



**WILLOW
CREEK
BETRAYAL
DETRIMENTAL**

KEITH MORGAN CHRONICLES #1

BRENT JEFFRIES

Willow Creek Betrayal

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Brent Jeffries

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WILLOW CREEK BETRAYAL

This novel's story and characters are fictitious. Certain locations, institutions, agencies, and public offices are real, but may have been manipulated to fit the story. The characters in this book are wholly imaginary, and any resemblance to persons living or dead is coincidental.

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*To my beautiful wife and our incredible kids.
Without you, it wouldn't have happened.
Thank you!*

Chapter One

Sometimes my mind wanders, and it gets me in trouble.

Not that it gets me into legal trouble or anything like that, but enough that I should be focused on the speaker right now. In fact, I should have paid attention throughout the whole meeting, but it's been a struggle.

"And this is how much growth we expect to see over the next five years," the speaker is saying.

This conference room on the nineteenth floor of an office building in downtown Detroit is relatively large, clean, and pseudo-modern. It's also unremarkable, like many I've been in before. I'm sitting in a reasonably comfortable chair, resting my elbows on a nice wood conference table.

I also have my laptop out to take notes, but I have typed nothing in several minutes.

The table under my elbows is made of... well, what is this? Is this table made of mahogany? Maybe it's walnut? Maybe it's just a darker stain on another type of wood? No, I don't think this expensive-looking office would cut corners.

With my limited wood knowledge, I would say this is probably a mahogany table. Yep, that's what it is. Is mahogany even considered 'nice' in an office today? How did I mentally venture into this table wood topic, anyway?

I need to pull myself back into the moment. Obviously, it doesn't matter what type of wood it is, and there is no real reason for that question to affect my focus. But it did. This happens sometimes when I get a little too comfortable, and I'm comfortable in this setting.

"The software your company is setting up for us needs to handle that growth." The speaker drones on somewhere in the recesses of my consciousness.

There are ten black, high back leather chairs around this table. They're tall enough to relax quite well if I was so inclined. My head would rest at the top of the back of the chair if I leaned back. Which, of course, I won't do as it would make me look disinterested.

For this meeting, only three of the chairs are occupied. One occupant is my customer for this assignment, one is a software salesperson, and one is me. My customer is sitting on the same side as me, and we have our backs to the windows that look out over downtown Detroit. It is Friday morning, and we have been here for forty-five minutes.

My customer is doing most of the speaking.

"We need you to configure the servers, the databases, and the software to grow with us. This solution needs to scale," he continues.

What makes concentration more difficult in this case is that I already know what my customer is going to say. I have given him this script during our prep sessions earlier in the week, and we have rehearsed the topics multiple times.

Preparation for this meeting is a small piece of my assignment with this customer. They are buying software, and I am here as a consultant to make sure they pick the right vendor. At least that's the cover I'm using.

To demonstrate the value of a consultant, I have to remember to toss out a professional smile, nod, and occasionally supplement a few of the words he's saying. After acknowledging my mind has wandered onto the mahogany wood topic, I make an internal pledge to take more notes. Maybe that will help keep my attention on the speaker.

"Our data and processing needs have grown exponentially over the last five years and we expect that to continue." Mike Schwartz continues to speak as I nod and type on my laptop.

Mike, my customer, is the CEO at BradComm. This location is home to their corporate headquarters, with the nineteenth floor being their executive level. They have employees on two more floors below us in this building.

BradComm is a public relations firm with a long list of prolific customers. Mike took over as the first non-Bradford-family CEO about five years ago because of his unique capability with data analysis, along with his PR campaign prowess.

Sitting in his navy blue three-thousand-dollar Armani suit, he definitely makes me and Dave Hawkins, the Diverse Data software salesman across the table, look underdressed. At least he isn't flashing one of his Rolex watches today, which would have only added to his over-the-top fashion display.

I'm comfortable in my far less expensive gray wool suit from Men's Warehouse or Dillard's, wherever it came from. I know it's one of those, however, as that's where I get most of my business clothes. I'm not a suit expert, but I'm sure Dave's charcoal version is near the same value as mine. He's the only one with a tie, which makes sense, as he's the only one trying to sell something here today.

Mike's suit matches his dark, short but thick, meticulously trimmed hair and tortoise-shell glasses. I don't know where those glasses came from, but I suspect they're worth more than my entire outfit. He's clearly the most fashion-conscious individual in the room, and I, for one, am ok with that.

"So far, we have seen the system can handle our current load. We would like some help with the integration into all the standard social media applications, of course," he says.

BradComm has long been a successful PR firm, but came to prominence during one of the many automotive recalls of the last decade. To be honest, I don't even remember which one it was. Before that success with automotive customers, BradComm had primarily focused on marketing and corporate branding.

It was their handling of that automotive recall debacle, however, that led them to more and more high-profile public relations opportunities. The fact that I don't even remember the specifics of the recall itself speaks to BradComm's capabilities to make the public forget bad things. I do remember, however, seeing Mike on the news, discussing their handling of that situation for months after it blew over. He used that success to become a media darling and an industry leader.

These days, BradComm's public relations efforts still involve traditional marketing and PR efforts, but also some successful campaigns they develop for their political customers. They could probably support the entire company on their political clients alone, especially during election season. Mike's recognition in political circles has gotten to the point that he walks the halls in DC like he belongs there.

"I want to make sure you guys can commit to all these requirements before we agree to any other terms. Plus, I want to make sure you are getting our input on any new features for the product."

I have to applaud Mike's effort in this software vendor selection process. Sure, it's the heart of their business, but he has shown a great deal of technical aptitude along with his business sense and industry knowledge. Rarely do I see customers, much less CEOs, with his breadth of business and technical skills.

I smile to myself as I look down at my still sparsely filled notepad. This meeting is going exactly as planned.

Chapter Two

This project with BradComm was an assignment from Rocky Mountain Equity, a venture capital firm in Denver. One of their partners, Paul Frazier, is an old friend. Well, he's a partner in the venture capital firm as his public job, anyway. In a less public capacity, Paul is the gatekeeper for a group of well-funded, patriotic citizens known to each other as The Association. It's this gatekeeper role that has caused him to ask me here.

Paul and The Association believe BradComm is in the middle of a large, and potentially international movement to manipulate United States elections. I don't ask how they know, but I am confident they're probably right. They always are. And The Association has, through Paul, asked me to use this assignment as cover to investigate their concerns. This isn't my first assignment from The Association.

To my friends and acquaintances, I'm a consultant. To Paul Frazier and The Association, I'm an associate. That's what we all call each other, and we do whatever is necessary to protect our country and our freedom. We're not a vigilante organization or a crime ring, we just try to help good things happen and make bad things stop.

For the public side of this assignment, Paul asked me to consult with Mike to steer BradComm in the right direction with a product acquisition. Rocky Mountain Equity holds partial ownership in BradComm, so it's easy cover for Paul to set up. On the surface, Rocky Mountain Equity simply wants to make sure BradComm invests in the right software to take the company to the next level.

Beyond the public assignment, The Association wants to know the driving force behind some of BradComm's election strategies. Are they farming out their services to manipulate the electoral process? And is it beyond the legal guidelines for this type of activity?

Mike continues, "As you know, the big need for us it to scale up our data ingestion exponentially. We simply have to remove all the manual labor involved with our campaigns."

Mike is referring to the volume of public relations campaigns his company deals with every year. BradComm, under Mike's guidance, has become a leader in the industry because of their track record of successful campaigns. The manual integration of social engineering into their PR strategies has kept them current, but automation with software like Diverse Data will keep them there — and may even get them ahead of the competition.

"We need to be sure you can not only take in our historical cases and provide real-time insight into the future, but we also need this software to scan the internet for any new, related stories. That's where we're going. Real-time decisions based on our historical data plus current trends. I want to plug in the scenario with parameters I select, then have this software determine how I should engineer the campaign. It's artificial intelligence, BradComm style."

Mike had told Dave all this before. In fact, the entire proof-of-concept project had been built on Mike's personal data, strategies, and algorithms. But repetition is not a concern in this meeting. Mike's

setting up for the negotiation and he wants to get everything on the table.

“Of course, Dave, I feel obligated to reiterate the need to keep all this confidential. Mike and BradComm believe the parameters he just referenced are integral to their competitive advantage in public relations and political campaign strategies,” I add.

I nod Dave’s way and wait for him to acknowledge. He does, as he has done many times before, and he nods Mike’s way as well. He is used to having blow-hard consultants like me putting in their two cents. I have to give Dave credit for playing the game.

His response has an appropriately urgent tone.

“Oh, absolutely, Keith. As you are aware, most of our references are completely confidential for that very reason. While we’ve had a good run with our software in recent years, the public rarely sees our more controversial or sensitive data that the software processes. We understand the need for confidentiality, and we build our software with that security in mind. Many of our customers have built their competitive advantage into the software by simply applying their data and rules.”

It’s a reasonable response from Dave. He knows what Mike does for BradComm. Yes, it is Mike’s knowledge of the industry and various data influences that have driven BradComm’s success. Mike has built a massive library of decision rules and related outcomes that desperately needs automation.

“Great. Thanks Dave. Let me run over the immediate outlook for the next two years and then we can get into the meat of our discussion.”

Ok, here we go. Mike’s going to outline his specific data requirements and performance expectations. As with the other topics, this one came from me.

The meat of the discussion Mike refers to is the actual price of the Diverse Data software and services. That’s where the rubber hits the road, and that’s where I will reengage. But for now, as I listen to Mike talk about terabytes, data and rules, my mind wanders to the city behind me.

Detroit remains the home of the American automotive machine. Today, however, it is also a painful reminder that winter can come

earlier around the Great Lakes in Michigan than it does in the mountains of Colorado, where I live. The temperature here is already below freezing in October, albeit a minor anomaly. I feel sorry for the poor kids who will be trick-or-treating next week in this area.

And with only that tiny thought, my mind launches away from the meeting I'm in.

Do kids still go door-to-door to trick-or-treat in bigger cities like this? Even if it's below freezing? I wonder if there's a minimum temperature they use to call the whole thing off? And how would they do that, with a TV announcement or something?

It's only a second, but my brief mental excursion causes me to once again acknowledge my need to avoid these lapses. I force myself back into the moment.

As I mentally refocus, I casually look around to reengage in the discussion. When I do, I realize my wandering mind may have put me in a jam. Mike is now looking at me as though he expects me to say something. Did he ask me a question? I can't let him know my mind was on trick-or-treating kids, so I turn to Dave to see if he's fielding the question. Maybe it was something more related to the Diverse Data product and he can bail me out. When I see the look on Dave's face, however, I realize that won't be an option. Dave is looking at me with that same expression of anticipation.

Ok, here I go. I suppose I need to drop some acronym-laced technical babble that will not answer any questions but will keep them from asking anything else for at least a few minutes. Before I can do that, I need to reconstruct the conversation of the last few minutes.

Were they still talking about product scale or had they moved the pricing while I wasn't listening? I'm trying to mix the pieces I remember into a coherent response that is broad enough to cover Mike's potential question that I didn't actually hear.

BradComm has been running the Diverse Data software for over six months now while they evaluate functionality during a proof-of-concept project. I have a general understanding of the project, but my personal involvement with the software itself is limited. I try to let the technicians handle the day-to-day details. Mike knows that, so I can assume he isn't asking me a technical question.

