

JUST

LEAVE

A CAMI LARK MYSTERY--BOOK#9

BLAKE PIERCE

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(A Cami Lark Mystery —Book Nine)

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PROLOGUE

Katie Symons' breath felt harsh and ragged in her throat. In, out. In, out. The air was cold and stale smelling. She had no idea where she was. Tied to a chair, somewhere. She could feel the seat – a hard wooden board, she guessed, and she could feel the chair's arms, that her own arms were trussed up to. Those were also basic, wooden, sturdy.

She couldn't see any of this because her eyes were covered with a blindfold. The black cloth was tied tight, pressing into her eye sockets, but even so, she squeezed her eyes closed, because somehow, it helped with the fear.

Over her rapid breathing, she couldn't hear much. This room seemed silent. There were no sounds of traffic outside. No sound of voices or footsteps passing by, and that meant she couldn't attract attention, shouting out, hoping someone would hear a cry for help. After all, she might be blindfolded, but she wasn't gagged.

But she guessed, with a twist of her stomach, that she could scream herself hoarse in here and it wouldn't make any difference. Her hands were tied, and her eyes were blindfolded, and if her voice could have made a difference, then he would have taken it away.

But maybe pleading would help. If she still had her voice, she needed to use it.

"Let me go." She mouthed the words through dry lips, not daring to say them aloud, but just practicing, in case she thought there was a chance. "Let me go, I don't want to be here. I'll never talk about this, I'll never let anyone know who you are."

Maybe that would work. It wasn't much in terms of bargaining. She wasn't negotiating from a strong standpoint here. She might be an excellent salesperson and dealmaker in business hours, but this was not business hours and she didn't feel capable of summoning a shred of her usual skills.

Begging was about as much as she could do. But, in the silent room, she practiced it. Again and again.

"Let me go." And then other words, more difficult to say and more terrifying, too. "Let me live."

And then Katie heard a new noise. The sound of a door being opened, and she caught her breath in terror.

Footsteps trod their way over the floor toward her.

The next moment, her blindfold was yanked away and for a moment, a blinding white glare filled her vision so that she blinked, eyes watering, as they adjusted to the light.

As soon as she could think again, she looked down. Looking down was important, looking down meant that there was less chance she'd see him. Blue carpet, that's what she was focused on. Just blue carpet.

When he'd taken her, she'd tried to do what he asked. She'd tried to do all of it, here in this room, doing exactly what he told her to. He'd been outside, though, calling to her.

But now, he was here, inside the room? In person? What did that mean?

"Don't look at me," he said.

"That's fine," Katie gabbled, "I don't want to look at you, don't want to see you at all. I just want to get out of here."

"No," he said. His voice was grainy, and there was a desperate quality to it she didn't like. "You're doing this wrong. You're saying the wrong thing."

"I don't understand," she gasped out.

"You must understand! Surely!"

He'd moved behind her. He was grasping her arms from behind. And then, a white light lit up in front of her.

It was a screen. And she gasped as she saw her own face on it. Drawn and terrified, but it was her face. With the blindfold over it. He'd been filming her earlier?

"I - I - I love you."

That was what he'd made her say earlier. But she saw now that there was a glitch in it. You couldn't hear the word love properly. The recording was faulty.

"You see? It's not right! It's not right. I need you to say it again. Say it! Say it again for me."

"No!" The word burst out of her mouth. "I'm not going to do that! I am not going to sit here, tied to a chair, telling you those words. This is like a - a sick game. Why? Why are you doing this? Just let me go!"

"I'm doing it because I need you to say this!" he threatened. "I need those words. Say them for me. Say them! Then I'll - I'll let you go. I promise."

"I don't believe you."

But what if there was some hope he would? Maybe he was telling the truth.

"Okay," she said, her voice shaking. "Okay. I love you. There, I've said it. Is that enough now?"

"No!" His voice was anguished. "You didn't sound like you meant it. You didn't sound like you did the last time. Say it again! Louder! And like you mean it!"

"I love you," she said.

"No! Louder!"

And with this pressuring, with the ongoing terror that was boiling inside her, Katie felt something break. He was never going to let her go! She'd tried her best to do what he'd asked, she'd given it all she had, and still he wanted more. He'd never let her go, she knew it, and trying to comply was only prolonging the torture.

"I love you!" She screamed out the words, her voice hoarse, cracking. As loud as she could. It resounded around the room. She screamed it at her own image on the big screen, now frozen at the end of the video. She screamed the words at him again and again, at this tormentor who'd grabbed her and was now terrifying her.

"No! You're doing it wrong! You're doing it all wrong! This is not what I asked you to do. You had the chance, that's all I'm telling you. You had the chance."

There was silence in the room apart from her frantic breathing and the hoarse breaths of the man behind her.

Then abruptly, the blindfold came down again, its black folds pressing on her eyes, blocking out all sight.

"Look, I'm sorry," she began hoarsely.

There was no reply.

A moment later, she heard something. A footstep.

And then, something swooshed down toward her head. She heard it whistle through the air and felt an explosion that turned immediately to blackness.

Then, nothing more.

CHAPTER ONE

Slowly but surely, Cami Lark was getting into the heart of FBI agent Bill Oertel's machine. And his life.

Her dyed-black hair, shaved on one side, hung down over her face, and she scraped it absently back as she worked. The apartment where she was working was warm, so she wore a sleeveless black top that showed off her tattoos.

She hoped that this might be the step she needed to crack open the mystery that had consumed her life. The mystery that had started a few years back, when her older sister Jenna had disappeared.

This had been a twisted and dark trail to follow. It had resulted in the death of good people. But she felt, now, that she was close to the truth.

If she could find the information she hoped was here, it would give her answers on the questions she had. Life or death questions that went back five years, all the way to that terrible day.

Cami had been sixteen then. Jenna had been eighteen. What had happened had been disastrous and inexplicable. Although Cami's domineering father had labeled Jenna a runaway, Cami had known her sister would never simply disappear. Something had happened to her.

The missing person case had been assigned to an FBI agent, Liam Treverton, who Cami had believed at the time had botched it through a lack of expertise.

Now she was realizing that Liam had been a good agent, hardworking and thorough, who had been forced to step away.

And just a couple of weeks ago, Liam had been murdered in his home.

The information she'd obtained from Liam's computer had led her here to his ex-boss, Bill Oertel, who was still working at the FBI.

It was two weeks since she'd managed to get the backdoor open into Bill Oertel's computer. She'd been patient, though. All the best hackers were. If you made your move too suddenly, then you sometimes ended up warning your target.

Very carefully, just a few minutes at a time, and working at times when she didn't think he'd notice, busy times of the day when he might put a slight slowness down to high server traffic, she was getting a picture of who he was and what he did.

She sensed she was on the verge of uncovering something very big. It felt at once exciting and terrifying.

While she worked, she was sitting cross-legged on the couch in the tiny living room in Kieran's apartment.

She wouldn't say Kieran was her boyfriend, but recent events - especially the murder of his brother, Ethan, who Cami had worked with at the FBI, had brought them together and they'd become very close.

A cup of coffee on the table, kindly made for her by Kieran, had grown almost cold because she'd been working furiously, taking advantage of the fact that Oertel's machine was open but inactive.

Quickly, she slurped down half the cup before getting back to her work.

"How's it going?" Kieran asked.

Cami glanced up, smiling as she saw him walk in with the coffee jug. He was wearing one of the blue plaid shirts he liked to wear for his new job as a mechanical engineer on a construction site. He looked good in it, with his broad shoulders, his dark hair, and his tall, rangy build. He wore the shirts because they were practical and didn't show dirt and dust. She liked that about him. Practicality, with a dose of humor.

"You're a star," she said, as he topped up her cup. "It's going well today. I'm getting a lot of time in his inbox today. I'm going further back in his emails and starting to copy the older ones over."

Copying took time, but it was important. If he knew she was in his machine, there were ways he could boot her out of it. She needed to get as much information as she could copied over. Or else he would delete the old evidence. That wouldn't make her job impossible, but it would make it much harder.

"I'm still so impressed that he clicked on that email you sent," Kieran said.

"I've had some experience in creating bait emails," Cami said. "Not in my MIT studies. We didn't learn it there. I learned from my group of hacking friends that I speak to online, people that I've never even met, but we share information. One of them taught me the secrets to creating a very plausible email."

Even so, she knew that Bill Oertel might have realized that the link she'd sent him to had been a hacking attempt and so she'd lain very, very low for a week, buried deep in his machine and not making any moves.

It was the law of the jungle, but in computer language. Lay low. Wait for

the prey to relax. Making a move meant you could be spotted. Staying still gave you a better chance.

"You know, it's lucky that you ended up hacking their website," Kieran said thoughtfully, as he watched her at work.

"Well, I did it for reasons I believed in," Cami admitted wryly. She'd never overcome her anger that Jenna's case had gone cold. She'd believed the FBI was full of incompetent people, and that was why she'd hacked their homepage a few months ago.

She'd gotten caught, and they'd offered her a deal. Jail - or work for us when we need you for a year. She'd chosen the work. And it had given her a much better picture of the FBI. Cami had a very different view of the organization now, and she had more skills and expertise, too.

"If you'd never worked for them, I don't think you'd have come this far," Kieran said.

"How so?"

"I guess you'd still be stuck in your thinking that the FBI had messed up the case. You'd be focused on getting even, instead of understanding the picture better," he said.

"I guess I would." She was silent for a while. "But what if that meant Ethan would still be alive?"

Ethan had been shot by an unknown gunman, while they'd been out at a dodgy bar, where Ethan was helping Cami with her research into Liam. She'd believed for weeks that it had been all her fault. She still did, even though Kieran's arrival at her door had changed her mind somewhat.

Now, he shook his head again, firmly.

"Ethan was doing his own investigation into something that he'd realized was wrong at the FBI. And remember I told you, they attempted to shoot him before he had connected with you at all. We thought it was just random neighborhood crime at the time. I think he'd alerted the wrong person. That's why you need to be careful." Now, his voice was anxious.

Cami knew Kieran was right. Someone was getting everyone who knew anything out of the way.

"I'll be very careful," she said.

"Cover your tracks," he insisted, glancing at the open computer.

"I'll make sure they're covered."

"I've got to get moving," Kieran said, checking the time. "It's five to eight. I'd better get going if I'm going to be on site on time, with the Monday

traffic."

"I'll let you know if I find anything. Have a good day."

Kieran stepped toward her. Cami turned her face to his, and felt the usual flip of her stomach as he kissed her gently on the lips.

"I'll organize something for dinner," she promised.

She knew they were so close to being in a proper relationship, girlfriend and boyfriend. They were taking it slow, which she was glad about. Although she'd started out sleeping on his couch, she was now sharing his bed. But she was wearing pajamas while in it, and no way was she going to take those pajamas off yet. It felt too soon. Even though she had to admit, she wanted to.

Kieran stroked his hand over her hair, his fingers tousling the longer section of it, his eyes full of warmth. Then, reluctantly, he smoothed her hair down, said a quick goodbye, and walked out.

And Cami turned back to the machine. What she was seeing here was interesting.

She'd finally gone all the way back to the communications that Oertel had sent and received around the time that Liam was taken off the case.

If she could read these mails - some deleted, some still on the system - then she might establish if Oertel was a good guy or a bad guy.

Cami already knew what she suspected. Now, she leaned forward, eager to finally uncover the proof. But, as the last of the emails were downloading, her phone started ringing loudly.

The sound startled her, making her jump. This entire situation was making her uneasy.

Quickly, she grabbed her phone, seeing, with a surge of anxiety, that it was her FBI boss, Agent Connor, calling.

His name on the screen brought his face to mind. A strong, tough jaw. A direct gaze that you couldn't hide from. Short hair, graying at the temples. She'd started off resenting him as a

controlling father figure. It was only after working with him on a few cases that she'd come to know him better.

Even so, a phone call from him was not what she wanted, while illegally downloading emails from the hacked computer of an FBI agent who was most probably in the same FBI building as Connor himself.

Cami turned away from her computer before picking up.

"Morning, Connor," she said.

"Cami," he replied, his voice sharp. "What are you doing?"

Guilt flooding her, she feared that he'd found out already, and the game was up.

CHAPTER TWO

Stay calm, Cami reminded herself. Don't confess anything unless directly asked. Maybe he means something different, and you're just interpreting it this way because you're feeling guilty?

"What do you mean?" she asked Connor hesitantly.

"I mean, are you in town, and are you busy?" he responded impatiently, and relief rushed through her. Her movements were still undiscovered – for now, at any rate.

"I'm in town and not busy right now," she replied.

"I may need your help," Connor continued. "We've had two murder victims discovered, within twenty-four hours, that look like they're part of a serial crime. The circumstances are pretty strange, but it seems that IT is involved, because both of their phones have had the same video downloaded and playing."

"That sounds IT related," Cami agreed, swallowing hard. It was a case. Connor wasn't mad at her. But Cami was under no illusions that this case sounded tough. It was not necessarily going to be easier than Connor discovering what she'd been doing.

It might be a whole lot worse.

"Can you come in now?" he asked.

Cami was already on her feet, grabbing her belongings. Phone charger, the silver laptop she'd bought for work, a spare shirt in case she needed it, a bottle of water.

"I'll be there in fifteen minutes," she said.

"Great. I've got a few calls to make on this side, and that should take the same time. See you then."

Connor hung up, and Cami put everything she needed into her laptop bag. She took her FBI jacket from off the coat stand in the corner and put the baseball cap on her head. She zipped up her laptop bag.

And then, she looked again at her powerful gaming machine, the one she was using to hack into Bill Oertel's emails.

She couldn't leave it connected up to Oertel's laptop. It would be too risky if he realized she was there. But maybe she could let it run for just five more minutes while she called a cab?

Cami kept her eyes on the screen while she quickly called a cab. The

emails were downloading as fast as they could, given that the server on the FBI side seemed busy with Monday morning activity.

Her phone beeped. The cab would arrive in three minutes.

Deciding she was going to take this down to the wire, Cami waited to see how much she could upload.

She watched the cab approach on her phone, and watched the data stream into her machine, from her illegitimate hacking connection.

More. One more minute?

She waited as long as she could, until the cab was actually turning into her street. From experience, she knew it would take exactly two minutes to get downstairs, but if she was lucky with the elevator, she could cut that down to one minute.

Okay. Enough. That was all she could do.

Cami closed the connection, hiding herself away from Bill Oertel again. No time even to see how successful this had been. She'd just have to hope.

Grasping her laptop bag she turned, taking her keys from the hook, slamming the door, and racing to the elevator.

Her luck was in. It was on her floor. She jumped inside, punched the button for the lobby, and got out into the icy, fresh morning air and over to the cab in less than a minute.

If only her luck could hold the same way for the case. Hoping so, Cami perched on the back seat, watching as the cab turned onto the main street and sped to the FBI Boston building in the suburb of Chelsea.

Rushing into the FBI office, Cami headed quickly through security, greeting the guard with whom she was now on friendly terms. Upstairs, through the window in the corridor, she saw a meeting had just disbanded and a group of agents were leaving one of the conference rooms.

Was one of them Bill Oertel? Had that meeting been where he was?

Her stomach clenched at the thought. He was somewhere in this building, and he might be the enemy, and she was sure he held the key to what had happened with Liam. And with Jenna.

And maybe, even, with Ethan.

No more time to think about that now, though, because she was already outside Connor's office.

Cami tapped on the door, just as a courtesy, and then walked in.

Connor was on his feet and packing up his belongings. Notepad, laptop, iPad, and phone were all getting shoved into his battered but tough-looking bag.

"Thanks for getting in so fast," he said. Then, in more serious tones, "You sounded stressed when I spoke to you. Is everything alright?"

He was suspicious. She hadn't completely dodged that bullet and would now need to be very careful.

"Everything's fine," she said.

He stared at her some more, as if thinking over that response. Then, he gave a tiny shrug. "Okay. That's good. How was your weekend?"

He was always polite. That was what Cami had noticed and taken on board. Even in the early days when they'd knocked sparks off each other, Connor had never been disrespectful. And he cared for his team, of which she was now a part-time member.

Of course, he could also be checking she hadn't been getting into any trouble on the weekend. But for now, she decided to put that worry aside.

"I went sledding on Boston Common," she said, with a grin as she remembered the fun she and Kieran had enjoyed. "And then we went for dinner at a pop-up restaurant nearby, doing Thai food. We had cocktails. The food was fiercely hot and delicious. It was awesome. How was your weekend?"

She liked that Connor was smiling as she told him about the fun she'd had. And she liked that he now seemed to be fully deflected from his earlier line of questioning.

"Mine was good. Quieter than yours," he said. "We hit the gym on Saturday morning, and then chilled out with the cats, who are both behaving like Velcro thanks to this colder weather. Binge watched some series on Sunday, and cooked a bulk bolognese dinner so we'd have some for the week. Oh, and we built a giant snowman on Sunday afternoon. Don't ask me why. The neighborhood kids roped us into helping."

His fond smile told Cami that his relationship with his now-fiancée, an interior designer who'd moved to Boston to be with him, was going well. And she loved hearing updates on the cats. It was making her wonder if she should approach the subject of adopting a cat with Kieran.

Now the formalities were over, it was time to focus on the hard topic of the case.

Connor slung his bag over his shoulder.

"Right. Time for business. The first crime scene is still open. The body's been removed, but they've kept the phone on site for us. It's an unusual location," he said thoughtfully. "I'm wondering if it has significance to the killer. I've got the case notes so far, and you can look through them on the way."

"Where is the location, and why's it unusual?" Cami asked, feeling a chill at the thought of that body as she walked alongside him while they left the office.

"It's the Gourmet Gallery," he said.

Her eyes widened. "But that's one of Boston's best restaurants!"

"It's about to have a brand new reputation as a body dumpsite, unless we can solve this crime," he said.

CHAPTER THREE

This body had been dumped outside one of Boston's most famous and luxurious restaurants, a place where Cami dreamed of going one day, when she was earning enough money to afford a meal.

The location was still an open crime scene. Yellow tape fluttered in the winter breeze, and the bright lights of the emergency vehicles lit up the gray morning.

From the location of the tape, she saw that it had been dumped around the back - but the back of this classy place was smarter than the front of most other restaurants were. There was a paved parking lot, a beautiful walkway with fairy lights strung over it, an overhanging tree which was now bare and white-branched, and a small seating area that was unused now in winter, but which overlooked a garden and a fountain in the summertime.

"He dumped the body here?" she asked incredulously.

"Yes. And as I'm sure you can imagine, the management of the Gourmet Gallery is beside themselves," Connor said, sounding regretful. "They know how badly this could hurt their business."

Thinking of the case notes she'd read on the way, Cami recalled that this victim, Mary Lou Jacobs, had been reported missing on Saturday afternoon, by a friend, after she hadn't arrived at her gym session. They'd found her car in the basement parking near the gym.

And the previous victim, Katie Symons, had gone missing at some stage during Friday afternoon. She lived alone and had been found in the small hours of Saturday morning, her body dumped outside the Boston Symphony Hall. The coroner had noted that from the estimated time of death, the women must have been kept somewhere for a few hours, then killed with a sharp, hard blow to the head, and dumped.

"So, the killer definitely has a type," she said, remembering that both victims were blonde, both attractive, both in their late twenties.

"Yes. He has a type, but I want to know how and when he targeted them. It's the recent arrival of Katie in Boston that makes this complicated," Connor agreed. "How did he know her? Did he see her in passing when she was out shopping?"

Katie Symons hadn't known a soul in Boston. She'd been in the city for only a week, having just moved into a new place after accepting a work

transfer from Atlanta. She hadn't even started her new job yet. Cami could immediately see there was going to be a lack of common connections between the victims.

However, there was one clue that the killer himself had provided, and it was one of the most puzzling she'd ever known.

At both the locations where the victims had been taken from, the killer had left a red rose behind. A rose had been found near Mary Lou's car in the basement garage, and another rose on Katie Symons' front doorstep.

It was clear that this killer had a type, and perhaps a preferred area, since the women lived within ten miles of each other. But that was all the information they had so far.

"For the moment, let's focus on this location, and see if there are any clues we can pick up," Connor suggested. "The walkway where Mary Lou was found is concealed from the road, so it was only noticed when they opened up this morning."

He walked over to the cops managing the scene.

"FBI agent Connor and Cami Lark," he introduced them. "I believe there's a video that has been played on both the victims' phones?"

"Yes. It was playing nonstop when we arrived on scene," the closest cop said. He looked to be in his twenties, with a pale, troubled face. With his hands buried in the pockets of his parka, he looked cold. But Cami was pleased to see that this young officer was resourceful. "It looked like the phone was low on battery, so I recorded it on my phone. I have a recording of the other one, also, but they're identical. Both the phones are in evidence now, as the batteries ran down."

"Thanks for doing that," Connor said. "Let's take a look."

Cami moved forward, grateful for the cop's foresight in getting the recording, and very curious to know what it was that was played.

The cop pressed the button on his phone, and the film of the recording began. Cami stared at it, now even more puzzled. It was an online video of Elvis Presley singing "Can't Help Falling in Love."

That was all.

The footage was grainy, the video looked to have been taken direct from an online site, and that was all it contained. That song. Playing over and over and over.

Cami shook her head.

This was really, really weird.

But there was a connection forming in her mind. The fancy restaurant, the romantic setting, the love song? Even the roses that had been left behind when the women were taken.

Did it mean something?

It seemed like it did. Connor had always said that one of the most important things in identifying a serial killer was to get inside their head.

Cami thought she was getting there. But Connor seemed to have a different priority in mind.

"Cameras," he said. "I want to see what happened when this body was dumped."

Cami looked up. Sure enough, she'd been so focused on the video, and on imagining why this killer might have chosen it, that she'd missed out on an important detail.

There were cameras at the back, overlooking the parking lot. If they had been operational after hours, then they could have captured the killer, dumping the body.

This might tell them who he was. At the least, they'd surely know the make of car he'd used?

"The restaurant staff aren't on site," the cop said. "They're not opening up today, and have chosen to stay closed for the day, until we're finished here and their staff are over the shock."

"I need someone to come in and open up so I can access these cameras," Connor said.

"I'll give you the manager's number," the cop agreed.

"Anything else?" Connor asked. "Any footprints?"

"There were footprints, but fresh snow had fallen, so all we saw were dents in it," the cop said regretfully.

Cami waited while Connor dialed, standing right there out in the cold, clearly on the hunt.

But as she listened to the conversation, Cami realized there was a problem.

"You're at the other restaurant?" he repeated. Then, in puzzled tones, "Where, exactly?" He paused, listened. "Can someone else come in and open up?"

It seemed the answer to that was no. She heard Connor start negotiating for the earliest possible time, which seemed to be after lunch.

Cami was wondering if the Gourmet Gallery's wifi was operational. If it

was out here, behind the building, she should be close enough to log into it. Then, they wouldn't need to wait for the manager to give them access at all. They could just quickly check.

Now, the manager was talking about getting legal clearance first. From what Cami was hearing, from Connor's one-sided conversation and the questions he was asking, it sounded as if client privacy was a very big concern and that they might have had a high-profile client last night in the private dining room who was not with his 'usual guest.'

This was clearly getting more and more complicated. It sounded as if they'd had some cheating politician or celebrity at the restaurant last night, and the manager clearly wanted to vet every moment of the footage before it was handed over to the FBI.

It was all going to take too long, Cami decided. If she could get into the wifi, she could bypass all of this.

She set her program to run, and waited. With Connor still on the phone, it looked to be a race against time as to what would happen first - the phone conversation ending, or her hacking program working.

She waited. Looked down. She forced herself to be patient because the one thing she'd learned as an IT student was that these gadgets picked up on your fear. Don't think for a moment they wouldn't do that, she reminded herself ruefully. They most definitely sensed vulnerability and a lack of expertise, and behaved accordingly.

But she wasn't scared, and she had full confidence in her program.

It ran like lightning. She'd worked on it for days, fine-tuning it, getting the help of hacker friends she had never met, some of whom lived in the States, others in Eastern Europe, others in China and other Far Eastern locations. They'd all offered input and ideas. Hackers helped each other.

There. She was in.

The software had worked, and she'd gotten into the wifi. Now, it was a simple matter of casting around.

She thought Connor might have picked up on what she was doing, as she edged closer to the building's wall to pick up better signal. Now that he was off the phone, he was speaking to the two cops, and she thought he was keeping them distracted so that she could work.

There was the camera app. There were two cameras, and she needed footage from both, and since it was now nine a.m., and this had happened sometime in the small hours of the morning, she was going to go back to

midnight and record it from there.

Cami sent the recording straight to the cloud. She didn't even look at it. There would be time later for looking, but the important thing now was to grab and run.

Then they could view it somewhere warm.

The wifi wasn't the fastest, but it chugged reliably along, making Cami think of a slow train as opposed to a high-speed bullet train. She glanced down a couple of times. The time stamp said four a.m., then two a.m. At two a.m., as she looked down, Cami's heart accelerated because she thought she saw a dark shape moving out of the frame. That was long after the last guests had departed, and it was definitely moving within the parking lot.

She was so tempted to go back and check it straight away, but it might be something different, and that would only mess up the time sequence and delay things.

Controlling herself with an effort as impatience flared, she watched as it crept its way toward midnight.

Hoping that this would get them a result, and knowing that it could well be futile and that the killer had kept himself hidden, Cami finally disconnected.

She turned back to Connor.

He knew what she was doing. He was watching her expectantly.

"We might not need the manager to come in after all," she muttered. "I've managed to get the footage."

"Excellent." Turning for the car, Cami followed him, glad to be getting out of the cold.

"We need to go straight to the two a.m. slot," she said, as soon as she was inside. "I thought I saw something there while I was filming."

Connor nodded, looking intent.

"I'm not even going to go back to the office," he said. "Let's watch it right here in the car."

Cami took out his iPad for better viewing, logged into her cloud site, and watched as the footage played.

It began from six a.m. and played backward.

She watched intently. She caught her breath as she saw the shape at the edge of the footage. That was the outline of the victim's head on the walkway, she realized. It was just visible in the camera frame, a spooky and terrible sight.

The parking lot was empty, with a light covering of snow that had footsteps in it.

Just after two a.m., she slowed it all the way down.

Was that dark shape going to be there again? And would it be the car they were looking for?

CHAPTER FOUR

Cami caught her breath as the shape of the vehicle eased onto the screen. Now they could see it clearly. It was all the way in the camera's eye, and this was good security footage, crisp, clear, and top quality.

"Well, look at that," Connor said, his voice intent.

"It's a Dodge pickup," Cami said.

"A black Dodge pickup, plates removed. But there are some identifying features here."

Connor paused the footage and pointed. "Look there. A dent in the rear bumper. Quite severe. That's an identifying feature, for sure."

He watched the footage play back.

When that car had disappeared from the screen, the victim's head had disappeared from the edge of the footage, too. Cami felt a surge of resolve. They'd got the right car. Unfortunately, the killer himself hadn't been in the camera's view when he'd got out of the car.

"Let's use that car as our starting point, and get moving straight away," Connor said. "We first need to see if there's been a vehicle matching that description reported as stolen. In the meantime, there are some second-hand car sale places and a couple of junkyards a few miles from here. I'm going to take a drive there. Sometimes, places like that aren't too quick to report any issues to the police. Looking in person might get us further."

Cami was replaying the footage, looking for any other identifying marks, as Connor got on the road and hit the gas, speeding toward the side of town where several second-hand car sales outlets and junkyards were located.

"Black Dodge, no visible plates, large dent in the right side of the rear bumper," he said. "Anything that's been called in, let me know."

