryan collapsed onto one of the high swivel chairs at the island and slumped against the seat back. He wrapped his hands around the glazed ceramic mug and let the heat soak into his skin.

Jake plopped down next to him. “Eat,” he ordered.

Chelsea sipped her coffee and considered him over the rim of her mug. “I heard what you two were talking about. If anything, the bombing should convince you that Ahmadi’s being truthful. Leila and Omar left the campus unscathed. You’re the one who was nearly blown into pieces. She’s not in danger. You are.”

Ryan swallowed a handful of almonds, then said, “I’d like to keep it that way. Assuming Ahmadi’s right, and I’m the target, if whoever’s targeting me finds out about Leilah, they might go after her to hurt me. Right?”

Jake nodded.

“So, if I agree to skip town, I need to know Potomac will protect her.”

At that, Jake guffawed. “As if her brother isn’t going to see to that. Of course, we’ll keep her safe.”

Ryan swallowed audibly. “Thanks. I’ll call her before I—”

“—No. You can’t talk to her.”

Chelsea and Ryan both blinked at Jake.

She asked the question before Ryan could. “Why not?”

“Because he’s right. She’s a way to get to him. She can’t know anything. It’s for her own safety.”

Ryan frowned. "I have to say goodbye."

"Can't," Jake insisted.

There was no arguing with Jake when he used his captain-giving-orders tone. Ryan knew all too well that the conversation would be fruitless, so he moved on.

"I have my laptop, but I don't think I should bring it with me." He swung the bag up onto the island. "Maybe Marielle and the geeks could go over it to make sure nobody's installed any sniffer software on it."

If someone had put spyware on his device, Marielle would find it.

"Good call. Do you want to print the documents from the drive Ahmadi gave you? I can fire up the printer in my office."

Ryan shook his head. "No need. I'll have computer access where I'm going. Don't worry. It won't be traceable."

"You sure?"

"Positive. I used to sneak away to think there when I needed some peace and quiet."

Jake studied him as if deciding whether he wanted to know more. After a moment, he must've decided he didn't. He nodded. "Okay. Leave the laptop and the burner phone. I'll give you a fresh one."

He handed it over; Jake placed it on top of the laptop bag and turned to Chelsea. "Did you have a chance to put together a go-bag for him?"

By way of answer, she lifted a duffle bag from the floor by her feet and passed it to Ryan. "You've got clothes, toiletries, some non-perishable food, and a basic first aid kit. The clothes are Jake's, so they're not your style, but they should fit you pretty well."

"What? No blazers and slacks?" Ryan cracked.

She gave him a faint smile, then cocked her head to the side. "Do you think you'll need survival gear?"

"Like what?"

“A tent, sleeping roll, fire starters, utility knife, water filtration kit ... things like that.”

“Oh, man, I hope not.” He had less than zero interest in roughing it.

“There’s no harm in throwing that stuff in the back of the Subaru,” Jake pointed out.

Ryan shrugged. “I guess it couldn’t hurt.” Hope for the best, prepare for the worst was, after all, the lawyer’s unofficial creed.

Chelsea nodded. “I’ll pack the car. Most everything you’ll need is already in the garage. It’ll only take me a few minutes.” She reached into her pocket, pulled out a cell phone, and pressed it into Ryan’s hand. “This is fully charged, and I programmed all our numbers into the address book. The charger’s in the duffle bag.”

“Thank you, both of you,” Ryan said as she crossed the room and took a fleece jacket off a hook near the door.

She pulled it on over her head and grabbed her keys. “You’d do the same for us,” she said, flashing him a smile before she left.

“I’m not sure I’m the one you should come to if you ever need to go on the run,” he told Jake.

Jake slapped him on the back and slid from the chair to his feet. “You’re the one we come to when we get in trouble with the law, which is an equally valuable service. Come on, I need to get something from my office.”

Ryan pocketed the phone, shouldered the duffel, and followed Jake into his small, spotless office. The room may not have been large, but the view, in the daylight, was vast and sweeping as a wall of glass displayed the verdant valleys, the dense trees, and the purple ridges of the Shenandoah Mountains. Right now, it revealed only an impenetrable wall of darkness.

Jake flicked on his desk lamp and used its amber glow to see as he opened the biometric safe hidden behind one of the wide oak wall panels. From the safe, he removed a boxy black

gun, a carton of ammunition, and a thick stack of rubber-banded cash.

“Did I just walk into a mafia movie?”

Jake lowered his chin and gave Ryan an unamused look. “You’re in danger, Hayes. The kind of danger that gets people killed. Until we get it sorted—and we will—you need to embrace your primal nature.”

“My primal nature,” he repeated.

“I’m not suggesting you lose sight of your moral compass or throw your integrity out the window. But I speak from experience—when bad people come for you, you need to be ready.”

Ryan’s shoulders tensed and his gut clenched at the grim warning, but he protested anyway. “I’m not going to shoot anyone, Jake. Come on.”

“That’s a choice you can make. If you have a weapon, you have a choice. If you don’t”

He stared at Ryan. Ryan stared at the gun. After a long pause, Ryan sighed. “If I don’t, I don’t.”

Jake placed the weapon down on the desk in front of Ryan. “It’s not loaded. Do you know how to load it and shoot it?”

Ryan nodded. “I’ve been to the range with Omar a few times.” He didn’t add that he’d hated the experience.

“Good. Remember. Never point the weapon at someone or something you’re not willing to kill. Not ever.”

Bile rose in his throat and he forced it back. “Understood.” He unzipped the bag and nestled the gun inside, wrapping it in a thick thermal shirt. Then he tucked the box of ammunition into the bag as well.

“Don’t forget the money.”

Ryan eyed the brick of bills. “If I get pulled over, how do I explain this?”

“You’re the lawyer. Talk your way out of it.”

“Talk my way out of a gun that I’m not licensed to possess and a gangster roll? I’m a lawyer, not a Jedi knight.”

Jake nodded. “In that case, don’t get pulled over.”

The kitchen door opened, then shut. The alarm system beeped as Chelsea armed it.

“Jake? Ryan?” she called.

Jake waved his hand in a hurry-up motion, and Ryan shoved the wad of bills into the bag and zipped it shut.

“In my office,” Jake called. “But we’re finished in here.”

He turned out the light and ushered Ryan out of the room. Chelsea stood in the hallway, dangling the keys to her Forester from one finger.

“You’re all set.” She gave Jake a searching look. “Does he have everything he needs?”

Something about her words and the way she said them told Ryan she wasn’t oblivious to the contents of Jake’s office safe.

“All set,” Ryan told her, snagging her keyring from her. “Thanks again.”

“Stop thanking us. Go. We’ll be in touch when we know something.” Jake gave him a one-armed hug.

Chelsea pulled him into a tighter hug. “Be careful.”

“I will.” He searched her face. “You’ll take care of Leilah for me?”

“Yes,” Jake promised.

But Ryan was talking to Chelsea. Leilah would need to lean on her friends. Luckily, she had some of the sturdiest friends imaginable. Chelsea nodded.

Jake walked him out to the car and gripped Ryan’s shoulder. “I’m personally going to review every client file, every project, every scrap of paper that you touched for Potomac until I find out who’s behind this.”

The vow was meant to reassure him, but he knew deep in his gut that Jake was about to embark on a wild goose chase.

He'd already scoured his mental records. Nothing he'd worked on for Jake should have made him a target. Not like this.

No, someone else wanted him dead. Unfortunately, he had no idea who. Or why. But he wasn't going to find the answers standing in Jake West's driveway. So, he nodded goodbye and slid behind the wheel.

WHEN LEILAH BURST into Chelsea's store, she made no effort to do so quietly. Chelsea, who was behind the counter checking in an order of wool hiking socks, looked up as the door shut with a bang and the bell hanging above it rang wildly.

"Where is he?" Leilah demanded as she strode through the outfitters' tidy rows of clothing and gear.

"Good morning to you, too," Chelsea said.

Leilah glared at her.

"Oh-kay." She set the socks aside and called to the teenager shelving sunscreen, "Logan, watch the register for me for a little while. I'll be in my office."

He nodded his understanding, and Chelsea walked out from behind the counter, gesturing for Leilah to follow her.

Once she'd trailed Chelsea into her cozy office, Leilah closed the door and fisted her hands on her hips. "Well? Where is he?"

Chelsea twirled a finger through one of her long braids. "I'm assuming the he in question is Ryan?"

"Of course I'm talking about Ryan." Leilah squinted at her. "You're stalling. You do know where he is."

She hadn't really expected Chelsea to know anything, but she'd exhausted all other avenues. When Ryan didn't call and didn't show up, she figured she'd pop in and surprise him at

work. The surprise had been hers. When she walked into Potomac's offices, she instantly felt the undercurrent of shock and worry running through the company's employees.

At first, she'd thought she was imagining it. But when she reached Ryan's office and Omar sprinted down the hall to intercept her, his expression made it clear that whatever was going on, it wasn't her imagination.

"Hey, sis," he'd panted as he awkwardly leaned against the office door, effectively blocking her path.

"Hey yourself, weirdo. Move."

Instead of getting out of her way, he'd led her to Olivia's office, where Olivia and Marielle gently broke the news that Ryan's car had been bombed and he'd had to leave town.

Now, she locked eyes with Chelsea and waited. She noticed, as she stared at her friend, that Chelsea looked tired. Dark smudges ringed her green eyes, and her freckles stood out more than usual because she was pale and drawn.

Of course. Ryan would have called Jake after the bombing. Chelsea was probably up half the night while they dealt with the aftermath.

"What did they tell you?" Chelsea finally asked.

"Nothing." Although Leilah couldn't keep the fury out of her voice, she managed not to shout. "They told me about the explosion and that Ryan wasn't hurt, but they said they were under orders from Jake not to tell me anything else. But you don't work for Jake. So, you can talk to me."

Chelsea pursed her lips. "What else do you want to know?"

"Where is he? Where did Ryan go?"

"They couldn't have told you that if they wanted to. They don't know where he is. Nobody does."

"Nobody?" Leilah repeated in disbelief. "Yeah, right."

"It's true. Listen, you're right. I *don't* work for Jake, so I'll tell you what I do know. Just sit down, okay? All the pacing is

making me nervous.”

Until Chelsea said it, Leilah didn't realize she was pacing. Actually, she was prowling back and forth across the office floor like a panther or one of the other big cats Omar compared her to.

“Sorry. I move when I'm agitated,” she explained, dropping into the guest chair in front of Chelsea's desk.

Chelsea perched on the edge of her desk. “Yeah, I noticed.”

“Okay, I'm sitting. Now talk to me. Please.”

“Ryan called not long after Jake finally got home. It was almost one in the morning. All Jake told me was that Ryan's car blew up when he used the remote starter. It was only a few minutes after you and Omar left.”

“That much they told me.”

Chelsea nodded. “Jake asked me to put together a bag for Ryan and then left to pick him up.”

“What kind of bag?”

“Essentials—clothes, food, toiletries. I charged one of the clean burner phones that Jake keeps in his office and programmed everyone's numbers into it. Yours, too, of course.”

“Wait. Back up. Your man has a cache of burners at his home office?”

“Among other things. What can I say? He has an unusual job.” She gave Leilah a little shrug.

“Huh. Okay, go on.”

“I put on some coffee and got some snacks ready. High-protein stuff that would fuel him for a while. When the guys arrived, we got some food and coffee into Ryan, and then sent him on his way.”

“How?”

“How?” she repeated.

“His Accord is a charred husk of metal. What’s he driving?”

“Oh, my Subaru.”

“And you and Jake honestly don’t know where he went?”

Chelsea shook her head thoughtfully. “I don’t think Jake wanted to know. And he doesn’t want you to know anything because whoever’s trying to kill Ryan might try to get to him through you. The more you know, the more danger you’re in.”

Leilah narrowed her eyes. “Then why are you filling me in?”

“Well, for one, because you came busting into my place of business like your hair was on fire. But, more than that, Jake did this to me, remember? When you found that tracker in my key fob, he told everyone not to tell me.”

She did remember. “Right.”

“And *you* told me.”

“Because I don’t work for Jake West either.”

“That and because you knew I had the right to know. Look, I love Jake, obviously. He genuinely means well. But he’s wrong about what people—civilians like us—can and can’t handle. And I’ll tell you something else, I got the very strong sense that Ryan wanted me to tell you what I could.”

The fist of anger gripping Leilah’s chest loosened. “Really?” Leilah blinked back the tears that threatened to fall.

“Really,” Chelsea assured her with a gentle smile.

“And you don’t have *any* idea where he went?”

“Well, I gave him camping gear, just in case. But he said he wasn’t planning to rough it. Wherever he was going, he said he’d have access to a computer and the internet that couldn’t be traced back to him.”