After a split second of internal analysis that seems like years in my brain, I start with one of my eloquent delay tactics.

“Well...” I say, as though I am being thoughtful versus covering up my lack of attentiveness. I really, really should have typed more notes while Mike was talking.

I am still dangling mid-thought when Mike’s smartphone buzzes. Luckily for me, he looks at the screen and abruptly indicates he needs to take the call with a quick motion of his hand. Saved by the buzz! That reminds me of an old television show, but I can’t go down that path right now.

Mike is trying to maintain a professional facade, but his terse responses and change in demeanor show this call is not pleasant. I can’t help but wonder what the call might be about. A CEO interrupting a meeting like this to take a call is odd. This must be something big. Given their client list, though, it could be a customer concern. What if that’s what it is? If so, I wonder who it’s about? Possibly a celebrity or a politician, although I suppose it could be a sports star.

Whatever it is, and whoever it’s about, it’s weird for Mike to take the call right in the middle of our meeting. It’s even more strange for him to be reacting with visible frustration like this, even as he tries to conceal his emotions.

Before I can get into another mental voyage, Mike gets up quickly, steps into his adjoining office, and closes the door. While interruptions like this may not be completely shocking for Mike’s field of business, I have to say this is uncharacteristic. He is typically one of the more calm and collected people I’ve seen. His years in the forefront of the BradComm business have equipped him to avoid the appearance of shock, even when absorbing society’s most shocking news.

Dave sits quietly with his mouth open and a blank look on his face as he watches Mike walk out. He’s even more surprised than I am. He looks at me questioningly as the door closes.

“What was that? Does this happen often, Keith? I’ve never seen Mike walk out like this,” he says.

I’m playing the consultant, so I have to have an answer.

“With their esteemed client list, you never know what challenge might arise. I’m sure it’s not insignificant if it’s taking him away from this important evaluation.”

I smile as I stick Dave with the notion this is still an evaluation, and not yet a final negotiation. Of course, that would have been more accurate but also would have left him thinking he could stop selling so aggressively to Mike.

He nods his acknowledgment, sighs, and settles back into his chair.

We barely have time to absorb the awkward silence when Mike briskly returns to the conference room. This time, he is not even trying to hide the urgency of his interruption as he stands next to us versus returning to his chair.

“I’m sorry, gentlemen,” Mike begins.

“I’m afraid something has come up and I need to head out immediately. Let’s catch up later,” he says.

Now I’m as surprised as Dave is. With that one statement, I realize my consulting engagement here at BradComm is not yet over. I also have to admit I’m ok with that, as I’ll get some more time to dig in further on the election concerns of The Association.

Chapter Three

Mike is still standing as he politely yet urgently motions toward the door, signifying an end to our meeting and his desire for us to leave. Dave and I look at each other and stand awkwardly and gather our things. We only had another thirty minutes left in our meeting, but the most important pricing discussion is still unresolved.

Trying to differentiate my position as a consultant from Dave's position as the vendor, I pause and I shake Mike's hand.

"Is everything ok?" I ask quietly, so Dave cannot hear.

"Sure, yeah," Mike says unconvincingly.

Dave steps over to us, now able to hear what we're saying.

"Keith, can I get a brief minute with you before you head out?" Mike asks as we shake hands.

Even if I get nothing more out of Mike, this will show Dave that I'm more closely aligned with BradComm. I'm hoping he's about to fill me in on the interruption.

“Sure,” I reply.

“Thanks. Hang out here for a second.” Mike turns to Dave and shakes his hand while motioning him to the conference room door.

I watch through the glass door as Mike escorts Dave to the BradComm reception area and hands him over to the receptionist to collect his security badge. The whole thing takes maybe thirty seconds before Mike is back in the conference room, still looking as distracted as before. As he walks up, he leans in uncomfortably close and lowers his voice.

“Hey Keith, I’m sorry about that. Just wanted to make sure we’re still on track?” he says, almost in a whisper.

I notice he offers no explanation for the interruption, so I decide to offer a generic query before I give up and move on.

“Well, yeah, I suppose we are. As long as everything is ok on your side?”

I pause briefly, seeing if I get any sort of response. All I get is a confirming nod, so I continue.

“Well, should I schedule another final negotiation session with Diverse Data next week?” I ask.

“Well, I’m on vacation next week. But the following should be good.”

I notice Mike seems to be in a hurry, and I cringe internally at the need to travel back out to Detroit when we were so close to the end here today. It’s a mild pain to travel out here, but it’s more frustrating to think of leaving my kids for another day while I attend a meeting that could have been avoided.

Plus, I’ve already determined The Association was correct in their concerns about BradComm. The company has definitely been involved in building campaign strategies for political candidates. If that’s what The Association was worried about, their worries were validated when the project team imported BradComm’s historic data into the Diverse Data system. There are numerous political campaigns in that historic data, going back several years.

It doesn’t seem to be a huge issue to me, as I’m sure most big PR firms do the same, but it’s what I was asked to investigate. More time on the project will allow me to do some more in-depth analysis.

After an emotional shrug of acceptance of the situation, I decide to move on.

“Ok, sure. I’ll set it up. I still think they’re the right choice.” It’s as much a closing statement as it is a vote of confidence in Diverse Data.

“Yeah, me too, Keith,” Mike says.

It’s obvious he has mentally concluded this conversation as he makes the statement. He even glances back toward his office without realizing it.

As he was with Dave, Mike is abnormally brief with me as he escorts me to the receptionist to return my badge and walks back to his office. It’s so quick, in fact, that Dave is still waiting at the elevator when I get out to the elevator lobby.

He speaks before I have a chance.

“That was strange,” Dave says.

“Yeah, Mike said he’s really sorry about that. He had an urgent personnel challenge,” I say, as though I know.

“He’d like to reconvene the week after next to continue the vendor evaluation, if you’re available?” Again, I’m not willing to let Dave know they’re selected yet.

“Not next week?” he asks, obviously as eager to close this sale as I am.

“No, sorry, Dave. Mike’s on vacation next week. Does the following week work?” I ask.

“Oh, absolutely. We’ve seen how well the system performs with Mike’s test data and we think we’re the right choice. Hopefully he sees that, too,” Dave says.

He looks at me for insight, so I decide to throw him a bone while I open the Uber app on my phone to get a ride back to the airport.

“The proof-of-concept is going well, yes. I think you guys have a real shot here,” I say, keeping it casual by not looking up from my phone. That encouraging feedback should keep Dave engaged.

I look up to see him smiling as he watches the elevator doors open.

“Ok, I’m glad to hear that. Let me know when Mike’s available and I’ll be here,” Dave says as he steps into the elevator.

We exchange pleasantries as we ride down the elevator to the ground floor.

When the elevator doors open, we come face to face with Dwayne Tolliver, the BradComm CIO. He is quietly chatting with another man I don't recognize. They stop talking awkwardly as they see us emerge from the elevator.

"Hey Dwayne. How's it going?" Dave greets him first.

"Gentlemen." Dwayne nods as he enters the elevator, while his guest says goodbye and heads toward the parking garage door on the right.

Dave is also heading to the parking garage while I'm on my way to the street exit to the left to catch my ride to the airport. We turn back toward each other and shake hands before we depart. Dave arrives at the parking garage door just as Dwayne's acquaintance passes through, so he holds the door for Dave.

"Enjoy the drive back to Livonia," I offer with a smile and a wave as Dave enters the doorway.

"Thanks, Keith. Have a safe flight back to Colorado," he says in return as he disappears into the parking garage.

And with that, I begin my trip back home.

As I step out of the building into the Detroit air, I continue to wonder what challenge has distracted Mike so much that he'd send us home mid-meeting. He's usually much more conscious of my travel and Dave's time. It also puzzles me how he didn't offer any insight at all when we were alone. That's unlike him, since he knows Rocky Mountain Equity is paying me to make BradComm successful with this software investment.

Something big must be going on at BradComm.

Chapter Four

The ride from the BradComm office to the Detroit airport takes about thirty minutes with normal traffic. The Uber driver for today, whose name I now know is Ted, is attempting a variety of tactics to get me to chat. Unfortunately for him, that's just not how I roll, no pun intended.

He gets a new opportunity, however, when a commotion interrupts the ride about halfway to the airport. A blast of sirens from police and emergency vehicles heading the opposite way claims our attention for a moment. It gives him a new topic to discuss.

"Wow, looks like something's happened back there," he offers to fill our conversational void.

"Yeah, sure does," I agree as I watch the traffic move aside to let the vehicles and their flashing lights pass. That's as much conversation as I have in me at the moment.

"I hope everyone is ok," he adds.

“Yeah, me too,” I reply as I focus on my phone.

Then he gives up. That’s the last time we speak until we are pulling into the shared ride drop off at the airport.

“Thank you sir, have a great day,” Ted the Uber driver says as he casually waves when I get out of his silver Honda Accord at the Detroit Metro Airport.

I notice the make and model of the car not because of my astute observational skills, but because I’m a long-time car guy. It came from my father, I suppose, but I’ve been that way as long as I can remember.

“Thank you. You have a great day, too,” I respond with my own casual tone as I grab my bags and head into the North Terminal of the airport.

After several years of travel, these airports begin to all look the same. Sure, they have their nuances with layout, theme, and age, but the basic characteristics are the same: ticket counter, security, central terminal area, and appendages off that central hub for a string of gates. The Detroit airport doesn’t have the most gates, but is a sprawling airport with trains to cover long distance gate connections. Still, the overall organization of the airport is the same as all the others. I rarely stop at the ticket counter anymore as I don’t often check bags, and this time is no different.

As I get to the security checkpoint, I find out the TSA PreCheck line is closed and I have to get in line with everyone else. The added time is a minor frustration, but nothing more. I’ll have plenty of time to get to my gate. The biggest annoyances for me, I must confess, are taking off my shoes and having to extract my laptop from my computer bag. As I think about it, I realize it’s probably not even enough of an annoyance to be taking the mental capacity I’m giving it at the moment. It adds maybe two minutes to my time in line and I don’t have anywhere special to go, anyway.

There are two terminals at this airport, each serving its own group of airlines. I’m headed to the North Terminal, where the United Airlines flights come and go. This terminal is the smaller of the two, but is still bigger than the entire airport in Colorado Springs where I will end my flight itinerary this evening. An added perk, this airport has been renovated in the last few years and feels relatively modern.

I gaze aimlessly around as I wait in the security line. As I stand there, my mind takes a stroll into its own thoughts.

Look at all these people staring at their phones. I wonder what they'd do if they all suddenly turned off? I expect that will be how our adversaries will begin their attack, if it ever happens. Of course, we already know they have access to our data, but that's even less valuable if they control our devices. How would they do that? If it's China, I suppose they could be more likely to install the chip set they need to control the devices, since they already manufacture many of the chips. Or maybe they would attack the towers and network infrastructure?

Then I check my own theories with an internal question. Why am I conjuring up such catastrophic thoughts here in the TSA line? Is there something wrong with me?

A familiar command, yelled from twenty feet away, shakes me from my thoughts.

"Shoes, jackets, and belts must come off! Large electronic devices, including laptops, and all liquids out of your bags and in a tray!" The TSA agent repeats the script over and over. I could quote it in my sleep.

"You're good to go." After walking through the security line and receiving the final acknowledgment from the TSA agent, I gather my x-rayed items and walk away from the security checkpoint.