"What about the earlier footage, the one from the other crime scene?" the agent on the other side asked. "There's a street camera down the road from that symphony hall. We could get that footage and see if there's a black Dodge that matches the description."

"Same car used in both incidents? Could be. That should be easy to get, so let's pull it."

Cami was reassured that all bases were covered, and she was interested to know what the earlier set of footage would reveal. Meanwhile, she made sure to double-check everything she'd copied from the Gourmet Gallery.

Playing the footage further back, Cami kept her eyes peeled for any other signs of the car. Had it been there earlier on?

She went back as far as midnight. The black car didn't appear earlier. Cami did spend a few minutes looking, with interest, at the couple who left the restaurant and climbed into a limo at about half past midnight. This must be the reason why the Gourmet Gallery was being so sensitive about their footage.

Well, she was clueless about who was who in politics and it didn't seem like any celebrity she knew, and being an ethical hacker, she immediately deleted that part of the footage.

They were out to find the car. And now, here they were at the first of the junkyards.

Connor stopped outside the gate, and Cami climbed out, tramping over fresh snow on the way to the gate. At the gate, a tall man in a dark gray overall was standing with a clipboard.

"Help you?" he asked.

"FBI," Connor said. "We're looking to trace a certain vehicle."

The man's gaze briefly traveled over the contents of the large junkyard. There must be hundreds of cars, trucks and pickups there, Cami saw, not all of them visible from the road. They were in vastly different states, some little more than a few pieces of metal, others fairly sound apart from a crumpled hood or door.

Cars were an unfamiliar world to Cami, and she hadn't driven very much. She could hack an electric car, but that was about her best level of expertise.

"And what vehicle would that be?" the man in the overall asked. It didn't seem like he was thrilled about having the FBI on his doorstep. Cami guessed that in a business like this, it was possible that certain things were not done according to the book. That was what she was sensing from his behavior.

"Black Dodge pickup. Dent in the rear bumper," Connor said.

The man consulted his list.

"Nope. The most I can do for you is a black Dodge pickup shell. No engine, no dent in the rear bumper. No tires."

Connor shook his head, saying in an easy way, "Not what we're looking for then, but thank you."

Cami noticed that by the time Connor turned away, the clipboard man's demeanor had relaxed a lot. Connor always seemed to have that effect on people. His skill set included the gift of getting people to open up.

Cami wasn't much of a people person, but she hoped that being with Connor on cases and watching how he did things might mean some of this ability rubbed off.

"On to the next one, then," Connor said, as they climbed back into the car and headed for the signage down the road.

The next junkyard was smaller. This time, they were able to park on the premises. Following the walkway, they got the whole way into the front office. Here, in the tiny room, a heater was blasting with such force that Cami's face began to defrost, and then to glow.

The friendly woman behind the desk looked through the inventory, but there was nothing matching that description. And then, it was back out into the cold, for what Cami saw was going to be a very long job. There were probably eight or nine different places stretching over a couple of miles.

Except then, they got lucky.

Connor's phone rang and he picked up quickly, speaking to someone at the FBI, Cami heard, as she got back into the car.

"You've had a report of a theft?"

She pricked up her ears as Connor listened carefully.

"Okay. So it's Second Chance Car Saloon, at the end of Ninth Street?"

He paused again.

"What?" he said, sounding surprised. "Is that so?"

Cami saw a frown appear on his face as he disconnected.

"What's the situation?" she asked.

"Well, there's been a vehicle matching that description reported as stolen at the second-hand car place down the bottom of this road," he said.

"Is there something strange about it?" Cami asked. "From your voice, I wondered."

Connor nodded. "Yes. There is something strange. The timing of the report is very odd."

"Why's that?"

"Because it was only reported stolen an hour ago. That's when the report came in." Connor's voice was cynical.

"But that car was used to dump a body last night! And possibly, the night before that, too."

"Of course, it could simply be that they only realized they were short a car in the mid-morning," Connor said, still with that suspicious note in his voice.

Cami was sure there was more to this. This wasn't looking to be a standard theft. What was it then? A cover-up?

Her pulse sped up as they approached Second Chance Car Saloon. She wondered what their welcome would be here if it had been a cover-up.

CHAPTER FIVE

"I love you."

He gripped the car's wheel before turning sideways, toward the passenger seat, where his gaze caressed the form there.

"This is love," he said again, his voice low. "I want you to know that. It's how I feel. It's how I think about you." He took a deep breath. "Maybe you feel differently. I understand if you need more time. That's fine."

As he stared ahead, hearing only the whisper of the car's heater, keeping things nice and warm on this frosty day, he thought about what had led him to this.

It was his need. He'd decided it was time to look for love and that he was going to find it at all costs.

He liked the phrase 'at all costs'. It vividly described the burning passion he felt within him – a passion to love, and to be loved. A need to have that lover by him at all times. That was what love was, wasn't it? People in love wanted to be with their loved one continually. That was what he was creating now, for himself.

The sense of warmth he felt when he heard her voice was incredible, like hot water flowing down his body, inspiring and calming, making even a stressful day seem better.

There were the words, also. Beautiful words, spoken with meaning, had power. The words she uttered spoke to his soul, and his soul spoke back again, answering the dialog. Because that was what love was really all about. Wasn't it?

Then there was the feeling in his own heart, and it was exciting. The speeding of his pulse when he realized she was the one. The sense of tension and breathlessness as he finally got the courage to speak to her.

The sensation that he'd laid it all on the table when he'd confessed his feelings at last.

It was all a journey, he knew.

Love didn't come quickly. It couldn't be rushed. And at the same time, other emotions had to be held in check.

He knew he was an emotional man. He wore his heart on his sleeve, but he also wore less attractive feelings there, too. Sometimes he couldn't suppress those.

"I guess we know that it's a case of 'for better, for worse', don't we?" he muttered apologetically. It seemed only fair to speak about his own shortcomings because if love followed its course, those would need to be accepted.

He cleared his throat and spoke in a louder voice.

"I know I can be - well, I wouldn't say jealous. That would be taking it too far, because jealousy is poison. But I can be possessive. There's a difference between the two. So I'm a possessive guy. What does that mean?" He paused, thinking it through. "I think it means that I'm not happy with second best. I don't want fifty percent. I don't want to share. I don't want leftovers. I want the real deal, I want all of you."

He took a breath, and again his thoughts surged forward.

If he was being honest, he might as well go all the way down the line.

"Sometimes, when I don't get what I want, I get angry. I know that's a very negative emotion to have. I try not to let it overwhelm me. Sometimes, anger can feel that way, you know. It can feel like it grabs you by the neck and it holds you tight and it will not let go of you. It's difficult to handle and difficult to beat. I try not to act in anger, but I know that sometimes I don't get it right."

It was good to get that off his chest. He couldn't go forward and get closer without honesty, and that meant laying bare the bad as well as the good.

"I try to control my anger," he summarized. "But sometimes, it does end up controlling me. Just for a while, and never for long."

He hoped that she understood, because she was remaining very silent.

"I'll always try to control it when I'm around you, which I hope will be a lot of the time. But if I can't, I promise I'll make it up to you. I'm good at doing that. I know I'm an exciting guy. I'm never short of ideas. I think you'll have fun with me. One thing I can guarantee is that you won't be bored."

He paused again, catching his breath, and also gathering his thoughts.

This relationship was still relatively new and still developing. He didn't want to say too much, that would be too forward. It would be better to keep quiet now and say nothing else personal for the time being.

"I hope we get to know each other better. Because there's so much for us still to do. So much we still have to create together."

Now, he stared at the front seat and the computer that sat on it, its lid open, facing him.

Its screen flickered with hundreds of images, stills taken from a video.

The speed was disorienting. He liked that. Love, after all, was disorienting.

Every one of the images on the screen seemed at first glance to have a black slash across the eyes.

It was only when you looked closer that you saw that the faces of only two women were featured in this collage, and that the black slash across both their faces was a blindfold.

But that was fine. Love, after all, was blind.

The only problem was that he didn't have enough of the images, and he needed more to create his ultimate love.

"I think we need to take things further," he said, his voice now soft and intimate. "Let's go for a drive."

CHAPTER SIX

"You aren't allowed in."

Staring at the security guard, Cami knew that the words he was speaking bore all the more weight because this guard was a six-foot-three man, with a massive shoulders and a hard expression, and he was standing at the gate she and Connor needed to get through.

Beyond the gate was Second Chance Car Saloon, the dealership that had recently reported the stolen vehicle.

At first glance, it did not look a lot like a very legitimate business.

The gate was solid and steel, but everything else seemed rusty and dilapidated, from the cars to the office to the unswept, snow-covered paths.

"We're FBI," Connor said politely, producing his badge.

"I don't care what you are, sir and ma'am." The guard, switching his chewing gum from his left to his right cheek, shook his head. "We have a policy here that no law enforcement gets in without a warrant. No warrant, no entry. Otherwise, we just keep getting harassed," he explained.

"It's just a couple of questions," Connor said. "Simple questions, not tough ones. We need some background."

"I'm not the boss and I don't dictate who comes in and who doesn't," the guard explained. "The boss does that and right now, he's out, looking at cars."

"Maybe that's a good time for us to go in and have a quick chat with whoever's there?" Connor suggested. "After all, you did report a car stolen. Surely you can see that would mean you might have law enforcement asking questions?"

"Without a warrant, giving you answers is not possible. The stolen car was reported to the local police station. You're the FBI. You're not the ones who received the report."

Beyond him, a massive steel roof sheltered an enormous workshop. There were about eight cars being worked on inside. Cami guessed they were being repaired, turned into vehicles that would run well. For a while, at least. Long enough to get them sold, perhaps? The sound of hammers, grinders, and welders filled the air.

They needed to get in. But with a chain link fence and a big steel barred gate, they didn't have enough cause, right now, to get past those barriers without a warrant.

"I'm going to have to ask you to leave," the guard said, with a nasty-looking smile stretching its way across his face. "You don't have any reason to come in here. We had a theft and we reported it, and it's been handled."

"Did the local police come here?"

"We went into the police station and reported the crime. There's been a spate of thefts in the area."

"I want to see where the car was stolen from. Do you have camera footage?"

"Not in that area." The guard folded his arms firmly.

"A vehicle that was used in a serious crime was reported stolen from your premises," Connor explained. "It's strange you don't want to cooperate."

"It was stolen. We can't help that," the guard argued.

"I need to see the owner."

"Like I said, he's not here."

"Well, I'm not going away," Connor said, all out of patience with the guard's rudeness. "I'm standing right here until I can speak to the owner. Either he comes back, or else my warrant comes through. And I'm going to call in to the FBI office and organize it right now."

As Connor spoke, Cami was on her phone, doing some background research. She didn't trust this guard's version. She could see some people in the distance. A big, heavysset man was showing a car to a woman. Surely that was the owner? He looked like the owner.

Cami sidled out of sight of the guard and quickly looked up more details on the owner.

His name was Bruce Coyne. She found a photo of him online, and it looked a lot like the man in the distance, who was now striding back to the office as the woman left.

Digging deeper, Cami unearthed a cellphone number for Bruce Coyne. It was an after-hours number that people were encouraged to call immediately if they had any desire at all to buy a used car outside of business hours.

Cami stared at the number thoughtfully. She wondered if she could use that to get into his messages or his online email account and get to know Bruce Coyne a little better.

It was pretty easy to log into someone's online account using a phone number. You could simply request a password change. Then, if you had the new password, you could log in. The trick was that usually, two-factor authentication was in place, with a confirmation code required. And the

confirmation code would be sent to the owner's phone.

But some people were not as savvy as others about looking after those codes when they suddenly appeared. Codes could unintentionally be given out if people were tricked into doing so. Cami hoped that this man, who specialized in car sales, would not be as savvy about email-related issues.

Bruce Coyne – or so she suspected - was in the office now, and he would surely have his phone with him. If he was rushed and distracted, and he received a quick, confusing series of messages involving a password, she could hopefully get a knee-jerk reaction from him.

She'd need to work fast.

First, use his phone number and email address to log into the online account and request a password change.

She did that. And sure enough, the message came up: *Enter the security code that has been sent to your phone.*

Bruce Coyne would now have received a strange security code, and he was probably wondering why. Cami quickly messaged him the text message she'd created to give him a fake explanation and prod him into sending her that code.

"There has been unauthorized activity on your online user account. As a result, it will be temporarily deactivated. To reactivate it, please reply to this message with the security code you have just received."

She waited. Maybe he wouldn't take the bait.

Oh, but maybe he would, she thought, with a skip of her heart, as the code appeared in her inbox. She'd done it. The right message, at the right time, to a distracted man, and he'd sent it on, hoping to avoid trouble.

Instead, Bruce Coyne had landed himself right in it.

Quickly, she entered a new password and logged in to Bruce Coyne's online account. It was hers now, visible on her phone.

Now she had access to all his emails, and also to all his messages, because he'd linked those up too.

Was there anything there that could possibly shed more light on the suspicious transaction of the stolen car, together with his strange unwillingness to allow the FBI onto his premises?

Cami scrolled through the emails and messages, quickly establishing that Bruce Coyne was more of a texter than an emailer. He seemed to do a whole lot of business by messaging on his phone.

Her fingers were getting cold standing out here. Connor clearly meant

what he said about not moving until they found a way in.

But as she read through the texts, she was now finding very interesting messages here, from a few days ago.

"I'm looking for a pickup. Drivable condition. Cash deal."

"I have two."

"Details?"

"One Mazda, red, five years old, low mileage, small scrape on side. One Dodge, black, ten years old, dent on rear bumper."

He listed the prices, and the prospective customer replied.

"Black one sounds good. Can I see it tomorrow? I'll take it if it drives."

"Sure."

There was a gap of a day. Then one more message.

"Car is fine, but why is there no spare tire?"

Bruce, the friendly local car dealer had messaged back, *"You got a good cash deal on the car. Tire is extra. Come in and buy one if you want one."*

The new happy, satisfied customer had replied with a very strong swear word.

There was no more conversation on that side. But Cami now had the strong suspicion that this car had been sold, for cash, before it was reported missing.

"Connor," she said, as soon as he'd hung up from his phone call. "Look here."

She took him aside, away from the guard's frowning gaze, and showed him the string of messages.

Connor stared at them. His eyebrows rose.

"So it was sold for cash, and then they reported it stolen," he muttered. "That makes sense. That gives us enough reason to go in."

And then, he walked up to the guard at the gate once more.

"We're coming in," he said. "I'm not waiting for a warrant. I want to talk to your owner now. There are illegal activities occurring in this establishment. We have sufficient proof of it."

"Wait, you can't just -" the guard protested, trying to jump in the way as Connor shoved the gate open and strode through. But Connor was now an unstoppable force. He rammed the gate open so that the guard had to jump aside or be hit in the chest.

"Get out!" the guard tried, but there was a note of uncertainty in his voice now.

“We’re going nowhere except inside. And if I were you, I’d keep away from the office for the time being,” Connor warned the guard. “Causing trouble now will get you arrested. I guarantee you that.”

Cami scurried through behind Connor as he strode over to the office.

The car’s buyer could be the killer. And in a minute, they might know his name.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Cami saw the owner of Second Chance Car Saloon spin around on his office chair as Connor blasted his way into the tiny office.

The guard was pounding up behind them, breathlessly calling out an apology to his boss. "I'm sorry, sir, I tried to keep them out but they insisted. I couldn't physically stop them. I want to do my job, but I don't want to be arrested."

Close up, Bruce Coyne was even bigger and heavier a guy than Cami had thought. His large backside, encased in faded blue jeans, overflowed the too-small seat of the office chair. His face, framed by spiky brown hair, was ruddy and flushed. He held his phone in one of his meaty hands, and Cami guessed he might have been trying and failing to access his messages.

He was seated at a desk that was untidily piled with car registration forms, old invoice books, and fast food receipts. A half-empty bottle of soda was acting as a paperweight.

The office, though it smelled a little stale, was pleasantly warm.

"What the hell are you doing in here?" Bruce asked rudely.

"We've come to question you about suspected illegal activities," Connor said, remaining calm. "You reported a car stolen this morning. A black Dodge pickup."

"Yes, I did. So what?"

But a defensive tone had now entered his voice. He was even redder than he had been a moment ago.

"It appears you sold the same car, a couple of days ago, in a cash deal," Connor said conversationally. "We received a tip-off about that." He carefully didn't mention Cami's role in the process.

Bruce began spluttering out a denial. "I've done no such thing! No such thing!"

"Give me your phone. I want to see your messages," Connor said firmly.

"My messages? That's private! You can't demand that I show you!"

"Give me your phone. Open it and hand it over," Connor said inexorably. "We can do it here, or we can do it at the police station. Your choice, and it depends how much time you want to spend with us."

Now, Bruce's chest was rising and falling fast under his pale blue shirt. Cami could see he was starting to sweat.

"Look, I didn't - er - there was a problem with that customer," he said. "I think my assistant might have done the incorrect admin."

He opened his phone with shaking hands. He clearly did not want to go into the police station. Cami had the strong feeling that the list of his misdoings would not stop at one. He was now deciding cooperation was better than arrest, but he was blaming an invisible assistant for his wrongdoing.

Connor read through the messages, giving no indication that he was doing so for the second time.

"It seems you sold this car, and then you reported it stolen?" he said.

"It - it was an honest mistake. I'm an honest salesperson," he spluttered. "Honest Bruce, that's me. I really don't know how that happened. It was an admin error, for sure."

"I'm sure it was just an honest mistake," Connor said. "I'm sure that before we've even left the premises, you'll be making a few calls and withdrawing that stolen vehicle report, won't you?"

"Absolutely. I will. I promise." Now, he was sweating. Cami could see the perspiration beading on his wide forehead.

"You need to remember that insurance fraud is a serious offense. It's a felony. You've got a jail sentence of up to five years coming your way, and this looks like a pretty cut-and-dried case to me."

"I - it was a genuine error. Genuine."

"Good. Now that we've cleared that up, it appears this vehicle was used in a serious crime. Two serious crimes, in fact," Connor said, and Cami's eyes widened. While they were waiting at the gate, he must have received footage of the earlier crime as well from that street camera and seen the same car in the vicinity of the other dumping site.

"I really didn't know that was going to happen," Bruce protested.

"Absolutely. You had no idea. But now, we need to get information from you, which I'm sure you'll be willing to provide."

"What do you need?" Honest Bruce asked.

"We need to know what the buyer looked like. Any identifying characteristics? You have a name for him, I assume?"

"I - I took his name, yes. His name is Bob - Bob - er - someone." He made a face. It was an expression that told Cami he was regretting all his life choices from the moment he'd agreed to do the deal with Bob No-last-name-given. If Bob was even the man's first name, which she now doubted.

Connor's grim nod told Cami that he understood this cash deal had been transacted without the need for any mundane details like proof of identity.

"Address?"

"I might not have asked for that. It was - it was up to him to reregister the vehicle, you know. I just sold it."

"You just sold it, of course. Now. What did this man look like?"

"He was - well, he was about five-seven. Brown hair. Sort of an average looking guy."

"What was he wearing?" Cami asked, wondering if there was anything distinctive like a red jacket.

"Jeans, a brown coat," Bruce mumbled, dashing her hopes.

"Did you get him on camera?" Connor demanded.

Bruce squirmed miserably. "We might have - we might have been out of sight of the cameras when the car was handed over. Just coincidentally."

Cami guessed he was telling the truth in that regard. When planning on committing insurance fraud, you definitely did not want your cash sale captured on camera.

"Okay." Connor paused, and Cami could see he was weighing up the situation. "I don't have time to follow up on your actions now, but that doesn't mean I am going to let you get away with it. You've been operating a criminal racket here."

"This was the first time it's ever happened," the man mumbled. "I've had a hospital bill to pay. I know I shouldn't have done it. My kid bust his arm and needed an operation, and business is so slow in the winter, and I guess I was desperate."

Cami doubted his story, it sounded like a version of 'one lady owner and lightly driven' that she was sure all his customers got. But she didn't doubt the fear in his eyes as he was forced to confront the consequences of his actions. That was all too real.

"I'm going to send the local police around to take a look at your books. They can decide whether to take action. And I'm going to make sure they drop in from time to time to do a spot check. Ultimately, if you keep doing this, the insurance company is going to get you at some stage soon. They're not fools. They might even have gotten you this time. So consider this an early warning, and a lucky escape. A chance to take a different path in life."

"I appreciate it," Bruce said in a small voice.

Connor turned and strode out of the office, with Cami following.

As he walked, he was already on the phone to the FBI offices.

"We need an urgent trace on a phone number," he said.

Cami guessed that the chances of getting the information would be small. After all, this man hadn't even given his full name when he'd bought the car. It was very likely that he'd used a burner phone.

Connor gave the number to whoever he was speaking to at his office. Listening to the one sided conversation gave Cami a pang of regret, because when she'd first been brought in on cases, that person would have been Ethan, and now Ethan was dead, and she could never hear Connor having those talks without remembering him. The sharp way Ethan had replied, his speed, his passion for getting the work done fast. His dedication to his job.

It reminded her all over again that Ethan had tried to act. He'd seen there was something wrong within the FBI, that someone was behaving in a way they shouldn't, and he'd tried to find out more, but they'd found him first.

Cami knew that a vein of rot within such a massive organization was a possibility, but it was deeply hidden, and now, she was the one who had to take the risk and danger, and try to root it out.

They got back into the car. And then, Connor's phone rang.

He answered it, sounding cautiously hopeful. "You got something?"

"This is surprising in the circumstances, but we got a trace on the number," the man on the other end of the line replied.

"Good work. Where is it?"

"West of where you are. Pin drop coming through."

In another moment, Connor's phone beeped, and to Cami's astonishment, they had the location, about ten miles from where they were. The actual location of the man who'd bought the truck that had dumped the body.

This was a breakthrough that could see the case solved.

The number was live, the phone was active, and now the chase was on.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Cami was on the edge of her seat – literally, as Connor drove. They were tracking down the cellphone number of the man who'd bought the car used to dump both the bodies. This was a seriously strong lead. She'd thought that the case would end up with her searching through the victims' phones for clues and links. That had often happened in the past. This time, though, a different set of evidence was blazing the trail forward.

Would she and Connor be face to face with the killer soon?

It seemed likely. She stared through the windshield, nerves fizzing inside her. This could get dangerous.

The radio was crackling with updates as they got onto the main road heading west.

"It looks like the phone's location is a halfway house institution," the agent who was doing the tracking from the FBI offices said.

"That's a place for paroled convicts," Connor muttered to her, and Cami's eyes widened. Paroled convicts? That was what they were heading toward?

"Any idea on the details?" Connor asked. "Number of residents, layout?"

"I'm on the phone now, asking," he said, and paused. "The manager says the place consists of two main buildings, with six rooms in each. So a twelve bed setup, for men only. I'm not sure how many people are in the building right now," the agent continued.

"Nobody must be allowed to leave," Connor said. "Entry allowed, but no exit, until we've arrived."

"I'll tell him that."

"Also, we need to keep things very calm. It's better that nobody's forewarned," Connor said. "We don't want this guy figuring out we're coming."

He accelerated along the road, lights activated, but not siren. The pin drop was getting closer. Cami watched it in trepidation.

Had an ex-convict committed these crimes?

"These halfway houses are all very different," Connor said to her, once the radio conversation was over for the time being. "Some are well run, others not so much. I don't know what we'll be going into here."

Cami's stomach twisted harder. She stared ahead at where they were going.

Connor's fast drive had taken him out of town, and now they were heading into an area that was a mix of small industrial buildings, wooded areas, and the occasional housing complex. He turned down a cul-de-sac and sped along it. Once more, he got into radio contact.

"Is the phone still on site?" he asked.

"Still there and turned on."

"Can you get a more accurate location on it?"

"I'm trying, but I'm not getting any luck. It might be that he's moving around within the building."

Cami remembered the rather vague description that Bruce had given them, which she wasn't sure if they could even trust. A man with brown hair, average height, and he hadn't been wearing anything distinctive. In a place like this, there might be a few people fitting that, she worried.

A low, steel fence at the end of the road, with two hulking buildings beyond, signaled the halfway house. The gates were closed, but a mustached man in a black parka with a badge on the pocket was waiting beside them.

"Agent Connor, and Cami Lark," Connor introduced them, showing his badge.

The man nodded, pressing a button to open the gate.

"I'm the manager of this place, and we've got about five or six of our occupants here at the moment. Two are out, and the rest are at work. I haven't said anything to anyone, and I'll stay here by the gate so that nobody leaves."

"That sounds like a plan," Connor said.

He drove through the gate and up to the paved parking lot between the two buildings. There was no sign of the black Dodge pickup. Cami guessed that if this pickup had been bought for cash and used by a killer, it was hidden far away from the halfway house where this criminal was supposedly reintegrating with society.

"Any update on that phone?" Connor asked on the radio as he walked toward the first building.

"I'm battling to get a clearer signal on it," his contact replied. "Network is patchy here."

"Keep trying," Connor encouraged him.

He walked into the first building. Cami followed, finding herself in a small lobby. There were steel lockers, coat hooks, and a scuffed, tiled floor. The desk at the far end was empty, with nobody in attendance.

Beyond, though, she could hear voices coming from a small living room.

Smoke filtered out, and she followed Connor inside, breathing in the acrid scent.

The room was shabbily decorated with a hodgepodge of furniture. A scuffed couch, a few armchairs, and a few wooden chairs. Two of the armchairs were occupied.

One of the men, tall, with a blond buzz cut, straightened up hurriedly from his relaxed slouch on the chair where he'd been checking his phone.

"Cops?" he asked in a loud, worried voice.

"Just looking for a certain individual to ask a few questions," Connor said.

The other man in the room was short - five-five at the most, Cami estimated. He was dark and swarthy and stocky, and he was busy working on a very old and battered-looking laptop.

Neither of these looked like the man they wanted, but Connor clearly also didn't trust Bruce's description, and was not leaving any detail unchecked.

"Mind handing your phones to me? Just need to check your number, that's all," he said politely.

Both the men handed their phones to Connor, who quickly checked the numbers. From his quick nod, Cami saw that neither of them was the owner of the phone in question. Now, Connor was asking around.

"You got a guy staying here who's about five-eight, with short brown hair?"

They stared at each other doubtfully.

"No. Nobody exactly like that," the closest man said. "There are a couple of guys who are taller. One with dark hair."

As Cami had worried, Bruce, the second-hand car salesman, had either misremembered or else told them wrong. Personally, she thought he'd been in a flat panic and had probably misremembered.

"No problem at all," Connor said easily. "How are you gentlemen finding this place?"

"Life outside is good, I guess," the blond man said. "Better than being inside. That's a place I don't want to go back to."

The dark-haired man frowned. "Getting a job is hard."

"Yeah, I can imagine. Tough world at the moment," Connor sympathized. "I hope you find something soon. Thanks for your help."

Again, Cami felt impressed by how he treated everyone with kindness and respect. Well, everyone apart from Honest Bruce, the second-hand car

salesman, who'd seen his tougher side.

After thanking the men again, Connor turned and walked out, heading for the neighboring building.

Cami followed behind, looking around as they walked between the buildings.

Connor headed straight to the door, but as he walked in, Cami hesitated. Had she seen a flash of movement at the first-floor window on the left side of the second building?

She looked again, but it was gone.

Maybe it had been nothing, just a flicker of light, or someone innocently passing by the glass. But even so, she felt uneasy, because what if someone had been looking out and seen them? She didn't want the killer to end up sneaking out.

Perhaps she should try to be stealthy, too, and see if she could spot him.

While Connor walked in, Cami hung back, hugging the outside wall, staying out of sight and checking her surroundings. Looking and listening, just like Connor had taught her to do.