Leilah frowned. “Anything else?”

Chelsea tugged on the end of her braid and thought. “He said something like the place he was going was somewhere he

used to go when he needed peace and quiet to think.” She made an apologetic face. “Sorry, I know that’s not very helpful.”

But Leilah sat bolt upright. “Peace and quiet?”

“That’s what he said.”

She shot up from the chair and squeezed Chelsea tightly. “Thank you. Thank you so much.”

Chelsea hugged her back, wide-eyed. “Uh, you’re welcome?”

“I know where he went,” Leilah explained.

“You do?”

“Yeah. I gotta go. I’ll talk to you later. You’re the best, Chels.”

She raced out of the office. Chelsea hopped down from the desk and ran after her.

“Leilah, no. You can’t go after him. It’s too dangerous.”

Leilah heard her friend’s desperate shouting behind her and picked up her pace. She had to get to D.C. or at least out of Shenandoah Falls before Jake found out what she was up to and tried to stop her.

She tore through the store and burst into the parking lot. She had Alia, her second-favorite Porsche, in gear and was squealing out of the lot by the time Chelsea burst through the shop’s front doors, still yelling for Leilah to stop.

Not a chance, Leilah thought.

She had a fast car and knew how to drive it.

THE LATE MORNING sunlight streaming through the leaded glass windows of the Seamus McGillicuddy Archive and History Center cast a soft glow over the papers spread out in front of Ryan. The wide tree-lined street outside bustled with activity, but he focused solely on the papers spread out before him on the oak carrel's surface.

He shook his head. He was stymied, unable to see what Cyrus Ahmadi had seen in this information. How had Ahmadi known someone was after Ryan? He flipped through the pages again. He was missing something. He ran his hands through his hair in frustration, removed his glasses, and rubbed the bridge of his nose. He'd been staring at the documents for nearly two hours without a break. He was just about to get up and stretch his legs when Maggie O'Donnell popped her head into the otherwise empty room.

"Fancy a spot of tea, Ryan?" the older woman asked in a near whisper despite the fact that he was, as usual, the only visitor to the Seamus McGillicuddy Archive.

"That would be wonderful, Mrs. O'Donnell."

"How many years have I been telling you to call me Maggie?" She smiled. "I'll be back in a jiffy with the tea."

Once upon a time, Ryan had felt guilty for dropping into the archives when he had no interest in or intention of studying the papers of the late seafarer Seamus McGillicuddy. But he soon realized that being the head archivist in charge of the papers of a long-dead shipping magnate was a dull job,

verging on boring. So during the years Ryan had spent in DC, he and Mrs. O'Donnell had developed a friendship. Whenever he needed quiet to work without interruption or to think through a thorny problem, he'd show up at the archives. After a few hours of undisturbed concentration, he'd have tea with the lonely archivist and listen to the latest news about her grandkids, the highlights from her vacations with her husband, and her book recommendations. It was a mutually beneficial relationship.

He gathered the printouts and papers into a neat stack and turned them face down as her footsteps sounded in the hall outside the door. He carried over the chair from the next carrel. A moment later, she returned bearing a tray that held a teapot, two mugs, and an assortment of cookies.

She sat down, lifted the teapot, and poured. "It's lovely to see you, Ryan. It's been too long. So, tell me, are you in town for your new job?"

"More of a personal project," he hedged. The less Maggie O'Donnell knew about the situation, the safer she'd be.

"Oh, I see. Well, whatever the reason, I'm glad you stopped in to visit."

"How's Timothy?"

She filled him in on her husband's gardening endeavors and their upcoming trip to Ireland and Scotland for their fiftieth anniversary. Then she said, "What about you? Is there a young lady in the picture?"

He bit back a laugh. Maggie worried more about his love life or lack thereof than his actual mother had when she'd been alive.

"I know, I know," she said, misreading his silence. "You're so busy with work. But Ryan, a nice young man like you should—"

"Actually, there is someone."

"Oh, you've met a girl!"

"I've known her for a long time."

“Friendship first,” she said, her eyes twinkling. “That’s what I always say. That’s how Timothy and I began. As friends.”

“Leilah’s the younger sister of my childhood best friend. We’ve been friends for twenty-five years.”

“Cupid finally drew an arrow, did he?”

“I think Cupid drew that arrow a long time ago. It took me a while to act on it.”

“And what does Leilah do?”

“She’s a professional race car driver.” He waited for her reaction.

She didn’t disappoint. She gasped, “My goodness, how dangerous!”

Ryan had thought so too, twenty-four hours ago. But now he knew what true danger was.

“She’s very good at what she does.”

“You sound smitten.” She took a bite of her butter cookie and gave him a knowing look.

He drained his cup of tea and she took the hint. “Well, I should let you get back to your work.”

He helped her load the tray and offered to carry it to the kitchen for her, but she waved him away. “Nonsense. It’ll give me something to do.”

Before she bustled out of the room, he said, “I enjoyed our chat, Maggie.”

She beamed at his use of her first name.

As she closed the door behind her, he heard her greeting someone in the hallway. He blinked in surprise. In all the years that he’d been coming to the archives, he could count on the fingers of one hand how many times there’d been another visitor. Maggie would be thrilled if someone had finally developed an interest in the copious diaries, bills of lading, and weather reports that filled the drawers of the reading room.

He flipped his pages back over to return to his fruitless and frustrating review. The door opened, and a shadow fell between him and the light from the windows.

“Finding anything interesting?” a familiar voice asked.

He blinked and jerked his head up. “What are you doing here?”

“Well, I’m not here to research the life and times of Seamus McGillicuddy,” Leilah snarked. “I’m looking for you. I guess I found you.”

“No. You shouldn’t be here.”

“Yet here I am.”

“It’s not safe for you to be here, Leilah. Someone blew up my car.”

“I know. I had to hear it from my friends.”

Her voice shook with anger, but he could tell that her outrage was a mask designed to conceal other, more unsettling emotions like worry and fear.

“I can see that you’re upset, and I’m sorry about that. But I had to get out of town, and everyone agreed that letting you know what was going on would put you in danger. Scratch that. It would put you in *more* danger.”

“I’m not a child. I can take care of myself.”

“I know you can. But look at it from my perspective. I don’t want to bring trouble to your door. Cyrus Ahmadi was right. Whoever messed with your brakes yesterday was going after me. You could have been hurt, or worse—because of me. Until I find out who’s behind all this, you need to stay away from me.”

She pushed back the chair that Maggie O’Donnell had vacated and flung herself into it. “Make me.”

“Pardon?” he said.

“I said make me,” she enunciated.

“Leilah.”

“Ryan.”

He swept up the papers in frustration and stuffed them back into his bag. “There’s a good Mediterranean place around the corner. Let’s grab lunch, and you can tell me how the devil you knew I’d be here.”

She stuck out her lower lip while she considered the offer. “Okay,” she said, finally. “But you’re not off the hook. I’m still irritated with you.”

“Understood. Let me say goodbye to Mrs. O’Donnell and I’ll meet you out front.”

“You don’t want to introduce me to your friend?”

“Do you want to eat sometime in the next four hours? If she sees you, she’s going to ask you a million questions and show you pictures of her grandchildren. Besides, I’m assuming you have some exotic sports car parked out front?”

“Alia. She’s a Guards red Porsche 911. She’s no Marie, but she’s a good girl,” she confirmed.

“You can park her behind the building. I’ll let Mrs. O’Donnell know.”

“Fine.” She swept out of the room.

LEILAH ATTACKED her falafel pita with gusto. Ryan was equally interested in his gyro. So they ate in silence for a few moments, focusing on their food.

Then he said, “I hated to leave town without saying goodbye.”

“Yet, you did.” She sipped her hot mint tea and eyed him over the table.

He pushed his plate aside, propped his forearms on the table, and reached for her hands. She hesitated, but only for a few seconds, before she relented and placed her hands in his.

“The only reason I’m alive right now is because I didn’t want to sit on a cold seat. I started the car with the key fob to warm it up. It’s April. I almost never use the remote start function except in the middle of winter. By rights, I should be dead.”

“But you did use it, and you’re alive.” She squeezed his hands.

“Sure. And what if I had driven you home last night instead of Omar?”

“But, Ryan, you didn’t.”

“I can’t stop thinking about what might have happened. It’s how my mind works. I look at every situation and consider the worst-case scenario. That’s my legal training.”

She took her time responding. “Well, I look at every situation, consider the worst-case scenario, and then devise a way around it. That’s my driving training. If there’s an oil spill on track, I don’t just drive through it and hope for the best. I change my line. I avoid it. Recognizing a danger doesn’t make it inevitable. And shutting me out solves nothing.”

“I’m not shutting you out.” He leaned across the table. “I want you to be safe. I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

She pulled her hands back. “I didn’t say you hurt me. I said I’m mad at you.”

“Sparky, your anger flares when you’re hurt, because it’s easier for you to show your temper than your heart.”

She fumed, formulating a cutting remark, and then realized that he was right. She sighed heavily and softened her tone. “Ryan, please let me help you.”

“I don’t think I need a professional driver for this.”

“No, but you need somebody. There’s no reason you’re doing this alone.” She shook her head, puzzled. “I don’t know why someone from Potomac isn’t with you.”

“This is my problem.”

“No, I’m sure it’s their problem. Whoever is behind this doesn’t want to kill you because you’re Ryan Hayes. They want to kill you because you’re Potomac’s in-house counsel.”

“I don’t think this has anything to do with Potomac. Jake is tearing the place apart, trying to figure out which client, which case, this is related to, but I don’t think it is about Potomac at all.”

“What do you mean? Of course it is.”

“I don’t know who I pissed off, but this is about me, personally.”

She gave him a skeptical look. “Have you been dating any daughters of cartel members?”

“Not to my knowledge.”

“Stealing retirees’ pensions?”

“No.”

“You haven’t been blocking your neighbor’s driveway, have you?”

He mustered up a laugh, but the concern didn’t leave his eyes.

She tried again.

“I mean, it doesn’t make sense. What could you possibly have done to warrant two attempts on your life in one day?”

“Believe me, I wish I knew. I have no clue.”

“There aren’t any hints on the drive Cyrus Ahmadi gave you?”

“So far, I haven’t found the smoking gun.” He shook his head in frustration.

“Maybe another set of eyes will help,” she offered.

“I’ll show it to you, but not here.” He looked around the noisy room. The tables were three-quarters full with the lunchtime business crowd, but nobody was paying attention to them. Still, she understood why he didn’t want to bring out whatever the materials were in the middle of the restaurant.

“Okay,” she said. “I’m going to hold you to that.”

“Please do. Now, I’m not trying to change the subject, but I really want to know. How the heck did you find me?”

Despite her lingering displeasure, a satisfied smile crept across her mouth. “It really wasn’t hard. When no one would tell me where you went, I went to see Chelsea, and she said that you told Jake you didn’t need him to print out the files from the drive because you were going someplace where you’d have access to the internet and a computer and where nobody would be able to trace it back to you. You also told them you didn’t plan to rough it.”

“I don’t. I hope that I can stick to that plan. But how did that lead you here?”

“I remember you telling Omar that when things got too busy at the Department of Justice, you would sneak off to

some shipping merchant's archive for peace and quiet so you could get some work done."

He wrinkled his forehead, trying to recall the conversation. "I'm sure I did tell Omar that. But how did you remember?"

Heat crept up her neck and she flushed. "I pay attention when you talk."

He grinned at her. "But it's still several steps from nameless shipping guy to the Seamus McGillicuddy Archive."

"Not as many as you'd think," she told him. "I knew it was off Embassy Row, and there aren't *that* many minor shipping industry archives. A quick Internet search returned exactly one hit. The bigger mystery is how you stumbled on the archive in the first place."

"During my third year of law school, I took a maritime law class. One of the assignments was to research the background of a shipwreck that changed the law. Seamus McGillicuddy's small fleet was involved in one of those cases. I went down a research rabbit hole but came to a dead end online. My professor mentioned that Mr. McGillicuddy had created a trust before he died to preserve his legacy. And sure enough, the building that houses the archive was purchased by the trust in the 1800s and has been an underutilized repository of his papers for hundreds of years."

"So you went there to do your research and struck up a friendship with Mrs. O'Donnell?"

He nodded. "She was just happy to see another human being. As far as I can tell, she's the only employee of the Seamus McGillicuddy Trust. And the archive doesn't get many visitors. She told me if I ever wanted to come back just to use the space to study, I could."

"You took her up on that, clearly."

"I did. Law students are radioactive."

She cocked her head. "How so?"