Knowing I have over an hour before my flight begins boarding, I head to the Star Alliance lounge and look for a reasonably quiet space to sit and work.

And, by 'work' I really mean doing the administrative part of my job. This is the part I don't so much care for. For several years, I have considered hiring someone to do this stuff. But honestly, I'm not sure the handful of hours it takes would merit an administrative hire. It just isn't my favorite task.

I also have to make sure I keep Paul updated on the situation at BradComm and the incomplete deal with Diverse Data. Paul is aware of what I've found so far, but is always pushing me to keep digging. The more data I can get to The Association, the more they can do with it. I assume their end game is to go to the authorities with their concerns, so I understand their need for more data.

While still looking for the right place to spend an hour, I feel my phone vibrate in my jacket pocket. I look down to see a voicemail message has arrived from Mike Schwartz. I didn't feel the call come in, so he must have called while I was going through security. I wonder if he's calling to fill me in on what might have interrupted our meeting with Diverse Data, so I tap the button to listen. With my phone to my ear, I navigate around the other airport travelers.

"Hey Keith, I wanted to apologize about the abrupt end to our meeting today. Something totally unexpected and urgent came up."

His voice sounds strained, as though he's anxious or in a hurry.

"Also, I think I may have accidentally dropped a small storage device in your laptop bag. If you wouldn't mind taking a look and letting me know, I'd appreciate it. It's rather personal, so I would ask that you please keep it between us to avoid any embarrassment for me and my family. Given my visibility in the community, it would be especially embarrassing if it got to the authorities or media. I'll send you an address to send the device to me next week while I'm on vacation. Look for that in your inbox when you get home. Thanks Keith. Sorry again, and safe travels."

Well, this whole situation is getting stranger by the minute. I don't recall seeing anything dropped into my bag, but make a mental note to search it when I sit down.

While the missing storage device is odd by itself, the explanation of its contents has me even more curious. Who keeps a storage device with embarrassing family data on it? And what could it possibly be? Maybe it's photos? Perhaps it's financial documents? I would never betray Mike's trust by looking at it, but this whole thing is certainly odd.

I find a spot in one of the quiet areas of the lounge that has a power outlet and a table for food and drinks. It also has enough space to work on my laptop while I make calls and log my expenses.

Setting my bag in the chair, I head toward the bar to order myself an Old Fashioned with Maker's Mark. It's my favorite drink and one I've ordered here multiple times before. While I wait for the bartender to take orders from the people ahead of me, I stand with my hands in my pockets and my thoughts drifting.

It's only noon back in Colorado, so is this too early for a cocktail? Detroit is an international airport, after all, so the social rules must relax due to the variety of traveler time zones, right?

I casually look around and notice others have already broken the day-drinking ice ahead of me, and I step to the bartender and place my order.

After grabbing my drink and heading back to my seat, I unzip my computer bag and pull out my laptop. I also open the outer sleeve to get to my charger, as I'm sure both my phone and laptop could use a battery boost.

It's during this unpacking exercise that I find the device Mike was talking about.

Inside the outer sleeve of my computer bag, I find a small storage device that isn't mine. It's almost the same as a typical USB drive but with a small fingerprint pad on it. It has no distinct markings and has only a USB-C connection on the end.

Mike said it was a storage device, but it's not the typical USB thumb drive I'm used to. Once again, it causes me to consider how strange this whole situation has become. Not only did Mike say this could cause family embarrassment, but it's on a device protected with a fingerprint? Who does that?

He sounded stressed about it, so I decide to call him immediately and let him know I have it. Whatever 'embarrassment' he was fearing can now be avoided. I intentionally keep myself from going further down the path of pondering what that data might be.

I pull up my recent calls and tap Mike's number. The phone rings but Mike doesn't answer, and the call eventually goes to voicemail.

I leave a message.

"Hey Mike, I think I found that storage device in my laptop bag. I don't see your email with an address yet, so let me know where to send it and I'll get it out tomorrow." Mike usually responds quickly, so I expect to hear from him soon.

I put the storage device away where I found it and close the zipper. Then I plug in my laptop charger and dial Paul while sipping my cocktail. It takes a few short minutes to give him the updates on today's meeting. He acknowledges the peculiarity of the abrupt ending to today's meeting, but like me, he also assumes there must

be an explanation. We both agree it will probably come out over time if it's important.

After the conversation with Paul, I book my next trip to Detroit.

Thirty minutes later, I board my flight to Denver.

Chapter Five

The jolt of the plane landing wakes me up. With all the travel I've done, I've become an expert at sleeping on airplanes. Once my noise-canceling headphones are on, I'm out like a light. This isn't the first time I've awakened to wheels skidding on a runway.

"Welcome to Denver International Airport, where the local time is 4:45PM." The flight attendant is beginning her welcome announcement as I remove my headphones and shake myself to regain my senses.

Today's travel itinerary from Detroit includes a layover in Denver, then a short flight to Colorado Springs, and finally a forty-five-minute drive to our house in Woodland Park. I sigh at the knowledge that I'll be making this trip again in two weeks.

It's not that I dislike traveling to Detroit. It's not a difficult trip in the grand scheme of things. In fact, I have positive memories of previous trips when I have visited the assembly lines and museums that

showcase their pride in Detroit's automotive heritage. The area truly illustrates the best of American automotive history.

No, I don't have any disdain for Detroit or most other cities I visit. Still, I would sigh over any trip that causes me to be gone two out of three weeks. It's just challenging to keep these trips from disrupting my life with the kids back home. It's also less interesting for me when my assignment from The Association is all but finished. Only the facade of my consulting engagement remains.

As I mull my feelings about Detroit and travel overall, I switch my phone out of airplane mode to see what I may have missed during the flight. My first concern is the kids, but I also think of Mike's storage device that has somehow made its way into my bag. Surely, he has responded to my voicemail by now and hopefully has emailed with the forwarding address he mentioned.

I check for any new messages, but there's nothing from the kids and Mike has not yet replied. I consider this briefly, but decide he's probably been with a customer or otherwise occupied with whatever issue had come up during our meeting. It's weird he called me sounding so worried, though, and now isn't responding.

As I wait for the plane to taxi to the arrival gate, I make a mental note to call Mike again when I find a quiet place.

After getting off the plane, I have time to grab a quick fast-food dinner before the last leg to Colorado Springs. I usually try to stay away from fast-food. Well, at least that is what I tell the kids. Sometimes, however, time and convenience take precedent and I just have to go with something quick and greasy. In my mind, I justify the waffle fries with a grilled chicken sandwich, joking to myself that the protein cancels the carbohydrates on the healthy food scale. Of course, I know better.

I chuckle to myself as I realize that is one of the terrible dad jokes I frequently recycle. In fact, I could probably summarize my entire life with dad jokes! Each of them followed by obligatory eye rolls from the kids.

As the dad joke thought runs through my mind, I realize I'm smiling as I sit there by myself at the food court in the airport. I glance at my phone as though I've received a funny text message or something, as if that makes laughing alone any better. After a quick

scan of the other diners nearby, I realize nobody is watching, anyway. Nobody seems to care about the guy in the suit sitting in the food court with a grilled chicken sandwich laughing by himself.

Deciding to accomplish something productive while I await my next flight, I give Mike a call once again to let him know I have his device. The call immediately goes to voicemail. Maybe that explains why he hasn't answered. He must have turned off his phone. I end the call and put my phone back in my pocket without leaving another message. There's nothing new to say.

I finish the rest of my meal while checking stock prices, Facebook updates, news, and Twitter. During my scan of the news, a headline catches my eye. There's no story with it yet, but I'll be watching for this story when it's posted.

Explosion Rocks Downtown Detroit Parking Garage

That must be why we saw all the emergency vehicles in the Uber. I have an instant sense of appreciation for Mike's early termination of our meeting. Otherwise, I might be stuck in the middle of that mess. That may also explain why Mike is having trouble getting service if he's still downtown. Even a small explosion could cause a heavy amount of disruption in that part of the city.

Eventually, I'm finished eating and walking to my next gate.

The connection is on time, and within ninety minutes from arriving in Denver, I am back in the air.

Chapter Six

After landing in Colorado Springs, I send a quick text to Stacey, our babysitter for today. As I type, I find myself lost in another random thought.

The kids would not appreciate me referring to Stacey as a 'babysitter.' I need to change that reference before I say it out loud in their presence. Maybe I should refer to her as a 'childcare provider' or a 'house-sitter' or something like that.

Landed in Colo Springs, heading to get car then will be on my way. How are things there?

All good here. Be safe!

Kids doing ok?

Yep. Homework and violin done.

I type in my slow, methodical phone method and her replies arrive seconds later. I'm always amazed at how quickly Stacey responds to my text messages. I can't even talk that fast! She also takes the time to type words out, which I appreciate, rather than forcing me to remember all the shortened phrases the kids use these days. She probably tired of explaining them to me and decided it's easier to type the words out.

One of the good things about taking assignments from The Association is having the flexibility that comes with scheduling my own trips. And flying first class. The Association pays more than enough to cover it, but I'm at the point where much of the time I get upgraded for free due to my travel points. Free or not, I always take the upgrade option. It's not really a luxury thing, so much as a space thing. And a time thing. Being seated in the front of the plane means an early exit. Here, for example, I've barely finished my text exchange with Stacey when the plane parks at the gate and we're already getting ready to deplane.

Getting off the plane within a few minutes of landing, I exit the jet bridge into the airport terminal and notice a couple of plainclothes law enforcement-type individuals watching closely as everyone walks by. There is a male officer holding his phone up in front of a female officer, both scanning each passenger as they go through the terminal. They are in business dress clothes but have their badges on lanyards around their necks, so their presence is obvious. I think little about it until they step in front of me as I'm about to pass by.

"Mr. Morgan? Mr. Keith Morgan?" The female officer asks with a forced smile as I get close enough to hear them.

It's clear they don't want to make a scene, but they definitely have my attention.

"Yes, how can I help you?" I respond.

"Would you mind if we ask you a few questions? We have a private location just a couple of gates from here," she says while the other officer looks on.

"Can you tell me what this is about?" I ask, feeling totally blindsided by their request.

"We'll fill you in when we get to our office. We just have a few questions, that's all," the male officer chimes in.

“Ok. Well, since it doesn’t sound like I have a choice, I’d be glad to,” I say, unable to disguise my annoyance.

“Great, follow us,” he says with another fake smile.

They lead the way in the same direction I was headed, constantly looking back to make sure I’m behind them. I follow the two of them past two gates to a nondescript door on the left side of the terminal where they stop. I wouldn’t have noticed the door if they didn’t open it in front of me.

Inside a small room, maybe eight by ten feet, is an even smaller table, with four plain plastic and metal chairs around it. It’s clear this isn’t used for anything but temporary business, like questioning, because there’s literally nothing here. There is another door in the back of the room, which is where I suspect people go who do not complete the questioning in a satisfactory manner. I don’t plan to go through that door.

Once we’re seated, the male officer begins.

“I’m Special Agent Thomas and this is Special Agent McNamara. We’re with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives,” he says.

Ah, so the ATF. What could this possibly be about? I decide to listen for the answer rather than ask the question.

“Well, it looks like you already know who I am, so an introduction feels redundant,” I reply.

I realize I may be sound like a jerk, so I purpose to behave more politely going forward, unless they hold me here too long. I’ve already told Stacey I’m on my way.

“I’ll get right to it,” Special Agent Thomas begins.