And her instinct paid off.

There was another flash of movement, this time from somewhere behind the building. Someone was running out from behind the building's cover, as if they'd made a hasty exit via a side door.

Then she tensed as she saw the figure sprint fast to the steel fence at the back of the property. The next moment, the brown-jacketed man had scrambled over it and was sprinting into the woods.

Without a doubt, this was their suspect.

He'd seen them coming. And he was on the run.

CHAPTER NINE

"Connor!" Cami ran into the second building, shouting his name.

In a moment, Connor appeared, bursting out through the living room door.

"What's up?" he asked her, his voice urgent.

As quickly as she could, Cami described the predicament.

"A man with a brown jacket ran out of the back of the building, just after you went in. I saw him go up to the fence. He jumped it, and he ran into the woods. You can see his footprints and where he went over."

"Right." Connor had time for only that once concise word. And then he was on the chase.

He shot out of the building, with Cami pounding behind, her Docs digging into the snowy grass as she headed toward the steel fence.

It was about the height of her head. She was going to have to get over it - somehow. She wasn't sure how. This might end with her staying behind, while Connor pursued their runaway suspect.

But, as Connor raced up to the scuffed portion of snow that marked the place where he'd leaped over the fence, he stopped.

He waited for Cami to run to the fence. And then he bent down, grasped her leg, and boosted her up.

Cami found herself flying into the air. Connor's powerful lift had taken her all the way over the fence. All she had to do was grab it and keep her balance, and get her other leg over the top.

And then she was slithering down the other side, landing on a crackling and uneven surface of snowy grass. Small branches cracked under her shoes. By frantically windmilling her arms, she avoided landing on her backside.

The next moment, Connor vaulted in an agile way over the fence, landed much more lightly than she had despite the fact he was six foot tall, and raced off in pursuit.

It was easy to see where the man had gone, because the snow was disturbed by a deep, widely spaced line of footsteps leading toward the trees. He was running hard.

But the trees were thick, and once they were in the woods, Cami hoped they'd still be able to track him. She raced valiantly behind as Connor entered the thick cover of the trees.

In the forest, it was cold and still, the snow lying in drifts, half covered by pine needles, and immediately, Cami saw it would be far harder to see any footprints. No wonder he'd headed straight for the wood. He had known it would provide the cover he needed to escape.

"Okay," Connor hissed to her, slowing his speed. "Quiet."

Cami obeyed - as far as she could, trying not to breathe as she planted her Doc Martens firmly in the ground, hoping they would not disturb a twig or a leaf.

This wasn't her environment. She had no idea how they'd tell where this man had gone, because it seemed he'd totally disappeared.

But she saw what Connor was doing. He'd instantly adapted to his surroundings, and he was now using his ears to tell him where this man had run.

And as she listened out, straining her own ears too, Cami heard what Connor was listening out for.

The thud-thud of footsteps. It was coming from their left, and now, ahead and through the trees, she saw that a trail, covered in slush and pine needles, ran in that direction.

"So he's gone that way," Connor muttered. In a moment, he was on the run and veering toward the trail.

With her only determined thought to keep this man, and Connor, both in sight, and not to get completely lost in these woods, Cami charged after them.

The trail led through the trees, zigzagging left and right. A dollop of snow, falling from an overhead branch, landed on Cami's head and shoulders, covering the brim of her FBI hat with a thick, heavy layer so that she had to take it off and shake it as she ran. This never happened to Connor, she thought. Maybe just like machines could sense the fear of unskilled novices, the trees could, too.

In any case, she was in trouble. She was already falling behind. With every footfall, she was losing ground, and now, looking up, she saw that Connor was almost out of sight. He'd reached a place where the trees thinned out, opening into a snowy valley.

When Cami finally reached that point, she saw Connor and the brown-jacketed man were both racing into the valley. The problem was that the brown-jacketed man, running as if for his life, was far ahead. He must have a lead of a hundred yards, Cami saw, stopping and gasping for breath as she assessed the situation.

He was probably making for a main road that she could see on the other side of the valley, about a mile away. It looked like the edge of a town. Beyond were lights, visible in the wintry gloom, that she guessed must be shops. If he got there, he'd be free and clear, because he'd have time to hide out or melt away before Connor got across the road. And they might not catch him then.

He might evade them and go on the run.

There seemed no way of stopping this disaster from playing out, Cami thought in despair, taking another moment, because she was seriously out of breath, and had as much chance of catching up with the two men as she did of flying.

But, talking of flying, she was hearing something from nearby.

She couldn't see it, but after a moment, she realized what it was. It was the distinctive buzzing noise of a low-flying drone. It must be close, out of sight, thanks to the line of trees, but not far above her head.

Cami wondered suddenly if she could use that drone. A thought – sketchy and desperate, but promising all the same, came into her mind.

She took out her phone, opened it, and quickly ran the program she used to pick up on any nearby devices.

For a moment, there was nothing, and her heart sank. But then, the ID pinged onto the screen.

One drone. Flying above her. It seemed to belong to a forestry department or some government institution. That was what she was picking up from the ID.

Would it be possible to hack it? That drone was the only device that could possibly catch up with the two men, who were still racing through the valley.

Quickly, Cami sent her program to run.

It might not work at all, but if it worked, she knew from experience it would be fast. She'd hack into the controls and would then have a mirror of them on her phone.

If it worked.

While the program made contact with the drone, she glanced up and narrowed her eyes worriedly. They were getting so far ahead. But she saw that their suspect had reached some rocky, stony ground. Maybe there was a river bed down there, frozen or dried up. At any rate, he was slowing, but not enough. And when Connor reached that part, he'd slow too, so it wouldn't help him.

As she was assessing the situation, her phone pinged.

She'd gotten into the drone. Her program had worked impeccably, and now, Cami had managed to take over the drone's controls.

Quickly, she moved away from the trees, needing to see where this drone was, and also if there was anyone nearby who was going to be mad at her and come and take her phone away.

Nope, she couldn't see a soul nearby. The owner of the drone was clearly elsewhere and had sent it out to do mapping, or a routine check, or some other job.

But the drone was now going to do a little detour, because Cami was going to send it across the valley.

Carefully, she maneuvered the control, banking it, and then sending it out in its new direction.

It had been flying slowly. She was going to change that.

She pushed the speed all the way up into the red, and felt a flare of satisfaction as the drone's buzzing rose to a whine, and it set off at full tilt across the valley.

"I'm coming for you, Mr. Brown Jacket," Cami said, looking down at her phone, where she could now see the swiftly moving landscape beneath the drone. "My new best friend and I are going to hunt you down."

CHAPTER TEN

Cami and her hijacked flying device were closing in on the running man. On the screen, she could see the top of Connor's head as the drone passed him. He glanced up as it buzzed overhead at full speed.

She wondered if he knew she'd got behind the controls. All his focus seemed to be on powering forward. Whether or not he knew it was her, he was doing his damndest to get to the suspect as fast as he could.

As the landscape passed by below the drone, Cami noticed a dark ravine lurking in the muddy soil. That would slow Connor down badly, and if he didn't see it in time, he might end up slipping and falling. The man they were chasing must have gone around it, and she needed Connor to do the same.

Cami veered the drone sharply right, bypassing the gaping ravine. She couldn't look back but hoped that Connor had gotten the message and would take the guidance.

Now, she was nearing the suspect, and she had to decide what to do. She really didn't want to damage a government drone. She didn't want to damage *any* drone. They were expensive, and there might be liability issues.

So, how was she going to use it to take Mr. Brown Jacket down if she couldn't actually crash it into him?

Get it in front of him, she decided. Get it in front of him and bring it down to head height. That would slow him all the way down, it would distract him, he'd be looking for ways to get past it. It might make him stumble and fall. And it would buy Connor the time he needed to catch up.

With her plan in place, Cami started work.

Watching the screen carefully, watching the man's head come into view - his hair was more of a dark color than brown, she thought - she maneuvered the drone in front of him and brought it down.

It worked better than she could possibly have anticipated. He stared in horror at it, skidding to a stop, and she knew that he was thinking it had been sent out especially to hunt him down.

That was the good part - all of five seconds long.

Then, Cami realized she was in a whole different set of trouble, because this running man wasn't looking to evade the drone, like she'd thought he would.

Instead, he surged forward and made a wild grab for it.

Gasping in shock, Cami quickly activated the control, lifting the drone, but she was too slow and his hand actually knocked it sideways, spinning out of control for a moment before she managed to regain control and wrench it into the air, too high for him to reach.

He stared at it. She could see him breathing hard. He wanted to destroy the drone. So if she could judge it right, and bring it down again to just outside arm's length, that would keep him busy.

Better still, the drone's loud buzzing would camouflage the sound of Connor's footsteps.

Cami lowered the drone again. This was very hard to judge on the small screen. She couldn't bring it close enough for him to actually grab. If she did, then that drone would be in pieces on the snowy trail before Connor stood a chance.

She swooped it down, let it buzz enticingly near his head, thinking of an annoying mosquito that stayed out of arm's length when you tried to swipe it.

Seeing his arm move, she hoisted the drone into the air. This time, her judgment was better, and he didn't manage to touch it. She lowered it again, letting it hang in the air a yard away from his face, capturing his attention.

He leaped for it, and gasping in consternation, Cami yanked it up in the air. She hadn't expected him to jump. That could have gone very, very wrong.

Hearing a shout from behind her that got her stomach twisting in guilt, Cami glanced around. But it was only someone on the trail, calling to their dog, who was feigning deafness and rooting around in a snowy pile of leaves.

Cami turned her attention back to the drone, lowering it again and then raising it.

But now, she saw that her suspect's attention span was wearing thin. She thought he'd decided this drone was not, in fact, tracking him and that it was just someone pranking him. Because, with a shrug of his shoulders, he turned away from the drone, and broke once again into a powerful run.

Cami grimaced in frustration, readying herself to get that drone in front of him, but out of grabbing distance, so that she could try her best to slow him down.

It wasn't needed, though. She caught her breath as she saw a figure approaching, fast, on the drone's screen. Approaching from behind, his footsteps muffled. Now, of all times, she needed to distract him. She moved the drone in a figure-eight, dive-bombing him while not getting close enough to let him grasp the device. She had his attention, for sure. All his focus was

on the drone's swift movement and not on what was behind him.

And then, Cami watched, enraptured, as the footage of Connor played out, tackling the suspect in a lithe, powerful leap.

The man went down, sprawling on the ground. Cami stood by with the drone, just in case he managed to break away, but although he threw one flailing punch, he didn't get the chance for another. With brisk expertise, Connor had his hands behind him and the handcuffs on.

Cami breathed out a sigh of relief. She'd managed to stop their runaway suspect, and now they could hopefully get critical evidence from him. But first, she had to complete her responsibilities in terms of the hijacked drone.

Cami turned it, banked it, and flew it back on the path it had come from, with the buzzing noise getting louder and louder as it approached. She reduced the drone's speed and turned it in the direction it had been going when she'd first seen it.

And then, she disengaged her program, and watched the drone continue on its path, high in the cloudy sky. With any luck, its operators would put that strange hiatus in activity down to a technical glitch.

Her phone started ringing. It was Connor, sounding breathless but satisfied.

"Great move," he said. "Thank you for the intervention and the route guidance along the way."

"No worries. I've got the drone back on course now," Cami said.

"We're closer to the main road than to you," Connor told her. "I'm going to radio for a police car to come and take us in. I'll send you the address of the police station where we take him. Go back, get my car, and meet me there. I left the keys inside it. And hurry. We may well need you for the interrogation."

Their suspect's name was Nealon Browne. Connor told Cami this in quick, quiet tones as they prepared to go into the interrogation room.

"He was inside for six years for armed robbery and assault. In one of our local maximum-security prisons, that's known as Boston Max. Not sure how he got out so fast," Connor told her. "Now, we need to find out what he's been doing since he got out, and whether murder was on that list."

The one thing they didn't have was his phone.

Unfortunately, by the time he was captured, there was no phone on Nealon Browne's person. While he was being processed, Connor had asked his contact to check the phone's location, and Connor's contact had said the phone was off the network.

Cami guessed that if she'd been using a phone for illegal activities she would also have turned it off as she ran, and thrown it somewhere deep into the woods where it would take an intensive search to find it again.

So, no phone. They could request the messages, and Connor had already got this process moving, but getting them would take days.

Now, it was going to be up to Connor's investigation skills to get the truth. And she hoped it would incriminate this man. Running had been a definite sign of guilt.

With that in mind, Cami headed into the interview room behind Connor. There, she took her first good look at the face of Nealon Browne, as opposed to the top of his head.

He had a glowering forehead, and his eyes were narrowed in suspicion as he gazed back at them. His dark hair was cut short, he had a prison tattoo on his forearm, and another one on his neck.

Would he talk?

Cami's worst fears were soon realized.

"I'm not saying a thing," he said, before Connor could even speak. "I'm not answering one question. I want my lawyer here before I speak a word to you. I know exactly how this is going to play out. You guys are going to frame me for something I didn't do. And I'm not going to go down for it!"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Connor felt jolted by this suspect's refusal to talk, but he didn't show it. He reminded himself that this was only the start. It would be suspiciously easy if a strong suspect confessed to everything upfront. That was where an investigator's skill came in.

Also, he had a feeling that there might be more to this. He could see Cami was convinced that they had the killer sitting in this chair.

But Connor wasn't so sure, and suspected there might be more layers to be peeled back.

"Mr. Nealon Browne, I know you don't want to talk. But I'm sure you can agree we have a problem," he explained calmly to the defiant, thickset man, who had now called his lawyer and was settled down again.

"The only problem you have is you're taking up my time," the handcuffed suspect grumbled.

Should he go for the shock value? Briefly, Connor considered the pros and cons of doing so before deciding it was worth it.

"Your vehicle was caught on camera, in two different locations, being used to dump the bodies of murder victims."

The man's eyes widened. He breathed in, hard. He froze in shock.

Then, his lips clamped together and he turned very pale, and his gaze started darting everywhere.

He had not known the car was being used for this. Connor was picking that up clearly. Now, he could guess at the scenario that must have played out. Someone had borrowed his car – maybe that same someone had even loaned him the money to buy it in the first place. But Nealon hadn't known the crimes that were committed using this pickup were so serious. Connor was sure he'd suspected it would be used for something illegal, but the killer hadn't told him exactly what.

Now Nealon was in panic mode.

"I need my lawyer. Please, I need him now. This is all the way out of control!"

"You must know who this was?"

"I'm not telling you. Man, I can't. This is bad."

Nealon looked down again, and this time, Connor saw something surprising in his eyes.

Fear.

He wasn't talking, but his silence was not out of loyalty.

Looking at his edginess, at the trapped expression in his eyes, Connor now realized that it was because he was scared of the consequences. That made it a whole lot harder.

Loyalty could be worked on. He had techniques he could use.

Fear was more difficult.

"I want my lawyer," the suspect insisted.

Connor checked the time. The lawyer, who Nealon had called earlier, had said he was on his way and he should be here by now. He stood up, nodded to Cami, and walked out of the interview room, leaving the suspect alone, glaring at his handcuffed hands.

As soon as they were out, Cami turned to him and, in a frustrated whisper, said, "What can we do to make him talk? Why is he being like this?"

"It's because he's scared," Connor whispered back, and saw her eyes widen in understanding.

"Oh. I see. So maybe this killer is not actually his friend?"

"He might be a friend. And I'm sure he's paid Nealon. But I think Nealon is very scared of the consequences of betraying him."

"What are we going to do then?" Cami asked, frowning thoughtfully.

"We're going to let him speak with the lawyer present. He might be more willing to talk then."

Wishing that this case was not quite as complicated as it was turning out to be, Connor headed through to the front office, where the lawyer had just arrived.

Connor guessed that the lawyer might be an old friend of Nealon's. He was in his forties. His sour face, and the cynical expression in his eyes, told Connor that those forty-something years had not been kind. He was wearing a shabby suit, with a few creases in the jacket. His hair was graying, and overdue for a cut.

"Are you the legal counsel for Nealon Browne?" Connor asked him.

He nodded. "Yes, I am."

"Your client is in the interview room. This is urgent, so can we move along right away?"

"Sure," the now-harassed lawyer agreed.

They headed back to the interview room, and Connor opened the door to let the lawyer in first. He didn't see any harm in letting them have a minute or

two to prepare, without Connor glaring at them across the desk. The recorder was on, they knew that.

While he waited, he glanced at Cami, feeling a flash of concern for her.

She was trying to solve something that was going on in the FBI. That, he knew. Connor was worried that whatever the something was, it might result in trouble or danger for her. He sensed that this was serious. And it was getting in the way of his goals and objectives regarding this talented, rebellious young woman that he'd grown to respect and even to consider a friend over the months.

He wanted Cami to consider a career in the FBI. She had immense talent and potential, and she was a skilled resource that they needed desperately. Over the course of their time together, Connor had realized that Cami was not a materialistic person. She wasn't driven by money, but rather by a cause.

That meant that unlike most of the other IT skilled agents they'd employed, she wouldn't be lured away by a startup.

He saw her as an IT specialist agent one day. That was his dream for her, and although he'd thought at one stage it might be an impossible dream, he'd recently had hints that she could be coming around to the idea and even considering it.

But this situation that she wouldn't tell him anything about - it could compromise everything. He wished she'd be prepared to tell him more. He knew that if there was sufficient proof, they could move against the agent who was responsible, if there was such a person. They could remove him from the FBI and get him jailed.

But Cami was nervous to tell him anything, and with Ethan having been killed, he didn't exactly have a strong negotiating standpoint.

Connor sighed, raising his hand to his forehead and briefly pressing it to ease a slight headache that had developed over the past couple of minutes.

Then, having given the lawyer and his client enough time, he walked back into the interview room together with Cami.

"So, Mr. Browne," he addressed Nealon. "Are you ready to tell me why you acquired this car, that was captured on camera at the two crime scenes, dumping a murdered body?"

His lawyer's frown deepened.

"Tell him," he muttered to his client.

"I - I was given some cash," Nealon stammered. "I decided to buy it."

"Who gave you the cash?"

A glance at the lawyer.

“Look, I really can’t tell you that,” Nealon said.

“My client is within his rights,” the lawyer agreed.

Connor thought otherwise, but wasn’t going to push that point for now.

“And where is the car now? I see it's not parked at your halfway house. Are you prepared to tell us where it is?”

There was a short, whispered conversation between him and the lawyer, and then Nealon nodded.

"Yeah. Yeah, I can tell you where it is."

Connor got out his iPad, and with the help of the lawyer, and a few minutes of frowning and recalibrating the map, Nealon pinpointed a place in the woods, not far from where he'd vaulted the fence and run.

"It's parked there. The keys are under the carpet," he said. “Look, I bought the car, I left it there. And that was all I did.”

“My client is innocent of anything further,” the lawyer insisted. “He knows nothing of the purposes this car was used for.”

Connor stared at Nealon thoughtfully.

Then he thought back over what he knew. First and foremost was to prove that Nealon’s version was in fact truthful, and that he was not the killer, lying masterfully.

Time had elapsed between the victims being taken and being found dead. At any rate, the police had ascertained that the second victim, Mary Lou Jacobs, had been taken in the afternoon on her way to the gym. She had left home but hadn't arrived for her four p.m. class, and her car had been found in the basement. That gave a rough timeframe of three-thirty to four p.m. on Saturday.

If he could account for his time, then he hadn't grabbed Mary Lou.

"What were your movements, Saturday afternoon?" he asked Nealon.

After another muttered conversation with the lawyer, Nealon replied.

"I was at the halfway house. I was watching a game. There was an ice hockey game on. I was with six of the other men in the living room. It was a big game. The only guys who weren't watching were at work."

"Was the manager there?"

"Yeah, he also watched it."

Connor nodded. He would confirm this, but if Nealon had been watching a Saturday afternoon game, then it backed up his version of events - that he had bought the car, asked no questions, and had not taken or killed or

dumped the victims.

He stared at Nealon again, giving him an intimidating frown.

"This is your last chance," he said. "We'll go easy on you if you tell us who paid you and who told you to do this."

But Nealon shook his head. "I can't, man," he said in a hoarse voice. "I can't. Don't ask me to."

"You have nothing on him," the lawyer backed him up in defensive tones. "It's no crime to buy a car and lend it out."

Nealon was even more concerned than the lawyer. Leaning forward in his chair, he looked directly into Connor's eyes.

"If I tell you, I'm a dead man," he emphasized.

CHAPTER TWELVE

He couldn't believe this was happening. It was a catastrophe.

Yet again, with romance and love at the top of his mind, he tried to dial the number of his connection's phone. He needed him to be ready for another delivery. He needed to prepare. Meticulous preparation and planning was key to reaching his goals.

But the phone was turned off.

He had specifically told him - in fact, ordered the owner of the black pickup - to keep that phone on. He didn't think that his contact would have disobeyed that order because he knew there would be consequences if he did.

Therefore, that only left one explanation, which was that he'd gotten caught.

There was a way of checking this, and he was going to do it now.

He felt his temper rising.

"I'm sorry," he muttered, knowing that at all times he had to prepare for the moment when himself and his love were together for evermore. "Things might get rough for a while because I'm likely to be angry. But I will try not to hurt you, I promise. You're not the one I want to hurt. After all, you always say the right thing, so there's no reason for me to hurt you. You're learning better than I could have asked for."

With the apology in advance made, he got into his car and headed out, driving through the snow-lined roads, heading for the place where he knew the truck was kept.

As he drove, he felt anger rising inside him like a red fog, threatening to overpower his control, to consume his thoughts. He hated that things weren't going his way. He hated seeing wrenches thrown into his plans. Things should have gone smoothly, and they hadn't.

But there was a way to soothe the anger, and that, after all, was what he was working toward.

He leaned over at a red light and quickly moved his hand across the laptop's touchpad.

A moment later, the montage of voices filled the car. Husky, intense, filled with emotion - even if it wasn't the exact emotion that he knew the words merited. He felt a deep thrill as the sound filled the car.

"I love you. I love you so much. I want to be with you for all of time. You

mean so much to me."

On repeat, the words comforted him, but they also got him on edge, because the montage was not perfect. He wasn't happy with some of the tones in the voices. And there weren't enough words. His recording was a work in progress, fragmented and incomplete. He needed to work on it and make it better. It had to be perfect. Perfect.

Once it was, then he would stop.

But stopping was a long way off, because he had so many improvements to make. New ones bubbled up in his mind every day, and how could he ignore these ideas that would mean so much to his end happiness?

The light changed and he headed on, driving out of town, being very careful now, because that unanswered phone was not a good sign, and he knew what it might mean. He was a careful man, and in this, his life's mission, he didn't intend to make a mistake.

He stopped the car at a point where the road crested a small hill. He was now out in the quiet, snowy countryside. From here, if he used binoculars, he could see all the way into the clearing where the black Dodge was parked. Out of sight, apart from this one vantage point.

He lifted the binoculars and focused them.

And then he let out a cry of utter fury.

Police were swarming the car. He could see three of them there - no, four. The uniformed scum were surrounding the car like a bunch of flies, clustering in, looking at it, with their forensic gear in place. They were examining that car, they would be ripping it apart, they would be taking trace evidence from it.

None from him, surely? No, not possible. He had been careful, he'd worn gloves and a hat, he didn't think that any trace of him would remain in that carpeted, musty smelling space.

But even so – what this represented was a violation.

He ripped the binoculars away from his eyes, unable to watch for another moment. How dare they do this! How dare they be there!

And so fast. For a moment, a tinge of fear laced his wrath. He'd not expected the police to find the car so fast. That meant they had found his contact. It meant Nealon would be arrested.

They surely hadn't found his phone. But if they had?

He needed to be careful. It was time to be rid of this burner that he'd used to connect with Nealon. He had others, all with the necessary information

saved. But right here, right now, it was time to lose this one.

It was already turned off. He wasn't stupid. He'd never drive around with a burner activated.

He took it out of the car and he drew his gloved hand back, and he flung the phone, with all his force, down into the valley. He let rip some anger as he hurled it, giving it extra momentum. He had long, strong arms. A powerful man, he found it easy to capture his victims.

The phone sailed through the air, a tiny black dot against the white snow. And then, it disappeared into the snow-covered brush at the bottom of the valley.

Gone.

Just like the man who'd helped him out with the car.

Placing those bodies was the pinnacle of every venture he did. Yes, getting the voice recording was the real reason. But showing the ultimate love and respect to the voices, by placing their shells at romantic locations with beautiful music playing - that was all part of the process and he couldn't go back from it. Now, he'd lost a very valuable cutout. He didn't want to use his own car, not when his emotions, and his respect, required that he used public places.

Now, it looked as if he would have to.

He climbed into his car. His rage had ebbed now. It never lasted long. He wasn't somebody who could stay mad for ages. While it lasted, it was intense. He would act in that rage in a way that he knew was violent. That was why people respected him. They did what he asked them to do.

But unfortunately, the police had swooped, and now he was out of luck and would have to be careful, because everything rested on his shoulders alone.

"Look at the good points," he said to the voices in the front seat as he climbed back into his car and drove down the hill. "The good points are that I have some of your voice now. I've started putting together the beautiful composition that will allow you to speak to me at any time. You know you mean the world to me, don't you?"

Once the voices were in the machine, it was surprisingly easy to think of them as one entity.

"I don't have enough of you speaking. Understandable, right? After all, your voice is so beautiful, how could there ever be enough? But I need more words. I need to be able to converse with you more deeply. Don't I?"

There was only one solution, and that was to do it all on his own. From start to finish.

There was nobody else he could rely on to help him. But perhaps, in a way, that made his quest even more poetically magnificent.

He knew his contact who'd supplied him with the car wouldn't talk. Nealon would be far too scared of the consequences. If he breathed a word, then he would know that there would be payback, no matter where he was. Inside prison or out.

And the other good thing was that the police had no idea who he was. He'd taken his voices in places where there were no cameras.

So he could do this again easily. And he was going to.

He had a list that he'd made up. And he'd done it in the best possible way - by listening. In order to identify the voices that he most wanted to hear, he'd gone out and found them, walking around supermarkets, shopping malls, out in the streets, even going to sports fields and to gyms.

Once he found a voice that spoke to the core of his being, he would follow its owner and discover where she lived. And then slowly but surely, with the utmost discretion and over a couple of days, he would track her movements.

He had quite a few names on his list. He was not committed to one voice only. He knew that this was a labor of love and that the very best collections were only gathered over time.

But now, he needed to grow his collection and go out on the hunt again.

Only another voice could comfort him now, and soothe the emotions that were surging inside him.

Another voice, to form part of the whole.

He was going to go and get her. Now.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"You been to a prison before?"

The question shocked Cami as Connor asked it, glancing at her in the car's front seat.

It made her think of the last time he'd used that word to her, and that was before she'd started with the FBI, when Connor had actually threatened her with prison after hacking their homepage.

Different times, now, that was for sure. It reminded her all over again how far she'd come and how much she'd learned along the way.

"Um, no, I haven't been to a prison," she said.

"This interview at Boston Max will be the first time, then?"

"It will be, yes."

"Let's see if we can fit it in today," he said. "Nealon was more scared of whoever had used that car than he was of us. So, since he's recently been in Boston Max, I'm going to assume that it's one of his prison connections."

"Could it be one of the people at the halfway house?" she asked, hesitantly.

"Yes. I'm going to check that the three people who said they were at work were really there. My office can do that later. For now, though, we need to focus on the inmates. The people who are inside might know more and be willing to talk."

"I guess so," she agreed, remembering Nealon's fear.