"The law library stank of desperation. The anxiety radiates off people, and after a while, it becomes contagious. The more

time I spent studying in the law library, the more convinced I became that I would never pass my classes. And if, by some miracle, I didn't fail out of law school, I definitely wouldn't pass the bar. And even if I managed to pass the bar, I would never get a job. It was a spiral of misery."

"So you started going to the archive to study."

He nodded. "Then, when the office politics at Main Justice got to be too much, right, I'd hop on the Metro and come up here to the archive." He grinned, shaking his head. "I still can't believe you found me."

She didn't share his unbridled joy at that fact. "But I did, and, honestly, it wasn't hard. Aren't you worried someone else—the wrong person—could also track you down?"

His eyes grew thoughtful behind his glasses. He was quiet for a long time. Then he shook his head.

"I don't think so. One, I haven't been to the archive in at least three years. Once I left Justice and went to work for Jake, I haven't been back. And two, having a refuge or a haven really only works if no one knows about it. If anyone from the DOJ knew they could find me there, there'd have been no point in going there to hide from them."

His rationale made sense, but still, she worried. "What about law school?"

He blew out a long breath. "That was a decade ago. I'm sure my housemates knew I went there, but do you really think someone's going to track down a random guy I shared a place with ten years ago to ask about my habits?"

She looked at him wide-eyed. "I have no idea, Ryan. I don't know what these people are capable of. They'll go to the effort of trying to murder you, but tracking down your old roommates is a bridge too far?"

His jaw tightened. "I hadn't looked at it that way. We should get out of here."

"Good idea."

He raised his hand to catch their server's attention. "We can go back to my hotel. I'll show you the printouts from the drive, and we can check in with Jake and the rest of the crew."

She winced. "Are you going to tell them I'm here?"

"I'm going to have to. I'm sure everyone's freaking out. In fact, I'm more than a little surprised I haven't heard from them already."

"I'm sure they're focused on trying to get Chelsea to tell them where I went."

"Poor Chelsea. But she doesn't know, does she?"

"No. I told her I knew where you were and then I split."

The server brought the check. Ryan placed a one-hundred-dollar in the faux leather holder.

"I'll be right back with your change, sir."

"Keep it. Thanks for the delicious meal and great service."

"Thank you. Enjoy the rest of your day." The server bobbed his head and hurried off.

"You're paying with Benjamins now? High roller," Leilah teased as they pushed back their chairs and gathered their things.

He shook his head as he ushered her out of the restaurant ahead of him. "You should see Jake's home safe."

THE HOTEL RYAN had booked was a short walk from the restaurant. The early afternoon sun had burned the chill from the air. The walk, while brisk, was pleasant. But he barely noticed. He was caught up in his thoughts.

“You’re quiet,” Leilah observed.

He had to tell her. She’d made it clear she didn’t want to be shielded from the truth.

“So the documents Ahmadi gave us,” he began.

“What about them?”

There was no good way to say it so he took a breath, exhaled, and told her. “He’d hired someone to watch you.”

“What do you mean, to watch me?”

“Based on the dates on the logs, it looks like shortly after Omar warned Cyrus Ahmadi to stay away from you, he hired a private investigator. A local woman out of Harper’s Ferry.”

“What’s her name?”

“Why?” He eyed her curiously.

“Someone’s been spying on me. I’d like to know her name.”

Fair enough, he supposed. “Vera Mullen. Ever heard of her?”

She thought for a moment. “Nope. So this Mullen woman, was she filming me? Taking photos?”

“No. Or at least, there are no pictures or videos of you in the files Ahmadi gave us. There are some photographs of vehicles, taken fairly recently judging by the time stamps.”

“Vehicles. My cars?”

“No.

“Are any of these vehicles black trucks like the one that ran Keisha off the road yesterday?”

“No. Sedans. Dark sedans. Three of them.” He made a mental note to ask Jake if he had an update on the incident involving Leilah’s crew chief.

“So, this private investigator followed me around and reported back to Ahmadi about where I went and what I did?” She vibrated with anger.

“It’s a gross invasion of your privacy. I know it’s disgusting. When we get back to the hotel, I’ll give you the whole file to look through. I didn’t want to blindside you with it, and you deserve to know.”

That earned him a slight smile. “I’m glad you told me. I would have been furious if you hadn’t.” Her smile turned into a fierce frown. “I *am* furious that he was spying on me. Who does that? And what was he hoping to learn?”

“It looks as if the scope of Vera Mullen’s contract was to see if you were dating anyone.” He was careful to keep a neutral tone.

“Oh, and what did she determine?”

Ryan stopped on the pavement and touched her elbow. “Ms. Mullen reported that you did not appear to be involved in a romantic relationship with anyone but that you were spending a lot of time with one of your brother’s friends.”

Amusement danced in her eyes. “Really? Which one?”

He nudged her with his shoulder. “The handsome, smart one.”

“The handsome, smart one—that’s what the private investigator’s report said?”

“The report said the friend was approximately five-feet eleven-inches tall, clean-cut, with dark hair and glasses. Estimated age, mid-thirties. For the record, I’m just a fraction of an inch shy of six feet.”

“Duly noted, short stuff,” the petite firecracker told him with a lilt in her voice. Then she mused, “So, Cyrus Ahmadi knew about us before we did. Ick.”

“Extremely icky,” he agreed.

They resumed walking.

“So you think these dark sedans that have been following me tipped him off that we were in danger? And how does he get from there to you being the actual target?”

“I don’t think the cars were actually following you. I think they were following me. But Ahmadi must have put the pattern together whenever you came around and Mullen snapped pictures of the cars.”

“Why didn’t he just tell us that?”

“Because, whatever else he is, he’s a sociopathic billionaire. I’m sure he enjoys making us work for the information.”

“I can see it. He’s very cold. But he told you he couldn’t determine who it was, right?”

“Right.”

“So he wasn’t able to trace the license plates, right?”

“Probably.”

“What does that mean?”

“It could mean one of a few things—none of them great. I hope we’ll know more after we talk to Potomac.”

As they walked on, she linked her arm through his and snuggled into his side.

“I’m glad you told me.” She leaned up and kissed him on his jawline.

“Does that mean you forgive me for leaving town without telling you?”

She took her time answering. “It means I’m considering forgiving you.”

“Ouch.”

“Well, Ahmadi’s not the only person who wants to make you work for it.”

He gave a grudging laugh. “I earned that.”

“I’m glad you realize it. Now, about this hotel room, how many beds does it have?”

“Oh, don’t worry,” he said. “We’re not going to need to have a cot sent up.”

“Really?”

“Wait and see.”

THE LOBBY of the Savoir Faire Hotel oozed with understated elegance. Every surface shined and sparkled; the enormous vases were filled to bursting with lush arrangements of flowers in bloom; and the furniture placed strategically throughout the space looked inviting, comfortable, and luxe.

“Why are you staying here?” Leilah whispered as their footsteps echoed with each step across the vast gleaming marble lobby.

She wasn’t unfamiliar with affluence. The racing world was filled with drippingly rich team owners. But the vibe in racing was flashy and ostentatious, whereas the Savoir Faire whispered its wealth.

“I needed a place that wouldn’t raise an eyebrow at cash, and this one happens to be convenient to the archive.”

“Wait, *this* hotel is accustomed to taking cash?”

“A lot of emissaries, diplomats, delegates, unofficial ambassadors—power brokers from foreign countries—stay here. When people like that go abroad, many of them prefer to deal in cash, in the local currency.”

“Why?”

“I have no idea, and, frankly, I’m not sure I want to know. Whatever the case, nobody blinked when I paid the first night’s bill in hundreds.”

He led her past a tea room, a French restaurant, and a swanky bar to a bank of elevators that required a key card for

specific floors. She glimpsed a couture dress shop and a chocolate shop down the hall.

“This place is all suites,” he explained as he inserted his key into the slot to call the elevator. “Wait until you see the room.”

The elevator arrived, and the doors slid open silently. They entered an elevator roughly the size of Leilah’s girlhood bedroom and rode up in silence. The elevator chimed softly to let them know they’d reached their floor, and the doors opened onto a wide, gleaming hallway.

He ushered her out and led her to the door at the left end of the hall. A matching door anchored the right end.

“There are only two rooms on this whole floor?”

“Yep. And the floor above this is the penthouse. It has access to a private rooftop garden and a plunge pool.”

“Must be nice.”

“I’ll bet Ahmadi stays up there when he’s in D.C.,” Ryan told her.

“Oh joy, that should make it easier for his investigator to find us.” She paused. “Is she still tailing me?”

He shook his head. “It looks like he called her off you last week. Probably after he realized the threat. Whether that’s because he didn’t want her to put herself in harm’s way or because he was afraid she’d get caught up in an eventual investigation and reveal who she was working for, I can’t say.”

“The first interpretation is a generous one. I think the second is the more likely of the two,” Leilah told him.

He swept the door open, and she stepped inside. As she did, her breath caught in her throat. The suite was enormous, sumptuous, and impeccably decorated. She entered into a sunken living room with a massive, highly polished bar and a seating arrangement of white leather couches and chairs. Three steps up was a dining room anchored by a table with seating for twelve under the largest crystal chandelier she’d ever seen.

Behind the table, French doors led out to a wide balcony with a view of the city.

Ryan waved toward the right. “There’s a full-sized kitchen back there.” Then he pointed to the left. “And three bedrooms, three bathrooms on that end.”

She walked down the hall to peek into the bedroom suites, lingering in the bathroom. She lusted after the iridescent glass-tiled oversized shower with a rainfall shower head mounted on the ceiling and an array of complicated looking knobs and sprayers mounted on the wall. A deep Japanese soaking tub sat next to the shower stall, calling her name.

“This bathroom is unbelievable. I’m going to take a shower *and* a bath tonight,” she informed Ryan.

He grinned at her excitement. “I have a change of clothes—several, actually. I mean, they’re Jake’s so the wardrobe is heavier on flannel and corduroy than my usual attire. But I’m guessing you didn’t pack anything?”

She shook her head. “I just took off.”

“We might have to complete this *Pretty Woman* experience by taking you shopping. There’s no Rodeo Drive, of course, but I’m sure we can find a suitable substitute in Georgetown.”

She started to smile back, then put the brakes on the fantasy. “Let’s wait and see what we learn when we call Potomac.”

“That’s fair. Come look at Vera Mullen’s reports, then we’ll call Jake.”

She followed him back out to the main living space and joined him at the walnut desk set off in an alcove near the dining room.

He removed a stack of papers from his laptop bag and passed them to her.

She settled into the chair behind the desk and scanned them. Each sheet was dated and every entry was notated with military time. It was disconcerting to see her life reduced to an antiseptic description of her movements:

Subject works out—cardio and weights.

Subject drinks green smoothie while chatting on the phone.

She'd been talking to Marielle, asking what she could add next time to make the bitter smoothie sweeter. Marielle recommended strawberries and an apple.

She flipped forward.

Subject attends dinner at parents' home. Brother present. No other guests.

Subject attends chamber music concert. Arrives alone. Joined in lobby by brother's friend. R.H.

There was the description of Ryan that shorted him a half-inch in height. She smiled faintly despite her unease.

Subject meets R.H. for coffee.

Subject has manicure appointment.

Subject drives practice laps in blue Ferrari.

She dropped the sheet on the desk. "It makes me sick." She meant it literally. Her stomach turned and churned.

He rubbed her shoulders with a sympathetic touch. "I know. Want to look at the vehicles instead?" He handed her a few additional sheets of paper. "These photos aren't at great resolution. The archive only has a regular laserjet printer. We'll have to get prints made if we really want to see the details. But I'm assuming Jake's already done that."

She stared at the black and white photos. The images could be of nearly any anonymous four-door car. "These sedans are very non-distinct."

Ryan nodded. "That's what I thought too."

"I mean, these could be any one of a dozen models or badges. They're so vanilla."

“I don’t think that’s an accident.”

His meaning took a moment to register. When it did, she raised her eyes to his. “You think you’re being followed.”

“I do, and I think the reason Ahmadi hit a dead end with the license plates was because these are government cars.”

“Government cars,” she repeated. “Are you saying one of the U.S. intelligence agencies is following you?”

“It’s possible.”

Her head spun. “But why?”

“I can’t think of a reason but it’s the only thing that makes sense.”

“But that would also mean *our* government’s trying to kill you.”

“Yes, it would,” he agreed.

Her stomach clenched and bile rose in her throat. She must have looked as ill as she felt because he gently guided her to the edge of the wide white leather ottoman.

“Do you need some water?”

She shook her head. “No, I just need to breathe for a second.”

He studied her face. “I’ll get you that water anyway.”

He disappeared into the kitchen and returned moments later with a glass of sparkling water and a twist of lime. He handed it to her. “Just take a small sip.”