“We understand you were at the BradComm office in Detroit this morning?” he asks.

So, that’s what this is about. This conversation must relate to the explosion I learned about earlier. And all the emergency vehicles we saw during the Uber ride to the airport. The annoyance leaves and a sense of concern replaces it.

“Yes, that’s true,” I reply.

“And you left at 9:50AM, according to the visitor log?” he asks while looking at his phone, presumably for the details.

“Yes.”

“And did you go straight from the BradComm office to the airport?” he asks, looking back up at me.

“Yes.”

“Can you prove that immediate departure? Maybe with a receipt or something?” he asks, as I begin to understand why I am in this room talking to ATF agents.

They must not know who set off that explosion, and they’re questioning anyone who was there. Although it seems really early in the investigation to be questioning guests from the offices in the building. There are dozens of other companies in the building where BradComm is, so I would think the employee interviews would take days. With the time it would take to get through those interviews, it seems they shouldn’t get to the office guests for some time yet.

“Yes. I used an Uber to get to the airport, so I have the receipt for that trip. I’m sure it has times on it,” I say.

“Great, would you mind showing it to me?” he asks.

“Sure,” I say as I bring up my email receipt of the ride.

It only takes a few seconds, and I hand my phone to Special Agent Thomas. While he’s writing something down on his notepad, Special Agent McNamara chimes in.

“When you left the building, did you leave directly from the elevator to the street, or did you go through the parking garage?” she asks.

“I went straight to the street. I didn’t enter the parking garage at all,” I answer.

Now I’m putting together the situation. There was an explosion in the parking garage, and the ATF doesn’t know who did it. I believe there are multiple buildings around who could have used that garage, so I’m once again impressed they’ve already isolated me. There must be hundreds of people to question who may have been there and they’ve already gotten to me.

Unless... A thought occurs to me and I can’t help but ask.

“Was someone at BradComm involved in the explosion?” I ask, sounding a little more aggressive than I intended.

“We’re not able to share details on that, as it’s an ongoing investigation,” Special Agent McNamara says.

It shouldn't surprise me, but the response annoys me since their questions basically implied it may have involved someone at BradComm. Before I can get another question in, Special Agent Thomas stops writing and closes his notepad.

"Ok, Mr. Morgan, you're free to go. Thank you for your time," he says as he waves toward the door I came in earlier.

"Wait, you never told me what this is about," I say while still seated.

"Like I said earlier, we just had a few questions. Routine investigation questions, that's all," Special Agent Thomas says, clearly not planning to share anything more, regardless of what he had said in the terminal earlier.

I wasn't in the little room for more than five minutes with the two ATF agents and now I'm done. They were right. It didn't take long. Realizing I'm not going to get any more details from these two, I stand up, grab my bags, and head back out into the terminal.

Seconds later, I'm dodging other travelers as I navigate to the exit. I barely notice another person as I head out of the airport to the parking lot. In fact, I only realize at the last minute that I've made the whole trek from that little bland office to the parking lot in complete autopilot mode. That brief visit with the ATF was a unique end to my trip, and it has put me on edge.

Based on their questions and behavior, I can't help but fear something happened to a BradComm employee. That's why they got to me already. There aren't hundreds of people to talk to at all. Even worse, I'm fearing for Mike's safety since I haven't heard from him since I left. And hopefully Dave got out before it all happened. He was leaving at the same time as me, so I suspect he had gotten as far away as me. Forcing any worse thoughts from my mind, I walk briskly across the airport long-term parking lot in the cooling mountain air.

I fetch my Toyota 4Runner from the parking lot and head out on the thirty-mile drive home. I have to cross town, then take the four-lane highway up the mountain pass out of Colorado Springs. The drive isn't bad when the roads are dry, but the winter months can make it more than a little exciting. Or worse. Today, the weather has

cooperated to enable an easy and traffic-free ascent from Colorado Springs to Woodland Park.

During clear weather, I often see sports cars flying up and down this pass as though it was a road course. Today is no exception. I first see it in my rear-view mirror, then within seconds I see the taillights of a black Porsche 911. I suppose some might find it irritating, but I smile as I watch it go by. Good for them, taking advantage of the curves and elevation changes on this pass. I'd probably be driving similarly if I was in my old Corvette, but it's sitting in storage. Instead, I watch the Porsche speed away as I lumber along in my off-road SUV.

As I transition from turn to turn up the pass, I eventually come to the section that jolts my emotions almost every time I pass it. No matter how preoccupied I am with other thoughts, this sharp right-hand curve next to the steep cliff before the turnoff to Cascade gets my attention.

This is the spot where my wife's car launched off the road and ended her life during that sudden snowstorm four years ago. The emptiness of her death hits me anew nearly every time I drive around this curve on the road. Tonight is no exception, as the memories of our life together consume me as I drive.

I remember everything being perfect. Then it wasn't. I try to remember the perfect part while I navigate the rest of the drive home. Most of the memories still cause me to smile.

One smile-worthy memory is when we met. It was during my sophomore year at Missouri State in Springfield, Missouri, that I met Beth. She was an out-of-town girl who had grown up outside of Denver, in a town even smaller than where I grew up in Missouri. I was at Missouri State with an ROTC scholarship in the engineering school. Beth was pursuing a degree in child and family development. We weren't necessarily a textbook match, no pun intended.

We had a psychology class together, which should have immediately doomed our relationship. I was much more into the world of technology and data than people, while Beth immersed herself in the study of humanity and human behavior. The class was a requirement for me, and I always felt it was a necessary evil and nothing more. Beth thought it was a blast.

Somehow, we were able to overcome our differing opinions of the psychology class. That doesn't mean we ever agreed on it, but I would forget any of our differences when I saw her smile. It wasn't just her green eyes and the slow smile that started cautiously but would eventually open to an all teeth and no eyes version. If the smile wasn't enough, the carefree way she would laugh and push her long, dark hair off her forehead absolutely melted me.

And lucky for me, she didn't require that I love psychology to go to the football game that Saturday in November. That was our first date. We dated off and on for three years, and as we neared graduation, we began making plans for our life beyond college. By the time graduation arrived, we were inseparable and had already made wedding plans for that summer.

After our wedding, I honored my commitment to the Army and spent four years in various locations across Europe and the Middle East. Beth stayed with me the first two years while we were in Germany, but the remaining two years of remote assignments did not allow families.

After my Army tour was over, I made the difficult decision to spend two more years leveraging my military skills with contract security work in the same geographies. The money from those two years was enough to give us a cushion that most couples work decades to attain.

During the last four years of my time abroad, Beth stayed with her parents in Denver. Our marriage not only survived, but in our case, absence did make 'the heart grow fonder.'

I shared little about what I did or what I saw during those four years apart and Beth didn't ask.

Chapter Seven

The drive up the pass to Woodland Park continues, as does my internal walk down memory lane.

Trying to put together a normal life after my military years, Beth and I both worked with placement agencies to find jobs in the same geographic location. While neither of us hated where we grew up, we had also been interested in starting off somewhere new.

Thanks to the boom of the Internet, mobile applications, and information technology, I quickly found a software development job in Colorado Springs. After reviewing our other options, I took the job and Beth soon found a therapist job that suited her perfectly. That was the beginning of our wonderful, painfully brief life together.

As I traverse the mixture of happy memories and painful emptiness, I have covered enough miles to pull into our small neighborhood. The memories of my life with Beth have once again

consumed my drive home. It happens more than I will probably admit.

After a half-mile of gravel that is our street, I turn onto our blacktop driveway. Most driveways in our neighborhood are gravel, but we splurged to have the blacktop installed shortly after we moved in. It seemed to make the drive to the house a little less dusty, having blacktop covering the last few feet to the house.

Our house sits just inside the city limits but has enough elevation and space to feel remote. The lot includes five acres of evergreens and other trees that keep visitors from seeing our house except for a direct pass in front of the driveway. There were gaps in that front tree line when we moved in, but I filled them in immediately. It was a pain to keep those trees alive those first few months, but I appreciate the privacy and dust barrier they provide.

There are no neighbors directly within eyesight during the summer. Now that it's October, however, enough leaves have fallen from the trees around the yard that we can see pieces of other houses. We can see small sections of the Sutter's and Miller's homes up the hill and the rooftops of all three homes below us. That makes up the six homes in our little gravel road neighborhood.

There are a few lights on, but no movement in any of the houses. In fact, the only movement I encounter is from three mule deer standing in the middle of our driveway as I pull in. They are in no hurry to get out of the way, but eventually they clear the blacktop so I can pull up to the house.

Ours is a traditional split-level home with cedar siding. It doesn't stand out among the neighbors, except for the landscaping that lines the house, the sidewalk, and the driveway. It was Beth's handiwork. She always complained that we didn't get enough rain here, but she still made the flowers thrive. And with the landscaping still in place, her influence still flows throughout the property.

I pause when I get into the garage, enjoying more reminiscing.

This was supposed to be our forever home in the mountains. We chose Woodland Park since it was close enough to our jobs in Colorado Springs, but has a little more of a small-town feel, and is more immersed in the mountains. This meant we had a longer

commute than we would have preferred, but to us, it was well worth it. This was the lifestyle we wanted.

Jamie was born two years after we moved into the house. If things weren't perfect then — which we thought they were — Kyle's birth two years later certainly rounded things out. It thrilled us to have our family started, and we began the ups and downs of parenthood and careers.

Beth's career took off faster than mine. Early in her pregnancy with Kyle, she accepted a position with a local non-profit organization counseling battered women. The intensity and responsibility were high, the salary was not. She still loved her job and was excellent at it. With all that responsibility and demand on her time, she still found time for her young family and for me. As I think about it now, I wish I had cherished those moments even more.

My career was a little more of a struggle in the beginning. Within two years of starting as a software developer, I realized that it wasn't my cup of tea. I could get along with the bits and bytes and enjoyed being involved with technology, but I didn't enjoy the isolated type of work that is a trademark of those who thrive in the programming arena. And I wasn't thrilled about having a boss and a schedule that someone else controlled.

It was about that time that Paul introduced me to The Association. He was aware of my military and technical skills from our time in Afghanistan, and he said he needed those skills to further the organization's efforts. I don't know who the other members are, at least not all of them, but I know they are well financed individuals who have been giving me well paid assignments for the last five years. And so far, the assignments have shown me they have the country's best interests in mind.

The assignments are not always easy, but they are necessary. Plus, I am always told I can decline if I need to. So far, however, I have never declined an assignment from The Association. There's always a reasonable cover based on my consulting expertise, and their support is immediate when I need it. Paul sees to all that. It's a great fit for me.

If I'm honest with myself, I never felt that I deserved Beth, nor the kids, nor The Association, nor the mountain home in Colorado. Each

of them was more than I ever dreamed, and I have always been determined to do the best I can for my family and my piece of heaven.

The kids were only four and six when she passed, but they remember their mother well. I tried to keep their lives as normal as possible, but those first few months were nowhere near normal. The kids had to spend lots of time with Beth's parents in Denver, my family in Missouri, and several friends here in Woodland Park.

I took no assignments for three months and drank way too much.

Now, I try to keep Kyle and Jamie's daily activities consistent with normal kids. At least as close to normal as I know 'normal' to be. Dealing with Beth's death definitely made us closer and created a strange sort of resilience. After dealing with that, we could probably handle anything.