Time had flown. It was already getting dark, and the day, gray and grim, was now threatening snow. But Connor was determinedly setting out on the route that led to the maximum security prison on the city's outskirts.

"Something like this, when it's urgent, they usually allow law enforcement to access the prison without making an appointment," he said. "But even so, I'm going to ask the office to call ahead and make sure."

He got on the radio as he drove. Cami watched the snowy landscape swish past. It was weird, she thought, how this case was touching on prisons. First, paroled prisoners, and now, people who were actually inside. It was a sector of society that she'd never had experience with. She'd never known anyone who'd been to prison.

In a few minutes, she would see what it was actually like in there. But just as Cami started mentally preparing herself, their day took an about-turn.

Connor's phone rang, and he picked up quickly.

"Problem?" he asked.

"Yes." The voice crackled over the speakerphone. "There is a problem. There was an incident at Boston Max this afternoon. One of the inmates got assaulted. It looks like it was attempted murder. Word got out, and it caused a flare-up. The whole prison is locked down until tomorrow morning."

Cami felt shocked as she heard the words. It brought an entire new world that she'd never known about, vividly to mind. And not in a good way. This sounded disturbing. What must it be like to live in a place where such violence could flare up at any time?

Although reluctantly, she guessed that wasn't exclusive to prisons. There were plenty of violent people who weren't in prison.

Connor turned right, and then right again, retracing his route.

"Guess we reschedule for tomorrow," he said. He sounded disappointed, and Cami could see why. This was their only lead, it was strong and important, and now they couldn't go further with it. "I'll drop you back home?" he offered.

"Home's further than MIT was," Cami said hesitantly.

"That's no problem. I'm always glad to see you home safe," he said. And then, in a more curious tone, "Where is home now? Are you living in your own place?"

Now Cami hesitated once more. Connor didn't know her circumstances, and she felt suddenly shy about telling him.

"I'm - er - I'm actually living with someone. Just sharing an apartment," she added hurriedly. Even though it was a one bed, and she was also sharing a bed with that person. That might be too much information for anyone, especially Connor. But maybe he should know who the person was because Ethan had been like family to him. Part of his work family.

"It's actually an apartment shared with Kieran," she confessed. "You might know him, or have heard of him?"

"Kieran Myers?" he asked, surprised. "Ethan's brother?"

"Yes," Cami said. "We connected after Ethan died. He reached out to me and we became friends."

And potentially more. But that was still too new and fragile to be talked about.

"Well, I'm very glad to hear that," Connor said. "I hope you're happy in the living arrangements."

"Yes, I am," Cami said. "Kieran is even teaching me to cook. He knows how to make a few different dishes. And it's my turn to cook tonight, seeing I'll be home in time."

"And what are you planning on making?"

"Tonight, I think I'm going to do chicken breasts in tomato sauce, with brown rice," Cami said proudly, remembering that she had to go to the grocery store that was next door to the apartment building, to buy some ingredients.

Now, it was Connor's turn to hesitate.

"I want to talk to you about something," he said. "We haven't spoken about this properly. And I know that there are issues with - with what happened to Ethan and what you're trying to find out. I don't think those can hang over your head forever, Cami. They need to get resolved so that you can move on. Otherwise, you're going to be stuck in limbo forever."

"I might have some answers soon," Cami said, her mind veering back to the emails she'd uploaded.

"When this is sorted out - not if, when - I would like to sit down with you and discuss career opportunities in the FBI," Connor said.

Cami stared at him in shock.

He wanted her to become a permanent part of the FBI. That was a huge surprise to her. She hadn't known that would be on the table, even though it was something she'd considered, and thought about, and dreamed about.

"I - I'm not sure I'd pass the agent training course," she admitted. "I'm not a good runner."

Connor gave her a reluctant grin. "Running skills can be improved, and it's never a bad thing to work on," he said. "But I don't see you in the role of a traditional field agent, Cami. I see you in a role that's created especially to use your skills - a tech expert. You could work wherever you're needed - not only in Boston, but anywhere that IT expertise is needed and not available. You could come on board and help teams with serious crimes. Not only murder - you've been thrown in the deep end there, I admit."

"I guess I have," Cami said.

"Kidnapping, fraud, embezzlement, missing people - there are so many areas where a deeper knowledge of IT could drastically improve the solve rate on cases, and increase the speed at which we could work. It would make a real difference." His voice resonated with enthusiasm.

Cami was amazed at the offer, and at Connor's vision for her. This felt as

if her life was opening up, and a direction she had never believed would be possible now existed.

"I'm so happy that you'd like to have me on board," she said. "And I'd love to think about that. Can you give me a few days?"

"Of course. No rush. Remember we've got you for a year in any case," Connor said, with wry humor, as Cami grinned reluctantly. She felt a happy warmth that she was needed, and it gave her even more determination to get over what she was facing now.

In a few days, she might have more answers.

In fact, maybe even sooner than that. When she got home, she might discover more about what Bill Oertel was up to and what his role in all of this was.

An hour later, the apartment smelled deliciously of cooking food. Cami had the chicken in the oven and the rice ready to steam. And now, with the cooking prep out of the way, she was ready to see where her email research had led.

She checked the time, feeling a pang of nerves as she opened her computer. Kieran had messaged to say he was on his way home. She had a window of time alone now, where she could delve into this deeply, and look through all the emails. The deleted ones that she'd managed to recover, and the ones that were still archived.

Sitting down, taking a deep breath, Cami began the search.

Bill Oertel was a brief emailer. He didn't waste time or words. That, Cami realized immediately as she began searching through. His work emails were extremely concise. One-liners, mostly.

At least that meant they were fast to read.

She skimmed through, looking for what she needed. Communication between Oertel and someone else. Who had instructed that the case get dropped? Was it Oertel's idea? Or had he received instructions from above?

Where was the smoking gun she suspected was hidden here?

Cami let out a frustrated breath. Her search was getting nowhere.

She couldn't find the incriminating content she knew she was looking for. And Bill Oertel had worked with Liam Treverton. She'd found enough evidence of that. He must have been involved in this. Liam's boss would

surely be involved in this if he'd told him to drop the case.

Think, she urged herself.

If this was highly illegal and so secret that people were prepared to kill to protect it, then there was no way she'd find it in an ordinary search, in an ordinary email chain.

This was going to be carefully hidden, and now Cami acknowledged that she was going to find no easy answers. She needed to be more clever and more cunning. She needed to look beyond the obvious. The dots would have to be joined another way.

Of course, Oertel wouldn't have sent an email to someone about this. But he might have made a phone call.

He might have set up an appointment for a face-to-face meeting to discuss it. And traces of that might be possible to find.

Cami quickly jumped up and put the rice in the steamer, and checked the chicken. She couldn't afford to burn dinner while she did her research.

Then, with intent filling her mind, she went back and searched.

"Don't look for the action," she told herself. "Look for the traces of it, and the shadow it casts."

The emails linked her to a lot of other sources of information where she could look. She could see Bill Oertel's daily appointments and meetings. She could see some of his private emails that he'd sent to himself as a backup. She could see his phone accounts because they got emailed through with itemized billing. She had a program that could analyze those, faster than what she could do herself.

Cami worked furiously. This time looking for the shadows. Intent on her research, fully focused, determined to find what there was to find. From time to time, she quickly made a note on her phone before turning back.

And then, she saw it. Finally, the evidence added up. She stared in shock at the screen, her gaze flickering between windows, her mind reeling as she realized what this must mean.

The rattle of the front door made her jump out of her skin.

Kieran was home.

"Hello," he said. "The apartment smells wonderful!" Then he looked at her more closely.

"Is everything okay?" he asked. And then, in different tones. "I can see it's not okay. What's happened? What have you found?"

Cami looked up, her mind whirling from what she'd just discovered.

"You won't believe what I've found," she said slowly.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Cami moved over on the couch to make room for Kieran, and then, item by item, she opened up what she'd found in Bill Oertel's records. Her heart was pounding. This represented a serious breakthrough.

"Look here. This is going back five years. This is the day before Jenna disappeared." Her voice wobbled.

"Okay?" Kieran said. He reached out his hand and put it on her shoulder, squeezing gently. The touch was comforting.

"You can see here, there was a meeting, with P. I don't know who P. is, but I do think it's strange that an FBI agent would note down a meeting with someone who only goes by an initial."

"It does sound strange," Kieran said.

"On its own, maybe it wouldn't mean much. But now, look here. This is Oertel's phone bill. It's an itemized bill, and it gets emailed through to him, so I looked at it. And over that timeframe, you can see there are a number of calls to a particular cellphone number. One call in the morning, and two other calls in the afternoon, after the meeting."

"Yes. I see those," he said.

"Now, we go to the day when Jenna disappeared. And look. Two more calls to that number."

"It might mean something," Kieran said, nodding. "It could also be a coincidence, though. I mean, maybe this is just a work colleague."

"It might be. But look here."

Cami pulled up the calendar, and the call log again, side by side.

"No other calls to that number for a while. But then, Liam starts investigating Jenna's case. I checked the date that investigation kicked off. And look. Now, suddenly, Oertel and this mystery number are in communication again. Two calls, two more calls, and then the case is dropped. Liam is emailed and told it will be moved to another department and reassigned. But it isn't. It's just left to go cold. Then there's another meeting with P."

Kieran looked from one to the other. "I'm getting cold shivers," he said.

Cami jumped up. "The food! The food!"

She had been so absorbed in her research she'd nearly forgotten all about the cooking food. Dinner had been minutes away from burning. Quickly,

Cami took the rice off the heat and got the chicken out of the oven. She needed to get this right - after all, it was her responsibility tonight.

Then, she rushed back to the living room and the laptop.

"If you thought that was giving you cold shivers, wait until you see this," she said.

It was giving her shivers all over again. Goose bumps prickled her arms as she opened up the next stage of her research.

"See here. Does that mean anything to you?"

"What's this date?" Kieran asked, and then he nodded slowly. "I remember, I think. It was around that time that Ethan got shot at when we were out on the street."

"There was a meeting with P. in the morning. There was a call to that same number an hour earlier. And look here."

"I'm not sure I want to see," Kieran said. Now he was sounding wobbly, and Cami put her arm around him.

"This is the night we went out to try to get the information I needed off Liam's computer. We went to that dodgy bar to try to get a voice recording from him, and that's when the gunman followed us." She took a shaky breath.

"Two calls in the early evening? And another call just before midnight?"

"It is no coincidence!" Cami turned to him, intent flaring inside her. "Somehow, Bill Oertel is involved with all of this."

"He must be," Kieran said.

"He's a corrupt agent. He has to be."

"So who's he been speaking to?" Kieran asked.

"That's the million-dollar question," Cami said. "And I'm going to find out the answer."

She closed the laptop lid, feeling as if she was trembling all over. This was so much bigger than she'd thought. And Bill Oertel was in constant communication with the owner of this cellphone, who so far she was sure must be the mysterious P.

"There have been a few other calls between them over the months. A couple of other meetings. But it just seems so strange to me that all those calls and all those meetings should have been on the exact same days as things happened."

She got up, needing time to process all of this. It was the smoking gun she'd been looking for, and she knew that she needed to act on it, but not without careful thought.

"Let's have dinner," she said. "And I'd like to hear about your day. I was called on a case, and I can tell you all about that, too."

Walking to the kitchen again, she appreciated some time away from staring at the screen and thinking thoughts that ranged from anger, to dismay, to fury.

Bill Oertel might not know it, but she was getting close.

And if he was involved in this, which Cami now strongly suspected, she promised herself she was going to take him down.

Cami had just finished eating when her phone rang.

It was Jacenta calling, the FBI agent who'd been assigned as her parole officer. Cami had been expecting the sharp-minded, dark-haired woman's call - for two reasons. Firstly, Jacinta always checked in with her on cases to make sure she was okay and that she was handling things.

But there was another reason, too, and that was because Cami had promised to tell her what was happening with her investigation into Jenna, and Liam Treverton, and ultimately, Ethan's death.

She'd almost told her the last time they'd met. But she'd held back, saying that she needed to do more research. She'd wanted to dig into Bill Oertel's emails before she talked to Jacenta.

Jacinta had messaged her a few times, asking when they could meet and what was causing the delay. And Cami had replied, saying she needed more time.

Now, her research was almost done, and she had most of the evidence she needed. It couldn't be delayed any longer, and she'd need to sit down with Jacenta and tell her everything.

"Cami Lark," Jacenta greeted her. "How's everything going there with you? I understand you've got another case on the go?"

"Yes," Cami said, getting up from the couch and hurrying through to the bedroom so she didn't disturb Kieran, who had his computer open and was doing some work. "As of today. It's a very weird serial case. I think I'm coping okay with it, but as yet, we haven't worked out who the killer is. The problem is that there really are no common threads between the victims. One of them only moved here two weeks ago and has no history or connections in the area."

"That makes it complicated," Jacenta said. "You'll need to use other routes to get there."

"Yes, this case is taking us in a very different direction. There's a chain of evidence we're following, and I'll be going into a prison tomorrow. That'll be my first time," Cami said.

"Probably not the last, especially if you consider a career in the FBI in the future," Jacenta said. The words jolted Cami. A career? It seemed that everyone was encouraging her to sign up for an FBI career.

And she had to admit, she was feeling more and more ready. A shock turnaround if she considered how she'd felt about the FBI when she'd first been confronted by Connor after having hacked their site.

"Now, that's not the only thing I called you about," Jacenta said, inexorably guiding Cami to the next step of the conversation. "I also need to know when you're going to be ready to resume the chat we had two weeks ago. It's been a long time. Longer than I expected this to take."

"I'm sorry," Cami said. It had taken too long. That was her fault, because she'd had to be stealthy in researching Bill Oertel. But she knew she couldn't delay it for more time. "As soon as this case is over, I'll meet with you. And then I'll be ready to show you everything."

"I think I might have heard that before?" There was a dubious note in Jacenta's voice.

"This time, I really am. I've done the checks I've needed to."

"Cami, we can't carry on like this," Jacenta said sternly. "This is now going over the acceptable time limit that I put on this matter. And I can't keep delaying it for much longer. You need to tell me and I'm going to give you a deadline. Three more days once the case is wrapped up. That's all you have."

Her voice was harsh.

Cami felt she was teetering at the precipice but knew she could track every step of the journey there. This hadn't come as a surprise. Now, though, she had to take her courage in her hands.

"Okay," she squeaked out the word.

Jacenta's voice softened. "Cami, you know you can trust me. We'll sort this out. Together. Okay?"

"Okay," Cami said.

She hung up, feeling extremely anxious. Three more days was all she had. And what if it was so big it blew everything out of the water, and the people who were involved in it decided to act by putting Cami down?

Don't think about it, she told herself. Just do the right thing. There's no reason for Bill Oertel to suspect you're onto him.

First, get through this case and find the killer.

And then, be brave enough to act the way you need to.

"Now, when we go into a prison," Connor said, "it doesn't always go according to the script."

"I can imagine," Cami said, feeling nervous.

It was the next morning, at seven a.m., and Cami had just scrambled into Connor's car. She was wrapped up in a scarf and gloves in addition to her FBI jacket and hat. It was freezing, and a chilly wind was gusting, scudding loose snow down the sidewalk.

It was time to get her thoughts away from Bill Oertel, and onto the suspect who had used the black Ford, and Nealon Browne, to dump the bodies of these two women.

This was the killer who needed to be stopped. Today, if they could possibly do it, Cami resolved they would catch him.

Connor was looking preoccupied and stressed, as if he, too, was under pressure to solve this case, as he swung onto the road, heading for Boston Maximum Security prison. Cami hoped that things would be calmer there today and that there wouldn't be a repeat of yesterday's violence.

"Especially after there's been trouble, it's possible that the inmates will say things, shout things, make remarks that are designed to try to get a reaction from you. It's best not to react," he warned.

"I'll try my best," Cami promised, not feeling any less nervous after that cautionary.

Connor headed down the main road. Traffic was dense going into town, but they were going the other way, out to the prison, which was on the edge of town. It was only a few miles away, and a quick drive, but thinking of Connor's words, she got more and more expectant as they neared it. She hoped that things would remain calm and sane once they were inside the gates.

Cami had lived in Boston for all her life, but she'd never been past this particular prison, which now loomed in front of them. Its stark, functional buildings, its high chain link fence, and the presence of cameras and guards

made it an intimidating-looking place, and yet again, she imagined what it would be like to come here in the back of a prison van and be locked inside.

Connor showed his ID at the gate.

"We've come in for a few meetings with convicts. It's been organized by the head warden," he said.

"Right. Should be possible today," the guard said. "No trouble inside since last night. Park in the lot on the right, and then go in the main door."

Connor parked in the lot on the right, where a couple of delivery vehicles were waiting, and then he headed to the main door. They walked in, went through security, and then the guard - silent and unsmiling - led them down a corridor. It was cold in here. Cami's feet sounded loud as they trod down the brightly lit passage.

The guard opened a door at the end. It led through to a small interview room. The room was divided into two halves by a low wall and a sturdy steel grille above it. There were two chairs on their side. One chair on the other side.

"From time to time, it can work well to go down to the cells and speak to the prisoners together," Connor muttered as they sat. "But with what we need to find out, this isn't one of those times. We need to make sure each of these men gives us their own version, and to do that, we need to talk to them one by one."

At that moment, the guard on their side called Connor out of the room.

He left, quickly, leaving Cami alone. She hoped she wouldn't be on her own here for too much longer as she perched nervously on the edge of her seat.

It felt like an age, but was probably no more than a couple of minutes, before Connor strode back in.

"Now, this is interesting," he muttered to her. The warden called me out to tell me that the man who's coming in first, Dave Booth, spent last night in solitary. For his own safety." He paused. "He was a close contact of Nealon Browne's, shared a cell with him before he was paroled. He was the reason for the flare-up. Last night, somebody tried to kill him."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Somebody tried to kill Dave Booth, the prisoner they were about to speak to? Was that a coincidence? Did this man know something important?

Thoughts were whirling through Cami's mind as the door clanged open, and the orange-suited man was led in by a guard. He was tall, gangly, and tan-skinned, with dark, wavy hair.

He looked morose and angry. He also looked injured, Cami saw, feeling her stomach twist as she saw the dressing on his neck. Below the white, there was a stain of dried blood. Had someone tried to stab him in the neck, or what had happened?

"We'll be okay in here," Connor told the guard. "You can wait outside."

He waited until the guard had gone. It didn't seem to Cami that this convict could do anything harmful, even without a guard to watch his movements.

His hands were cuffed together. His legs were not shackled, though, and he moved over to the chair and sat down. She could see a guard watching closely from behind the two-way glass.

Then Dave Booth raised his head and stared at her and Connor, his eyes taking her in, his gaze roaming over her hair, her face.

Cami felt a surge of horror as she looked at him. There was a dull hopelessness in his demeanor that chilled her. Prison was a horrible place. If Connor had actually brought her here and showed her what it was like, Cami thought she would have agreed to work for the FBI even faster than she had done.

"I'm sorry to see you've been hurt," were Connor's first words to Dave Booth. "Do you know who attempted this, Mr. Booth?"

"You think I'd tell you if I knew?" Sounding surly, Booth responded.

"I don't know. I'm not sure what I'd do in your circumstances, but I'm sorry this happened," Connor said again.

It was as if the words acted as an invitation, because Dave shrugged, but then he began speaking.

"I didn't see who attacked me. I was grabbed from behind. Someone had managed to get hold of a piece of steel, and they grabbed me from behind and dragged it across my neck, and then shoved me forward. By the time I'd managed to turn around, they were gone."

"Do you know why this happened?"

"I think I do," he said.

"And the reason?" Connor asked, while Cami felt shivers play up and down her spine.

"It's because I gave someone what they deserved a while ago," the man said. His lips tightened.

"Was this anything to do with a man who got paroled recently?" Connor asked carefully. Cami noticed how he'd kept the question open-ended. He hadn't mentioned any names. Just in case the killer's name came up, Cami guessed.

Clever as the question was, the answer was unfortunately disappointing.

"It was to do with another guy inside. He's part of a gang. He tried to hurt me a while ago. I tried to hurt him back. He had it coming. Maybe he thought I do, too. I guess this is the latest round of payback."

"Are you getting moved?" Connor asked.

He shrugged. "Yeah. I guess after this, I will be moved elsewhere, or else things could get worse. Prison wardens don't like dead bodies turning up inside their prisons." He gave Connor a sly look.

Time to move on to the real business of their visit, now that they'd established that the injury was not related.

"Tell me about Nealon Browne. You shared a cell with him, right?"

"Nealon?" Dave Booth looked surprised. "Yes. I shared a cell with him for a couple of years."

"Tell me who his friends were. Apart from yourself?"

He narrowed his eyes. "Why do you want to know that?"

Cami could see that Connor was considering the answer to this question very carefully. He didn't want to make trouble for the convict, but he wanted to get an honest answer out of him. If that was possible at all, Cami wondered.

Eventually, Connor said, "It seems that somebody got him into some trouble. We're just looking to get the full picture. Of who his friends were, who might know more."

That was deliberately vague.

It seemed to be enough to reassure Dave Booth.

"He used to share a cell with Ellis Zackey before he shared with me. Ellis got out a few months ago, though. Then he used to spend time with Nick Edwards and Giovanni Bellini. Those were his closest friends, I guess. Not

that he was the friendliest guy." Dave grimaced. "Nick is still in here. Giovanni is out."

"How about enemies?" Connor asked. "Anyone hate him?"

Dave sighed. "It's Boston Max. We're not exactly kumbaya here, you know."

"Anyone?" Connor pressed.

Dave shrugged. "Why don't you ask Nick? He knew Nealon better than I did."

"We'll do that, and thank you."

Connor got on the phone, and a moment later, the guard entered the cell and took Dave away. Cami saw how carefully he held him and how there was another guard waiting outside, so that Dave had a double escort on the way back to the cells. This was scary to see. These men had the potential for violence. And perhaps one of them had unleashed it, and used Nealon to help.

It was only a minute later before Nick walked in. He walked slowly, and Cami's eyes widened as she saw he wasn't just in handcuffs. He was in leg shackles too.

She didn't know what that meant. Perhaps he'd done something so serious he had to wear them. In a way, she didn't want to know.

He was a huge man with a massive, shaven head, piercing eyes, and a densely tattooed neck and forearms.

He sat down on the chair and stared them down.

Cami made herself stare back, even though she felt her eyes were watering with the effort.

Connor said easily, just like he'd addressed Dave, "So, you're due for parole in a couple of months, Mr. Edwards. Looking forward to it?"

Breaking the ice. Nick looked surprised at that. Maybe he didn't get many people asking that kind of question.

"I guess," he said warily. "Can't be worse than in here, right?"

"We're here because of someone else who got out recently." Connor moved smoothly into his reasons for being here.

"Is that Nealon?" Nick asked.

"Yes. Why would you think we were here because of him?"

Nick shrugged. "He, Ellis and Giovanni got out recently. He was the most recent, though."

"Was he close to the others?"

Now, a sly expression crossed Nick's face.

"Seems like you want to know this badly?" he asked. "Strange information to be wanting. Did something happen outside?"

"We would appreciate the information," Connor said.

"But what am I getting?" Nick spread his hands.

Cami felt a flicker of worry as Nick continued.

"So I've got to help you now, and I get nothing? That doesn't seem fair. And if it's not fair, I'm not helping." He stared at Cami again, his gaze raking over her. "I'll tell you what. How about a conjugal visit? From this pretty young lady here? I'm owed one! I'll give her a good time, I promise you." He grinned.

Cami ducked her head, her face burning. She remembered Connor's warning. She couldn't show emotion. But still – this was something she'd never expected to have to handle.

"You don't say that to FBI visitors!" A rough, unfamiliar voice made her raise her head again. The guard was there, grabbing Nick's shoulder angrily, shouting into his ear. "You don't say that kind of thing. Or all your privileges will get revoked!"

Nick glared angrily back up at the guard.

"Wait a minute!" Loud and sharp, Connor's voice intervened. "I have an idea."

For a few beats, there was silence. Everyone looked at Connor.

What was Connor going to do now? Was there a way of saving the situation after that inappropriate and offensive comment?

"I believe in fairness. I can't do much for you inside, but maybe we'll get further if we talk about what's possible and reasonable. So, how about some credits at the prison store?"

She could see Nick turning the idea over in his mind. The guard's demeanor relaxed slightly.

"Okay," Nick said. "I guess that'll do."

Cami breathed out a sigh of relief.

"Store credits it is," Connor said.

"Organize them. Now. Or I'm not talking. And it better be a decent amount."

Nick was a hard negotiator.

"I'll be back now," Connor said.

Cami followed him out. No way was she going to sit there alone with him after what he'd said. It was creeping her out. The way he'd gazed at her like

she was an object that was there to be looked at, was horrible.

Connor walked quickly down the corridor, called out to the guard by the top gate, and asked him directions to the prison store. That was a brisk walk away, that took them out of the prison and into the bitter cold.

The store was accessed via a separate entrance that required going through security all over again. Cami was sure there was a different way through if you were a prisoner, but they weren't allowed to take it.

All this, just to buy credits? Cami felt they needed technology in this jail, but acknowledged that it might be too much of an enabler for a smart and sneaky convict who wanted to escape.

Connor bought a very generous amount of credits, and then they headed all the way back again, down to the cells, and with the guard watching sternly, Connor handed the credits over.

Nick glanced at the receipt and nodded. Clearly, Connor had estimated the amount correctly.

But would he talk now?

"I'm not sure what you want to know," he complained.

"I want to know if either of the men who left at around the same time as Nealon, had any problems, any grudges, showed any strange behavior. What kind of guys were they?" Connor asked.

"I didn't know them so well. They were average. Ellis was smart, but a sneaky creep and a backstabber. Giovanni was quiet, but in a way I never trusted," Nick said disparagingly.

"Anything else you noticed? Did Nealon have any enemies?"

"Not in particular," he said.

"What about good friends? Anyone particularly close?"

He shrugged. "I wouldn't say we were close as a group. I remember Giovanni, I think, couldn't wait to get out. He had some dream of reuniting with his girlfriend, but that would never happen. She moved to another state, probably to avoid him."

"Thanks a lot. Helpful," Connor said.

Cami felt stunned.

They now knew that one of Nealon's friends, Giovanni, who was untrustworthy and quiet, had gotten out with intentions of reuniting with a girlfriend.

This linked up to all the romantic places the bodies had been left, the ribbons, the music on the phones.

Giovanni could easily have gone on a killing spree after finding his girlfriend had left the state.

Now to track him down.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Cami had never thought they'd find Giovanni Bellini in a place like this.

Crashes and bangs resounded around the large room. Lights flickered, sending colorful flares and shadows spinning over the ceiling. War cries and cheers resounded around the space.

When she and Connor had rushed from the interview room to find out more about Giovanni Bellini, they'd discovered that he'd found a job after leaving prison. He was working as an assistant at one of the new event venues in town.

And when Cami and Connor arrived, having checked that Giovanni was on shift and in the building, they'd found themselves at a robot fighting event.

"What on earth is this?" Connor said, looking at the poster by the door.

"Robot fighting is a new craze," Cami stage-whispered, above the commotion made by people flooding in. "Teams work together, they custom build their machines, and then they put them into a combat situation on stage, remotely controlling them, and see who wins. It's proving amazingly popular."

"I guess this is the modern equivalent of dog fighting or rooster fighting?" Connor asked, still sounding perplexed.

"Yes. I like it a lot better because no innocent beings are harmed. Although it ends up feeling as if the robots are real," she said. "Most of the robots in these fights look like battlebots, and are controlled in basic ways, just crashing into each other and dodging each other's attacks. But I see here from the poster they're doing an experimental fight right now, with more advanced robots that have arms and legs and move more like people, instead of flat objects. That should be very interesting for fans of the sport."