She did as he suggested, then placed the water on the stone coaster on the table at her elbow. “I’m okay, really. I’m just shocked.”

“That makes two of us,” Ryan said. “We should call Jake now.”

She nodded her agreement. Maybe he could dispel the terrifying theory she and Ryan had hit upon.



RYAN SETTLED on the couch next to Leilah and placed the call.

Jake answered on the second ring. “West.”

“It’s me.”

“Hey. Hang on,” Jake said. Then he addressed someone in the room, “Our friend is calling in.”

“I’ll get Omar.” Trent’s response was faint but audible.

“Grab Olivia and Marielle too. We might as well have the whole team on this.”

“You got it. Are we all going to squeeze in here?”

“Yes.”

The door opened and shut—a soft thump through the phone’s speaker—as Trent went to gather the team. Having the conversation in Jake’s soundproofed office was the smart choice. Jake swept his office for listening devices weekly and ran a white noise machine at all times to prevent eavesdropping. Potomac Private Services’ entire facility was supposedly secure—although he had his doubts given the two attacks on his life in the past twenty-four hours. But nowhere on campus was more impenetrable than Jake’s personal office.

“Am I on speaker?” Jake asked.

“You are.”

“Does that mean Leilah Khan is with you?”

“Hi, Jake,” Leilah said.

“You’ve got a lot of people very worried, Leilah.”

“If you hadn’t tried to shut me out, maybe I’d have told you where I was going,” she countered.

“Leilah—”

“It’s done, Jake. Save your lecture.”

“You took a foolish, selfish, and unnecessary risk,” Jake said as if he hadn’t heard her.

Before Leilah could retort, Jake’s door opened and closed, and the rest of the team filed in.

“Ryan and Leilah are on the phone,” Jake told the others without preamble. “Chelsea was right; she took off to find him.”

“Jeez, sis,” Omar grouched.

Ryan jumped in to steer the call away from Leilah and toward the files. “I’ve had a look at the files on Ahmadi’s drive. I assume you all have, too.”

“We have.”

“I can’t believe that pig had Leilah followed,” Olivia exclaimed, her anger palpable.

“It’s disgusting,” Ryan agreed, “but it might have saved our lives.”

“There is that,” Trent allowed.

Hearing Trent’s voice reminded Ryan to ask about the black truck. “Hey, Trent, have you gotten any updates about that truck that drove Keisha off the road?”

“Yeah, nothing good. When Jake called the police department this morning, Halloran mentioned they’d found a burned-out vehicle down in the hollow. So we went down there to see for ourselves.”

“Let me guess. It’s the truck that ran Keisha off the road.”

“Bingo. It’s been wiped clean of prints, and the forensics guys say any DNA evidence was probably rendered unusable by the fire—if not flat-out destroyed. A hell of a coincidence, isn’t it?”

“Mmm.” Nobody on the Potomac team believed in coincidences. “Did Halloran buy the story about the explosion being a training exercise?” Ryan asked. That had been worrying him.

“I don’t think so,” Jake said.

“But he pretended to,” Trent added.

“Good enough for me.”

“So what are your thoughts on the files Ahmadi gave you?” Omar asked.

“What do you think his thoughts are?” Leilah shot back.

Everyone spoke at once, muttering some variation of an answer that included “nondescript, late-model sedans” and “government-issued.”

“So we’re all on the same page,” Omar said.

“Right. The only question is which government agency?” Ryan added.

“Nope, that’s not the question.”

Ryan and Leilah exchanged confused looks.

“It is for us,” Leilah told her brother.

“Oh, well that’s only because you didn’t see the DEA roll up on me this morning.”

“DEA, as in the Drug Enforcement Agency?” Ryan clarified.

“The one and only.”

“Your old unit?”

“Nope. They sent some suits down from D.C.”

“Why?”

“The cover story was someone I’d worked with was being considered for an assistant directorship, and they just wanted to vet him.”

“I hear a but.”

“But they don’t send four armed agents to get a reference.”

“No, they generally don’t,” Ryan agreed. “What did they really want?”

“They wanted to know the last time I saw you.”

“Why?”

“They said they have reason to believe you’re in danger.”

“Well, they’re not wrong,” Leilah interjected.

“No, they’re not. But I don’t know these guys, and I don’t trust them. It could be that they know you’re in danger and they want to protect you. Or you could be in danger from them.”

“It’s worth considering,” Jake said gravely. “Were you working on anything with the DEA right before you left the Department of Justice?”

Ryan thought back. “The DEA was involved in a lot of our cases. I mean, drug trafficking was a sizeable part of the workload. But it was all run-of-the-mill stuff. Off the top of my head, nothing particularly juicy stands out. At least nothing worth killing me over.”

“Tell him,” Trent urged in an undertone.

“Someone you worked with at the Justice Department died last month,” Omar said in a grave voice.

Ryan shook his head. “If an AUSA had been murdered, I would have heard.”

“Not murdered, an accidental death. At least that’s how it was reported. He allegedly fell down a flight of stairs in some Foggy Bottom bar. Although the DEA guys intimated it wasn’t really an accident.”

Olivia spoke up, “You know how it is with unofficial government actions. The whole point of plausible deniability is that you never admit it.”

“So reading between the lines, it sounds like they were telling Omar there was a hit out on this prosecutor,” Jake continued.

“A hit by whom?”

“That’s not clear.”

Ryan grunted in frustration. “Great.”

“I hear you, man. You’ve got to sit down someplace and go back through any notes you have. See if something tickles

your memory,” Omar said.

“You don’t take files when you leave the DOJ,” Ryan explained. “I don’t have any notes to consult.”

Marielle spoke quietly to Omar, who said, “that’s not a bad idea.”

“What did she say? We can’t hear her on our end.”

“She said she’d do a search of some death indexes, obituaries, that sort of thing to see what she can find out about this attorney who died.”

“I doubt there’s a connection,” Ryan told them. “Hundreds of lawyers work for the Department of Justice. Thousands, if you count the field offices.”

“Natsuo Ito,” Omar said without preamble. “That’s the guy who took a header down the stairs. Ever hear of him?”

Ryan felt the phone falling out of his hand and bobbled it so it didn’t hit the desk. He said nothing.

Leilah pried the phone from his frozen hands. “Judging by Ryan’s stricken expression, I’m guessing the answer is yes.”

Ryan pressed his palms against the desk and forced out a long breath.

“We’ve gotta go. We’ll call you back,” Leilah said.

“Remember that this isn’t your area of expertise. Proceed with caution,” Jake warned.

Of all the things that Jake could have said to Leilah, the warning was one of the better choices. Even through the fog of his shock, Ryan could tell the caution had landed appropriately.

“We’ll be careful, Jake. Tell Chelsea I said hi.”

“If she’s speaking to him at this point,” Olivia piped up.

“Liv, let’s stay out of it,” Trent suggested.

“We’re going to go. You guys bicker amongst yourselves,” Leilah said.

“Wait,” Omar said.

“Waiting,” his sister answered.

“Ryan?”

“Yeah?” he croaked.

“You’ve got this,” Omar said simply. “I know you do.”

Leilah ended the call and stared at Ryan. “Are you okay?”

“Mind if I have a sip of your water?”

“It’s all yours.” She pushed it toward him.

He took a long drink. “I’m okay. Hearing that name was a shock.”

“Why?”

“Nat and I started on the same day. We met at orientation. Then we were both assigned to the same matter for our very first case.”

“Oh, wow. Small world.”

“The lawyer in charge of that case, a guy named Grover Anderson, became something of a mentor to both me and Natsuo. And whenever Grover could, he staffed his cases with one or both of us.”

“I see. So you and Natsuo did work on a case together.” She said slowly.

“We worked on a lot of cases together.”

“With this Grover person.”

“Correct.” Ryan scrubbed his hands over his face. “I need to talk to Grover.”

“Why? Because your friend fell down a flight of stairs?”

“I’m sure the official story will be that Natsuo was drunk and tripped. But I never, not once, saw Nat drink to excess.”

“You think he was killed?”

“Maybe. Probably. And if he was, and it’s related to the attempts on my life, Grover might be in danger, too.”

“What are you going to do? Just walk into the Justice Department? That doesn’t seem like a good idea.”

“Grover retired not long after I left. He lives in some coastal town on Maryland’s Eastern Shore. A little place near Saint Michaels. I can’t think of the name.” He shook his head. The town was on the tip of his tongue, just out of reach.

“Let’s go back to the archives,” she suggested. “It’s not five o’clock yet. We can search for his address and maybe you can give him a call.”

“That’s a good idea.” Then he frowned. “What phone are you carrying?”

“None.”

They’d both destroyed their personal cell phones a day earlier in a hotel in Harrisonburg, Virginia, to avoid being tracked, and had purchased prepaid flip phones that couldn’t be traced to them.

“You don’t still have the burner?”

“I left it at home when I went looking for you.”

“We’ll get you a new one.”

She gave the hotel room a longing look. “I hope we get to spend at least one night here, but I’m not going to hold my breath.”

He reached for her hand, “When this is all over, I’ll bring you back here. I won’t even spend Jake’s money to do it.”

She laughed lightly and then leaned in to brush a gentle kiss across his lips. He kissed her back, harder.

“It’s a date,” she said against his mouth. “Come on, let’s go track down your mentor.”

He was grateful she was here. As much as he worried about her safety, he wanted Leilah by his side.

WHILE RYAN FIRED up the public computer in the archive reading room to locate Grover Anderson, Leilah found the ladies' room. She was washing her hands when she noticed her makeup could stand to be freshened up. In her view, being on the run from unknown government agencies was no excuse for letting her personal standards slip, so she removed her makeup bag from her purse and began to attend to the repairs.

She was daubing lip primer and plumper on her full lips to create the base coat for a fresh lipstick application, when the door from the hallway opened and an older woman strolled in, humming to herself.

"Oh, goodness! I didn't realize anyone was here." She clasped a hand to her throat, then she frowned. "But you left hours ago."

"I didn't mean to startle you," Leilah said with a smile, turning away from the mirror. "I'll bet you're Maggie O'Donnell."

The woman's face relaxed. "That's right."

Leilah swiped the lipstick over her mouth, checked her handiwork, then returned the tube of lipstick and the jar of primer to the bag before extending her right hand. "I'm Leilah Khan."

"Nice to meet you," Maggie O'Donnell murmured as she shook Leilah's hand. "Leilah's a pretty name." She paused and tilted her head. "Seems I've heard that name recently?" Her voice carried a question.

“Probably from Ryan.”

The woman’s face lit up. “Oh, you’re Ryan’s Leilah. What on earth is he doing back so soon? Getting your car?”

“He needed to look up one more piece of information. In fact, I suspect he’s already finished, so I should hurry back. You take good care, Mrs. O’Donnell.”

Leilah zipped the makeup bag closed and returned it to her tote bag.

As Leilah headed toward the door, Maggie called after her, “Did Ryan’s friends catch up with him?”

She froze with her hand on the door, poised to push it open. “His friends?”

“Yes, not even five minutes after Ryan popped into my office to say goodbye, four gentlemen showed up asking if I’d seen him.”

Leilah turned from the door and pasted a bright smile on her face despite her galloping pulse. “Oh? Did you catch any of their names?”

Maggie frowned and gave a slow shake of her head. “I’m afraid not. I’m surprised they didn’t head over to the hotel.”

Leilah’s eyes widened. “The hotel?”

Ryan told this woman where he was staying? They were going to have to have a serious conversation about operational security.

“Well, yes, dear. Ryan mentioned that he’s staying at the Diplomat Club. So I sent them there.”

A tsunami of relief swept over Leilah and her knees nearly buckled. *Sorry, I doubted you, Ryan.*

“Oh, of course. That was kind of you. I’ll let him know.” She flashed another smile and then raced out of the bathroom.

She sprinted down the hallway and skidded to a stop in the doorway to the reading room. “We need to go. Now.”

Ryan looked up from the computer screen and held up his pointer finger. “Give me a minute.”

“No! Now!” She realized she was shouting but didn’t care.

He didn’t ask any questions. He pushed his chair back, grabbed his bag, and hurried to the doorway. She pulled him toward the exit door.

As they stepped out onto the wide brick porch, Ryan gave her a worried look. “What’s going on?”

She was opening her mouth to answer when a dark, late-model sedan careered into view, screeched to a stop directly across the street, and parked illegally. All four car doors opened, and four men in suits exited the car.

“We need to get my car.” She turned toward the parking lot behind the building.

“No time. Run,” Ryan shouted, pulling her down the stairs to the street.

They ran.



RYAN CAUGHT Leilah’s hand and pulled her off the sidewalk into a dormant green space maintained by one of the embassies. “Shortcut,” he huffed. “This runs behind the hotel. There’s a back way into the guest parking garage.”