But while the kids resumed a normal cadence within a few months, my own life, I have decided, stopped being normal on the day Beth died. My time in Afghanistan gave me experiences that will haunt me forever, and Beth was the one steadying force I had. Now it's just the kids and The Association.

I realize I'm sitting in the garage in the 4Runner doing nothing, and eventually I take a breath to clear my head, get out of the vehicle, open the door and head into the house.

Chapter Eight

By the time I open the door from the garage into the dining room, it's close to 10PM. Stacey let the kids stay up since it's Friday and my texts let her know I'd be arriving soon. Otherwise, she knows the rule of 9PM bedtime during school nights.

The craziness of ice time frequently overrides that rule during Jamie's hockey season, of course. I try to convince myself that is ok because of all the great things hockey brings to Jamie's life in place of sleep. I'm also sure that's a common justification for parents everywhere, with whatever late night kid's activity they choose.

Stacey Brown has been a godsend to me and the kids over the past few years. She lives down the hill from our house and can ride her bike or ATV here to help watch the kids while I'm away. No, they don't need much help, but they are not really old enough to stay by themselves. At least they're not old enough by my judgment. The

Brown family, like many others in the area, has been great to us in the years since Beth's death.

Stacey's little brother, Steve, plays hockey with Jamie. That means I have spent plenty of time chatting with their parents in various youth ice hockey venues across the region. They're good people. I am concerned what will happen to Stacey's interest in childcare when she gets her driver's license next year but we can cross that bridge when we come to it. For now, she's great for Jamie and Kyle and a huge help to me.

Jamie, now ten years old, is an avid hockey enthusiast. Since I'm a big hockey fan myself, this gives us an excuse to spend a fair amount of time together. Beth always envisioned a daughter who would take up dance as she did, but Jamie didn't quite conform to that vision. We tried the dance school path for several years when Jamie was young, but she never really showed a passion for dancing.

She can still remember her dance moves when she needs them, especially when goofing off with her friends, but hockey is her true love. She has been playing since she was five and has no intention of stopping soon. If nothing else, it keeps her physically active and leaves little time for mischief.

Jamie's brother Kyle, on the other hand, has no intention of subjecting himself to the physical exertion of ice hockey. He is an 8-year-old violin prodigy with a keen interest, perhaps better described as an obsession, in video games. That blend of hobbies and interests puts him in a rather diverse social mix at school.

The prodigy distinction may be a bit of an overstatement, although I am certainly not an expert in violin prodigies. Since the moniker was given to Kyle by his one thousand dollar per month personal instructor, however, I am skeptical of that title's sincerity. Although I can definitely agree he is above average, having sat through several recitals with him and his peers.

It also seems Kyle has a similar aptitude and skill for the latest video games. I used to limit the time he spends with those games, but I'm less dogmatic about it now. That may be, I surmise to myself, because I learned people actually make money playing these games nowadays. In fact, I sometimes find myself rooting for his online

video game rankings as much as I root for his violin recitals. As a responsible parent, I would never tell him that, of course!

I drop my bags on the table and have a look around. After so many trips like this one, I know what to expect.

Jamie and Kyle no longer run to the door to greet me when I get home, but they still take a moment to yell or wave to acknowledge my arrival. Winnie is the only one who runs over and greets me joyously. I smile and soak it up, even though Winnie is not a human but a sixty-pound Goldendoodle.

The dog's actual name is Winchester, a name I insisted on as a tribute to my love of shooting. Beth and the kids reluctantly accepted my name choice for the pup, but somehow morphed the name into Winnie. I don't acknowledge that nickname in their presence, as it totally loses the intended meaning. At least Winchester still runs to the door to greet my arrival.

Stacey is standing at the island in the kitchen and is already throwing her things into her backpack when I walk in.

"Hey Stacey, thank you so much for heading up today! How were things here?" I ask as I try to escape Winnie's welcome.

"Same ol' same ol' Mr. Morgan. Just violin lessons and homework," she answers.

I'm not one hundred percent sure I believe that's all that goes on here when I'm gone, as I've seen her playing hockey with Jamie in the garage and trying to beat Kyle at a variety of video games. But since I have no issue with either of those activities as long as the kids' other tasks eventually get done, I always let it go.

"Ok, good. I'll send money to your Venmo account like usual. Tell your parents I said hey." I have to talk quick to catch her before she heads out.

"Sure thing, Mr. Morgan. I'll let them know. Thanks!"

And with that brief conversation, Stacey is out the door, on her bike and headed home.

"Hey Kyle, did you rehearse your recital music?" I yell into his room.

"Yeah." It was the one-word response I expected and the one I got.

"Jamie, you ready for practice tomorrow?"

“Yeah.” Again, the expected one-word answer.

I smile at the responses, knowing they won't expect me to let that go. I head into each of their rooms to get the real details of what's going on and how their days went. They certainly don't tell me everything, but I'll get some level of interaction even if I have to pry it out of them.

After sharing as many stories of the day as they will divulge, the kids brush their teeth and I tuck them into bed. Before going to bed myself, I unpack from my brief trip and put my things away.

As I pull out my laptop and dig for my power cord, I come across that device of Mike's I had found earlier. It reminds me I left that voicemail earlier and haven't gotten a phone call or text message in response. Hopefully, whatever happened in downtown Detroit earlier has cleared.

I grab my phone to see if I may have missed an email or a message. That's entirely possible, as the kids often remind me. They claim I miss texts all the time. In this case, however, I haven't missed anything. There is nothing from Mike yet. The longer I go without hearing from him, the more concerned I get.

After pausing briefly to consider if I should call again, I decide not to. It's late, and he probably had an awful time getting out of downtown Detroit this evening due to the traffic disruption from the explosion.

I force myself to believe he was delayed versus the more disturbing track my brain keeps wanting to go down.

Chapter Nine

Saturday morning is a typical October weekend day for us. Jamie has to be at the ice rink in Colorado Springs at seven for hockey practice. Such are the trials of a pee-wee hockey parent these days, I suppose. At least the snow hadn't started yet, so the trip from home to the rink is not as treacherous as it can be later in the season.

I wake up at five thirty and Jamie and I are packing her gear into the 4Runner by six. As usual, Kyle was last to get up and is last into the car. His 'gear' requires far less preparation than Jamie's. Kyle's packing includes only his iPad, so he uses that lack of required preparation to get a few more precious minutes of sleep.

"Everyone got everything? Jamie, you have your sticks? Kyle, you have your... shoes on?" I ask as I start the car.

"Yep," replies Jamie quickly.

Kyle mumbles something I don't understand, but I can see he's fully clothed, so that's probably all I need to know.

As I'm getting ready to put the 4Runner into gear, I realize I have left my coffee inside.

"Oh great! I need another second, kids. I forgot my coffee," I mumble as I unbuckle my seatbelt.

I turn the car back off and run inside.

That mug full of dark coffee is the lifeblood of my morning routine, so I am not leaving home without it! As I'm stepping back out into the garage from the kitchen, I can see down the driveway to the street. Out of the corner of my eye, I notice a dark SUV pass the driveway behind the trees, going down the hill. I don't get a good look at it because of the dust swirl behind it, or else the car enthusiast in me would have automatically identified what it was.

As I climb back into the 4Runner, I ask the kids about the vehicle.

"Hey, did you guys see that car that drove by?"

"No, why?" Kyle mumbles and shakes his head.

"Nope," Jamie chimes in without looking up from her phone.

"Well, was wondering who was heading out this early."

"Probably the Millers." Again, Jamie responds without looking up.

I say nothing else about it and head down the driveway.

The vehicle passing the driveway didn't look like the new Mercedes the Millers just bought, and it was smaller than the classic 1976 full size Ford Bronco that Ed Sutter drives. Given those are the only two families who live up the road from us before the road ends, a foreign vehicle is somewhat of an anomaly.

However, I also know that a snow-free Saturday in October is still a great time to head out to fish, ride mountain bikes or just drive, so I don't think twice about it. Someone else could be the designated fishing driver today and could be picking up Ed or either of the Miller boys next door.

Ed frequently hits the mountain streams with his buddies on weekends, and the Miller boys are typical teenagers with an endless barrage of outdoor excursions. While an unrecognized vehicle on our gravel road may be infrequent, it is not unexplainable. My wandering mind could have a heyday with this, but I choose to cut it off as Jamie demands we play her "get fired up" play list from her smart phone. This will not be a quiet ride to the rink.

Pulling onto the highway to head down the pass, I notice I am just below a quarter tank of gas. Annoyingly, I remember I had been aware of this last night on the way home from the airport and had decided I would get out early before practice to have time to stop. But then, of course, here we are without the extra time I had planned to add to the schedule.

“Need to make a stop for gas, sorry,” I confess to the kids.

“We’ll have to hurry now, dad! Coach gives everyone crap when they’re late. It’s embarrassing,” Jamie says with an annoyed voice.

Jamie doesn’t enjoy being called out in front of the team. I get that.

“Yeah, I know. I’ll stop right here at the corner as quick as I can.”

There is a Loaf ’N Jug convenience store around the corner from our street where we frequently stop before heading down the pass toward practice. Yes, this has happened before.

Luckily, all the pumps are empty and I pull into the closest one.

“I’ll be quick,” I yell as I jump out into the cold, crisp morning air and touch my debit card to the gas pump.

As I’m waiting for the tank to fill, I look around the horizon and appreciate the mountain life. Those poor city dwellers don’t know what they’re missing by not experiencing this fresh Rocky Mountain air smell on a beautiful fall morning. Yes, it will get so cold it’s painful in a few short weeks, but for now it’s perfect. I take deep breaths and gaze around at the mountains in the distance, waiting for my tank to fill.

Then, as my eyes drift around aimlessly at the glory of my surroundings, I once again glimpse a dark SUV. This time, it is sitting around the corner on the far end of the convenience store lot with the rear end facing us. That means they backed into the spot. That’s not necessarily odd, as that seems to be the thing to do these days, even if it bugs me.

Why doesn’t anyone just pull in forward and then back out anymore? Is it faster to get in and out that way? Is it safer?

I decide to google it while I’m waiting for the tank to fill, and I’m surprised to learn the AAA does indeed recommend backing into parking spaces. After internally patting myself on the back for

learning something during today's gas station trip, I get back to pumping gas.

I peer into the convenience store windows and I don't see Ed or the Miller boys in there. But then I cannot really see the whole interior from where I'm standing at the gas pump. If Ed is in there, I should probably step inside and let him know I will be at his Halloween party next weekend. I was supposed to RSVP weeks ago, but that is one of Beth's habits I have never picked up. I admit I should do better at that.

Ed lives in the large log home at the end of our six-house neighborhood. He is twice divorced and now single, but he still uses every bit of his three thousand square feet of living space. I could probably spend hours in there just looking around, as he has filled the house with sports memorabilia and outdoor equipment of all kinds. It may seem excessive to some, but Ed doesn't care. And like his various collections, that attitude impresses me. As do his legendary parties.

I consider stepping into the store to see if Ed is inside with whoever is driving him in that black SUV. But then again, it may just be the Miller boys, and I have no reason to talk to them today. I also have to consider that Jamie's coach is not altogether sympathetic to tardy players. She has made that clear.

The pump shuts off, and I decide the RSVP can wait as I need to move along. I will talk to Ed about his party later. Or I will simply skip it. I snicker to myself as I consider how Beth would have given me an earful for even thinking that way.