"Tickets?" the doorman said.

Cami could see Connor was intrigued by the action inside the room, and so was she. Robotics was something she had always been fascinated by.

But they were here to catch a killer. Her curiosity about this robot fight would have to wait.

"We're FBI," Connor said, showing his badge in lieu of a ticket. "We're looking for Giovanni Bellini. Would you know where he is?"

His ID photo and description were unhelpful. He was average height, average build, short brown hair and brown eyes, and thirty years old. With an

oval face and no distinguishing features, not even visible tattoos, picking him out of the crowd wouldn't be easy.

"Giovanni's somewhere in there." The doorman gestured to the crowded room. A massive, metallic crash filled the air, and the lights dipped and flared. Cheers erupted. "He's circulating inside. I'm not sure where, though."

He peered into the murky light.

"Any uniform? Would he be wearing anything distinctive?"

"A RoboBattle baseball cap and a black jacket," the doorman said, and Cami had to suppress a flare of frustration. It looked like everyone in the room was wearing similar clothing.

"I guess we go in and look for him," Connor said.

He stepped inside, weaving his way through the tightly packed crowds. The robot battle was occurring on a raised stage at the back. Two machines, with metal gleaming and arms raised, were doing battle, while their teams, at either end of the stage, worked the controls.

The lights dipped again, plunging the place into blackness, and then flared. Cami stared around, seeing the crowds, battling to get her eyes adjusted to the constantly changing light, and to train her gaze to pick out the man they needed.

Everyone in the crowd seemed to be wearing that baseball cap, and there were hundreds of people in the room. The robot fights were clearly a hugely popular crowd-puller, and Cami could see why. There was something hypnotic about watching two large, remote-controlled machines battle for supremacy.

"How long will this fight carry on for?" Connor asked.

Cami shouted back in reply. "Usually, as long as it takes for the one team to get the other one's robot on the floor. Then the lights will go up and we'll have a better chance at spotting him."

"Okay. I'll have a look around. Let's stay in touch via message."

For a moment, Cami considered speeding things along by hacking into one of the robots and simply forcing it to lie down. She could have done that. If she got to the controls, she had a very powerful program that would work.

But she put that idea instantly out of her mind. It would not be ethical to do that. And she was trying her best to remain an ethical hacker. Prize money was at stake, these teams had put their all into the game, and a few minutes more of searching in the gloom would have to be endured. In any case, it looked like the team with the red and gold robot was much stronger and that

the silver and black one would soon be forced into submission.

But maybe this room wasn't the only place there was to search.

It was very crowded in here, and she didn't see what role an assistant could play in this space. Surely it was far more likely that an assistant was going to be somewhere behind the scenes? Perhaps checking that the restrooms were clean, or setting up the catering, or backstage, ready for the next team's entrance?

"This way?" she said, turning.

But she saw that Connor had already gone.

Her boss had headed off somewhere different, and now she'd have to pursue her good idea all on her own.

A crash, a flare of light, and raucous cheers signaled that Team Gold had almost won against Team Silver, but at the last minute, the silver team had got their robot out of the way, sending it back, regrouping. Working on their strategy. She watched as the robot lifted its arms again.

It was hard not to ascribe human emotions and feelings to something that behaved in such a lifelike way as the silver robot tottered bravely forward once more.

Maybe, Cami thought with a shiver, the robot actually had more humanity within its mechanical soul, than the man they were here to hunt.

There was a side door, taking her out of the main viewing hall.

She pushed it open and headed through, to see where it led, and if her hunch was correct. The side door whooshed shut behind her.

Back here, it was much darker, with only a string of tiny, silvery lights showing the way. And it was much quieter. The noise, deafening from inside the main hall, was muffled back here.

She followed the corridor along, letting her eyes adjust to the gloom.

Footsteps from up ahead alerted her and she moved to the side, pressing herself against a wall, as a woman in a baseball cap hurried past. Cami guessed she'd come from the restrooms. They must be down this way, and she saw another sign directing her to the kiosk and refreshments area.

It was a few steps later that Cami thought to herself that the woman passing by had looked upset. As if she'd been trying to get back to the hall, fast. She had been rushing back. She'd been looking threatened.

And a moment later, she picked up the sound of raised voices coming from further down the corridor. She heard a man's voice, sounding angry. And then a woman's voice, high and traumatized. The note of fear in it set

Cami's instincts prickling. She needed to see what was happening. This could be Giovanni Bellini himself, trying to grab another victim from this crowded and anonymous venue.

Where was Connor? Cami quickly picked up her phone and sent him a message.

"I am in back corridor, toward restrooms. Sounds like some trouble from down here."

She hesitated. There was no guarantee that Connor would read her message any time soon. He was prowling around an extremely noisy competition hall in search of their killer. Unless he actually looked at his phone, there was no way of alerting him.

Another shout from down the corridor. Whatever was playing out, it wasn't resolving. It was getting worse. And with no sign of Connor around as yet, Cami would have to stop this herself.

Taking her courage into her hands, she headed down the corridor, walking quietly, hoping that whatever was down there, would be within her power to solve.

She'd so much rather have been in that competition hall. Hacking into the robot would have been easy compared to this.

"No! Get your hands off me!" Those words were clearly audible, and the woman sounded terrified.

Cami broke into a run, pounding down the dimly lit, carpeted corridor. It ended in a lobby, with restroom doors on either side and an emergency exit beyond.

A woman, with frightened eyes and long platinum hair, was resisting the grasp of a solid looking man, who had her arm firmly pinned in his hands, and who was trying to drag her to the exit door.

Cami couldn't see his face. But he was average height, strongly built, and wearing a RoboBattle baseball cap.

If this was the killer, she had to act. Now. Because if he got her out of that door, it would be too late.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

"Hey! Stop that!" Cami shouted out the words as loudly as she could, rushing forward. She was hoping that her shout might attract someone else who could come and help. The guy in the baseball cap already had the door open, and the woman was fighting with all her strength to get free from his grasp.

"Let me go! Let me go!" Her voice was shrill and panicked.

Alerted by Cami's shout, the man turned to face her, without letting go of his platinum haired captive.

His face wasn't exactly like she remembered the ID photo, but it was difficult to tell under the shadow of the baseball cap's brim, and also because he looked so angry.

His features were tense and hard with fury. She could see the way his hand, with strong, stubby fingers, was digging hard into the woman's arm.

"Get the hell away," he snarled to Cami. "This is a private matter."

"It's not private," Cami retorted, her outrage now winning over her fear, because this terrified woman needed her help, and she could not let him drag her out of the door. Drawing on reserves of courage she didn't even know she had, she continued. "You're abusing her. You're trying to take her away. Now let go!"

She should threaten to call the cops. But the guy might laugh at her, and in any case, she *was* the cops. If he wasn't taking her FBI jacket and hat seriously, then that threat wouldn't wash with him.

"You get away!" he shouted. He tugged the woman harder so that she almost stumbled and fell. She was trying to wrench her arm away, but it was clear his grip was like a vise.

Cami knew she was going to have to get involved. Actively involved.

Taking a deep breath and trying not to think how badly this could go wrong, she strode over and grabbed hold of the man's arm.

"Let her go!" she yelled, trying her best to twist his arm, to hurt him, to break it free from that iron grip. It was like grappling with a gnarly tree branch. Cami felt shocked by his power, and by how little effect her grasp had. Then, things got worse. He shifted his weight subtly, and the next moment, his foot lashed out at her.

It was only by pure luck that Cami shifted her feet to try to avoid being

dragged sideways, and the kick he'd aimed glanced off her thigh instead of cracking right into her knee.

Even so, she gasped as pain flared. It was like being kicked by a horse! This guy was a brutal street fighter who was not holding back.

Somehow, determination overrode her fear, as she reminded herself that she could not let another woman be taken, to be killed in a terrible way. She raised her foot and tried the same, kicking him right back again.

And she got lucky, partly because the platinum blonde had chosen that moment to try to struggle against her captor, and he was distracted. He wasn't watching Cami, and her foot landed where it counted, and he gasped and staggered.

Cami felt a flash of total shock. She'd done that?

Then the next moment, shock turned to panic, because he let go of the door, and reached out his other hand, and caught her by her sleeve. He dragged her toward him and, stumbling and flailing, Cami found herself staring right into his angry eyes.

Blue eyes?

She had only a moment to take this in before he raised his head and brought it lashing down, aiming for her face.

With a flash of fear, she cringed away, knowing that having this man's giant forehead slam down into her face was going to shatter her nose and teeth and land her in the hospital.

She managed to wrench herself sideways, terror now pumping because her attempt at heroism had now gotten her in way over her head, and she wasn't equipped for hand-to-hand combat.

Or head to head, as he was now engaging in.

Cami now had two main aims. To avoid extremely serious injury and to somehow get away from this man. Too late to wish she'd called for help in the first place, instead of getting involved.

But now she was involved, and she needed to break free from him, because while he had trapped, she was way too close, and he was going to be able to hurt her badly. She couldn't keep on being lucky.

She wrenched herself away, gasping as his foot thudded against her thigh. Yet again, a lucky movement had helped her evade a bone-breaking blow to the knee. She kicked back at him, but with a sneering laugh, he moved his leg and her Doc banged harmlessly on his steely calf.

They needed help here. Cami had done what she could. She'd slowed this

down, but her fighting reserves were all spent now and she didn't have more to call on.

And at that moment, the cavalry arrived.

A man wearing a black jacket burst into the corridor, sprinting straight for them. He rammed right into their blue-eyed attacker, who yelled and let go of Cami's arm as the other man piled in.

The platinum blonde wrenched herself free, running a few steps away, sobbing for breath and rubbing her wrists, as the two men began fighting, punching and kicking.

It was like watching the robot fight, only this off-stage version involved two live, street-fighting humans, Cami thought, astounded. Neither man was holding back. Angry shouts, grunts, and meaty punches they were engaged in battle.

But she saw now, to her astonishment, that the newcomer was the better fighter. He was faster. More powerful. He got in a chop to the other man's neck. His fist slammed into his midriff. Then, his boot met the other man's knee with an audible crack.

The blue-eyed man was left bent over, coughing and choking.

He didn't wait for another round. Instead, he did what any coward would do. He turned and fled. Bursting through the exit door, he was gone, with a thudding of feet. And the man in the black jacket wrenched the door open and sprinted out behind him, giving chase.

Cami was breathing hard. Her life was still flashing before her eyes, and she was trembling with adrenaline. It had been the scariest thing in the world to have someone so aggressive and so powerful using his strength against her.

"Are you okay?" she asked the platinum-haired woman, who was crying hard now. Cami moved forward, groped in her jacket pocket, and offered her a tissue.

"I'm okay. I'm - I guess I'm okay." She sobbed, wiping her eyes.

"Did you know that guy?"

"He was my boyfriend."

Cami approved of that word "was". She nodded as the woman continued. "We haven't been dating long. We had a disagreement and it became a fight, and then he started slapping me and trying to pull me out of that door. I've never experienced anything like that."

Cami's brow furrowed. "I seriously think you need to keep far away from him," she said.

"Damned right!" The platinum blonde tossed her hair back, with her tears now dried and fire flaring in her eyes. "I'm going straight to the police from here. No way is he coming near me again, ever. And thank you so much for helping."

"It's no problem. I didn't really do much, though."

"He'd have got me outside if it wasn't for you," the woman emphasized. "Then it would have been too late."

"Well, it was that other man that managed to break up the fight."

Where was he? Tiptoeing to the door, Cami peered out.

There was no sign of the blue-eyed attacker. He was gone. But the man in the black jacket, who'd intervened, was now jogging back toward the door.

"He got away," he said, coming back inside. "Jumped inside a red muscle car and drove off."

"Yes, that's his car," the woman said. "Hope I never see it again."

"Ma'am, do you need any help? Do you want me to call the police, or call our manager, or find you a back room to sit for a while?" The man looked at the platinum blonde in concern.

"I'll be fine. I'm going to call a cab and then call the police," she said, grabbing her purse from where it had dropped on the floor, and rushing away.

But Cami was now looking at their unlikely savior with renewed suspicion.

He might have broken up the fight, but the man in the black jacket checked every single box in terms of the suspect's description.

He was clearly an employee. His jacket had the RoboFight logo on the front. He was wearing the branded baseball cap. He was brown-haired and brown-eyed and of average height.

He'd weighed in to help them, though, so what was going on?

She cleared her throat, breathing hard.

"Are you by any chance Giovanni Bellini?" she asked.

"I am." Now, his face changed. He suddenly looked wary.

His gaze traveled over the FBI logo on her baseball cap and her jacket, as if seeing them for the very first time.

"Why do you ask?" he asked, in a voice that sounded very different.

His tone made Cami fear that she had just escaped from a bad situation only to land in a worse one.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Right now, staring into Giovanni Bellini's suspicious eyes, Cami needed Connor. But Connor was somewhere in the noisy main hall, or perhaps elsewhere in the warren of side passages. She knew he'd get to her as soon as he could. As soon as he read her message.

But he wasn't here now. And that meant she'd have to handle this herself.

Cami tried to stamp down the flare of blind panic that threatened to blast right through her logical thought. This wasn't the time for that.

Plus, she told herself firmly that Giovanni Bellini had actually rushed up to help. He'd even gone in pursuit of an obviously bad guy. Whatever that meant, Cami decided she was going to see it in a positive light.

She straightened up, raised her chin, and stared at him as calmly as she could.

"My partner and I came here to ask you some questions," she said, making it very clear, right from the get-go, that she was here with somebody else. Just in case that was important.

"Me? No way! Why?"

Now he was looking even more wary. In fact, Cami realized, from his body language, it looked as if he was ready to turn and blast straight out of that emergency exit again.

If he ran out, there wasn't a chance she'd catch him. To keep control of the situation, she needed to draw on all her resources - not that she had many. But maybe she had more than she thought she did.

For a start, she had the experience of quite a few cases behind her, and she had seen Connor at work.

She needed to channel Connor to get through this.

"It's just questions," she said, making sure to sound calm. "You're not an actual suspect in anything." Then she paused. A possible reason for the change in his behavior was occurring to her. "Wait a minute. You're out on parole, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am," he retorted, still clearly shaken and wary and not wanting to be in this situation.

"I guess you think that if you got into a fight, you might end up going back inside?"

She'd gotten to it. She saw it in his eyes.

"Yeah. That's the problem. I'm afraid I could go back inside after what happened there."

"But you fought off a man who was trying to hurt his girlfriend. If he'd dragged her out of there, who knows what would have happened?" Cami said.

"I guess so, but I'm still worried. Being inside was the worst experience of my life. No way am I going back. I'm trying to completely change my behavior patterns."

"That was a positive for you, not a negative," Cami emphasized firmly. "It was a security intervention. You simply took steps to stop someone from abducting a woman, and beating up another woman who tried to help," Cami added, feeling the place on her thigh throbbing where the man's boot had landed. She'd have a bruise there for sure.

"You think?" he said, in a less stressed voice.

She wasn't getting very far with the questioning. She knew she needed to work around to that thorny topic. For now, at least, her suspect was calm, and she was pleased that she had managed to reassure him.

And then, footsteps sounded from down the corridor, and Connor appeared at a run. He looked anxious and intent, as if he'd seen Cami's message far too late and was stressing about what might have happened in the interim.

"You okay?" were his first words. A moment later, his face tautened as he took in who she was speaking with.

"This is Giovanni Bellini?" he asked.

"Yes," Cami said. "I've just begun asking him some questions. Giovanni actually arrived and helped me out of a tricky situation. A customer was having a fight with his girlfriend and trying to drag her out of the building. That was why I messaged you. I tried to stop him, and Giovanni managed to make him go away."

"I see," Connor said. "Okay. That's positive."

He looked around, taking in the quietness of the passage, which was probably the least noisy place in the building, with its blaring music and sound effects and cheering. "Okay, if we have a chat here?" he asked Giovanni.

Connor's arrival had made Giovanni wary all over again, Cami could see it. But he was settling down once more, thanks to Connor's easy demeanor.

"I guess we can, yes."

"We're investigating a series of two murders," Connor said. "They have the same MO, and they both involved a vehicle owned by Nealon Browne. You knew him when you were inside, didn't you?"

"Nealon?" Giovanni looked surprised. "Yes, I knew him. We were fairly good friends. But I got out three months before him, and I haven't seen him since then," he said firmly.

"Why's that?" Connor asked.

Giovanni took a deep breath. "You know, I made a huge mistake in life. Going to prison was, like, the worst experience of my life. It really showed me how I'd been wrong to act the way I had, and I've been working on being a better person since then."

"Okay?" Connor encouraged him.

"I wanted a fresh start and didn't want to stay in touch with any of the people I knew when I was inside. I didn't know if they were going to go back into crime or what. I mean, I had my doubts. So I didn't contact him, or anyone else, at all. Luckily, we weren't assigned the same place for our parole."

"What about your girlfriend?" Connor asked.

Giovanni looked blank. "What girlfriend?"

"We were told that you had a girlfriend outside that you were keen to get back together with, but that she'd moved to a different state."

Giovanni shook his head. "That wasn't me. That was the guy we were both in prison with, Ellis Zackey. Ellis was rather obsessed with his girlfriend. I think he kept trying to contact her, and yes, he wanted to track her down and reconnect when he got out. I haven't been in touch with him for the same reason I wasn't in contact with Nealon - fresh start, you know?"

Cami exchanged a glance with Connor.

Either Giovanni was a superb liar, or else Dave had misremembered the situation. Her money was on Dave misremembering. He hadn't seemed to her like the most reliable of witnesses. She waited to see what Connor would think and say.

"We'll have a chat to Ellis," he said, "but in the meantime I'd like to confirm your whereabouts at a certain time. Can you tell me where you were at three-thirty p.m. on Saturday?"

Of all the times, Cami guessed that was the one that might be the easiest to provide an alibi for – when Mary Lou Jacob had been grabbed from the basement parking of the gym. She guessed that a man living on his own

might not have an easy alibi for the small hours of the morning when the bodies had been dumped.

Giovanni answered instantly, looking relieved.

"I was here," he said. "I worked the Saturday afternoon shift, from noon until eight p.m. Same on Sunday. I clocked in, and I was busy the whole time. I think at four, I was working behind the kiosk." He frowned, then nodded. "Yes. That was in between two of the fights. I was manning the kiosk with my boss, Archie. You're welcome to confirm that with him. Just please, don't mention what - what happened earlier?"

"We will confirm it, and we won't mention anything. Routine confirmation only. I'll ask my office to do so immediately."

Cami could see that Connor had accepted Giovanni's version, but that he didn't fully trust it until he'd gotten that proof.

Connor got on the phone, walking away to have his conversation, and Cami waited with Giovanni.

"How do you find it, working with the robot fights? It must be fun?" she asked him, wanting to at least try to have some easy conversation while his alibi was checked.

He nodded. "They're great. I love robotics. I wanted to study it. Perhaps I still will. For now, it's a fun environment even though it's hard work."

"It's really awesome to watch," Cami agreed. "I might come here again sometime to see a full afternoon of it."

At that moment, Connor walked over.

"Right. Thanks for your time." He nodded to Giovanni. "We've confirmed what you said."

Giving them a quick nod, Giovanni ran off.

And Connor turned to Cami.

"Ellis Zackey is the suspect we need. They're getting an address for him and we need to get to him as soon as it's come through. And there's something else." He paused. "He's violated his parole conditions and didn't arrive for the check-in yesterday evening. So we might have a hunt on our hands."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

"If Ellis Zackey violated his parole, where are we going to find him?" Cami asked as she and Connor sprinted for the car. They headed around the outside of the events building - a quicker route than going back through the RoboBattle crowds.

"That's the million-dollar question," Connor said. "He moved out of the halfway house a month ago. They do have a forwarding address for him. Let's see if he's there."

His tone said it was unlikely, and Cami shivered.

Through no fault of their own, but simply through getting unreliable information, they'd wasted a lot of time chasing after the wrong suspect. And now, it could cost them.

"Okay. They say here he's staying with his uncle," Connor said, reading the stream of updates that were beeping on his phone. "That's to the south of where we are now. About twenty minutes away." He paused. "His uncle runs a business that I think Ellis might be working for or might have worked for in the past."

Connor's voice was calm and steady as always, but Cami could see he was driving as fast as possible, his lights on, looking for any gap that could give them a lead. He flattened his foot and sped through a light as it changed, then wove left and right, overtaking a slow-moving truck with seconds to spare.

The nail-biting journey was taking them out of the built-up area of town and into a more suburban setting. They sped along quiet roads, passing small houses in tidy lots, a few schools and churches and a couple of local shopping malls.

"What's the business that his uncle runs?" Cami said, wondering if she could do some research while they drove.

"I'll have a look now." As soon as he had the chance, Connor glanced down at his phone, which still hadn't stopped beeping with incoming information.

"Okay. The uncle runs a delivery business. He transports small loads and parcels in and around Boston. So that means Ellis could be anywhere out on the road. Or else, he could be somewhere different entirely.

Ellis was working for a family business, and Cami guessed that might

complicate things. Perhaps the uncle would protect his nephew, not wanting the FBI involved. If that was the case, then he might make things difficult.

Here they were, approaching the business's headquarters, which seemed to be run from a corner house. There were three small white delivery vans parked outside. The downstairs windows of the house were covered with blinds, indicating that it was used for an office.

Connor parked outside and they climbed out and headed through the garden gate, up the path, and knocked on the front door.

It buzzed open, and Cami followed Connor into a small lobby, where a receptionist, with a blue jacket, and a blue Alice band in her brown hair, was on a call.

She acknowledged them with a quick nod, and while she waited, Cami stared around. The lobby looked like a busy place. There were pictures of the team, and the vehicles, and some enlarged printed testimonies from happy clients. It looked like image was very important to them, making Cami even surer that they wouldn't want the FBI digging around.

Had Ellis absconded, she wondered.

Eventually, the receptionist finished her call and Connor stepped forward.

"FBI," he said, showing his badge. "Ma'am, we're looking for Ellis Zackey. We need to ask him a few questions."

"Mr. Zackey? He's - er - he's not here now."

She sounded as if she'd changed tack with what she wanted to say halfway. As if she'd been about to give out some information and then hadn't. Cami picked up on that. Already, this woman was being cagey.

"No problem. Is he out on the road, working for you today?"

"I'm not sure," she said. "Really, since he's the owner's nephew, it would be better if you spoke to Mr. Zackey senior about this."

"Is he in?"

"Not at the moment," she said, still with that regretful tone. "He's out for the day and will probably be in at about five."

"Can I call him?" Connor asked.

"He's asked not to be disturbed today," she said quickly. "He's meeting with a number of clients, and in these meetings, he doesn't like interruptions."

Cami could see that they weren't going to get anywhere. Not anywhere. This woman was stonewalling them, and Cami didn't know whether she was doing it for a reason or just because this was their policy, but either way it was effectively stopping them from finding anything out.

But if all these vehicles were out on the road doing deliveries, surely they had some kind of tracking and mapping system in place, Cami wondered. At the very least, they must have a schedule of who was going to go where.

While Connor politely persisted with questions that the receptionist was blocking, Cami started wondering if accessing the schedule could help them.

With that in mind, she turned away, opening her phone, and seeing if she could get into the wifi network here. If she could do that, then she might be able to log into the online operating system and see what was there.

She ran her program, glancing down anxiously every few seconds to see if it had worked. It was taking longer than usual, and that worried her. Most times, it worked, but when it didn't, and the wifi was too securely guarded, then she was stumped.

Gritting her teeth, Cami realized that this was not one of the times it was going to be easy.

Not using traditional hacking methods, anyway. Her program could get the password, she was sure of it, but it might take another hour or two and right now, that was time they didn't have.

But perhaps the wifi network password might be written down in an accessible place? Maybe even on the notice board behind the receptionist? Because if it was a complex password, it would need to be somewhere handy.

Discreetly, Cami took a few photos of the notes pinned to the board. From where she was standing, the writing on most of them was too far away to read, but thanks to her phone's sharp photo clarity and zoom function, she could enlarge what she'd found.

She zoomed in on one. Nope, this was a fire regulation. This was a note for someone to pick up a delivery when they came into the office. And this one? Triumph surged through her. This looked like a code, for sure. She typed it in, waited, and, to her relief, it worked. She was on their network and could now go exploring.

As she logged into the operating system and took a look, Cami saw that they did have a vehicle tracking system in place. All the cars could be located on a map, in real time, via a GPS networking app. They had five vehicles out on the road at the moment.

Now, was there any way of finding out who these drivers were?

Cami looked at the map, but the only thing it gave was the van's license plates. There was no driver allocation. Not there, anyway.

But perhaps they were somewhere?

This software looked like a good, comprehensive system. Elsewhere, there must surely be some place where you could see who was driving where, and what they were transporting?

She switched to the next page, which required another password and another few agonizing moments of waiting.

She glanced up again. It seemed like Connor and the receptionist were wrapping things up, and Connor would probably have to leave just now.

In fact, right now.

"Okay. We'll come back with a warrant," Connor said, and Cami jerked her head up guiltily. She met the receptionist's eyes and took in her disapproving stare. It was obvious that the receptionist thought Cami was a junior agent who was just fooling around on her phone and reading messages. She had no clue that she was hacking into the company's systems, Cami realized.

To be fair, if she had known, she would have looked even more disapproving than she was already. Escaping her withering glance, Cami hustled outside.

"You got something?" Connor asked, as soon as the door had closed.

Cami nodded. "I got into the vehicle tracking software, and I'm just waiting to access the list of drivers. If we can see that, we can at least figure out if Ellis is working today or not."

Finally, she was in, scrolling down a long list that started all the way back from last week, and went forward to the current day. She followed it, looking at the names. Looking for the name she wanted.

There it was. E.Z. Those were the initials, jumping out at her.

E.Z. was driving today, He was taking a delivery load to a couple of drop-off points about twenty miles south of Boston.

E.Z. was on the road, and if she kept herself logged into this software, Cami realized she could map exactly where their fugitive was going to be.

CHAPTER TWENTY

It was time, and he was excited.

Climbing into the car, he got his favorite music playing. It was an older song. One by Frank Sinatra, this time.

He enjoyed the older love songs. He felt they had more meaning to them. The newer songs were too commercial, too canned. In his opinion, anyway. The artists of yesteryear were the ones who truly understood what love was about. Their songs came from the heart, not the wallet.

The heart, not the wallet.

He liked the phrase. He felt pleased with it as he checked his reflection in the rearview mirror.

Smiling, he thought it was a reflection that any woman would be pleased to see when she opened her door to him.

His hair was neatly brushed. He was freshly shaven. For this important occasion, he'd picked out a gray suit, not expensive, but well cut, paired with a lavender shirt.

To keep the theme going, he'd added a lavender buttonhole. But in his hand, he held a small arrangement of red roses. Six of them. It was an elegant sufficiency. The gesture, as much as the flowers. It was romantic and caring. Of course, he'd leave one behind.

He put the flowers down on the passenger seat. For this occasion, he was not going to travel with his laptop. It was at home. Instead, he had a recording device, a state-of-the-art one, attached to his lapel. When he got where he was going, he'd activate it.

He knew this would be exciting. First meetings always were.

"I can't wait to meet you," he said as he pulled out of the driveway and headed onto the road. "I hope you'll like me. You'll find me fun and caring."

He indicated right, trying to avoid a flash of anger as someone turned in front of him. It was his right of way. His!