They hurdled a row of low bushes and came out of the mini-garden in a brick alleyway. He craned his neck. He didn’t see their pursuers, but he couldn’t imagine they’d been that easy to shake.

“Come on,” Leilah urged. “I can see the garage door.”

They sprinted, arms and legs pumping, straight for the metal door. He yanked it open, and they raced into the stairwell. Before the door swung all the way closed, he spotted four men in dark suits crashing through the shrubbery.

“They’re right behind us.”

“What floor?”

His brain blanked. *Think.*

She stared at him, waiting.

He blinked.

“Ryan, what floor did you park on?” Her voice was calm, but he saw the fear in her eyes.

The floor number flashed in his mind.

“Fourth. It’s the fourth floor.”

They pounded up the metal stairs, their shoes clattering against the steps. The landings flew by. *Two. Three.*

The door from the street opened. Heavy footsteps sounded below.

Four.

He wrested the door open, and they ran out onto the parking deck.

“By the pillar.” He pointed at Chelsea’s crossover vehicle.

“Keys,” Leilah panted stretching out her palm.

He dropped the keys into her hand. As he did, he spotted a heavy earthen container near the elevator.

“Go start the car.”

She took off, and he dragged the Savoir Faire’s answer to the ugly metal trashcan from the elevator area to the stairwell door. He pushed it into place against the door. It wouldn’t stop anyone who was sufficiently motivated to come through the door, but it would slow them down.

The Subaru hurtled toward him and stopped. Leilah leaned over and pushed the passenger door open while he launched himself toward the seat. He pulled the door closed and scrambled for the seatbelt.

“Where’s your parking ticket?” she asked, frantically running one hand under the driver’s side visor.

“It’s not that kind of hotel. Parking’s included. The room key card gets you into the garage. The arm will rise automatically on the way out. Or it’s supposed to at least.”

“Oh, it will. One way or another.”

She sped and spun down the circular levels, controlling the car through the turns but never easing off the gas. When they reached the bottom floor, he held his breath until the barrier gate’s arm began its slow ascent as the car drew near. He glanced in the rearview mirror, then twisted in his seat to look out the back window.

“They aren’t behind us.”

“Probably realized their mistake and went back to their car. The street we exit onto — is it one way?”

He thought for a moment. “Yes, make a left.”

“How far until the first cross street to the right?”

“To the right? Not far at all. We’re near the corner. So, call it a hundred, a hundred and fifty feet.”

“Okay, listen. I’m going to make a right.”

“No, it’s a left.”

The gate arm rose to its full extension.

Leilah rolled her neck and turned to meet Ryan’s horrified gaze. “And they’ll be waiting for us at the corner. We’re turning right. You should close your eyes.”

She hit the gas, the Forester bucked forward, and Ryan Hayes gripped the dashboard and squeezed his eyes shut as they shot out of the mouth of the garage and into oncoming traffic.

THE ENTIRE WORLD narrowed to the two lanes of traffic rushing headlong at Leilah. Her hands were light and sure on the wheel, her heart steady, her breath measured. Beside her, Ryan may or may not have been reciting a prayer. She left him to his bargaining with God and focused on flowing between the honking cars piloted by gesticulating, red-faced drivers. She didn't dart or weave; she was water, and water flowed.

"This would be a lot easier in my Porsche," she muttered.

At the corner, a bus idled, blocking her planned escape from wrong-way driving. She recalculated, recalibrated, and jerked the car to the left to swing wide around the bus, and shot onto the cross street against both the traffic and the light. She joined the sea of cars headed out of the capital toward suburban Maryland.

"It's okay to look now," she told Ryan.

He turned to face her. "That was—"

"—metal?"

"No."

"Fire?"

"No, it wasn't metal, fire, lit, or balling. It was reckless."

She pulled a face. "What is the point of having a professional race car driver at your disposal if you're not going to do race car things?"

“You did race car things on Massachusetts Avenue, Leilah!”

She scrunched up her nose. “Admit it, you feel more alive than you ever have before. Don’t you?”

He gave her an unamused look. “I feel fortunate to *be* alive.”

“I was in control the entire time. Also, you’re welcome.”

“I’m ... what?”

“Your friends aren’t behind us.”

His eyes drifted up to the rearview mirror. “You’re right. They aren’t.” His jaw tightened.

“What?”

“What what?”

“You clenched your jaw. Why aren’t you relieved that they’re not following us?”

He exhaled through his nose. “If this were an official investigation, there would be a backup team—at least one—in position to take up the pursuit if the original team lost us. I don’t see a backup team, do you?”

She scanned the traffic behind them. “No,” she admitted.

“Which means this is likely an off-the-books operation. We’re dealing with rogue agents who almost certainly are acting without oversight or authority.” His tone was grim.

“Oh.”

“Still relieved?”

“Not really.” She changed the subject. “Did you find Grover’s address before we had to split?”

“I did. He lives in Barrington. It’s about two hours away with rush hour traffic. Let’s avoid the interstate and pick up 50 in East Prince George’s. We’ll stay on it the whole way.”

“Are we showing up unannounced?”

He shook his head. “We’ll stop to get a bite when we’re half an hour away. I’ll call him then and let him know I’m in the area. I’m sure he’ll invite us to visit.”

“And if he doesn’t?”

He shrugged. “We’ll visit anyway.”

She reached out to switch on the radio, then reconsidered. “Why don’t you tell me about the cases you had with Grover Anderson and Natsuo Ito?”

His eyebrows drew together. “My duty to maintain the government’s confidences survived my separation from the DOJ. I really can’t share any details.”

“One, the government is trying to kill you. Remember? Seems like that should grant you some leeway on that duty. And, two, I’m not really going to listen to you.”

He side-eyed her. “Rude much?”

She giggled. “I didn’t mean that the way it sounded. Marielle talks through thorny data puzzles or problems. She’ll just talk and talk to me, Chelsea, and Olivia about whatever’s got her stymied. We don’t have the faintest idea what she’s going on about, but we make encouraging noises and say ‘oh, really?’ every once in a while. And without fail, she’ll talk through it and have a eureka moment.” She shrugged. “Maybe you will, too.”

He was silent for a moment.

“Or I can turn on the radio,” she offered.

After another long pause, he shrugged. “I suppose it couldn’t hurt to talk it through.”

She nestled her back against the car seat, activated the vehicle’s adaptive cruise control feature, and let Ryan’s warm baritone voice wash over her as he began to talk.



AS RYAN RECOUNTED the cases he'd worked with Nat and Grover, more cases flooded his mind. He talked virtually nonstop all the way to and across the Bay Bridge. As promised, Leilah made periodic noncommittal sounds of interest.

After they crossed the four-mile span across the brilliant blue Chesapeake Bay, he fell silent. Telling the litany of stories about his former colleagues with the knowledge that Nat was dead had caused an ache to take up residence deep in his chest.

She flicked her eyes toward him. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. My voice is getting tired. And I'm not remembering anything that explains why someone wants to kill me—and may have killed Natsuo."

"We should stop anyway. We'll check in with Marielle to see what she found out about his death. You can call Grover to let him know we're coming. And you need to feed your driver."

"Duly noted. I'll keep my eyes peeled for a good place to stop."

They ended up driving another twenty minutes and Route 50 had made the turn due south before he saw it. "Look, a real roadside diner."

She slowed and turned on her indicator light to make the left into the parking lot that fronted the long rectangular building. Shaped like a railroad car and clad in stainless steel siding, the diner conjured up images of meatloaf, shakes, and pies.

Once they'd taken a seat at the large red leather booth near the front window, Ryan realized that only the architecture was vintage. He eyed Leilah over the extensive menu. "Seasonal cocktails and local farm-to-table specialties? This isn't a diner."

"Simmer down, oldster," she teased him. "The Chesapeake Tacos look good. Oh, and the roasted local vegetables over chickpea pasta. Decisions, decisions."

“It’s a travesty,” he insisted, only half-joking. He scanned the menu and, on principle, chose the most authentic diner meal he could find. “I’m going to check in with Marielle. Will you order me a turkey and gravy on toast, hold the turmeric-ginger chutney, and substitute fries for the cauliflower mash, please.”

“You’ve got it. Do you want a drink? I’m driving, so you might as well.”

“Sure, a beer would be great. Something local.”

“Consider it done. Hey, tell Elle I said ‘*coucou*,’ okay?”

His eyebrows crawled up his forehead. “Coo-coo, like the bird?”

“Close enough. It’s a sweet way to say hi to a good friend in French.”

He gave her a skeptical look. “I don’t know if you’re pranking me or not, but I’ll tell her.”

Leilah’s melodic laughter followed him out of the diner and did nothing to allay his suspicion.

He leaned against the front of the building, pulled up the address book on the phone Chelsea had given him, and scrolled through the contact list until he found Marielle’s office extension. He pressed the button to make the call and walked over to the metal newspaper box near the diner’s entrance while he waited for the call to connect. He crouched and peered through the front glass. The box was empty. Not surprising, given the slow, steady death of local journalism. The local paper was nearly as much of a relic as the roadside diner.

“*Allô?*”

Marielle’s greeting interrupted his musing. “Hi, it’s me.”

“Oh, you have perfect timing.”

“You have something for me?”

“I do. Mr. Ito may have tripped and fallen down a flight of stairs, but he didn’t stumble drunkenly.”

“You got the blood alcohol level?” She was a magician.

“Yes. There was a trace, and I mean trace, level of alcohol, confirmed by his stomach contents. According to the bartender’s statement, which was curiously missing from the official files, Natsuo Ito ordered and then nursed two non-alcoholic beers over the course of three hours.”

“Huh.”

“Indeed.”

“Does anything else stand out?”

“The autopsy wasn’t performed by the District’s Medical Examiner.”

“Now, that’s odd. Who did it?” He frowned.

“The AFMES.”

“Who?”

“Exactly. The Armed Forces Medical Examiner System, which is a thing that exists, handled the autopsy.”

“Never heard of them, but it sounds like they would handle investigations into the deaths of active duty military personnel.”

“Gold star for you. Yes. The Department of Defense website only mentions one exception: DNA testing to identify former service members who went missing in action.”

“Which Nat was not.” He thought for a moment. “He had been in the Army. They paid for law school, and he served his four years in the JAG Corps. before he joined the DOJ.”

“Hmm. There’s a four-year reserve commitment, too, isn’t there?”

“That sounds right.”

“If he was still in the Reserve, I *guess* there’s an argument for AFMES to involve itself.”

The doubt in her voice echoed his own lack of conviction. “Maybe.”

“That’s all I have for now.”

“Thanks, Marielle. Oh, Leilah said to tell you ‘*coucou*.’”

She laughed merrily. “And *coucou* to her as well.”

He ended the call and fished a folded-over sticky note out of his pocket. He read Grover Anderson’s telephone number from the square of paper and punched it into the phone.

“This is Grover Anderson.” Grover’s familiar foghorn voice boomed.

“Grover, it’s Ryan Hayes.” He hurriedly pulled the phone away from his ear before Grover could respond.

“Hayes, how’ve you been?”

“Pretty good, Grover. Did you hear about Nat?”

Grover’s upbeat tone shifted to a mournful one. “It’s a hell of a thing.”

“I just found out. I guess word travels slowly to the private sector.”

“I only know because I was a fixture at that bar back in the day. The owner called me after it happened. Who’d have thought that Nat, of all people, would drink so much he couldn’t walk.”

Ryan drew his eyebrows together. “Wait, the bar owner told you Nat was hammered?”

“Yep, blotto. I never knew him to be a big drinker.” Grover sighed. “I guess people change.”

“I guess so,” Ryan said in a dubious voice. “Anyway, I’m on the Eastern Shore with a ... friend. Could we stop by for a visit?”

“A friend, eh?”

“You remember Omar? It’s his sister.”

“Ah, the lovely Leilah. Of course, of course, you’re both welcome. I’ll open a bottle of brandy. It’s funny. I was just thinking of you.”

“Why’s that?”

“Got a visit from some suits.”

“DEA?”

“How’d you guess? Did they come to see you, too?”

“Uh, I heard they were at my office, but I was out of town on another matter. What did they want?”

“To ask me about the Cortez case.”

“Cortez?”

“You remember, it’s the last case you, Natsuo, and I all worked on together.”

“Yeah, I remember. What about it?”

Grover hesitated. “I’m not sure. I got a vibe, as the kids say, so I shut the conversation down. On their way out, they asked if I had any copies of the case files in the house.”

Ryan grimaced. Grover was old-school. He kept physical copies of everything—just in case the entire interconnected Web up and failed someday. And if anyone was going to waltz out of the Justice Department with confidential files, it would be Grover Anderson.