The drive down the Ute Pass between Woodland Park and Colorado Springs is an exercise in blood pressure control at the speed limit. When you are late like we are, it gets really interesting. I hear my share of grunts and groans from the back seat as I navigate down the pass, but eventually we arrive at the rink with no mishaps. While the dark drive up the pass last night was slower and more nostalgic, this one was brute force. We had to get to the rink on time while blasting Jamie's music.

I park temporarily in front of the door to unload Jamie and her gear, trying to save a few minutes.

"Good luck, Jamie! Skate hard!"

I really should come up with a more creative motivational speech as she gets out, but that's what I have at the moment.

"Thanks, dad."

She does not sound motivated.

Jamie heads inside and makes it just in time to get dressed and on the ice before the first whistle. After parking in a legal spot, Kyle and I head inside to watch. Kyle takes his iPad and plops next to me on the bleachers as we sit in for another hour of ten-year-old hockey drills.

Watching my kids has become one way my mind can totally relax. I become immersed in how Jamie navigates the skating, passing and shooting drills with her teammates. The same thing happens when I watch Kyle at his recitals and gaming events.

These are my peaceful times.

Chapter Ten

Kyle and I are sitting in the bleachers quietly, minding our own business, when Dawn Kramer makes her grand entrance to this morning's practice. When I say entrance, it's not really an entrance to the building or anything, but this woman makes a statement every time she shows up anywhere. Today, she has stepped onto the bleachers at the far-right end, opposite from me and Kyle, and has started her noisy 'look at me' parade toward our end.

All I can do is stare forward and hope she stops before she gets to us. But no, she doesn't stop. She does clank so loudly the players on the ice are turning to see what's going on. I don't know what kind of shoes she's wearing, but they are interacting with the aluminum bleachers so loudly you can't help but look. Her son is on the team, and my quiet nature seems to make me a target when she sits in on his practice or games.

Dawn makes her red carpet strut all the way down the bleachers, clanking her shoes, waving, and calling out to the other parents as she goes. She's in rare form this morning. It's way too early for most of us to be dressed up like that, but she has outdone herself. Her tight black pants and pink puffy ski jacket don't quite match her over-the-top jewelry and designer bag, but it's her hair and makeup that really separate her from the other parents. She must have gotten up well before sunrise to put herself together like that.

I'm not sure how much plastic surgery that woman has had, but it's impossible to tell if she's forty, fifty or sixty. Although I'm guessing she's much younger than that. And what has she done to her lips? It looks like she is trying to mimic a duck's bill with whatever she's getting injected into them. Her lips aren't the only things artificially enlarged on Dawn's body, and she's proud to show everyone all the work she's had done. Including her huge hair, of course.

Realizing her divorce two years ago has put her through some rough emotional times, I have given her the benefit of a doubt for virtually everything she does. She is financially set for life, but it came with some painful experiences. The rumor is her lawyer ex-husband had stepped out on her for years. Plus, it all played out in the public eye, as he's a well-known public figure in Colorado Springs. Yeah, Dawn has earned the right to look and feel however she wants.

Still, I should have prepared by sitting on the edge of the bleachers, but I wasn't on my A-game today. I let Kyle sit on the edge and I'm left with my right side completely open and exposed. And Dawn has zoned in on that mistake.

After her slow, loud, grandiose walk down the bleachers that seems to take twenty minutes, she wipes the bench with a napkin before carefully descending into the spot next to me. The smell of her perfume is overwhelming, but I'm able to push back the tears as I offer a friendly but intentionally subdued smile.

"Hey, Keith. How have you been, buddy?" she starts.

To this day, I am not sure why she calls me her buddy. I'm the only parent on the team with that designation, for some reason.

"Great, Dawn. How are things with you?"

Dawn often tries to strike up conversations with me at practice and games, but I've become adept at avoiding her most of the time. I usually prefer to watch what's happening on the ice rather than chat. Today, however, I spend the rest of practice in small talk with Dawn Kramer.

About halfway through practice while the kids are skating their circle drill, I notice a new spectator watching at the other end of the bleachers. He stands there by the boards rather than taking a seat, but doesn't talk to any of the other parents. As I observe the newcomer from the other end of the bleachers, it also strikes me that his black leather bomber jacket and Italian loafers don't fit with the typical hockey parent attire.

"Who's the new guy?" I ask Dawn. If anyone knows a new parent, or uncle, or whatever he is, Dawn will know.

She glances his direction when I ask. After a second she shakes her head with the substantial hair and replies.

"No idea. I don't think we have any new kids, so he must just be watching. Maybe his kid's on the ice next or something," she says.

She's probably right. That happens all the time. With ice time at a premium out here, parents are always coming and going, so a new face pops up along the boards all the time.

After just a few minutes, he's gone. If his kid is on the ice next, he probably went back in to help them get ready.

It seems to take longer with Dawn beside me, but eventually practice is over and we are loading back into the 4Runner to head home. I won't have much time to relax before Kyle has to be at violin lessons, so I'll have to tolerate the mess of a drive-through breakfast on the way. I suppose I won't be vying for the father of the year award with a fast-food meal after hockey practice, but the kids will be happy.

Back at the house, we go through the after hockey practice ritual of odor and fungus prevention. I am happy that is a routine, as I'm confident this equipment would not survive without it.

I wonder what would grow in this stuff if we didn't air it out? My God, I never thought a ten-year-old girl could sweat this much!

Jamie and I take her equipment out of her bag and assemble it in the garage on the designated drying rack to make sure it gets no

chance to sour too badly. It doesn't work perfectly, but it's definitely better than leaving it all in the bag to ripen on its own. The cool, dry fall air helps.

Kyle has already gone inside, but the garage door is still open while we unload the equipment. I'm grabbing the last hockey stick when I see the dark SUV driving down the hill again, moving at an abnormally brisk pace. This time I get a clearer picture than before. The dark SUV is a relatively new black Ford Explorer. Those things are incredibly popular in Colorado these days, especially the blacked-out versions like this one. The tricky part about those is some of them are police vehicles. Police or not, they all blend into the Colorado traffic as though they're meant to be there. This one has a bike rack mounted on the roof, but no bikes. I can't see the rack details as it goes by, but its presence makes me suspect this one is not a police vehicle.

The sight of the SUV moving at that pace means it must have come from the top of the hill. That makes me even more confident someone was probably taking Ed out fishing this morning and must have just dropped him off. As I stop and concentrate, it seems I may remember him telling me about it during one of our casual conversations earlier in the week.

Did he mention a fishing trip when he stopped while I was getting the mail earlier this week? I think maybe he did? That would explain the presence of an unusual vehicle. But maybe he didn't mention it? I'm not really sure. Sometimes the things I remember and the things I forget make no sense.

I close the tailgate and tell the kids to stay put while I walk up the hill to talk to Ed. I may not have officially RSVP'd to the party, but I will tell him in person. He definitely knows me well enough to accept that.

Ed's driveway is directly at the end of the gravel road that passes in front of our house. It's literally at the end. If you keep driving — or, in my case, walking — you go right up his driveway. His driveway is all blacktop like ours, but is much wider and longer. As I'm walking, I wonder if it was a good idea to leave Jamie and Kyle in the house alone for even this short time, but quickly dismiss it. I will be back in five minutes and the kids are more mature than most.

I'm still in the driveway when my mind begins asking itself some questions about the kids. Am I justifying my behavior or are they indeed more mature? Surely, they are. They've been through a lot in their short years. Both of them could probably take care of some adults I've met.

I keep rattling through that thought until I arrive at Ed's door. I ring the doorbell and wait. There is no answer. I ring again. Again, there is no answer. I walk around to the back of the house to see if Ed is outside when I hear the booming sounds of his Bronco coming up the street and into the driveway. So, it seems Ed was not in the black Ford Explorer I have now seen three times since yesterday.

Ed sees me walking down the driveway and stops short of his garage.

"Hey Keith. What's up?" he yells as he leans out the driver's side window.

"Not much Ed. You doing some fishing today?"

"Yep, nothing to write home about, but you know how it goes. A bad day of fishing beats a good day of working."

If I've heard it once, I've heard it a thousand times. It's one of Ed's favorite expressions.

"You got that right! Hey, I thought I'd stop by to give a verbal RSVP for the party. I apologize for my lack of etiquette by not emailing or sending a written response, but you know it won't be the last time I fail at an etiquette test."

I smile as I stroll to the truck.

"Ha, no worries, Keith. We'd come drag you over if you didn't show! Or maybe we'd egg your house. We'd think of something."

Ed laughs, but I also know he's sincere. Well, he's sincere about my RSVP, anyway. I hope he's not sincere about the eggs. He knows me well enough to expect this type of RSVP behavior. Ed has been a good friend since my arrival in Woodland Park. I exchange a few more pleasantries with him and reiterate my apologies once again before heading back to the house.

Back at home, the kids are ingrained in their own daily activities when I walk in. Jamie is in the room on her phone or iPad or some other mechanism to engage her social media realm. Kyle has

already immersed himself in his video game and neither of the kids acknowledges my presence.

I check out the window a few times to see if the black Ford Explorer returns, but I don't see it.

Maybe my mind is in overdrive on this one, and I need to relax. But what if that's not true? I have heard of people's homes being robbed while they are out during the day, so I wonder if these people are tracking my activities to know when I will not be home? Perhaps someone on our street is having trouble with the law and the Explorer is actually a police vehicle? Who would that possibly be?

My mind is still involved in this internal neighborhood gossip when Jamie yells from her room.

"Where is my portable charger?"

This is a conversation we seem to have multiple times per day. I tell Jamie she can plug the phone into the wall when she is home, but she insists that requires her to sit way too close to the wall in her room. So instead, when her battery gets low or dies, she uses her portable charger.

The thought of a portable charger has me digging into my memory as it always does.

When did I last see it? I remember seeing it recently, but where was it?

As I scan the kitchen counter to help Jamie find her precious portable charger, she yells back.

"Never mind, I will use my iPad!"

Well finally! I think to myself. I have been trying to get her to realize the iPad has the same apps she uses on her phone and maybe she is finally getting it! Either way, my mental checklist considers this a completed task.

The entire episode reminds me, though, of the storage device of Mike's I still have in my laptop bag. I check my email again, hoping he has sent the mailing address he promised.

Again, no email. No message. Nothing.

So, I call his number again. And again, the call goes straight to voicemail. I end the call with no message like the last time.

I pull up the news story on the Detroit explosion to see if it helps explain any difficulty Mike might be having with his phone service.

The story only indicates an explosion in a parking garage and an ongoing investigation. It doesn't mention service impacts of any kind.

There are also no names of injuries, or of anything worse.

I send Mike a text message, knowing he's usually good at responding to them. Plus, I can check back later to see if he read it.

I'm starting to get a sick feeling in my gut about this Mike Schwartz situation.

Chapter Eleven

Our schedule today is a little odd because of the morning hockey practice and late breakfast, but we have learned to live that way. That does mean, though, that it's a light lunch for the crew today. I find a simple chicken stir-fry dish in the refrigerator. It only takes thirty minutes for it to be heated and devoured. Now it's time to head out to Kyle's violin lesson.

Mr. Petrosian is Kyle's violin instructor and is supposedly a renowned violinist on his own. Oddly enough, he has a little studio right here in Woodland Park. How lucky for me, since I now pay the man one thousand dollars per month to tutor Kyle in the finer arts of violin. I can't help but be cynical about it but I keep that opinion to myself.