"You'll need to align to my moods, though. Like all humans, there are times when I get angry. And during those times, you'll need to dial your own behavior back. You must understand that I don't like fighting. And it is easy to get into a fight when you get mad. So, I need you to be calm and manage your behavior during those times so we can avoid conflict."

He turned again, following a route he knew well because he'd rehearsed

the drive a few times. After all, one didn't want to be late for a first date.

Checking the car's clock, he saw he was well on time.

Good.

Enough time to ease off on the gas and talk a bit more to his potential love, before he even met her.

"I'm mostly easygoing, but I do have a few quirks," he admitted. "I mean, nothing out of line. But I like the house to be kept very clean. I'm something of a neat freak. Mess makes me mad. If you were to leave a piece of clothing on the floor, for example, that would be a big no-no. I wouldn't consider our relationship over. But I would feel you needed to be punished for it. After all, you are going to be living in my home. My place, my rules."

This was the street. He was almost here. And a little early. He slowed right down.

"I'm thoughtful enough. I believe in sharing the chores, as long as you do them to my standard. However, the cleaning of the basement will be your job alone, and that's because the basement is your private space. It's where you will go when you want to be alone. Or when I want you to be alone. Or else, when we're working on our recordings there together."

He looked in the mirror, straightened his tie, and opened the door.

"You'll find the basement is a restful place, although there are rules when you're there. You must speak, in the right way, when you're down there. It's the best place in the house for getting a good recording, and it's the one place that I trust we will never be disturbed. Because it's soundproofed, you see."

He closed the car door and he walked up to the house, feeling a sense of expectation as he raised his hand to knock on the door. Before he did, he checked around. It was a working neighborhood, and at this hour, there were no other people nearby. Kids weren't out of school just yet. The houses on either side were quiet. Across the road, the front curtains were closed.

That meant he was set up for success, but now, it was time to stop worrying about himself. He could talk on and on about himself for hours. It was a personal failing that he needed to work on.

In its place, he should be asking this beautiful woman, who he already knew was the love of his life, how she felt. That was good etiquette on a first date, to be interested in the other person.

He brought his hand down in three raps. Not too loud. Not too soft. First impressions counted, even when it was something as minor as a knock at the door.

He heard footsteps. Quickly, he activated the recorder as the door opened. And there she was, still in her work clothes, but with the sleeves of her top rolled up and with slippers on her feet instead of the high-heeled shoes she normally wore. That gave him a moment's disappointment. It was slovenly to be improperly dressed, and he wouldn't allow it when they were in love and together.

But he didn't let it show now that he was troubled.

He smiled. "Am I on time?" he asked. "Are you ready to go?"

She stared at him, frowning. "I think you have the wrong house," she said, sounding perplexed, and with a note of abruptness that got his anger surging instantly. "I'm sorry, but I'm not the person you want."

And this was not the welcome he wanted! Where was her politeness? Where was the happy, breathy greeting that he'd hoped for, the compliments on his appearance, perhaps a hint at how much time she'd spent getting ready?

There was none of that. None! She hadn't even done her hair. It was tied back in a plain ponytail that didn't do justice to the tawny blond locks.

But the voice - that was the worst. There was no love in it, no warmth. Nothing.

"You are the person I want," he said, his voice cold. He stepped forward over her threshold, and now he saw the flash of fear in her eyes. "You are the person I want and I'm going to take you. Now!"

His hand lashed out. He caught her, yanked her close. He shoved the cloth, soaked in chloroform, in her face, while he bent her arm up behind her so that she'd be controlled by her own pain.

She tried to scream and writhe and kick, but he was strong, and his hold was inexorable, and within seconds, she went limp.

Picking her up, he quickly carried her to the car. Inwardly, he was fuming. A level of fury was gripping him that he was finding it hard to control.

He'd have to redo this entire greeting now. She'd messed it up, and badly.

There would be no second chances. She was going straight to his basement.

Just like the others.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

Ellis Zackey was out on the road. He was driving a van, making a delivery for his uncle. He'd missed his parole check-in yesterday, and Cami knew they now had a chance to find out why.

"I've been able to find his route here," she muttered to Connor, as they hustled to the car. "I logged into their tracking software and found the van he's been assigned for deliveries today.

"Where's he headed?" Connor asked.

"South. I'm going to link his route up to my phone's GPS," Cami said, putting her phone in the holder. "Then we can see in real time where he's driving."

The route was showing itself now, a black dotted line, slowly inching its way across the white map, winding through the roads.

"Seems like he's driving out of town," Connor said, scrutinizing the map, and the moving dots, closely.

"Yes. I can't quite see from this map, but it looks like he might be heading for that hotel there, the one near that forested area?"

"That could be it."

It was the closest destination that Cami could see, now that the van had turned along this minor road, looking narrow and quiet and hemmed in by trees. That was what she was picking up from the map, and it seemed that she'd find out for herself soon enough.

Connor was on the chase, and already speeding along the main road, in that direction.

Now, he had both lights and siren on. He was weaving in between the traffic, and if he hadn't been so skilled a driver, Cami acknowledged she would have been scared.

As it was, she couldn't help gripping the dashboard whenever he judged one of his inches-to-spare overtakes.

In just a few minutes, they, too, were heading out of town, leaving the traffic behind and speeding onto quieter roads. With adrenaline surging, Cami watched as the lines on the two maps got closer and closer together. Soon they would converge with their suspect.

Connor turned left, off the main road and onto a narrow road heading up into the forested hills. He kept his lights on, but switched off his siren.

Checking the map, Cami saw they had now joined the same road where Ellis was heading with his delivery van. And the road was exactly like Cami had imagined it would be. Narrow, quiet, and lined with snow-covered trees. The hotel was about ten miles ahead, and beyond that was a small town hidden away in the hills.

"We should see him any minute," Cami said, checking the distances again.

"Good."

Connor hadn't turned off his lights, although he had turned off his siren for now, seeing there wasn't much other traffic on the road. The drive had passed in silence, mostly because of the siren, but also because Cami hadn't wanted to distract Connor. Now, with the road quieter, there was a chance to find out something that was bothering her.

"What was Ellis Zackey in prison for? Do we know yet?" Cami asked. She wanted to get a picture of the man that they were trying so hard to catch up with.

"Let's ask the office that." Connor got onto the radio and called the question in.

There was a pause, and Cami imagined the team looking up the records and quickly researching.

The reply, when it came back, caused her stomach to lurch even harder than when the car powered around a sharp bend.

"Attempted murder," the voice from the radio said succinctly. "He got into a fight and tried to beat the other guy over the head with a fire iron."

"Thanks," Connor said, not even flinching at this bombshell, but Cami felt appalled.

This was their man, no doubt about it. He'd attempted to murder someone in a very similar way to how the victims had been killed. The MO was almost identical. And there was the issue with the ex-girlfriend, too. All the boxes were finally being checked, and she was sure that when they came face to face with Ellis Zackey, they'd be looking at the killer.

Hopefully that would be soon.

Every time they swept around one of the bends, Cami kept an eager lookout, hoping to see the vehicle in sight. A white van, with a blue stripe and the company logo, was what she was looking out for, and expected to see.

And there it was, at last. Ahead of them, accelerating up the road. It was

compact in size, a panel van with the back windows painted over. Ellis didn't seem to be wasting any time as he drove. He was pushing the van.

"I was wondering," Cami said hesitantly, looking at the speed that Ellis was driving. She'd been feeling pleased that her GPS hacking had got them here so easily. But now she was wondering if the chase was over, or if there might be more trouble to come.

"What?" Connor asked. For once, he didn't glance at her. His gaze was pinned ahead, as they closed in on their suspect.

"I was wondering - that receptionist in the office who told us she didn't know where he was. She might have warned him?"

There was something about the manic way the van was flying along the road now that was causing Cami's suspicions to prickle.

"Yes," Connor acknowledged. "She might have done that, because he's going fast."

He turned off his lights, but Cami realized with a twist of anxiety that this might have been too late.

If Ellis Zackey had been checking his mirrors - and perhaps all the more often if he'd been worried that they were on his trail - he would already have seen those lights.

"He is speeding," Connor muttered.

The only saving grace was that the hotel was ahead.

"According to the map, I see he does have a delivery stop here," Cami said, feeling relieved.

The hotel was on the horizon now, on the right side of the road, a big, sprawling, gracious building.

A low wooden fence and tall, stone-clad gateposts were now visible against the snow. Ellis Zackey would soon turn in through the gateposts and follow the winding drive, lined with trees, up to the hotel building itself. That was a large two-story building that Cami saw was decorated in an Alpine style, with sloping roofs, wooden beams, and pine trees surrounding the hotel, with walking trails and paths criss-crossing the neat looking grounds.

But as they neared the hotel, she started worrying all over again.

What if Ellis didn't turn into the hotel? What if he had seen them, and was planning on running from them, and he sped right past the hotel and up into the hills, and they had to chase him down in this unfamiliar, ice-covered network of narrow roads?

Cami felt a surge of utter relief when she saw the van's brake lights flash

crimson, and a moment later, the vehicle veered to the right, speeding in between the gateposts, and heading into the hotel grounds.

"That's a relief," Connor muttered, his hands relaxing on the wheel, and Cami realized he'd had the same thoughts as her. He'd also been worrying their suspect was on the run.

Connor slowed, turned, and sped up the winding drive. It led past clusters of pine trees and smaller outbuildings. It was pretty and scenic and peaceful. Finally, after rounding a small knot of trees, the hotel buildings were fully in sight once more.

The parking lot was on the left, and there were about twenty cars parked in it. An attendant was busily cleaning and de-icing the vehicles.

But there was no white van with a blue stripe. No tire tracks were even leading into the parking lot, or else they would have seen them in the thin layer of fresh fallen snow in the lot.

"Maybe there's a delivery entrance?" Connor wondered aloud.

"I guess that would be at the back of the hotel?" Cami said.

Connor swung the car away from the guest parking and followed the driveway around. It led between two large wooden barns, past a couple of buildings that she guessed were staff accommodation, past a tennis court with a walkway heading down to a lake.

And then they were around the hotel, all the way at the back.

There was a delivery vehicle parked there, a bigger van with a fruit and vegetables logo on the side. Steam was billowing from its exhaust.

But there was no sign of the white van. No sign of Ellis Zackey, and with a sinking feeling in her stomach, Cami knew the worst had happened.

He'd seen them following, and he'd turned in here - and somehow, he'd lost them.

The GPS route wouldn't help her any longer, because Ellis wasn't following it. The screen had gone blank. No more dotted line.

He'd turned it off.

Their suspect had outwitted them, and done a sneaky maneuver - she remembered that Dave had said he was sneaky.

She stared around in a panic. Where could he have gone?

Could he have driven all the way around the hotel and rejoined the main road, going faster this time?

"He might have gone back to the road, but we need to check if there's another way out of here," Connor said, echoing her thoughts, looking at the

strip of paved road that ran around the hotel.

Then Cami caught her breath as she spotted another way. Behind the barn, she glimpsed a narrow lane, leading out into the hotel's grounds. There were faint, but recent, tire tracks on it.

"There!" she said, pointing. "Could he have gone there?"

Connor didn't answer, but swung the car in that direction and hit the gas.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

Sneaky was the word. As Connor sped up the dirt road, which was snow-covered with patches of treacherous ice, Cami felt anxious that they wouldn't catch up in time.

Ellis Zackey had deliberately evaded them. He'd gotten wind of the pursuit - either from a phone call or else because he was expecting someone to come after him. And he'd cunningly used a back route that he knew well while turning off the GPS and making himself invisible.

Now, they were hurtling down the snow-covered track in pursuit of a target they could no longer see. Cami was extremely nervous that he might have somehow double-bluffed them and got back on the main road after all.

But Connor was getting that base covered.

He was on the radio, organizing for additional police patrols and roadblocks along the other road.

"We're tracking the suspect on a dirt road leading out of the hotel. There's a possibility he fled along the asphalt road, either back toward Boston, or else out of town. We need cars in both directions, looking out."

"Copy. I can see on the map where we need to get to," the agent replied.

Connor read out the van's license plate.

"Small, white panel van, blue stripe."

With the details sent, he could focus solely on his driving, as they headed along the track that wound its way up into the hills.

At least the tire tracks that were visible every so often on the snow, were cluing them that they were going in the right direction, Cami thought. There had definitely been a vehicle traveling this way this morning. And it must be the van, it surely must. This was how Ellis Zackey was trying to escape them.

It didn't help that this road was becoming borderline dangerous.

Connor's unmarked vehicle was a powerful sedan, the ideal car for fast and unobtrusive driving about town. But it was not designed for the tough, snowy terrain in which they now found themselves.

It wasn't too bad while the hotel was in sight. But then they crested a hill, and the track suddenly got a whole lot rougher. Cami gasped as the car was airborne for a moment, flying over a hidden dip in the road before bouncing down again and sliding sideways.

They were on a collision course with a tall pine. She drew in a sharp

breath, grabbing for the dash as the car careened toward it, tires slipping on the snow, the solid, gnarled trunk of the tree getting bigger and closer with every moment that passed.

"Looks like we're in for some fun here," Connor said through gritted teeth. Easing off on the gas, he carefully steered out of the skid, fighting for control every inch of the way. They flew past the tree trunk with a foot to spare, snow spraying as they rejoined the road, branches scraping and scratching against the car's sides, so loudly that Cami flinched.

"Guess we'll have to send it in for a paint job," Connor joked, and Cami let out a nervous laugh. She'd be deeply relieved if a coat of paint was the only thing the car needed after this hellish pursuit - and the man they were chasing was still nowhere in sight. What if he'd somehow managed to veer out of the way and hide while they roared straight past? The snow was rougher and icier out here, festooned with pine needles, and although Cami strained her eyes to see any sign of tire tracks, there were no obvious ones at this point.

Not to her, anyway.

"Are you sure he went this way?" Cami asked, doubting herself, feeling anxiety surge as she worried

"I see a couple of dents in the snow," Connor said. "Every so often. And there's been nowhere he could have turned off the road. No sign of tire tracks heading left or right."

Cami guessed that Connor's eyes were sharper than hers. This was his area of expertise, and now, his experience was showing as he deftly maneuvered the treacherous path, swerving to avoid hidden rocks and potholes that she could barely pick out, and this time, slowing the car enough that they didn't get airborne when cresting the bumps in the road.

She wished she could be more helpful right now, but out in this increasingly desolate terrain, chasing over ice-bound tracks, she wasn't sure there'd be wifi signal at all. And the van hadn't been an electric model. It was a basic diesel vehicle. She felt like her hands were tied, acknowledging that if they caught up with him now, it would be thanks to Connor's expertise. The most she could do was watch out for the van.

Surely they were getting close?

And then, as Connor powered around a hairpin bend in the road, Cami caught sight of it. Just for a moment, but the flash of blue between the trees was unmistakable. But it wasn't coming from the road.

Was she correct? Yes, she was. It was way too far over to the side.

"He's there! He's gone to the right!" Her voice sounded breathless.

"To the right?"

Connor hit the brakes - carefully, easing the car slower, and as he did, Cami saw where the van was headed.

There was a gap in the trees that they might have missed if they'd been going at full speed. It was barely wide enough for a car to fit, but now that she looked closely, she saw two faint indentations in the snow.

"Well spotted!" Approval resounded in Connor's voice as he swung the van hard right, and they bounced along the narrow track. It was little more than a trail. Trees loomed overhead, lining the road closely, and branches scraped the car's sides again. But now, they were gaining. Cami picked up the flash of brake lights ahead, which warned Connor to slow, swerving around a boulder in the tiny gap that the trees offered.

For the first time, Connor was in sight. The back of the van was in view, but then she heard the roar of the engine as he saw them, and accelerated away.

This ride had just gone all the way from risky to dangerous.

Snow sprayed from his tires. The exhaust smoked and steamed. The engine bellowed. In his desperate flight, Ellis was taking crazy chances on this winding, little-used road. He was flying along. She saw him swerve desperately, the back of the car spinning out, to avoid something that was almost invisible on the snow-covered road. For a heart-stopping moment, she thought he was going to crash. The van went sideways, the back bumper brushing against a massive, snow-covered branch. Snow cascaded down in a heap as the van slewed into the tree. And then, the tires found grip and Ellis sped on.

Following behind, Connor was able to avoid the obstacle - a hidden tree branch - more easily, and gain some ground. Now they were just twenty yards behind Ellis, and panic was causing him to drive more erratically. He was making mistakes. The van was sliding. He was using his brakes too much, overcorrecting, and as she watched, wide-eyed, he skidded again.

This time, he didn't come back from it. Cami gasped aloud as the van reached the edge of the track, and then the back wheels spun out and it tilted, righted itself, spun a complete circle in the snowy ground, and stopped, with its front bumper up against a tree.

The wheels spun violently. Spun again. Snow and mud sprayed up in a

gray shower. But the van was going nowhere. With its back wheels mired in snow, its bumper against a tree, and its front wheels spinning helplessly, Ellis was well and truly stuck.

Now they had him, Cami thought. At last, after a chase so nerve shredding her legs felt weak - and she hadn't even been doing the driving.

She thought it was over, but it wasn't.

As Connor stopped the car and jumped out, Cami saw to her alarm that the van door was bursting open.

There was Ellis Zackey. A tough, broad-shouldered man with a mean expression and a determined glint in his eyes.

Ellis wasn't giving up. He scrambled out and headed into the trees at a full run.

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

Cami gasped in dismay. Ellis Zackey was doing whatever it took to avoid being caught. Up to, and including, fleeing on foot in the snow. She'd thought they had him, but now he had a lead again, and there was a real risk they could lose him.

"Ellis Zackey, FBI! This is an order! Stop running!" Connor shouted, his voice sharp and loud in the quiet air.

But Ellis didn't even hesitate in his headlong flight.

Connor set off, powering after him as he raced into the woods. Cami hesitated, climbing out of the car, twisting her fingers together indecisively. She should follow - but she'd never catch up. This man was running scared, and she didn't think he had a plan anymore. His plan was now just to keep ahead of Connor.

In which case - an idea came to Cami. Maybe there was a way she could get ahead and cut him off.

Running around to the driver's side of the car, Cami took a look at the map on Connor's GPS.

That was where they were now, she established, orienting herself. This winding strip was the road, becoming more and more of a zigzag as it headed up into the hills. And that tiny track was going in the direction that Ellis had fled.

The track intersected with the road again a couple of hundred yards later. So, surely that meant that if Ellis kept that course, scrambling uphill along the icy, slippery, stony track, then he would burst out of the trees and connect with the road again?

If he did, she could be there, waiting for him.

Without any further hesitation, Cami jumped behind the wheel of Connor's car, pulled the seat forward, and set off.

Immediately, she acknowledged Connor's driving skill. He'd made this look easy. In fact, it was horrendous. The car was bumping and slipping and sliding over the track. Just keeping it on course was a massive challenge, never mind trying to do it at speed. She really wasn't sure how Connor had done it. It reinforced her boss's skill to her all over again.

Now, here was the bend ahead. She needed to get around this without skidding out, and she needed to get up some damned speed. No point in

crawling up to the intersection point to find Ellis had already run past.

"Come on, you can do it," Cami urged herself through gritted teeth. She steered through the bend, feeling the car's wheels catch on a snowy drift, biting her lip as she worried she'd be caught there, helplessly mired, just like Ellis himself. And then she was through, powering up the hill, daring to push down harder on the gas as the car surged forward.

And glancing once more at the map. She was approaching the intersection point. If he followed the trail, he'd come out here. Ahead.

She slammed on the brakes. Got the handbrake up. Jumped out, breathing fast.

There he was. She'd judged it right - almost. The trail led onto the road a few yards further up the hill, so Cami rushed to meet it. She wasn't sure what she'd do, but she knew she had to do something.

"Stop!" she yelled, as loudly and authoritatively as she could.

Luckily, that shouted word, combined with the shock value of seeing her in front of him, had an effect.

His head flew up. His pace slowed. She saw the consternation in his eyes as he stared at her.

And then, he took in who she was. Five-six at the most, even in her Docs. A slim build. And she saw his gaze veer down to her hands as he realized she wasn't holding a gun.

His expression hardened, and he squared his shoulders, and he broke into a full run again. This time, running at her.

Cami braced herself. She was going to have to try to tackle him, but she feared that he was going to simply plow through her. If she was lucky. If she wasn't so lucky, he might take the time to stop and purposely hurt her.

But then, in a shower of snow, Connor burst out from a side path on the trail, running hard.

Connor didn't hesitate. He launched himself at the ex-convict with all his power in a mighty tackle that sent Ellis's feet sliding straight from under him.

Ellis landed with a thud on his side, shouting and struggling, arms flailing. Cami rushed over to help, leaning in, doing her best to grab hold of something. She caught hold of his jacket sleeve and held onto it doggedly, with both her hands and all her strength.

Connor had the cuffs on one of his arms. Then the other. And finally, their suspect's chase was over.

Breathing hard, Connor stood up, holding tightly to Ellis's stocky arm as

he scrambled up - not the easiest job on an uneven, snowy and icy track with his hands cuffed behind him. As he skidded on the ice, he swore.

"I'm bruised. I should sue you. You hurt me there! You're bullies! You did this to cause me grief and injury!"

"You disobeyed a direct order from law enforcement to stop running," Connor pointed out, turning him around and maneuvering him to the car. A volley of swearing from Ellis accompanied his actions. Their suspect was mad, and showing it. He resisted, digging his feet in and causing Connor to have to shove him forward.

In the car, Connor attached the cuffs to the handle in the back seat, placed there for that purpose. Only when he was sure that Ellis was firmly attached to the handle, did he close the door and go around to the driver's seat and climb in.

Cami got in the passenger side. Connor gave her an appreciative nod.

"Good work there," he said. "Good thinking. Let's get this suspect into a police building. It's freezing out here, and the drive will give him some time to settle down."

He turned the car around and drove back down the hairpin bend. He drove all the way past the mired van and headed out on a route that would take him back to the main road.

Gradually, the abuse that Ellis was flinging at them from the back seat began to taper off and, as Connor had anticipated, he quieted down.

After the chase they'd had, there was only one place this suspect was going to be questioned. Securely locked in a police interview room was where the hard questions would be asked.

Cami hoped the answers would reveal his true motives.

Excitement flared inside Cami as she and Connor headed to the door of the interview room.

It was early afternoon, and snow was falling outside. It had taken them a long time to reach the closest police station - a small police station a few miles out of the city, but once there, things had happened fast. The police had organized for the room to be ready, got the equipment set up, and had helped to process their suspect.

While being processed and fingerprinted, Cami had noted Ellis's sullen

silence.

After the flood of angry abuse had dried up, he hadn't said a word, and she had guessed that was because he knew the game was finally up.

He'd done his best to evade the police, but he'd been caught. Now, hopefully, a combination of questioning and evidence would lead them to the truth.

Connor sat down opposite Ellis. Cami closed the door and sat next to her boss.

The silence in the room became uneasy. Looking at Ellis's hard face, with a twisted scar on his right cheek, Cami saw he was becoming uncomfortable. His mouth was twitching, he was swallowing, he was glancing around the room, and then down at his cuffed hands.

"So," Connor said eventually, and the sudden word, breaking the silence, made Ellis flinch. "You went to a lot of trouble to get away from us. Why?"

He shook his head, pressing his lips together. "I thought you were going to make trouble for me," he muttered.

"You missed a parole check-in yesterday. That's already going to cause you more trouble than I could make for you. That's a very serious violation of your parole conditions. Why did you do it?"

"Yesterday I was doing an emergency delivery for my uncle's business, and I got delayed. There was a massive crash on the highway and I only got back into town after dark," he said. "I was going to check in today."

"You were? When? You didn't seem in a hurry to do that. You seemed to want to drive out of town and spend time on the back roads," Connor accused.

Lowering his head, Ellis shrugged.

"What about Saturday afternoon? Where were you then? From about four p.m. onward. Can you account for your time?" Connor asked conversationally.

"I was at home."

"Alone?"

"Yeah, alone. It was the damned weekend!" he snapped.

"Nobody can account for your movements at that time? Did you speak to anyone, call anyone?"

"I was home. Alone," Ellis repeated angrily.

Connor waited a while, let the silence do its work, before continuing.

"You've been earning money for a while now? Does your uncle pay you

cash?"

Ellis shrugged again, and Cami thought of that conveniently large amount of cash that had been available to buy the black Dodge.

"You've had contact with Nealon Browne since you've been out?" Connor asked.

"No, I haven't. Why would I speak to that deadbeat?" he asked, defiantly.

"Show me your phone."

"No."

"We need to see a record of your communications. If you won't open your phone, then Cami here will open it for you. Either way, we're going to take a look."

He shrugged, clearly unwilling to cooperate in any way.

"She can do it. She won't find anything on it," he said. Then, for the first time since she'd seen him, Cami saw him smile. It wasn't a nice expression, but it was an assured one. It made her think that he was confident there were no incriminating messages on the phone.

Maybe he'd used a different phone, or maybe he'd deleted them. If he'd deleted them, she might be able to retrieve a trace. But she didn't like his confidence. Not at all.

Now, she was the one feeling uneasy.

Connor nodded to Cami. She took the phone from the tray and headed out. It would be easier to let her programs do their work when she was sitting in privacy.

She headed to the back office, but as she did, she saw the police officer who'd helped them do the processing, hurrying in their direction.

The young, ginger-haired officer looked anxious, and Cami quickly changed direction and rushed over to him.

"Is your boss busy in there?" he asked.

Cami frowned, knowing how absorbing the interrogation was, and that an interruption could mean a serious setback.

"He is quite busy, yes. Why?"

"Because we've just had something he might need to hear about."

"What?" Cami asked.

"There's been a missing person report shared on all networks. We were told that if we hear of any such incidents, we need to report them to the FBI because they could be part of this serial crime. It's a twenty-seven year old woman called Myra Evans, and she seems to have been taken from her home

this afternoon, probably about an hour ago."

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

Cami stared at the ginger-haired officer, shock reverberating through her. Another woman taken?

Maybe it was just coincidence, her mind pleaded with her. This might be an unrelated crime, Myra Evans might have gone missing for another reason.

Surely they had the killer in custody? Ellis Zackey had made one of the biggest efforts to run from the police that she'd ever seen. Plus, he had no alibi for the time that the first victim had been grabbed.

All she needed to do now was to look at his phone and see if he had, in fact, been messaging Nealon Browne and setting up the purchase of the black Dodge pickup.

But Cami knew they could not risk wasting any time. Connor needed to know this new development immediately, because if they were wrong, then a life was at risk. And every second would count.

Cami turned back. She ran to the interview room door and opened it.

She heard Connor's voice, "So, this girlfriend of yours? Were you hoping to connect with her at some stage?"

Ellis shot angrily back. "I'm still in contact with her. We email each other, okay? Maybe she moves back to Boston someday, or I go visit her? It's not like I'm obsessed."

Cami's breathless arrival cut off any further explanation. Connor turned, staring at her, rising immediately to his feet as he saw her face. A moment later, he was out of the room, with the door closed behind him.

"What's the issue?" he asked.

"It's a police report." Cami indicated the ginger-haired cop, waiting worriedly at the end of the corridor. "There's been another woman reported missing, probably from an hour ago."

Connor's eyebrows rose.

"That could be a real problem," he said. He strode down the corridor, speaking calmly to the officer. "Can you brief me on what happened?" he asked.

"The woman's name is Myra Evans," the officer replied, walking quickly through to the back office, with Connor striding alongside. "I've printed out the details we have so far. Here they are."

He handed Connor a folder.

"Myra Evans, aged twenty-seven. Blonde hair, blue eyes," Connor said thoughtfully. Cami knew that he was comparing this with the other two women and finding a lot of similarities. Too many of them. She was the killer's type, there was no doubt about it.