“I told them I did not have any files in my house.” Grover enunciated each word as if Ryan were supposed to divine a secret message.

“Uh, okay,” Ryan said, having divined no messages.

“We can talk more about Cortez in person. Not on the phone.”

“Understood. We’ll see you in about an hour.”

“Wonderful. And Ryan?”

“Yeah?”

“You trust this woman, right?”

“Leilah? Of course.”

“Good enough for me.”

Grover ended the call. Ryan walked back inside slowly, puzzling over the conversation.

BY THE TIME they'd finished their meal, the sun was setting over the bay. Orange light streaked and shimmered across the water, a muted mirror of the bright orange and yellow striations that striped the sky. Leilah paused beside the car to drink in the sight.

"Gorgeous," she breathed.

"Yes, you are."

She turned to Ryan. His eyes gleamed like the sinking sun, but he wasn't looking at the display in the sky. His gaze was fixed on her. For a moment, she felt as if the sun were in her chest, rising, not setting. A sunburst of warmth filled her.

"Come on. We need to go see your friend. You can be sappy later," she said, joking to cover the depth of emotion that overtook her.

He held her eyes for another moment before he turned to get in the car. She slid behind the wheel.

"You are, you know. Gorgeous," he clarified, as if she might not have followed his train of thought.

She smiled at him. "I'd rather be fierce."

"Luckily you don't have to choose. You're both."

Her grin widened and she turned the key in the ignition. As she shifted into gear and pulled out of the parking spot, she brought the conversation back to the situation at hand.

“So, to recap what you said at dinner, Natsuo’s death is definitely suspicious and someone came around asking Grover questions about an old case.”

“Right. Cortez.”

“And why would the Department of Defense and the Drug Enforcement Administration be interested in that case?”

He twitched his lips to the side and shook his head slowly. “I don’t know. I mean, Cortez was a drug case. But it wasn’t a big deal.”

“What do you remember about it?” Maybe talking about it would jog something loose in his memory. Or maybe she’d see something he’d missed.

He drummed his fingers on the dashboard. “The defendant wasn’t a rocket scientist. He was pulled over for running a red light, and the officer spotted eight ten-milliliter vials of liquid ketamine in the glove compartment when King opened it to take out his registration.”

“King?”

“King Cortez. He was—”

“Is that his real name?”

He chuckled. “Nobody names themselves, Leila. So while I hold King Cortez responsible for many things, his royal moniker isn’t one of them.”

“That’s fair. Go on.”

“Also, his name *was* King. Mr. Cortez met an unfortunate demise in a jailhouse altercation while he was being held pending trial. That’s the reason the case isn’t particularly noteworthy. It never went to trial. We dismissed it when the defendant was murdered.”

“Another murder,” she observed.

“Yeah. It was a frustrating case anyway because he was on the bubble. The ketamine was obviously packaged to distribute. But the amount was low enough that a decent defense attorney would argue it was for personal use. Word on

the street is that King was a runner for a dealer who made deliveries. Nat, Grover, and I always thought he was out making the rounds and had been lucky enough to be pulled over toward the end of his deliveries, not at the beginning. We figured the highest and best use of King Cortez would be if we could convince him to give up someone higher in the organization in exchange for a misdemeanor possession charge and one hundred and eighty days, including time served awaiting trial. It would have been a win/win.”

“But, unfortunately, Mr. King died in prison awaiting trial.”

“Right.” He frowned. “Something always bothered me about King’s case. Most low-level drug traffickers like King have their bail posted anonymously. Usually, someone in their organization pays the bond to ensure they stay loyal and quiet. But whoever King was working for let him cool his heels in lockup.”

“And now he’s dead.”

“And now he’s dead, Natsuo’s dead, and someone’s trying to kill me. So, maybe King’s death wasn’t as random as it seemed two-and-a-half years ago.”

“Maybe not,” she agreed, giving the Subaru some gas. “We should try to get to your friend’s house before the last light is gone. Astronomical twilight is about an hour and a half after the sun sets,” she informed him.

“I didn’t know you were an astronomy buff.”

“I’m not. Race cars don’t have headlights. That makes it important to know exactly when it gets dark.”

They drove in silence for a while. Then she said, “Did Jake give you a gun?”

He eyed her for a moment before answering. “Yes.”

“Will you use it if you have to?”

“If I have to, sure. Why?”

She lifted her hands from the wheel briefly and flexed her fingers. “Because I have a bad feeling.”

EVIDENTLY, Leilah's bad feeling was contagious. Ryan's stomach was in knots when they pulled off the quiet country lane and turned into the long driveway that led to Grover's farmhouse. As the last glimmers of light faded into a dark starless sky, Leilah parked alongside Grover's woodpile and killed the engine. They sat in the car for a moment in silence and looked up at the house, which was illuminated by both interior and exterior lights.

Ryan didn't know what she was thinking, but he was thinking about the brutal beating that ended King Cortez's brief, troubled life. As was typical for a prison brawl, nobody saw nothin'. But Ryan remembered being surprised at the time by the extent of King's injuries. In his experience, unless a homemade weapon—a shank, a shiv, or a length of pipe—was involved, most fights were brief and non-deadly. There might be some broken bones, bites, or blood loss. But King Cortez had been pulverized. Looking back now, it seemed clear that the attack had been lethal by design. Cortez hadn't been beefing with the wrong guy. He'd been silenced.

He shook off the thoughts, raked his fingers through his hair, and unclipped his seatbelt. Then he removed Jake's handgun from the duffel bag, loaded a magazine into the well, and checked the safety. He kept the firearm pointed down and away from his body as he and Leilah exited the car and walked up the stairs to the front porch.

“You're going in guns blazing, huh?”

He gave a half-shrug. “I don’t have a holster and I’m not sticking this thing in my waistband. I just hope we don’t spook Grover.”

He needn’t have worried.

He rapped on the door. While they waited, he scanned his surroundings. Grover’s place was set back from the road and shielded from view by a row of budding cherry trees. In a few more weeks, they’d blossom, go to full, spectacular bloom, and then soon after, his lawn would be carpeted with pale pink and white petals. Beyond the house, a red-roofed white barn sat to the left. A floodlight mounted to the frame shone down on a wheelbarrow propped near the barn door—Ryan couldn’t tell if it was decorative or utilitarian. And behind the entire property ran the shimmering waterway, barely visible in the darkness. But the gentle lap of water against the bank was audible in the otherwise still and quiet night.

Ryan turned back to the house and frowned at the lack of movement inside. He knocked on the door again, louder this time.

“Where’s his car?” Leilah asked.

“Maybe he parks behind the house or in the barn. He has to be home. He knew we were coming.”

“Unless he got to thinking after you spoke and came to the same conclusion you did about Mr. Cortez’s death.”

Ryan clicked his tongue against his teeth. “Grover wouldn’t run.”

She walked over to the window and peered inside. “I don’t see anyone.”

“Grover? It’s Hayes,” he called as he thumped the side of his fist heavily against the door. It creaked open.

He and Leilah exchanged apprehensive looks. Then he swallowed hard and eased the door the rest of the way open with the barrel of the gun. The instant he did so, he heard Trent Mann’s voice in his head berating him for his unsafe weapon handling and recalled Jake’s warning to never point a

weapon at anything he didn't intend to kill. He lowered the gun to his side as he stepped around the open door.

“Grover, are you in here?”

He walked into the cozy living room. First, he spotted the bourbon bottle and three tulip-shaped glasses on the low table in front of the couch.

He turned to Leilah. “He’s here.”

Then, he turned back and saw the feet sticking out from behind the couch.

“Wait,” he told her as she followed him into the house.

It was too late. She stepped up next to him and drew in a loud breath. She pointed at the shoes.

He nodded. “Stay here.”

His throat was dry and tight as he raised the gun to chest height and prowled across the room. *Please let him have passed out drunk. Fainted. Suffered a bout of narcolepsy. Heck, even a heart attack would be okay.* But he knew.

He knew before he peered around the corner and saw Grover Anderson lying on the floor, staring sightlessly at the ceiling, with a single bullet hole in the dead center of his forehead and a trail of blood running down the left side of his face. He knew, but he knelt beside Grover and checked his neck and the still-warm skin of his wrist for a pulse that wasn't there.

Grover's body was still warm. His eyes were clear, not milky. Ryan was far from an expert, but he knew enough from prosecuting killers to understand that a warm body temperature and clear eyes meant that Grover had most likely died within the last thirty minutes.

Half an hour ago, he and Leilah had been approaching the tiny village of Barrington proper. Had the killer or killers driven past them as they fled the scene? Or had they continued east? Or, Ryan thought, tightening his grip on the gun, were they still on the property, watching from the dark backyard?

He felt rather than saw Leilah come around the corner. He heard the sharp intake of her breath then a low, barely audible whimper.

“Go out to the car and start it, then call Jake. I’ll be out in a minute,” he said in a strained voice.

“Not a chance. We’re not splitting up, not least of all because you’re armed and I’m not.”

He twisted to look at her. “That’s fair.”

She crouched beside him and stared at Grover. “He’s dead, right?”

He nodded.

“I’m sorry.”

“Me, too,” he said thickly.

“We need to call the police.”

“Eventually, yes. But there’s no helping him now. Come on.”

He rose and offered her his free hand to help her to her feet. She cast a final sorrowful look at Grover as Ryan led her out of the room and into the dining room. Judging by the upturned desk drawers and scattered papers, the room had doubled as Grover’s home office.

“They were looking for the Cortez files,” Leilah breathed.

“Probably. They didn’t find them, though.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because Grover didn’t have copies.”

“He told you that?”

“Yes,” Ryan began. Then he stopped. “No. Actually, what he told me was that he didn’t have copies in his house.”

“Okay.”

“In his house,” he repeated.

They turned in unison and looked out the window at the barn.

LEILAH INSISTED they drive the short distance to the barn rather than walk across Grover's shadowy yard, exposed and vulnerable. Ryan readily agreed and tried to convince her to wait in the Subaru with the engine running while he scoured the barn for any files the man may have squirreled away. But she was adamant. She didn't want to let him out of her sight.

As a compromise, she'd left the engine running. Now she stood by the barn door to keep an eye on the vehicle while Ryan searched the stalls and the hayloft.

"Find anything?" she called over her shoulder.

She knew full well that he'd have announced it if he had. But asking the question distracted her from the image seared in her brain: Grover Anderson, a trim Black man with close-cropped gray hair, sprawled in a supine position on the floor behind his comfy couch with a hole in his forehead.

A loud thump sounded behind her and she turned. Ryan had jumped from the hayloft rather than use the ladder. Now he stood, wiping hay from his borrowed pants.

"Actually, yeah."

"Files?" Her heart ticked up in anticipation.

He shook his head and dangled a key from his finger. "A key."

"Great, you found a key in a haystack. But what's it a key to?"

“A filing cabinet. I’m almost certain.” He drew closer and showed her.

She had to agree the tiny silver key looked like it would open a standard-issue filing cabinet. “Where was it?”

“Hanging on a hook.” He jerked his chin toward a small room at the back of the barn. It took up the side wall behind the unused stalls. “I’m guessing the filing cabinet is in there.”

“What is that room?”

He shrugged. “Beats me. Want to come check it out?”

“No. If someone is still lurking around the property, our running car is awfully tempting. I’ll stay here. But please hurry.”

“Will do.” He headed to the back of the barn but turned on his heel and came back. “Almost forgot, I think whoever killed Grover came by boat, and probably left that way, too.”

“Why do you say that?”

“There’s a small dock at the bottom of the hill. I could just make it out from the window in the hayloft. Traveling by water under cover of night is a lot less risky than driving through a small town on the only semi-major road in the county. There would be far fewer potential witnesses on the estuary.”

She nodded. “It makes sense. But then, where’s Grover’s car?”

He shrugged and started toward the back of the barn again.

A moment later, he called, “I found it.”

“The filing cabinet.”

“No. The car. You have to see this.”

She hesitated, uneasy about leaving the Subaru unattended. But curiosity got the better of her, and she walked to the back of the barn. Ryan stood in the doorway, gesturing toward a small, British racing green classic convertible lit from above by a spotlight mounted to a cross beam.

“I don’t believe it. Do you know what this is?”

“A very cute car.”

“It’s an Austin-Healy Sprite. See the fixed headlights on the hood? This car is nicknamed the Frogeye in the United Kingdom and the Bugeye here in the States because those headlights look like, well, bulging eyes.”

“Never heard of it.”

She shook her head. “You wouldn’t have. Fewer than fifty thousand of this model were produced.” She walked into the bay and ran a loving hand down the side of the car. “Hello, darling,” she purred.

Ryan laughed. “I didn’t know Grover was a car guy.”