I have always thought the amount of money I pay for Kyle's violin lessons is absurd, even if the lessons come from someone with the reputation of Mr. Petrosian. On the other hand, he seems convinced

Kyle is going to be a concert violinist the way he talks to — and about — him. I don't know if he talks about other students like this or not, but it sure keeps Kyle engaged. Plus, it keeps me paying, and keeps me from having to drive to Colorado Springs or Denver to find another studio that would have good violin lessons for Kyle. I also use the lack of a long drive as more justification for the expense.

If Kyle ever becomes rich and famous because of his violin playing, I will remind him of these expensive lessons that I sent him to when he was young! Well, no, I suppose I would never do that. Plus, it's not necessarily more money than a lot of travel sports other kids are involved in, anyway.

"Hey guys!" Mr. Petrosian exclaims as we walk in.

He heads over to shake my hand but delivers his greeting comments to Kyle.

"And there's the young prodigy, Mr. Kyle Morgan," he bellows to Kyle, smiling. Kyle is eating this up as he heads into one of the music rooms to warm up.

And with that, we are into the second round of kids' activities for this Saturday.

Jamie and I spend the hour in the lobby area next to the individual classrooms. The lobby at Mr. Petrosian's studio includes four chairs and a table with a coffeepot. The television on the wall above the coffee pot is showing the PGA tournament in Las Vegas with no sound. There is a desk where a receptionist might sit, but there is no receptionist. It is just me and Jamie in the studio lobby today.

The studio only has two classrooms, a lobby, and a restroom that I can see. I know there is more space in the building behind what is visible, though. Maybe Mr. Petrosian lives there. It wouldn't surprise me.

Jamie and I can hear the lesson the whole time, but we are glued to our phones and not really paying attention to the music. While I have no clue what Jamie is doing, I am digging through the news about the explosion yesterday in Detroit. I'm so engrossed in trying to find any new updates, I'm barely aware of Kyle's violin lessons in the next room. I feel bad for being that way, but it's true.

I also take a moment to text Mike again. He hasn't responded to my last message, nor does the message status show he read it. I hardly have time to consider what might be going on with Mike again when I hear Kyle practicing his recital piece. This means this week's session is about over.

Within a few more minutes, violin lessons end and Kyle packs up. As he does every week, Mr. Petrosian stops by as we're getting ready to leave.

"Remember to keep Kyle practicing!" he begins.

"He's doing so well. We need to keep him going. He's also got a key part in the Christmas recital he's been working on. It's not all that difficult for Kyle, but it will be crucial to the program. He still needs to keep running through it, though, right up to the recital."

"Got it, Mr. Petrosian," I obediently reply.

He has a way of making me feel like I'm the student.

"And don't forget to mark your own calendars for that Christmas recital, too! It's going to be amazing!" he adds triumphantly.

"We'll be there."

I nod as I step out the door. It's the same nod I have given every other time he mentions it.

After lessons and throughout Saturday evening, I try three more times to get in touch with Mike. Not only does he not reply, but the text messages are still not showing that they're read. The message status shows my texts were delivered, but it never changes beyond that.

Mike may be busy, but I know from our previous exchanges that he typically reads them relatively quickly, even if he doesn't respond for some time. Of course, he may have turned that notification off, so once again, I convince myself not to get too excited.

After Kyle's lesson, we arrive home, where I decide it's time for a run. I let the kids know I'm heading out and receive minimal response. They're used to it, as this running thing has remained a habit since my Army days. I try to get in at least twenty miles a week to keep from fading too badly. I won't say I enjoy it, but I have learned over the years to tolerate it well enough. Plus, it gives me time to think.

Grabbing Winnie's leash and heading out into the afternoon sun, I once again feel an appreciation for my life here with the kids in the mountains. There is still sadness and loss, but I have so many great things to live for here. And with that thought and some positive vibes, Winnie and my six-mile trek is underway.

After an uneventful run and a shower, it's nearing dinner time for our crew. I'm not all that interested in cooking two meals today, so I yell through the house.

"Hey kids, where should we go for dinner?"

I'm not sure why I do this, as the answers don't change. Kyle will want barbecue. Jamie will want Mexican food.

Sure enough, Jamie is first to respond.

"La Casita!"

That's the Mexican restaurant in town.

"JJ's Smokehouse!" yells Kyle on cue.

"Ok, Grandmother's Kitchen it is!"

I yell with my usual answer. If they can't agree, we go to my favorite diner in town. More often than not, it forces the kids to collaborate on one of their options.

"Ok, La Casita."

Kyle concedes this time. They take turns giving in, as neither wants dad to get his way. Kyle's concession puts us on the path to La Casita and we're on the way there in ten minutes.

We have a delightful meal of burritos and enchiladas, and get home for a little downtime before bed. Pulling out my phone, I decide to once again check for the address Mike promised would come for the storage device.

There is no email yet.

Once again, I also look at my text messages to Mike and find none have been read. I decide I will try to contact him again tomorrow and head off to our nightly bedtime ritual.

Maybe Mike is out of mobile range for the weekend somewhere. Maybe he left for vacation already. He may even have lost or broken his phone. That type of thing has certainly happened before at the Morgan house.

One last quick scan of the news reveals a new detail about the explosion in Detroit. The latest amendment to the story notes the

explosion was a 'car bomb in an underground parking facility off Broadway,' which is exactly where the BradComm facility is. Of course, there are several other underground parking facilities in that area, so I'm still not one hundred percent sure it was the one BradComm uses. Although the linked video sure looks like the same one and the questions from the ATF agents are still ringing in my head.

Having convinced myself Dave was ok because of our departure timing, my mind now gets the best of me and I text Dave to make sure he's ok. It would be good to hear from him directly since he parked in the BradComm facility that same morning.

Hey Dave. You catching the news from Detroit?

Yeah, that's crazy! Looks like same area where BradComm is.

That's what I thought. Glad you're safe! Catch you later.

You too. Thanks

Dave's responses give me a sigh of relief. Hopefully, that means Mike is ok, too. Of course, Mike wasn't leaving when we were there, so he could have come down to the parking garage later. Again, I won't allow my mind to go down that negative path. Surely Mike isn't responding for a logical reason.

Jamie and Kyle know the Saturday night routine and head to bed with no fanfare. Teeth are brushed, games and phones are put away and charging, and they're in bed by 10:30PM. Given it's Saturday night, bedtime is a little flexible.

I tuck them in and head into my room to do some more research on the explosion in Detroit, catch up on my documentaries, and decompress. After thirty minutes searching various news and social media outlets, I find no new information on the explosion and I give up. Next, it's decompress time. I'm a sucker for the barrage of documentaries I can stream online and it's easy for me to get absorbed quickly.

In another hour, though, I'm also asleep.

Chapter Twelve

Sunday begins with a relatively event-free schedule compared to Saturday. There is no early morning hockey practice and no violin lesson today.

I wake up to our precious Winnie whining to go outside. Even as I do, I realize I'm using the word 'precious' in my mind facetiously. And no, it's not the first time. Before I even open my eyes, I know it is somewhere between five forty-five and six AM. That is just how Winnie works. Every day. Every single day. If I'm not up earlier, I might be able to 'sleep in' to six.

The nagging Mike Schwartz storage device comes to my mind as I pick up my phone from the nightstand. Before getting out of bed, I check the text messages from yesterday and see there is still no response. No email with an address either.

There is a small breakthrough this morning, however. I take some solace because Mike has read the messages. I speculate he must

have gotten into a service area long enough to get messages sometime in the night. That's something, I suppose, but I'd still prefer to hear from him to know he's ok. I make a mental note to watch my phone closely this morning.

I also know he was heading out on vacation, so perhaps he'd been on a long flight without phone service. I realize I'm probably trying too hard to spin a positive story with the parking garage explosion still in the back of my mind, so I stop over-analyzing and get out of bed.

When there's no event scheduled, my morning tradition after Winnie's wake-up call usually starts by getting up and heading in one of two directions. Every other day we go on a run, with the alternate days being my weightlifting days. Since I ran yesterday after violin lessons, today I'll be opting for some weightlifting and we head to the basement.

Winnie lays in the corner chewing on his bone while I go through a reasonably intense chest and triceps routine while blasting some classic rock on my bluetooth speaker. I may not be as strong as I was in my twenties, but I take pride in the fact that I'm close. Plus, it makes me feel good and gets the blood flowing.

Even more important, and always in the back of my mind, is the potential need to use my strength and fitness for some of the more aggressive assignments with The Association. There have been a few assignments where I've needed to be fit and ready for physical exertion of one kind or another. That possibility helps me push out a few more repetitions every time I'm down here.

After my workout and shower, and given the cool but sunny weather outside, I decide to gather our crew and head out on a quick fly-fishing excursion to help clear my mind. It will allow us to spend some time together away from all our daily tasks.

If I think about it long enough, I realize that's probably just an excuse to get out there. The truth is, I simply love to do it. The streams and rivers in this area of the Rockies provide ample opportunity to challenge my fly-fishing skills and enjoy the outdoors. It's even better that I can spend time with my kids with the same activity.

The kids are still half asleep and eating breakfast when I bring it up.

“Who’s in for a brook trout trip today?”

I ask, knowing I am not likely to get an argument.

“I’m in,” Kyle says without looking up.

“Sure,” Jamie responds between spoonfuls of cereal.

And with those two less than enthusiastic responses, we have set the schedule for the next few hours of our Sunday.

After breakfast, we pack up our gear and some snacks and head into the garage. It will be light fly rods and small flies for this trip. I call these ‘hiking and hiding’ trips. They typically require hours of walking slowly along the stream looking for little riffles and pools, while trying to get our flies to the fish before the fish see us and zoom away. Plus, the low, clear water and bare trees of October make the fishing even more difficult. This style of fish stalking, however, requires the dedicated focus I love.

The fishing trip packing is easy for us since most of our gear stays in the 4Runner. It only takes us a few minutes to load up the snacks and the small stream gear, then pile into our seats.

“Where are we heading, dad?” Kyle asks while still staring at his iPad in the backseat.

“I’m thinking Willow Creek?” I respond with a question, truly asking for his thoughts.

“That’s a good one. There’s no snow yet, so it’s an easy walk.”

Having been there several times, Kyle is aware the location of this creek requires some walking, and snow makes it a tough excursion in the winter. The snow will be a problem soon, but it’s not here yet. Jamie listens in and nods, but doesn’t look up from her phone.

I’m smiling to myself about the prospect of a great fishing day with the kids as we pull out of the garage.

Chapter Thirteen

The trip to Willow Creek takes us west out of Woodland Park, further into the mountains. I have fished at this location a few times a year since I found out about it. Even though they call this place Willow Creek, I'm not really sure that's the name of the stream. In fact, I have no idea what the official name of the stream is. It doesn't matter, as we now know it by Willow Creek, and we know it's full of brook trout and has a reasonable population of brown trout — if we can find them.

In the months and years after we moved to the area, some of the local residents were kind enough to take me along to some of their favorite spots away from the tourists. Of course, there are not as many tourists here in October anyway, but I still consider some of these more remote places to be my favorites. Ed Sutter, our neighbor up the hill, is the person who showed me this one.

Navigating to Willow Creek requires about thirty miles of two-lane highway driving to the tiny town of Lake George. Then there are about three miles of blacktop to a campground turnoff where a branch of the South Platte River flows along the gravel road for several miles.