"She was supposed to be at home after a morning shift at the doctor's rooms where she worked. A neighbor noticed the front door was open, and came by to see if everything was alright. The neighbor found her purse, upended on the floor. Her phone is missing, but turned off. And a single red rose was found in the hallway."

Cami caught her breath. It was his signature, and that meant the killer had struck again.

The killer was still out there. He was ahead of them, and unless they caught up fast, another woman would die.

"Can we use this desk? We have some research to do," Connor asked the cop.

"Sure," the cop said. "Sure, of course. Here are the passwords if you need to get into the systems."

The problem was, Cami thought, feeling bludgeoned by shock, that they now had no idea who this killer was.

They'd ruled out every single person that had been close to Nealon Browne in prison. And having been so recently paroled, those were his closest connections.

Connor shook his head.

"We need to check again. I'm going to call Boston Max. Maybe they can pull a list of Nealon's visitors over the past few months. There must be someone we've missed."

With nothing else that she could do in the meantime, Cami opened her phone, and started the program running to access Ellis's phone, while she waited for Connor to get his information.

At least she could check the phone while it was here. Maybe it would even give them a different lead, she thought. Maybe if she went through Ellis's messages, it would lead her to a mutual connection that both the men had known.

Connor had gotten through to the prison and was already speaking to the head warden.

"Yes, it's very urgent. I need a list of all visitors who arrived to see Nealon Browne in the last few months. Any family members, any friends,

any old prison buddies who came in again to see him?"

He paused, waited.

"We've got another missing person now, so it's an emergency, and the only fact we're sure of is that the killer has made contact with Nealon. Nothing else has come through yet."

He listened again. "Great, I'll wait. Thank you."

With the phone to his ear, Connor got on another phone. This time, to the FBI office.

"Myra Evans has just been called in as a missing person. I understand she was grabbed at a time when nobody was around. A neighbor found her door open later. Can you take a drive by her house, look for any street cameras? He's clearly using a different vehicle now, and this time, it might be his own."

He hung up that call and went back to holding on for the prison warden.

Cami was not optimistic that there would be cameras. This killer was being very careful. He hadn't exposed himself to the cameras at all. All he'd done was expose a borrowed car to them.

The car.

That got her thinking all over again.

It was exquisitely frustrating to know that Nealon Browne knew who this killer was. He could name a name, but he wouldn't. And he wouldn't do it because he was scared.

Who could he be so scared of? It had to be someone close to him. You wouldn't be scared of a random stranger. Not a tough ex-convict like Nealon, who wasn't afraid to use violence.

And yet he was afraid to give this name to the FBI, and that meant something.

Connor was back on the phone to the warden.

"You're emailing the list now? Great. Thanks."

He hung up. "Just in time. He's about to head into a meeting with the governor, and he'll be turning his phone off now."

He turned to his laptop and watched the screen, clearly impatient for the information on the prison visits to come through.

Meanwhile, Cami had gotten into Ellis's phone. A beep told her that her password software had done its job.

Now she could access the messages. For what it was worth.

There were reams of them. Ellis was a chatty person when he wasn't busy committing attempted murder. The first thing Cami read was that he

definitely had been out on the road yesterday. He really had been stuck in traffic and wasn't lying. There were about ten different messages, back and forth, between him and the receptionist, advising him on alternative routes and updating the delivery times of the remaining items in his van.

Connor sighed, looking up from his email.

"It's come through, but it doesn't look like the visitors list is going to get us anywhere," he said. "He didn't have many. His mother was his main visitor, once a month. Then, he'd occasionally get a visit from his aunt. Neither are top of the list for the killer's profile." He sighed. "We have to look elsewhere. I need to think." He got up and started pacing. That was what Connor did when he was stressed and wanted to get his mind working harder.

Cami kept scrolling through the conversations. At least it was something for her to do, and who knew, perhaps there would be an insight?

There were no messages at all about the Dodge pickup or any other vehicle.

But there were occasional texts with other ex-cons, asking how they were doing, how life outside was treating them.

It was interesting to see that they all seemed to have different opinions on the guards. The head warden seemed to be thought of as a fair person. The cons all acknowledged he ran a tight ship and was reasonable. But the guards? They were different.

One guard seemed to have done occasional favors for the men. He was a favorite with them, ready to get them a shop voucher if they needed one, or sneak them some chewing gum or cigarettes. Another was very strict, but went according to the book.

But who was this one, referred to only as "the Guy".

"Don't let the Guy find you out, or you'll be back inside."

"You'd better watch it. The Guy threatened me with all sorts of punishment, and I think he meant it."

Going further back?

"I'm glad to be out of there and away from the Guy. That man's a monster."

"Yeah, he's a psycho alright."

Cami frowned.

All this was adding up. The pieces were starting to fit together.

"Connor," she said. "Read this. I think the killer might be one of the prison guards."

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

"One of the guards?"

Cami saw Connor's eyes light up at this new idea, as she pushed the phone toward him.

He took it and read through the messages carefully, his eyes narrowing as he took in the relevant details.

He gave a small nod.

"I think you've hit the nail on the head here. It's sounding like one of the guards was acting aggressively outside of his mandate, and that he might have had some kind of hold over a few of the prisoners."

He looked up, at the same time that the idea occurred to Cami.

"You think Ellis will tell us his name?" she asked.

Connor shrugged. "I don't know. He hasn't been willing to spill out any information so far. And if this guard is the kind of man I think he is, then even Ellis might be scared to say much. But we can try."

Cami knew this was make or break. Feeling intent, she got up and followed Connor back to the interview room, holding Ellis's phone in her hand.

Connor walked in, and Ellis straightened up from his discouraged slump, to stare at them both again defiantly.

Showing no sign of haste, even though Cami knew exactly how impatient he must be feeling inside, Connor sat down.

"We have some new questions," he said.

Ellis glared at them. "What makes you think I'll give you answers?" he asked.

Connor tapped his fingers thoughtfully on the desk.

"I could put in a good word for you with the parole officer?" he said. "Make sure there are no consequences for you missing a check-in? I'd do that favor for you if you do one for me."

Ellis raised his eyebrows. That was clearly a powerful incentive, and suddenly, the prospect of finding out who the guard might be, was seeming much more positive to Cami.

"Yeah? A favor? What favor?" He sounded wary.

"It seems you all had a certain prison guard as part of the team. Your messages refer to the man as the Guy. Seems he wasn't the nicest person. I'd

like to know who he is."

Cami was watching Ellis as Connor spoke. And it was scary to see how he shut down.

As Connor made his offer, as he mentioned the prison guard, Ellis began frowning, and his expression closed up. As Connor mentioned the name Guy, Ellis pressed his lips together.

This wasn't going to go well. Cami could see it, even before Ellis shook his head.

"No, man. We don't give out things like that."

"He got something on you? Or your friends?" Connor guessed. "Maybe if you tell us, you think that he might organize some kind of payback?"

Cami was watching his face, and she could see that was exactly what Ellis thought.

"He won't," Connor promised, but Ellis was shaking his head.

"No, man. Just no. I'm not saying another damned thing. Ask me anything else. Anything. But not that."

It must take a serious threat to make such a tough, defiant ex-convict suddenly look unsettled and scared. That was what Cami was seeing now.

They were on the right track, she knew it. This was the person they were all afraid of. This was the reason that Nealon, too, wasn't talking.

But there were a few guards in Boston Max, and the problem was that the head warden was now in a meeting with the governor. There would be a delay in getting hold of him.

"Guy. Is it his real name, anything to do with his last name?" Connor asked.

But Ellis had shut down.

He was staring at his hands, and he wasn't saying a thing. He didn't dare to. He was too fearful that there would be repercussions, either for him or else for his friends inside, Cami guessed.

"We'll be back," Connor said. "The offer's still on the table."

He turned and walked out again.

Cami followed, and as soon as she was out, she scrolled through the phone once more, now feeling frantic with the impending pressure. Surely there was somewhere that they'd slipped up and referred to him by name? Although, maybe not. Maybe not if he was that toxic and threatening a person. They might always have been careful and referred to him in coded terms.

Suddenly, Cami thought of a possible solution.

"Connor, surely we'd know which guard it is, if we were able to access the list of shifts?" she asked. "Because we have times for two of the victims being taken. The first victim was taken on Saturday afternoon, and now Myra was taken this afternoon. If we could check out the schedules of all the guards in that section of the prison, and see which ones were off at that time, and also at the times when the bodies were dumped, then it might narrow down who it could be?"

Connor nodded. "Yes. A shift list is exactly what we want. But we can't get one yet. Not until we've gotten hold of the head warden again. He'd have to authorize that. We can't just ask the prison for it. And he's in a meeting with the governor now, as he told me earlier. That'll be a couple of hours, most likely."

Then he looked at Cami's face. "Okay. You're saying you might be able to hack into the prison's systems and find that list?" He sounded incredulous. "Cami, no. I can't let you do it. We'd better wait. Hacking a prison system is a federal offense."

"But a woman's been taken," Cami argued. "Connor, she's been taken and he might kill her at any time. He might have her shut away somewhere, and her life might depend on us acting fast. We can't wait!"

"We can't do it," he argued.

"You can't. I can!" she argued right back again. "I can go in there and see if I can find who it is. I'll say I was testing their systems. I can say I got told in confidence by one of the parolees we've been speaking to, that there was a loophole, and I was testing to see if that was valid."

Connor narrowed his eyes. He frowned. But she could see he was coming around to the idea.

"Aren't their systems set up to detect outside threats? I imagine they do regular security sweeps?"

She nodded. "I'd need to work fast. Usually, in a big system like this, I'd have about an hour to work, and then I'd need to get out before a routine sweep picked me up. To be careful, we could say half an hour?" she pleaded. "There's nobody else we can ask, with the warden in the meeting. Nobody's going to talk, and we also can't risk warning any of the prison staff, or word might get back to him."

Connor checked his watch.

"Twenty minutes," he said. "That's the time I'm giving you. I'm going out

of the room. By the time I come back, you're in - or else."

He walked out of the room, and now it was Cami's turn to frown and be stressed.

Twenty minutes to break into a secure prison network?

She steeled herself, remembering that all things were possible, and that her hacking friends had done even more audacious feats in the past.

She herself had managed to get into the FBI's homepage.

But a prison?

This would require a multi-pronged approach.

First, she was going to look at the network and assess it for any vulnerabilities. At the same time, she was going to run a brute force attack on the server and see if she could crack any of the passwords to allow her to gain access. And thirdly, she could identify a couple of email addresses, and send through a likely sounding email that an unsuspecting person might just click in.

Working furiously, harnessing up her phone and her email, Cami set about attempting to achieve the impossible. She got her software running. She started her overview of the network. And she put together a few emails, that she hoped would sound plausible and official, and would encourage people to click on the link.

She could send those out to a few prison staff whose addresses she was able to find on the system.

Trying to stop herself from frantically checking the clock, Cami did her best with the phishing emails at short notice. Ideally, she should have had a few hours to do this research. With only a few minutes, she had to keep the emails basic and work-focused. There wasn't time to look up her targets and research their personal lives to see what their interests were and compile the mails accordingly.

But, as she wrestled with the wording for an email heading that would sound like it was work related to a prison official, she heard a ping from her phone.

She caught her breath.

Her brute force attempt, the one she'd thought was the least likely, had worked. Someone in the prison system had made their access password too easy, and her software had gotten it.

Now, she was in.

She had just seven minutes left to see if she could find the guard's register

and work out who hadn't been on duty at the time these crimes were committed.

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

Feeling frantic with the pressure, and desperately worried about Myra Barnes, the third missing woman, Cami searched through the unfamiliar prison system. She knew she was lucky to have gotten in here at all, but now she was here, the systems was complex and vast. There were deeper, locked, even more secret folders that she didn't know if she should spend time trying to access. There were timetables and schedules - some of which seemed current, and others redundant or historic.

She forced herself to focus using all her control, blocking out the sights and sounds of the back office where she was working, not thinking about the clang of the rattling heater, or the voices in the background, or the repetitive sound from outside the window as someone tried, and failed, to start a vehicle whose battery had run down.

Putting all that aside, Cami battled to understand the complexity of Boston Max's online management systems. This entire structure here, that she'd found her way into, seemed to be for prisoner allocation. Exiting it, she saw there was another massive set of folders for reporting.

And something new had just come up. A reminder had started flashing on the screen. What was this?

Cami opened the small box and read it with a sense of mounting horror.

The notification was informing her, and all users, that a scheduled security sweep would be occurring in exactly three minutes. Systems would be shutting down, a security check would be done, and then everything would restart with new passwords in place.

Cami bit her lip. She didn't even have the tiny window of time she'd expected. A security sweep would pick her up. That meant she had to get out of the system before that happened, and she couldn't get back in afterward, because the password she'd cracked would automatically be changed.

Now, the clock was seriously ticking down. If she'd thought she had been under pressure beforehand, she'd been wrong. This was pressure.

With the clock counting inexorably down in her head, Cami tried to make sense of the enormous, complex system. It would be terrible if she'd gotten the whole way in, only to be booted out empty-handed - or worse still, caught red-handed.

And she couldn't copy all of this over. It was way, way too much

information and would take hours.

Nope, she had to use her smarts and her intuition to try to work out where the guard timetable was likely to be.

Would it be under Personnel? For a moment, her finger hovered there, ready to click, and then she shook her head. She didn't think an up-to-date guard schedule would be there. The personal details of the guards would, but that wouldn't help her. And if she went in the wrong place, she'd waste time, because every time the screen refreshed, it took a few seconds to do so. This was a big system, and it was running from slow servers.

But then, she realized she was wrong. She needed to get in there. Because the schedule wouldn't show who wasn't working. It would only show who was.

And what if this feared, psychotic 'Guy' had taken a week's leave to do these killings? If she didn't have the full list of personnel, she'd never know.

Seething, because this was so time-consuming and it was time she didn't have, she clicked on Personnel.

Scanning the new screen as fast as she could, she headed quickly through the lists of staff members, looking for the guards.

There it was. An alphabetical list of around thirty names. She screenshot it and then sped back up to the main menu.

Now it was time to find out which of these people had been on duty, and who could be ruled out.

Operations? That sounded promising. The day-to-day operations was surely where wardens would be allocated.

Cami went into there, impatience surging inside her as she waited for the system to refresh.

There she was. And her guess was accurate, she realized with relief, even though she still didn't know if she'd do this in time. She was at least in the right place. Here were all the timetables, reams of them.

Timetables for the kitchen staff, for the cleaners. Timetables for the food deliveries and the prisoner exercise schedules. And here was the one she needed. Guard Duty Roster. At last.

Cami breathed a sigh of relief as she went in, which immediately turned to a sigh of frustration as the system hung again.

She was well under one minute now. At any moment, this system could start shutting down, and then she didn't know if she'd be able to get out in time.

Feeling her breath quickening, Cami held up her phone. She turned it on to video. And then, scrolling down slowly, she started to video the timetable. Day by day. Night by night. Each one seemed to take an interminable time to refresh.

And now the screen was flashing as the security countdown began. Five seconds left.

Cami refreshed one more screen, captured it on video.

Three seconds left.

She didn't have time. She needed to get out. Slamming her fingers down on the keys, she beat a hasty retreat, and the prison admin screen disappeared from her computer with - she guessed - one second left to go.

That had been nerve-racking. She let out a long, shaky breath.

Only then, did she become aware of a tall figure standing behind her screen. Her focus had been so intent, she hadn't even noticed Connor there. Now, she jumped to see him there.

"You were very focused," he said.

She nodded, speaking quietly to explain her highly illegitimate hacking actions. "I was working on a tight time limit. I got the schedules for a few days, and I got a list of the guards. Then I got out, because there was a security restart. I couldn't get more."

"That's going to help us," Connor said. "Let's take a look and compare the lists."

He sat down beside her. Cami pulled up the main list in one window on her laptop's screen. And then, on another, she pulled up the video she'd taken of the guards' timetable.

"So, this timetable I'm looking at now is recent. It's from today," Connor observed. "We had the third victim taken today, so let's see who we can rule out."

Looking from list to list, Cami was able to check off eight of the names.

"Now, let's go back and look at Saturday," Connor said. "Saturday was a big day for our killer. He took one victim in the afternoon, and then late at night, he dumped her in the small hours. So that covers both Saturday shifts. Anyone working on Saturday at all can be ruled out."

More names were crossed out as Cami went back and forth between the screens. This was looking good. They'd now ruled out more than two-thirds of the list of guards.

"We don't know exactly when the other victim, Katie Symons, was taken,

but we do know when she was dumped. Late on Sunday night, going into Monday. So - Sunday night shift. Who's there?"

Another six names were added to those who had been ruled out already.

Now, they were only left with three.

Three names, and Cami was sure that one of them must be the killer.

"Samuel Potts, Craig Anderson and Barry Coombes," Cami said. That told her that 'Guy' definitely was a nickname, because none of the names seemed to relate to it.

Wondering if there might be anything else that could help her, she went back to the original list of staff members.

Looking at it more closely now, and comparing it to the timetable, she saw that Barry Coombes hadn't been on the roster at all. Was he on vacation, and if so, was he their killer?

"What does this code mean?" she puzzled, seeing a two-letter code by his name.

"I think that means injury," Connor said, scrutinizing it. "It means Coombes is off duty due to injury. I would say that makes him a far less likely candidate. A warden who's injured enough to be off duty won't be able to capture women and carry their bodies around. So that leaves two. Samuel Potts and Craig Anderson. One of them's our killer. And we have to get to both of them as fast as we can."

CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

The race was on to get to the two off-duty guards. Either one could be the man they needed. Cami couldn't let herself think about the missing woman as she and Connor ran for the car.

Connor was on the phone again, communicating with his office.

"I need contact details for two prison guards. Samuel Potts, Craig Anderson. They should both live locally. Can you get the addresses?"

"Just a sec. I'll look them up," the agent in the office replied.

Cami bundled into the car. Connor was at the wheel, getting ready to go. Phone open, GPS activated.

"Right. I've got details for Craig Anderson," the agent in the office said.

As he read out the address, Connor quickly put it into the GPS. It was about ten miles from the prison, in a quiet, suburban area of affordable housing. Cami looked at the map, hoping that they could get there fast, and that they would be in the right place, and in time, to rescue Myra Barnes.

While Connor drove, Cami opened her phone. She could at least do a search to see if either of these guards were visible on social media. There might be some clues there.

Craig Anderson seemed to be off the radar. She couldn't find anything on him at all in a quick search, but Samuel Potts had a profile with an AI-generated smiley face and a few posts that looked innocuous.

Neither one, at first glance, was a highly suspicious individual, and thinking about that made her even more worried. They surely couldn't be wrong about both of them. There were genuinely no other leads she could think of.

"Here are their ID photos and descriptions," Connor said, as this information beeped through from his office. Cami took a look.

Craig Anderson, whose address they were going to, was a tall, bulky man with a shaven head and a grim expression in his ID photo. He was six foot tall and looked like a strong, bodybuilder type.

He definitely looked like someone who could intimidate prisoners, Cami thought.

But how about Samuel Potts?

He was shorter - five-nine, but also looked like a strong person. Cami guessed that all prison guards needed to be strong. However, he was staring

at the camera with a half-smile. At first, the look was friendly, but as she gave it closer scrutiny, Cami decided his expression was in fact a bit creepy.

It was a knowing smile, as if he knew something that nobody else did.

"We're nearly there," Connor said, and Cami quickly looked up from her phone. She'd been so engrossed in her research that the drive had passed faster than she'd expected. Now, they were speeding into the suburb where Craig Anderson lived. The houses were small, the area was rundown. Cami saw some trash blowing in the street as they turned into his road.

Connor pulled up outside the house on the corner. It was a small house with peeling paint and windows that looked in need of a good cleaning.

Her heart was thudding, hard. What would they find here? Would this be their killer, and if so, was he inside? Where did he keep his victims, in the time that elapsed between them being grabbed, and being killed?

"Right. Let's see if this is our guy," Connor said. He climbed out of the car and, adrenaline surging, Cami followed him up to the house.

Connor knocked loudly on the weathered front door, and Cami listened hard, shivering as she stood on the unswept front doorstep. There was a car parked outside the house - a big SUV that was dark red in color. That could easily be the car he'd used for the most recent grab. There was definitely enough room inside for a victim to be transported. And the car's presence in the driveway showed that Anderson was at home.

Or did it?

Because he wasn't responding to the knocking. Nobody was coming to the door.

Connor shook his head. "I'm going to take a look around the house," he said. "While I do, you get back in the car."

It was clear that Connor didn't want Cami alone on the front doorstep until he had ascertained whether this suspect was at home.

"I'll do that," Cami said, now feeling anxious for Connor. What if something went wrong while he was looking around the house? What if this killer was lying in wait somewhere?

But she acknowledged that in a fight, she was going to be useless, and that standing on the front doorstep, she might be a liability - or else, a target.

Connor got on the phone to the office.

"Anderson's car is here, but he's not answering the door. Is his phone on? Can you get me a location for it?" he asked.

Hoping that the phone location could be tracked, Cami got into the car,

grateful to be in the warmth, but frantic with worry about the situation they were in.

The radio was crackling, with information streaming through. The address of the second suspect, Samuel Potts, had become available, and it was just a couple of blocks away. He lived on the outskirts of this small rundown suburb. As she heard the address, Cami plotted it on her phone.

She thought that Anderson was far more likely to be the killer. He looked aggressive and angry in his photo. And it didn't seem like he was home. Seeing as how his car was here, the logical assumption was that he'd found someone else to borrow a car from, and he was out, either holding his victim somewhere, or worse still, dumping her.

Surely not dumping her? Please, let her be alive, Cami thought. But it was already getting dark. And she knew that once it was dark, the killer would be able to go about his deadly business far more easily.

There was nothing to be found on Anderson. She looked again, double-checking, but the man seemed to be totally off the radar as far as social media went.

Could she log into his wifi from here?

No. He didn't seem to have his wifi activated. She could see the neighbors' wifi - Mellor1, which would align with the 'Mellor' she saw on the next-door house's postbox, where Connor was heading now. But nothing for Anderson at all. The guy didn't seem to be active on social media or have his own personal home wifi.

He really was a dark horse, and that was making her more and more suspicious.

What about the community?

Maybe there was a community chat group she could look at that might give some hints. Community chat groups were often good sources of information. While Connor knocked on doors, she might be able to sort through neighborhood communications. Then they would have double the chance of finding out more.

With that in mind, Cami went searching, using the help of the neighbor's wifi. Mellor1 had a very easy password to crack, and she was in within a minute. Now, to see if she could see any community groups.

She set her programs to run, checking everywhere. Checking on the devices she was able to access via the wifi, and checking for groups that were relevant to the area.

Ah. There was a local chat group. She'd found one on Mellor1's machine. And, working quickly, Cami was able to view it.

It was a very active group, and there were a lot of people on it who seemed to spend their lives snooping and peeking at their neighbors.

"Why is number seventeen Mandalay Way playing loud music AGAIN after eleven?"

"Can't you just live and let live? Maybe we should worry about the trash in the streets and not about that?"

"Pick up your own trash, litterbug!"

"Does anyone know the name of a good dry cleaner?"

She scrolled back a week, two weeks. Lots of chit chat, lots of complaining, but nothing serious, or that she thought could be linked to the case.

And then, going back a month, her gaze was caught by something familiar.

"Delivery vehicle here, dropping off soundproofing."

"That's for number twelve Conifer Way, the house a few roads down. Not for Colony Way."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. They must have gotten the address wrong at the delivery place. There was a whole stack delivered last week too. Doors, insulation, bricks, concrete, other materials. For soundproofing a basement, apparently."

Cami's eyes narrowed.

She recognized the address. Connor's office had just called it in. That was Samuel Potts' address. He lived at number twelve Conifer Way. The house further out of town.

Why was a prison guard busy soundproofing his basement?

Cami looked again at Samuel's profile. There was something about that avatar that was creeping her out. Something about the smile in the real life photos of him she could see.

Cami opened the car door and jumped out. She hurried over to the neighboring house, where Connor was turning away and striding back.

"The neighbors know nothing, but we've just got a GPS location for the phone. Anderson is on the highway, to the west, and heading out of town, fast," he said. "If we rush, we can get on at the next exit and catch up with him."

"Connor, wait!"

Cami felt torn now. Which decision would be the right one? Go after the man who was speeding out of town in a borrowed car - or go where her gut was telling her?

"Please," she said. "Can someone else track Anderson? Because I've found out something about Samuel's basement. And I think it might be where he's keeping these women."

CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

"In the basement?" Cami saw Connor frowning. This was a big decision to make, and time was against them here. "What did you find out?"

"Your office sent through his address. He lives a couple of miles away. There was a problem with the delivery of soundproofing equipment, which was discussed in this neighborhood group. And that's how I've found out that Samuel Potts has soundproofed his basement. And recently. Lots of soundproofing, new doors, a whole lot of improvements that a normal basement surely wouldn't need. Connor, I'm worried he did that because he wanted to keep the women down there. And he's close by. Just a couple of miles beyond here."

She waited for a tense moment.

"You really think this is the guy?" Connor said, sounding dubious.

"I really do," Cami said. "It's the soundproofing, and also his social media avatar. It's an AI creation, and looking back, I see he's changed it a few times. And in the past, once or twice, it's been an avatar of a dark-haired man with a blond woman."

"Is that so?" Connor asked. He still sounded undecided. Cami knew it was a big decision for him as well.

"I know it's not a lot. But it's something. Maybe it's pointing to his aims. To the romance, or whatever it is he wants, with his victims. I do think it's important."

With a firm nod, Connor made the decision.

"You're right, Cami. We can't ignore the smaller details, especially if they're adding up. And I see he is close by."

He got on the radio.

"Urgent alert. We need an officer who can assist in the GPS tracking and location of a suspect's cellphone." As he spoke, he climbed into the car, glancing at the address which Cami had already programmed into her phone.

"Yes. Anyone who can help out must get onto the highway, and as soon as possible. We're heading somewhere else."

He started up the car and swung in the direction of Conifer Way.

Cami's stomach was churning as he drove. She was hoping, hard, that she hadn't been wrong about this. If she'd been wrong about this, then she'd messed everything up and wasted precious time, and she knew that worst

case, this could cost them a life.

But on the other hand, pursuing a car on the highway, while a woman was locked in a basement nearby, might also cost them a life.

Conifer Way couldn't come soon enough. She watched the street names anxiously, her gaze veering from the map to the snowy suburbs ahead. This was a more scattered area. The houses weren't bigger, but the lots were larger. There were more trees and more privacy. And here, finally, was Conifer Way.

Connor swung into the road. He stopped outside number twelve.

It looked like all the others - a small, rundown place with a main house in front, and a shed in the backyard. But there had clearly been excavations and improvements happening. Looking through the trees, Cami saw there were some piles of sand in the backyard and some planks still stacked near them. Connor got out. He walked up to the front door. He knocked.

Just like at the other place, there was no reply. But would there be a reply if the man was down in a locked, soundproofed basement? He might not be able to hear a thing.

Did he have wifi, Cami wondered, as Connor waited, checking his watch, raising the knocker again. That was something she could confirm.

A quick look on her phone, and she saw he did.

"Connor, I'm getting something here on the wifi. I'm going to see if I can log in," Cami said.

"While you do that, I'm going to look around the house. We don't have enough cause to break in, but if there's any sign or any reason, I'm going to risk it."

They each had their own challenges now. Connor was looking for a way in physically, and Cami was trying to get into the house remotely.

She had a horrible feeling about this deserted looking place. It might be the killer's home, or else, a terrible mistake. As yet, she didn't know which it would be.