She scrunched up her nose. “A real ‘car guy’ probably wouldn’t bother with a Sprite. It was always more of a niche vehicle. A curiosity. Was Grover a bit eccentric?”

He smiled. “A bit.” Then his smile faded as if he’d forgotten why they were talking about Grover in the past tense and had suddenly remembered. “But as cool as this is, it’s not a filing cabinet.”

She scanned the room. The lovingly restored car’s hardtop rested against one wall, but the room held no furniture other than a roll-around stool with a base loaded with car tools. Then she looked back at the Sprite.

“Maybe it is.”

Ryan raised an eyebrow. “Go on.”

“The Bugeye has a boot—er, a trunk—but no latch to lift it. See?” She pointed.

“That makes it pretty useless as a trunk, wouldn’t you say?”

“I wouldn’t.” She vaulted over the side and into the car’s interior, then knelt and felt around behind the seat. “The trunk is actually surprisingly spacious, but it can only be accessed from the interior.”

She located the opening to the trunk, pushed the trunk lid up, and grinned at Ryan. He looked down into the space and then back up, wide-eyed. She hopped out of the car and stood next to him, staring down at the small two-drawer filing cabinet nestled on its side in the trunk compartment.

He kissed her. “You’re a genius. Let’s get out of here and call Jake, then the cops.”

He lifted the metal cabinet from the trunk, and she shut the lid gently. As he carried the filing cabinet out to the Subaru and situated it in the rear hatch alongside the camping gear, she lingered in the barn to admire the Sprite. In her view, it wasn’t much of a car, but it was an exquisite piece of art. And it made her wish she’d had the chance to meet its owner.

Distant sirens penetrated her thoughts.

“Leilah, let’s go,” Ryan shouted urgently as the sirens grew louder.

She ran toward the front of the barn as fast as she could. When she reached the car, Ryan was already in the driver’s seat and the passenger door hung open.

“I should drive,” she protested.

“Get in,” he ordered.

Flashing lights crested a hill out on the road, and she dove for the front seat, yanking the door closed as Ryan hit the gas and the Subaru lurched forward.

“Floor it,” she told him.

“Call Jake,” he shouted back, his voice almost swallowed by the sirens. He tossed her the burner phone.

She caught it, bobbled it, and then punched in the speed dial number for Jake West.

“West.”

“We’re in Barrington, Maryland, on the Eastern Shore at Ryan’s old boss’s house. Grover Anderson. We found his body when we got here. He’d been shot. Police are on their way, but

we didn't call them." The words tumbled from her mouth in a rush.

Jake was silent for what felt like an eternity but was probably three seconds. "Get out of there. Now."

"We are."

"I'll call you back when I know something." Jake ended the call.

Leilah stowed the phone in her bag and stole a glance at Ryan. His hair was damp with sweat and his face was drawn, intensely focused as the Subaru bucked and bumped down the country road at eighty miles an hour.

AS THE SUBARU shot out onto the paved highway from the dusty country road, Ryan blew out a long sigh of relief. They'd made it to the main road without encountering any law enforcement. Now all he had to do was put a bit more distance between them and Grover's house. They should leave Maryland, but they couldn't go back to the District or Virginia.

Delaware or Pennsylvania, he decided. Close enough to keep tabs on the investigation, but far enough away to get some breathing room.

He was about to say as much to Leilah when she swore softly under her breath. A heartbeat later, he saw why. A police cruiser was parked perpendicular across the road, partially blocking both directions. Two officers stood in front of the car in wide-legged shooting stances, their weapons aimed at the Subaru. He wet his dry lips and glanced in the rearview mirror. Two more black and whites came into view and hit their lights and sirens.

He considered his predicament for a split second. He was carrying a weapon he was not licensed to carry. He had sixteen thousand dollars in cash in his bag. And a dead man's filing cabinet was shoved in the rear hatch of the car he was driving—a car that wasn't registered to him.

Run.

The idea was tempting. But he had reasonable explanations for all the bad facts. He was a trained lawyer. He could explain the situation, even offer to help the authorities. He'd put them

in touch with Potomac, which had much greater resources than a small, rural police department would.

He eased off the gas, and the car decelerated.

“What are you doing? You can get around them,” Leilah urged.

“They’re prepared to shoot us.”

“So, what, you think you can talk your way out of this?”

Yeah, he thought, *I do*.

What he said was, “I know I can’t if we’re dead.”

“Ryan, this is not a good idea.”

The police car directly behind the Subaru closed the distance between them and hit its siren with a short, loud *whoop, whoop*. Ryan turned on his right indicator signal and pulled over to the shoulder. Leilah pounded the dashboard in frustration. He put the car in park but left the engine running. Then he dropped the gun to the floor of the car, praying the safety was still on, and kicked it under his seat.

The officer took his time clomping up to the Forester. Ryan watched him tap the left tail light. *Old school*. He could work with that. He buzzed the window down, then placed his hands at ten and two on the steering wheel and waited.

The officer leaned down and peered into the car. “Evening, folks.”

“Officer.” Leilah offered a tight smile.

“Good evening, officer,” Ryan said.

“Do you know why I pulled you over?”

“I’m not sure I do.”

Ryan was a law and order guy, but he knew all the traffic stop tricks and had no intention of walking into a trap.

“License and registration, please.”

Ryan kept his hands on the wheel as he explained. “Sure thing. My license is in my wallet in the bag in the passenger footwell. My passenger will retrieve it, okay?”

The cop aimed a flashlight into the car, temporarily blinding Leilah before aiming it down at her feet to light up the duffle bag. “Go ahead, ma’am.”

As she unzipped the bag, Ryan focused on breathing calmly.

Please don't let him glimpse the wad of cash.

She surreptitiously shoved the roll of bills further into the bag as she removed the wallet. She held it up so the police officer could watch her open it and remove Ryan’s license from the ID window. As she passed it over, Ryan’s fingers brushed her. She was trembling.

He handed it to the officer, who held it under his flashlight’s beam.

“Okay, Mr. Hayes. You’re a long way from Shenandoah Falls, Virginia. What brings you up here?”

“We’re just visiting the area.” Truthful, vague, noncommittal.

“Mmm. Registration?”

“It’s in the glove compartment.” *I hope.*

The cop nodded at Leilah, who exhaled heavily as she opened Chelsea’s glove box.

“This isn’t my car,” Ryan volunteered while she rifled through the documents in the box.

As a rule, Ryan believed a citizen should never talk to the authorities without a lawyer present. But, then, he was a lawyer. And he was present. He also believed that with or without counsel, a citizen should not volunteer any information to law enforcement. However, in about ten seconds, this man would realize he was not Chelsea Bishop, so he was just being efficient.

“Oh?”

Leilah handed him the registration card with a small shake of her head.

“Yes,” Ryan explained, as he passed it out the window to the police officer. “I borrowed it from a friend. My car’s in the shop.” Essentially true.

The flashlight arced back into the passenger compartment. “Are you Chelsea Bishop, ma’am?”

“No, officer.”

“And you’re driving the car with Miss Bishop’s permission?” he asked Ryan.

“Of course.”

“Hmm. I’m going to go run this. Make sure Miss Bishop hasn’t reported her car stolen and make sure you don’t have any outstanding warrants.” He tapped the driver’s license and the registration card against the palm of his hand. “You folks hang tight.”

Ryan flashed him a smile as he walked back to his cruiser.

“It’s going to be okay,” he assured Leilah under his breath, eyeing the two police officers still standing twenty yards ahead with their guns drawn.

He flicked his eyes up to the rearview mirror to see where the third police car was. The driver had pulled up alongside the cop who had pulled them over and sat, idling, on the berm. While he was focused on the officers behind him, Leilah reached over, threw the gearstick into Drive, and swung her left leg over the center console.

“What are you doing?” he yelled.

She wrested the wheel away from him and stomped down hard, accelerating while she shifted her butt onto the console.

“What does it look like?” she shouted back as the car careered into the other travel lane.

Once again, she was driving in the wrong direction. Only this time, a police car was blocking the road and two law enforcement officers were taking aim at them. She crawled into the seat and planted herself on his lap.

The speedometer passed sixty, then seventy, then eighty, and kept climbing. Leilah steered the vehicle toward the left shoulder, and, for the second time that day, Ryan squeezed his eyes shut and prayed.

LEILAH WENT OFF-ROAD briefly to cut through a pasture turned construction site, knocking over a sign for luxury bayside homes in the process, but she didn't slow her speed. She trusted Chelsea's vehicle to handle the bumps and ridges.

"This would *not* be easier in my Porsche," she joked, happy for the first time that they'd left her distinctive sports car tucked away safely in the archive parking lot.

The police gave what was, in her estimation, a halfhearted chase before disappearing from the rearview. Once she was sure they'd fallen back, she lifted her bottom off Ryan's thighs.

"Can you climb over?"

"I'd say I like it here, but I'm too furious to flirt with you," he told her as he pushed his way out from under her and dumped himself in the passenger seat.

She snorted and hit the high beams. There was no reason to mar her flawless escape driving by falling into a hole dug for the foundation of a luxury home.

"Why didn't they keep up the chase? Lazy."

"You're disappointed?"

A little.

"No, but it's weird."

"Mind telling me what that stunt was all about?" he demanded as he buckled his seatbelt.

She kept her eyes on the expansive field and fastened her own seatbelt one-handed before answering. “Who called the police?”

“What?”

“Presumably, the police were alerted to Grover’s murder. We didn’t call them. So who did?”

“The killer, I assume.”

“Right. Do you think the killer knew we were going to see Grover, or do you think it was a coincidence that he was murdered within thirty minutes of your call?”

“Clearly, they knew.”

He sounded cranky. She didn’t care.

“Isn’t it also reasonable to assume they were setting us up to take the fall for his murder?”

She waited. He didn’t respond. She risked looking at him.

“Please watch where you’re going. Yes, of course. But we didn’t kill Grover.”

“Sure. And we’re driving around with a gun, a gangster roll, and a cabinet full of a dead man’s documents. You were a prosecutor. Would you believe us?”

In her peripheral vision, she caught a glimpse of his jaw softening. “No, but, Leilah, fleeing makes us look a thousand times more guilty. You have to see that.”

“But we’re alive.” Her voice cracked. “I couldn’t stop thinking about King Cortez the entire time we sat there with those lights flashing behind us and the police officers blocking the road ahead of us. He went to prison for what arguably should have been a misdemeanor prison charge and ended up dead. If this is all related to his case, what makes you think the same thing wouldn’t happen to us?”

He was silent for a long time. Then he lowered the passenger side window and reached into her purse.

“What are you doing?”

“You’re right,” he told her as he removed the burner from her bag. “And if they knew we were going to see Grover, they were either listening to his calls or mine. Probably his, because this is a clean phone. Well, it was a clean phone until I called Grover from it. Now, we can’t risk using it.”

He stuck his hand out the window and released the phone. It bounced and rolled over the hard earth. A cool salty breeze coming off the water blew through the car before he raised the window again.

“Remember what you said about rogue agents back in D.C.?”

“Sure.”

“Could those police have been acting without authorization? Maybe that’s why they didn’t follow us or call in a chopper or something.”

He considered this for a moment. “It’s possible. If so, this thing, whatever it is, has tentacles that reach everywhere. I hope that’s not the reason. I hope they’re just a small overextended department without the resources to pursue us out of their jurisdiction.”

She hoped so, too. The alternative explanation chilled her.

She leaned forward and squinted at a road they were approaching diagonally. “Can you read that sign? Is this Route 33?”

He peered ahead. “Yes.”

“Hang on.” She crashed through a low fence and bumped over a shallow drainage ditch before hanging a hard right and fishtailing onto the road. “You okay?”

“Yeah. I think I’m getting used to your bone-rattling driving, unfortunately.”

She smiled. “You’re teasing me. Does that mean you aren’t mad anymore?”

“It means I understand why you did what you did. But we’re still not back to the flirting stage,” he told her.

“Give me time, Hayes. Give me time.”

He laughed, then grew serious. “You realize we really are on our own now. We have no way to call Potomac even if we wanted to.”

“We’ll figure it out,” she said with a confidence she didn’t feel.

“Mind telling me where we’re headed?”

She sighed. “To the beach. But sadly, not in the way either of us would like to go to the beach.”

“That’s not elucidating.”

“We’re roughing it.”

He groaned.

“Tell me about it,” she agreed. “But it’s the perfect spot. Nobody’s going to expect us to go tent camping at Cape Henlopen State Park on the Delaware shore in early April. We can hunker down, go through Grover’s files, and find out what the devil is going on.”

“From a suite at the Savoir Faire to tent camping. Oh, how the mighty have fallen.”

“Please don’t remind me. If I think about that bathroom, I might start to cry.”



THE NIGHT AIR had turned from cool to cold by the time Ryan and Leilah had struggled with Chelsea’s tent and gotten it more or less set up. He started a fire with the overpriced logs they’d bought from an unattended roadside stand with an honor box. She headed to the bathhouse to freshen up, and returned moments later, grim-faced and shivering.

“That bathhouse is listed as being heated on the map. But either the state park’s staffed by dirty liars or the heat is broken.” She rubbed her hands together over the fire.

“It’s going to be cold tonight,” he warned her. “Even with all of Chelsea’s gear.”

She shrugged and put on a brave face. “We’ll survive.”

“The odds are better than they would have been at the county lockup,” he agreed.

“You’re such a ray of sunshine.”

“While I’m spreading joy and happiness, you should know that Chelsea packed one sleeping roll. So ...” He trailed off and watched her expression in the firelight.

She swallowed and met his eyes. “So that’s good because we’re going to need to share our body heat to stay warm.” Her voice was husky.

Despite the circumstances, his body responded. He forced himself to remain composed. “I won’t take advantage of the situation,” he promised.

She stalked around the fire like a cat and stared up at him, her eyes shining. “What makes you think I won’t?”

She brushed her lips against his neck, and he tensed. “No, Leilah. Not like this.”

“Yes, Ryan. Exactly like this. Your friend is dead. Scratch that, two of your friends are dead. Someone’s tried to kill you. Twice in one day, as a matter of fact. We’re on the run from the Talbot County police, the Department of Defense, the Drug Enforcement Administration, and heaven knows who else. You need—we need—to do something life-affirming, something hopeful and beautiful. And also, warm.”

He needed very little convincing, but her words were more than adequate.

She took his hand and led him to the tent.

He stopped and gave his head a sad shake. “I don’t have anything. Protection, I mean.”

She laughed. “Did Chelsea pack a bag with hand warmers and foot warmers?”

He threw her a puzzled look. “Yeah.”

“Was there an envelope labeled ‘full body warmers’ in that bag?”

“Yes, but it’s a letter-sized envelope, so I don’t think—”

“Those are condoms. Chelsea believes in always being prepared.”

He stared at her for a moment, then threw back his head and roared with laughter.

She grinned and unzipped the tent, then grabbed him by his shirt collar and pulled him inside. “That’s enough stalling, Ryan. It’s time to do something life-affirming, hopeful, and—”

“And beautiful,” he growled against her mouth, as he reached back to close the tent flap. “So very beautiful.”

RYAN WOKE FIRST. Before Leilah, before first light. He propped himself up on one elbow in the cold, dark tent and waited for his eyes to adjust to the darkness. He traced a lazy finger across Leilah's cheek. She made a soft sigh sound in her sleep, and he smiled at the kitten-like noise. She shifted, then settled against him, the curve of her hip bumping into his waist as she nestled closer.

His smile faded as he thought of the day ahead. As spectacular as the night had been—and it had been phenomenal—they had real problems and real work to do in the cold light of day. He huffed out a breath that he could see. In the *very* cold light of day.

He needed to find out what was worth killing for in the Cortez case files but he also needed Leilah to know that last night mattered. She mattered. It was a delicate balance, a needle he wanted to thread perfectly because he couldn't bear the thought of hurting her or disappointing her. Leilah Miriam Khan deserved the best he had to offer. And his abiding fear was that right now, under these circumstances, his best was nowhere near good enough.

Having killed his own early-morning buzz, Ryan wriggled out of the tight sleeping roll and tiptoed out of the tent into the frosty air. He rifled through the bags in the hopes that Chelsea had tossed some instant coffee in with the protein bars and jerky strips. His optimism was rewarded when he unearthed a small box of single-serving tubes of freeze-dried organic roast.

He started the fire to boil water, pulled on his shoes, and took a brisk walk along the dunes trail while the water heated. He headed to the point in time to see the pale pink and purple sunrise over the distant lighthouse. The sun itself was a smear of color in a slate gray sky reflecting off the glass water with a warm glow.

He walked back to the campsite slowly, listening to the eerie call of the loons and the soft cheep of the piper plovers running along the sandy shore. He fixed himself a mug of surprisingly drinkable coffee and sipped it slowly, savoring the contrast between the hot liquid and the cold air. Much like the contrast between the fiery race car driver and his own cool calmness.

Get a grip, dude. He definitely wasn't going to resolve any of the pressing problems facing him if he spent his morning mooning around like a lovesick Nicholas Sparks character.

He made a second cup of coffee, guzzled it, and then found the keys to the Subaru. He unlocked the hatch manually so the soft beep of the key fob wouldn't wake Leilah. Then he carried the filing cabinet to the picnic table and fished the key out of his shirt pocket.

The night before, with the police bearing down on Grover's place, he hadn't taken the time to confirm that the key fit in the lock. But he figured if it didn't, he could smash the thing open with a flat rock. He didn't have to, though. The key slipped into the keyhole on the bottom drawer with ease and turned. He pulled the drawer open and pawed through the folders until he found an overstuffed redweld neatly labeled '*United States v. Cortez.*' He tore open a protein bar to chew on as he leafed through the files: police reports; witness statements; interviews; private investigator reports; forensics reports; research memos; and court filings. The Cortez case had generated more activity than he'd remembered.

He was paging through the evidence list when the tent's zipper unzipped and Leilah stepped out of the tent. She stood, blinking in the light and shivering in the cold. And somehow, she looked fresh and refreshed. She looked like she'd spent the night sleeping on one-thousand thread count sheets in a

luxurious king bed and not squished into a polyester shell sleeping bag on the rocky ground.

“Morning, Sparky.”

“Morning,” she said in a husky, sleepy voice. She eyed his coffee with longing. “Is there more of that?”

He stood and filled the pot with bottled water. “Coming right up.”

She smiled. “I’ll go brush my teeth while the water gets hot.”

She ducked back into the tent and reemerged with her tote bag tucked under her arm. He watched her jog down the trail to the bathhouse.

When she returned, he handed her a stainless steel mug filled with steaming coffee.

“Thanks.” She smiled brightly.

His heart squeezed in his chest. Instinctively, without conscious thought, he leaned toward her and lowered his head to kiss her.

Her hand went up, firm against his chest. “Hang on.”

He pulled back. She sipped her coffee and studied him.

Then she exhaled heavily. “We need to talk about last night.”

Oof. Her words hit him like a gut punch.

Pull it together, man.

“Okay. Let’s talk.” He gestured for her to sit.

She perched on one of the picnic benches and he claimed the other. She reached across the table and took his hand. The gesture felt like a condolence.

“Last night was amazing,” she began. The color rose in her cheeks and she lowered her gaze to the table for a moment before lifting her head and looking at him with a clear, direct gaze. “Amazing,” she repeated. “You are amazing.”

“I hear a but coming.”

She exhaled shakily. “Ryan, I This matters to me. Us, we matter. But right now we have to focus. Someone’s trying to kill you. We have to figure out what’s going on so you can get your life back. We don’t need the distraction.”

“And a relationship would be a distraction?” He didn’t know why he was pushing her. She was saying what he’d just been thinking. What he wanted. And yet, he hated it.

She gave him a soft look. “Yes, it would. A beautiful, wonderful distraction. I want to float through my days, forget where I left my keys, and generally wander around in a blissful fog.” Her look hardened. “But we can’t afford that now. For now, just for now, we need to forget last night ever happened.”

She had to be kidding. How could he forget the heat, the passion, and the tenderness they’d shared? But she was also right. Distraction was dangerous, and, in this case, potentially deadly.

“Sure. Of course.”

She gave him a close look. “This is just temporary, right?”

He forced a smile. “Right.” Then he divided the pile of folders in two and slapped half of them down in front of her. “Let’s get started.”

She eyed him for a moment longer while she drank her coffee, then she nodded and smiled back. “Sounds like a plan.”

THEY'D BEEN WORKING STEADILY, mostly silently—aside from the occasional question or stray remark—for hours when Leilah found it. The answer. Or, more precisely, the fact that would set them on the path that would lead them to the answer.

She almost didn't say anything. She told herself it wasn't that important. That it didn't mean—couldn't mean—what she thought it meant.

No, she told herself. This is important, and you're being a baby.

It was, and she admitted, she was. After she'd explained her thinking to Ryan, after she'd set aside her personal desires, her own wishes, to do the smart thing, the adult thing, the responsible thing—all things that were antithetical to Leilah Khan—he'd frozen her out. He'd thrown up an invisible, impenetrable icy wall. He was on one side, and she was on the other.

And, dammit, it hurt.

But saving his life was more important than her wounded feelings. Finding the people who'd killed Natsuo Ito and Grover Anderson, and possibly King Cortez, mattered more than her pride and her dignity. So she squared her shoulders and cleared her throat.

“Ryan?”

“Hmm?” He didn't look up from the case he was reading.

“Look at this.” She waited a moment, and he flipped a page. “Ryan,” she said again, her tone sharper.

He met her eyes over the top of his glasses. “What is it?”

She shoved the paper across the picnic table and raced around to his side. She leaned in to point to the passage and pretended not to notice when her breast brushed against his arm. “Read this part.”

She watched his face as he scanned the portion of Natsuo’s memo to the file. His eyes widened and lit up. Then he read it again, aloud this time:

“Army Medical Logistics Command at Fort Detrick is investigating the suspected theft of more than four thousand vials of the analgesic ketamine hydrochloride. The vials were reported missing after a routine inventory of medical supplies by AMLC staff in stateside warehouses. The drugs had been earmarked for delivery to field medical personnel.”

He looked up at her and let out a long, low whistle. “Four thousand vials.”

“Fort Detrick is in suburban Maryland. It’s maybe an hour from Washington.”

“Cortez was stopped with liquid ketamine. Four thousand vials back then would most likely have had a street value in the millions. If someone in the Army was stealing ketamine and supplying it to street dealers” He trailed off, and she picked up.

“And DOD and DEA found out, they might be incentivized to keep it quiet. Handle it internally, maybe?”

“Then Nat stumbled on the information while we were working on the Cortez matter. DOD and DEA found out and silenced Cortez.” He fell silent. “But Cortez was killed two

and a half years ago. Why dredge it back up now? It doesn't make sense."

"Natsuo must have done something or said something that made them realize they hadn't cleaned up all their loose ends," she suggested.

He leaned over and kissed her—a quick, light peck. "You're a freaking genius, Leilah. Let's go."

"Where are we going? Back to D.C.?"

"First stop is Natsuo's condo."

"What's the point? I mean, he's been dead a while."

"He lived with his cousin. Juno will talk to us. And there's a chance Nat's papers and computer might still be there."

He was vibrating with excitement. She hated to dampen it, but it needed to be said. "If Juno's still alive, you mean."

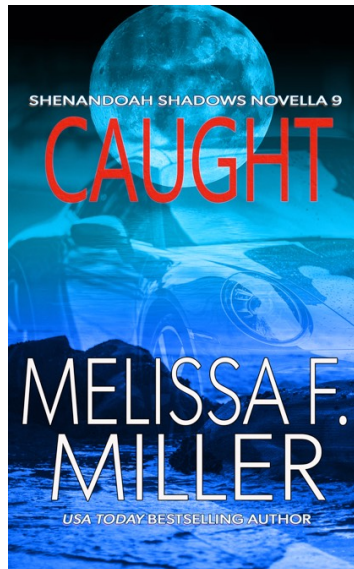
Ryan's face tightened. "Right. So we'd better pack up the tent and get moving. There's no time to waste." He tossed the Subaru keys to her. "You should drive."

She snagged the keys out of the air and gathered up the papers. They were one step closer to an answer, and she should have been as excited as he was. But she wasn't. All she could focus on was the cold, perfunctory kiss he'd given her. As if she was his sister—or, worse, his best friend's little sister.

He looked over his shoulder and called, "Sparky, let's go!"

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



USA Today bestselling author Melissa F. Miller was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Although life and love led her to Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington, D.C., and, ultimately, South Central Pennsylvania, she secretly still considers Pittsburgh home.

In college, she majored in English literature with concentrations in creative writing poetry and medieval literature and was stunned, upon graduation, to learn that there's not exactly a job market for such a degree. After working as an editor for several years, she returned to school to earn a law degree. She was that annoying girl who loved class and always raised her hand. She practiced law for fifteen years, including a stint as a clerk for a federal judge, nearly a decade as an attorney at major international law firms, and several years running a two-person law firm with her lawyer husband.

Now, powered by coffee, she writes legal thrillers and homeschools her three children. When she's not writing, and sometimes when she is, Melissa travels around the country in an RV with her husband, her kids, and her dog and cat.

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