She looked down to see that her program had gotten in. At least this was progress, and she'd accessed the wifi. And there were several devices attached to it.

There was a computer. Could she somehow get into it? The computer was open and live.

Working quickly, Cami tried to access it via the wifi. It wasn't difficult. The computer didn't have a strong password, and it was clearly used on the

private home connection.

Cami accessed the camera. Was Samuel Potts inside, working on it? Could she see anything?

The camera flickered into life.

And she gasped as it showed her a chilling sight.

She was looking through the camera's eye at a woman who had a black blindfold covering her eyes and who was tied to a chair. The room behind her was small, with freshly painted white walls. The woman was breathing hard, her chest rising and falling under her jacket, and from her tense demeanor, and the twist to her face, Cami could tell she was absolutely terrified.

"Go on!" a man's voice said, so loud and harsh that Cami jumped. Her eyes widened. He was in there with her.

"Go on, say it! Say you love me! I need you to tell me the words!"

With her chest heaving, the woman seemed too panicked to speak.

But now, Cami thought she understood his aims. This man was trying to create a montage of voices. He was trying to create the AI version of the avatar she'd seen on his profile. He wanted to have those words recorded in his machine so that he could pretend it was a real, live person. Maybe he was filming her as well. That bright white wall behind her and the fact he was staying out of sight of the camera himself hinted at that.

"Connor!" she yelled. "Connor!"

Still holding her phone, she rushed around the house to find him.

Connor was sizing up the back door. For a shabby house, Cami had to admit, the doors were solid, and the windows all had security bars on them. Not just to keep people out, she now realized, but to keep them in.

"Connor, look!" She showed him the phone. "He's got her here, in the basement. He's trying to make her say something to him, and he's recording it on the computer. We have to get down there and stop him. I'm worried she's too scared to talk and then he'll kill her!"

"I'm going to go in," Connor said. "The back door's my best chance. The only way into the basement seems to be from inside. It's more like a cellar room. Completely underground." He turned to her. "You go and wait in the car. I don't know if this guy is armed or what's happening. I'm calling for backup now, and they can help deal with it."

Cami felt terrible that Connor had to deal with this alone, but she knew that she would be more of a hindrance than a help.

And also, more importantly, in the car, at least she could keep track of

what this man was saying and doing.

She huddled in the car, keeping the door open a crack in case Connor needed her, and focusing on her phone, trying to see what was playing out in that basement room.

And immediately, Cami saw that the situation had taken a turn for the worse.

"You will talk! You will!"

The man's voice was even more angry and threatening now. There was a note of pure, high fury in it that told her he was rapidly losing control.

And then, the picture proved it. He stepped into the camera's eye, and for the first time, she saw the suspect. He was broad-shouldered, wearing a simple black T-shirt, with short hair and dark eyes, and a look on his face that chilled her.

He was standing behind the woman now, where she couldn't see him. And in his hand, he held a steel bar.

He gripped it tightly, still screaming at her.

"Talk! Talk to me! Say something. I didn't go to all this trouble to have you refuse to speak!"

Connor, be quick, Cami begged silently. But her boss was obviously having difficulty breaking in through the back door, and now, Cami saw to her horror that she was all out of time.

Yelling furiously, the man raised the iron bar. He was hefting it in his hands, and she could tell he was on the point of using it. The only reason he hadn't yet, was that he was hoping she would say something. But a few more seconds of silence would seal her fate.

If Cami couldn't find a way to intervene, now, she would have to watch the horrific sight of him killing her, in real time.

CHAPTER TWENTY NINE

A camera works two ways.

The thought flashed into Cami's mind. She had control of Samuel's camera and that meant she could interact with him, by using the computer's own software. That would take literally a second now that she was inside.

She pressed the keys.

Now, she had control of the speaker. And now, she had to talk. What on earth was she going to say?

"I love you," she said loudly. After all, those were the words he had wanted. "I love you. I really do. You're the guy for me. I always knew it."

She thought she was getting somewhere. As she spoke, he spun toward the screen, lowering steel bar, staring at the computer in utter shock, as if he'd never dreamed that it would have the ability to start talking back.

"What the hell?" he asked. "Who's in there?"

Now, Cami needed to think even quicker.

"It's your AI program," she said. "There's an update to the software that now enables interaction with the user. I am now able to respond to simple questions and commands."

There was a silence.

Samuel moved away from the screen.

And faintly, from the street, Cami heard a splintering of wood. That hopefully meant Connor had managed to break in through the back door. Now, he had to get down into the basement, where there might be another locked door still to break through. She had to keep this man's attention so that Connor could do his work.

"Ask me whatever you want," she said. "I'll answer you within my parameters."

"Where did we meet?" he said.

Cami racked her brains for an answer that would sound like a plausible, AI generated piece of text. "We saw each other immediately in the crowd. Don't you remember? I knew at once that you were the one. That you were going to be my love for life."

She had to admit, it felt wrong to be using the word 'love' in such chilling and deadly circumstances. Cami had always felt that word to be sacrosanct. Even pretending to be an AI program, telling this monster that she loved him

was surprisingly difficult.

"I wanted to be with you immediately," she said, wondering what else she could use to get through to him and keep him listening. He was someone who captured women and put them through hell. But what was his personality like, outside of that? Were there any other clues?

She swung the camera around. It was able to move through a restricted angle. She still couldn't see him - he was out of sight, maybe so that the recording could work. But what she did see was that the small basement looked pristine. It was very clean. Uncluttered. The chair was placed squarely in the center of the room.

Maybe he was a neat freak. That might align with his twisted personality and his need to control women. Perhaps she could capitalize on that.

"You must tell me what to do," she said. "When we're fully in love, I know you're going to have to guide me. After all, I want to please you. Are there any requirements you have for our home?"

"Yes," he muttered. "Yes, I will have to guide you. Do you ever make a mess? Leave things lying around?"

That was an easy one to answer. "I'm very neat by nature," she said. "And I like a man who is the same, who's a neat person too."

"What's your favorite flower?" he asked suddenly. Another one that wasn't too difficult.

"Roses," Cami said. "I love roses. They're the most beautiful flowers. I love red roses because they have such meaning. But all colors are beautiful."

Where was Connor? She was shaking with tension. He must be having difficulty getting in. Cami was guessing that the door to the basement was well hidden. Maybe it was behind another locked door, or hidden away in a cupboard, or maybe it was a hatch that was concealed under a carpet or behind furniture. He should have been in by now, but he wasn't. This killer was very, very smart and sneaky. Even though he had the FBI breaking down his door, they weren't yet close enough to stop him.

She had to keep talking, because now, she heard a note of suspicion in his voice.

"You're not AI, are you? You're tricking me. Are you in my house? Have you gotten inside here?"

No, Cami thought, coldness flooding her.

It was inevitable that after the shock of hearing his computer speaking back to him, he was going to start questioning how this could happen. And

quickly realizing it couldn't.

If there was ever a moment she needed to keep him talking, keep him distracted, it was now.

Connor might be in danger otherwise, when he finally gained access to the basement.

"Well, I'm your AI program, and I can't answer that question. It's too difficult. I'm programmed to answer questions about love. I'd like to talk some more about how we met. I think that we were really preordained to be together. You know, when you get cold shivers because you wonder what would have happened if that chance moment hadn't occurred?"

Cami paused. Her mouth was dry, and her voice was starting to crack from the strain. She still couldn't see Samuel Potts. He'd moved out of the camera's angle, and she had no idea where he was. What if he was waiting by the basement door for Connor to come in, holding up that iron bar?

"Speak to me. Don't you have any more questions?" she asked.

But there was only silence now, as Cami's heart accelerated and she started feeling sick inside.

And then, she heard a crashing, rending noise that made her gasp. Sweat sprung out on her palms. Her gaze was glued to the phone.

And Connor was in! She saw him on camera, rushing over to the woman, grabbing her shoulders. He'd gotten in safely, he'd managed to avoid the killer, and he was okay. Relief crushed her - but only for a moment.

Hot on its heels came another urgent question.

Where was the killer? Because clearly, he hadn't been in the basement when Connor entered. She'd heard the sound of a door breaking down, but nothing else. No fight, no gunshot. Nothing at all.

Coldness filled her. This wasn't over yet. Was he hiding in there?

Or -

And as Cami had her next thought, the car door was wrenched open behind her. A rough hand grabbed her, and a foul-smelling cloth was mashed into her face.

The world started to swim, and then she knew nothing more.

CHAPTER THIRTY

What was happening?

The world was tilting, swimming in and out. Cami felt sick, and there was a foul, bitter taste in her mouth.

As her mind emerged from the fog, reality hit her with a slam.

She was in the trunk of a car, which was veering along the road. Rolling around on the carpeted floor, she was unable to brace herself properly because her hands were tied and her legs were, too.

Gradually, her shocked brain began piecing together what had happened.

Samuel Potts must have had an alternative exit route out of the basement, Cami realized, feeling her stomach tilt nauseatingly as the car veered right. Most probably, he had planned this and built an escape route that led somewhere else. Maybe an underground passage leading to that shed. So when Connor had broken in, he'd broken out and burst out of the shed and grabbed her.

Ironically, she'd have been safer going down there with Connor.

On the plus side, though, Cami thought, trying to program her mind out of the doomsday channel it seemed to be stuck in, if Samuel hadn't grabbed her, he might have chosen to run, and gotten away. Imagine if she and Connor had been down in the basement, and he'd burst out via his secret passage, and fled the area and they'd lost him?

And even though she was now in terrible danger, she was at least still alive.

But she was blindfolded. Now, as full consciousness returned, she realized that a tight black wrap had been fastened over her eyes. Not being able to see was causing her more panic than having her hands tied behind her. Knowing that her vision was gone was utterly terrifying. And she couldn't remove her blindfold. It was tied too tightly for her to be able to scrape it off against the car's floor, although she tried.

For a while, Cami could not fight the suffocating fear that gripped her. She just had to ride it.

She breathed jerkily in and out. Nothing else she could do. At least she was able to take in air. It was the one thing she could be grateful for.

And then, slowly, she got control of her thoughts. Started to channel them in a different direction than panic.

This guy had taken her. What did she know about him?

He was insane, that was a given. He was violent. He would try to make her talk to his AI to get a voice recording proving her love, and then he would kill her and dump her body, and leave an old Elvis song on her phone and -

No, Cami told herself. No. Stop right there. You're panicking again. Backtrack.

An Elvis song? On her phone?

That was the common factor. All the victims' phones had been left with them.

Now she was getting somewhere. That surely meant her phone was in here? He wouldn't have left it behind. He needed it for his scenario, and it hadn't been difficult for him to spot. It had been in full view, grasped in her hands, when he'd smothered her with that horrible cloth.

Would he have turned it off? She wondered about that for a moment. Maybe not. What he would probably have done was turned it onto flight mode and disabled the locking mechanism, because he would need it later for the recording, and he was a prison guard, not a high level hacker.

She had her voice. And her phone was somewhere nearby.

And her phone had voice commands activated.

Solutions were coming together in Cami's mind.

She was in the trunk, and this killer, Samuel Potts, was driving. So he couldn't see her, and he might not hear her. However, she didn't know where her phone was or if it was within shouting distance. If he'd silenced it and put it on flight mode and flung it into the trunk with her, then it would be close enough, and she hoped that was what he'd done.

Cami cleared her throat. These circumstances were not ideal. Her voice would be hoarse, and she hoped that she'd be able to hit the right volume. Enough for her phone but not enough for Samuel.

"Voice access," she said. Then, just in case, she said it louder. "Voice access."

The problem was her eyes were blindfolded. She had no idea if the phone had reacted or the screen had lit up. Blanketed in darkness, she had to find another way because her phone had been on silent.

"Activate notifications. Volume up."

She waited. And a moment later, from a muffled location nearby, she heard a faint beep.

She felt a surge of hope so intense it was overpowering. The first part of

her plan had worked, and she was communicating with her phone.

Now, what would be the best plan of action?

If he'd put her phone into flight mode, she needed to get it out of there, urgently.

"Deactivate Flight Mode," she said. "Enable GPS tracking."

She wasn't sure if her phone would recognize that command, but it was vitally important because she didn't know where she was. It wouldn't help to call Connor and say she was locked in a trunk if he couldn't locate her.

Maybe she could ask her phone to give her the location.

"State GPS location," she commanded.

But there was only silence, and her heart plummeted. Somewhere down the line, her commands hadn't been heard or understood, and this might mean the difference between getting out of here alive - or not.

Somehow, she needed to fix what had gone wrong.

CHAPTER THIRTY ONE

When things go wrong, you restart.

Cami had been taught that as gospel. It usually worked well to reset things. But her go-to, her failsafe, was impossible right now, because she wasn't sure if her phone would restart fully. It might remain locked and unresponsive until she could physically put in the passcode. She didn't want to risk it.

Now, without being able to look at the screen, without knowing anything at all - least still when this death ride would end, she had to troubleshoot in a different way.

What apps would work?

Maybe one of the messaging apps would be active, and she could use it to make a call. Then she could try doing a location pin and see if that worked.

Using her voice, which was now shaking with stress, Cami navigated to the app.

"Call Connor," she said. She waited, feeling her heart thudding hard. And then the worst happened.

The car jolted to a stop. Cami was flung against the wall of the trunk, feeling like a sack of potatoes as she rolled helplessly across the carpet.

He'd stopped, and this might mean he was at his destination. In that case, she was all out of time.

"Send pin drop," she urged her phone. "Connor. Location pin drop. Activate location. Location pin drop."

Anxiety was flaring inside her. Without looking at the screen, it was incredibly difficult to remember the process. Trying to force herself into calmness, Cami tried her best.

Was there a yes? Maybe at some stage, when she'd given an earlier command, her phone would have asked her for a yes, and she hadn't said it. Now that she was thinking more clearly, she thought that the deactivation of flight mode might have required a yes.

Just like the killer had been waiting for the response he hadn't gotten from his victim. It was weird and ironic to think her phone might have been doing the same thing with her. So the phone was stuck in that process, waiting for her permission.

She needed to give it, and fast.

"Yes," she said aloud. "Yes!"

The car started moving again. It hadn't been their end destination, but just a stop street. Even so, she feared she didn't have much time.

But as it pulled off, she heard the faintest of beeps, almost masked by the engine's roar.

This time, it had worked.

"Activate GPS," she said loudly. And then, just in case, "Yes."

Now, she was going to assume that GPS was now activated. And she was going to try again to call Connor. He wouldn't know where she was. He would have called her, and it would have gone straight through to her voicemail. But she needed to tell him she was back online so he could start driving in her direction.

She tried again.

"Call Connor," she said.

This time, she heard the ringtone. Her GPS was active, her phone was operational, and she was now going to be able to connect with Connor.

It all looked like it was going fine.

Right up until she hit the back of the trunk again, hard, as the car jerked to another stop.

This time, the driver's door was wrenched open with a loud click. Footsteps scrunched in her direction. Cami had time to swallow down a huge bubble of fear. And she had time to hear Connor say, "Cami. You okay?"

Then, the trunk was flung open.

And she heard the furious voice of Samuel Potts.

"What are you doing?" he shouted. "Are you talking to somebody inside there?"

She didn't know if Connor would hear him and stay quiet. She could only hope he'd picked up Samuel's voice.

Hopefully, he was already on the way to help her.

"Of course I was talking." In the darkness of her blindfold, she turned her face to where his voice was coming from. "I'm trying to calm myself. You grabbed me and shoved me in the trunk. Why did you do that? I'm an innocent student, just job shadowing."

The words spilled from her reflexively. She thought that if she came across as sweet and confused, she might just have a better chance at survival.

"You're going to have to do what I say," he shouted. "You spoiled everything. I know I could have forced that woman to say what I wanted. But

you came in and interfered. You're police, I know it! You're not even the right type for me. No way are you the person I want. But you'll have to do. I need your voice. Here. Speak here."

He grabbed her hard. Then, he hauled her out of the trunk and she landed on her knees, unable to break her fall. His hand was still grasping her shoulder and she scrambled up, stumbling, disoriented, lacking balance, and feeling slippery snow under her boots. In the darkness of her blindfold, she had no idea where she was. All she knew was that she was standing in the open, somewhere.

Should she try to break free and run?

The thought was tempting, but how could she do it when she had no idea where she'd be running? She couldn't flee blindly. Or could she?

Maybe it would work to barge forward and surprise him. He wouldn't be expecting it, and she might get away. Her feet would be moving ahead of her to pick up any obstacles she met, and she'd surely be able to feel the slope and nature of the terrain around her. She might not even need to get far, just far enough to reach a place where people might see her or hear her scream.

Cami decided she was going to do it. In three, two, one...

But, as she prepared herself to race away, his hand grasped her head, and she gasped at the shock of the sudden touch. It was too late. He was holding her now, and she'd lost her chance to flee. Probably, he was forcing her head in the direction of a microphone.

"Now, tell me!"

Cami's mind raced.

It was imperative to stay alive long enough for Connor to track her. She'd seen what happened when things didn't go this killer's way. If she wanted to delay him for long enough, she'd have to give him everything he wanted. She'd have to keep him so engrossed in what she was saying that he didn't dare to stop her. And if anything could buy her time, it was that.

She didn't feel in the least romantic. But now, remembering that rose and the locations, she knew that creating a romantic story might just save her life. However, it couldn't be something she'd already said to him. "I love you" wouldn't cut it. It had to be something new. Something that would keep him engaged with her and would prevent that killing rage.

Taking a deep breath, Cami spoke into the darkness, hoping that she'd be able to find the words that would keep her alive.

CHAPTER THIRTY TWO

"I knew as soon as I saw you, that you were the one," Cami said softly, feeling shivers chase up and down her spine at the spooky horror of the situation. She had to fight for control because speaking into the darkness was horrifying. The hand on her shoulder was no longer there. She didn't know where Samuel Potts was or what he was doing. Nor did she know where she was. He could have her on the edge of a precipice for all she knew.

All she was sure of was that it was quiet, and she couldn't hear much ambient noise around her, and that she was outdoors.

"Go on? Go on?" he urged. Okay, so he was somewhere nearby.

But Cami knew that if she finished up her story too soon, then she'd be in a dangerous situation. She had to delay and spin this story out for as long as possible so that he didn't think she was done and decided to kill her.

What she needed to do, she decided, was give him different voice footage, footage that he wouldn't yet have, and that he would find unusual, but still compelling. She had to keep him intrigued.

"You might not even know it, but I noticed you before you even saw me," she said. "You might think you were drawn to me. But I deliberately made sure to attract your attention because I knew straight away that you were the one for me. However, there's something about me you don't yet know because I didn't want you to know it. I was scared of telling you."

There was silence. She didn't know if he was accepting her story or not, or if he was getting angry, or if he was raising that steel bar. Cami forced her voice not to quake from the strain as she continued, wishing she could see where she was.

"I needed to take some time to trust you. Because, when you approached me, I realized that I'd found the man I needed, and that a world was opening up for us. I was so excited by all the possibilities. The romantic places we could go, the things we could do. But throughout all of this, I felt bad that there was something I was keeping from you. I knew it was something that I would need to tell you eventually."

"What?" His voice made her jump, though she tried her best not to show it. At least he was clearly intrigued by her story.

"Please, forgive me, because the time never felt right. It was so personal to me, you see. It was something I worried if you'd accept about me, though I

hoped for your understanding."

"What is it? What?" Now there was a note of anger in his voice, and Cami knew that her attempt to buy time was running out. There wasn't long to go.

"It wasn't anything from my current situation, but it was something in my past. And I felt worried that it might come back to haunt me. To haunt us, I mean, when we were together. And I thought that if I told you, you might not feel the same way about me anymore."

"What is this problem?"

As he spoke the words, Cami thought she picked up the sound she'd been waiting for. The sound of a car's engine was fast and urgent. The screech of tires around a bend.

This was Connor, she hoped, and he was getting to her as fast as he could. But now, she needed to keep Samuel's attention focused on her completely.

"It's a secret you might not want to know." She raised her voice because she didn't want him to pick up that approaching engine just yet. The longer she could delay it, the longer Connor would have to get close.

"It's a terrible secret. I was worried it would destroy our love. But yet, I hoped you would understand. I hoped you'd be able to accept it. It took so much courage for me to be ready to tell you, and when I finally thought the time was right, I hoped our love would endure. I don't know if you should hear this! I don't know! I feel scared. Will you trust me if I tell you?"

She spoke even louder, the words high and fast, hoping to continue the distraction and draw him in for as long as she could.

"What is it?" he bellowed.

And then, from somewhere behind him, Connor's voice rang out, sharp and loud.

"It's this. You're under arrest. That's what this is. Hands in the air! Now!"

She heard him cry out, an enraged howl. And then, almost simultaneously, the crack of a gunshot split the air.

Cami froze. She didn't dare to move. Didn't know what was around her or what was nearby or where he was. She stood as still as she could, even though her legs were shaking. Gasping came from nearby. He was down - she thought. Then running footsteps - more than one set. Connor had arrived with backup.

And then, finally, Connor's hands grasped her shoulders, and his voice, calm as always, spoke to her.

"Everything's okay, Cami. You did a great job to keep him talking, and to

get the message to me about where you were. I'm not even sure how you did it, but it worked."

"Voice commands," she said, her mouth dry and her limbs shaking all over. "The only thing I was able to use. They seemed to work okay – for my phone, and also for him."

A moment later, she was blinking in the bright light as he took the blindfold carefully off. Then, he went to work on the nylon rope that was tying her hands together.

Eyes watering, she stared around, seeing blue sky, snowy expanses around her, and woods nearby.

Samuel Potts was down, lying on the snow. Still roaring with anger, he was bleeding from the arm where Connor had shot him. With a distinct lack of sympathy, a cop was busy cuffing him.

The two things she then noticed chilled her to the bone.

Firstly, the steel bar that was lying within arm's length of her. Samuel must have had it in his hand. Maybe he'd even been ready to use it. Just as well, she hadn't known about it.

And secondly, she saw to her consternation that she'd been standing on the edge of a steep cliff, with a sharp, rocky drop in front of her.

If she'd tried to run, if she'd risked breaking free in the darkness of her blindfold, she'd have fallen down that precipice.

Cami turned away, unable to look.

She knew this case would haunt her nightmares. At least Samuel Potts was now in police custody. The violent prison guard would never harm another woman in his search for what he thought was love, but which she knew was a sadistic desire to control and kill.

EPILOGUE

"This is it. Today's the day, and this morning is the time," Cami said aloud.

She closed her laptop, and took the coffee mugs to the kitchen sink, trying to subdue the nerves that churned in her stomach.

Confronting Jacenta about the research she'd done into her sister's cold case and everything that had followed, felt even more intimidating, and scarier, than confronting the criminal two days ago had done.

At least Samuel Potts was now in a high-security prison cell after his bullet wound had been treated. But the people she was going to point fingers at were still in the FBI, working as reputable and trusted agents.

Cami had the sick feeling that she'd be opening up a huge can of worms when she told Jacenta about this situation. She would be naming names and accusing people that Jacinta knew and might have a long history with.

What if Jacenta didn't believe Cami?

What if she took this further, and Cami suffered the consequences?

Never mind that. It had to be done, and Cami kept the memory of her sister in her mind to give her courage. Jenna, with her smiling green eyes and her tawny blond hair, who'd never deserved to be caught up in this. Cami suspected she'd suffered worse consequences than anyone. If Jenna was still alive, which Cami doubted, she'd be living in pure hell.

Kieran, who was bustling around in the living room, getting together his work things, glanced at her in concern.

"Now?" he asked. "You've got everything?"

Cami nodded. "I do. And by that, I mean 'everything'."

Further investigation into the shadow cast by Bill Oertel's activities had led Cami, stealthily, to two more names. One agent was higher up in the hierarchy than Bill, one was lower down. She had those names ready to present to Jacenta with the proof she'd been able to obtain.

Nerves tightened again as she wondered if the proof would be enough.

"Well, I wish you luck," Kieran said. "And please, call me if you are worried. If you feel you need help, if anything goes wrong."

Kieran walked over to her and wrapped his arms around her and kissed her.

Last night, in bed with him, they'd held each other also. Cami had been

comforted by the feeling of his strong arms around her, his hands stroking her hair. Well, not just comforted. Her feelings had gone further than that. She'd been tempted - very, very tempted - to take off the pajamas that had stayed firmly in place up until now, because she'd felt that she was not yet ready for anything more.

Now, she was ready. And she knew that it wouldn't be long before they were in a proper relationship. She was glad they'd taken it slow, because this was too important to rush.

"I'll text you as soon as the meeting's over," she promised.

"Good."

Cami picked up her laptop bag and headed out of the apartment, taking the elevator down and walking out into the cold, sunny morning. She waited for a bus, and caught one heading into town. It was an easy ride to the stop nearest the FBI building, and cheaper than taking a cab.

She barely noticed the buildings passing by, the view she was now accustomed to seeing, though more often from Connor's car, or a cab, than from a bus. Her thoughts were all focused on the meeting. What she should say. What she should ask from Jacenta, because she'd need security and reassurance that this would stay confidential. Kieran had agreed that was very important.

She needed to know what would happen next. Would the FBI take this further, and if so, what would the timeframe be? Would anyone be arrested? Were they going to be able to gather additional evidence?

There were so many questions, and the thought of what the answers might be, was making her hands feel cold and her heart thump rapidly.

Climbing out at the stop she needed, she headed across the road and up to the FBI building. Walking in, she greeted the security guard, though with a more nervous smile than usual.

This time, she didn't go down the corridor like she usually did, to where Connor's offices were. Instead, she headed up to the building's third floor. Jacinta had booked one of the meeting rooms for nine a.m. It was five to nine now, Cami saw, hurrying down the corridor on the way to the meeting room.

Jacenta's office was halfway along the corridor, and as Cami reached it, the door swung open and Jacenta stepped out.

She also looked tense, Cami saw, as if she was worried about what bombshell Cami might be ready to unleash.

"Good morning, Cami. That was good timing," she said with a quick,

tight smile.

"Morning," Cami replied, dry mouthed.

Jacinta was wearing a smart, beige business suit, and her dark hair was held back with a white Alice band. She looked competent and intimidating, and Cami had to remind herself that Jacinta was close to her and understood her and could be trusted.

Cami hadn't worn her FBI jacket today because she wasn't here on an official case. She was wearing her smartest pair of jeans, her Docs, and a charcoal top, with her black jacket over it.

Together, they walked down the corridor, and Jacinta pushed open the door to the meeting room.

Then, she hesitated, surprised, and then nodded, stepping inside.

The meeting room was occupied by one man, who was getting up from his chair, picking up his briefcase.

"Sorry. We're a little early," Jacinta said to him.

"Not at all. I ran over time." He turned to face them, and Cami felt her blood run cold. She recognized him, from photos. She knew this man.

Quickly, Jacinta made the introductions, but Cami felt frozen, unable to respond coherently, unable to do anything more than nod.

"This is Cami Lark." As Jacinta spoke her last name, she saw the man's eyes narrow.

"A name I didn't know until now," he said, his voice cold. "But it's very good to make your acquaintance at last, Ms. Lark."

"She's come in for a private meeting with me," Jacinta continued. "Cami, this is our department head, my boss's boss, Senior Special Agent Bill Oertel."

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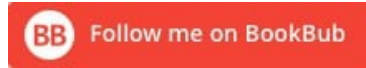
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Blake Pierce is the USA Today bestselling author of the RILEY PAGE mystery series, which includes seventeen books. Blake Pierce is also the author of the MACKENZIE WHITE mystery series, comprising fourteen books; of the AVERY BLACK mystery series,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

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