As we pass the campground by the river, we see a couple of campers with Jeeps parked next to their tents. It's a little cool for camping here in October, but diehards will still brave the weather for another few weeks. This small group is camping along the gravel road and is probably preparing to head out onto the trails in their Jeeps. They are far enough off the main road to have some privacy, and without leaves on the trees, it's easy to see they have the whole place to themselves.

Kyle notices the Jeeps, as he always does. Along with video games and the violin, he has also become quite fond of off-road vehicles.

These particular Jeeps are lifted Wranglers with large tires and mud splattered all over them. They've apparently been enjoying some of the many off-road trails in this area. We've tried some trails ourselves, and they're a blast. I smile at the thought of working our way up the simpler trails in our 4Runner when we moved here. Beth hated it. With that thought, my smile fades and the happiness gives way to that ever-lurking sense of loss.

"Whoa, dad, look at those! Are those thirty sevens?" Thankfully, Kyle interrupts my thoughts.

I honestly can't tell what size the tires on the Jeeps are, but I admire his interest.

"Not sure, bud. They're sweet though," I respond as we continue down the gravel road, and we leave humanity behind.

Sometimes we fish here on the river near the campground, but the South Platte River can get crowded during the summer months. Today there is nobody fishing here but we move on along the gravel road, anyway. Our destination is Willow Creek.

After another two miles, we turn away from the river and the gravel road, and drive for roughly a quarter mile uphill, before one last descent down a four-wheel-drive-only trail. This is where the trail typically clears out all the visitors focused on camping, fishing, and

casual driving. The descent brings us to a barely visible pull off at the top of a long valley.

At the bottom of this valley is a small stream that varies in size from two feet wide to ten, maybe twelve feet at the widest point. I doubt the deepest pool is deeper than three or four feet. This is Willow Creek.

People from the rest of the country would probably never consider stopping at a small stream like this to go fishing. I suppose I wouldn't have tried it before moving to Colorado, either. I have learned, however, that this little stream houses a large population of wild trout.

We'll probably not catch anything over twelve inches long, but large fish are not the priority for today. It's more about getting outdoors with the kids, putting my brain into intense focus, escaping the concern about the Detroit explosion and that storage device, and just getting away from the daily grind. As we park the car and look around, it's clear I have found the right spot for that type of outing.

If nothing else, getting this far into the mountains forces us to some level of mental separation. There is no mobile phone service down at the stream, and even here in the parking area, the signal is spotty. Plus, we rarely encounter other humans. Those two facts change the feel of the place.

Jamie and Kyle are not as fond of fly-fishing as I am, but they have both gotten reasonably adept at it, even at their young ages. Kyle especially has taken to these smaller, more difficult streams. Given his affinity for video gaming and mobile phones, I am a little surprised — and proud — of his interest in getting outdoors. While his sister is often quick to pack up her rod and find a spot to sit with her iPad, Kyle will work the stream with me for hours.

We unpack our rods and reels and assemble everything for the trek down the hill.

"You guys got everything. We can tie on the flies up here so we can start stalking as soon as we get there." I make the suggestion, knowing they both like to get to fishing as soon as they get to the stream.

"Sure."

"Yep."

They're already pulling fly line through their rod guides before I even say anything.

Within ten minutes, we've got our gear set up and are walking down the trail. The trail is dusty and steep, but not too bad in hiking boots. Given the small stream, we won't be standing in the water and don't have to wear waders. Boots are all we need here.

The parking area sits out on a sort of point between two ravines on either side. Rain and snow have created these ravines with years and years of runoff into the valley. There are several enormous boulders and fallen trees sprinkled along the valley wall to break up the terrain, so the path is certainly not a straight line.

In another fifteen minutes, we are all stalking trout in the small, clear stream. From here we can't see our car, or the road, or a house, or any man-made structure at all. It's just the mountains, the stream, the fish, and us.

On this day, we cover a quarter mile of the stream, inching along as stealthily as we can. Along the way, we net a dozen brook trout between the three of us. Well, it's now between the two of us, as Jamie has packed up her fly rod and has perched herself on a rock. I'm getting hungry, so I'm sure the kids are too.

"Hey guys, are you getting ready to head out? I'm sort of ready for some lunch!" I suspect I won't get an argument.

"Sure, I caught the most anyway." Kyle announces his personal achievement with a smile.

"I've been ready to go for an hour!" Jamie adds, helpfully.

On that note, we pack up our gear for the hike back up the hill. On the walk up, Kyle is chattier than normal.

"I think I caught the only brown trout of the day, dad. Did you or Jamie catch any?"

"No, Kyle, you caught the only one." I have to admit with a smile.

He takes it as another win and grins ear to ear. He got the most fish overall and the only brown trout. It was a successful trip for Kyle.

It was certainly a successful trip to Willow Creek for me, too, and I'm smiling as we crest the top of the ridge and arrive at the 4Runner.

Then my phone starts vibrating.

Chapter Fourteen

The first message I see is from Dave Hawkins.

“Mike is dead!?”

I stop moving when I see the message.

Then I see the next text is from Paul, who simply sent a link to the news story. The headline alone shocks me.

Mike Schwartz, CEO at BradComm, Dies in Explosion

My mind is numb as I absorb the reality of that message. After all the times I refused to think about this possibility, my fears are now reality. I tap the link to the short news story that gives further details.

Local authorities were alerted to an explosion in a parking garage in downtown Detroit Friday morning. A single vehicle, a Jaguar SUV,

was destroyed in the explosion at approximately 10:30AM. The owner of the vehicle, Mike Schwartz, CEO at BradComm, was pronounced dead at the scene. There were no other injuries, although several nearby vehicles were also damaged. An investigation is underway to determine the cause of the explosion.

No wonder Mike didn't call. Now all the events of the last two days are making horrible sense. First the emergency vehicles, then the questioning by the ATF agents at the Colorado Springs airport and, of course, Mike's lack of response.

I look up to see the kids staring at me while I stand there shaking my head.

"What's wrong, dad?" Kyle asks.

I pull myself away from the news and attempt a mild smile.

"It's fine, bud. I got some tough news from work. One of my business contacts has been in an accident."

"Oh, no! Are they ok?" Jamie is sincerely concerned.

Again, I try to paste on a comforting smile.

"Unfortunately, no, honey. It seems he passed away. I'm sure I'll learn more when we get home. Sorry to end the trip with a story like this. He was a good guy and all the people he worked with will certainly miss him."

"Did he have kids?" she asks.

"No, I don't think so, honey," I answer solemnly.

I have to think about it for a minute, but I remember Mike mentioning how difficult it must be for me to travel with kids. And how he's glad he doesn't have to have that additional concern for his frequent travel.

"We sure had a great trip, didn't we?" I try to lighten the mood as we load our gear back into the 4Runner.

They buy my change of topic and return to their normal selves with a nod and a smile.

I see I also have a couple of missed calls and voicemail messages, but after that exchange with the kids, I don't want to sour the moment further by ingesting more bad news. Deciding they're probably more messages about Mike, I turn my phone face down on the console and reverse out of our parking spot.

Driving home from Willow Creek is slightly slower than the trip here as we have to head back up the four-wheel-drive trail we came down earlier. Clearly, this is why the trail requires four-wheel drive, as the downhill direction was much easier to manage. Climbing out takes a bit of time, perhaps even some finesse. Weaving around the trees and trying to maintain traction on the short, steep sections is tricky. It definitely takes some focus.

As the nose of the 4Runner crests the last steep uphill section, I can finally take a glimpse ahead of us at the gravel road that will take us along the river and back to blacktop.

As we level off, I see a faint cloud of dust some distance ahead of us, and quickly surmise the Jeeps from the river campground have passed through. As we move down the gravel road past their campsite, however, I see the Jeeps still parked where they were.

Ok, so another vehicle had been down near our location and not one of these two Jeeps. That fact does not surprise me at all, but my mind goes back to the black Ford Explorer I had already seen three times. With that, though, my curiosity gets the best of me. Three times is already feeling like too much to be a coincidence. A fourth sighting would validate my concerns.

The gravel road does not require as much driving focus as the dirt road, but it is still slow moving. We weave left and right, up and down, and I try to move a little quicker to see if I can get a glimpse of the dust-churning vehicle ahead of us.

There is one stretch of the gravel road near the top where we will get a longer view of the last bit of gravel road and some of the blacktop back into Lake George. It's not a perfect view, as there are still plenty of evergreen trees scattered across the mountainside, but if I can get close enough, I should be able to at least get a glimpse of the vehicle.

I push it a little too far at one point. We slide around one of the gravel corners, getting a little close for comfort to the steep drop that reaches from the edge of the road down to the valley below. The kids are both preoccupied with their iPads, but the speed and the sliding have gotten their attention.

"Why are we in such a hurry, dad?" Kyle asks as I slow down to a more normal pace.

While I would love to see who was ahead of us, I also will absolutely not put the kids in jeopardy to satisfy my curiosity. Then, just as I'm ready to concede my pursuit, we round one of the final curves heading toward the blacktop. At that moment, my speeding is rewarded with a brief glimpse of the back of a vehicle just turning off the gravel road. I can't be one hundred percent sure, but I believe it is a black Ford Explorer, and it is definitely moving way too fast to be out for a casual Sunday drive. I am too far away to see if there is a bike rack on the roof, but that doesn't matter.

What is that vehicle doing out this far? Is it following me? If it is, why isn't someone talking to me? Are they tracking me for some reason?

I slow down and concede for now. The kids' safety is my priority, and I decide to table my growing suspicion of the black Ford Explorer.

"I thought I saw the Millers up there, but I was wrong." I smile at Kyle and make a mental note to behave more normally the rest of the way home.

Even with the mental note, though, Mike's death and the sight of that SUV dominate my thoughts the rest of the way back into town. In fact, I'm so preoccupied with my thoughts I don't remember a single conversation with my kids all the way back.

Plus, a tingling on the back of my neck has me wary of the story about Mike. According to my phone, my text message to him was read late Saturday night or early Sunday morning.

How could he read my text messages if he was dead? And if he was in an explosion, I wouldn't expect his phone to be working. Did the authorities have his phone, or someone else?

Chapter Fifteen

“Grandmother’s Kitchen again?” Jamie asks in a slightly dramatic and exasperated voice.

“Sorry. Sometimes I just gotta have it!”

I chuckle as I respond, pulling into the parking lot. This is my go-to diner when I get to choose our lunch restaurant.

It’s half-past one, but we are all tired from the hiking, the mental intensity of the small stream fishing, and the drive. I don’t speak about Mike, nor do I mention the SUV sighting to the kids. My mind, however, continues to consider all the reasons it might have been up there. And on my street. And at the gas station. Maybe I’m overreacting, but my gut says I’m not.

Plus, there is at least one voicemail on my phone I need to listen to. We head into the diner, and as the kids head to an open table, I pause.

“I’m going to stop off and wash my hands, guys. Be back in just a second,” I say.

“Ok, I’ll go when you get back,” Kyle responds as he sits down.

“Me too,” adds Jamie.

I head around the corner where they can’t see me and pull out my phone. Looking at my recent messages, I see one voicemail from Paul, and one from a Detroit number I don’t recognize. I listen to Paul’s message first.

“Hey Keith. I sent you a text, too, but wanted you to know about Mike Schwartz. I know you were there with him Friday, so you’re probably as shocked as everyone else. Horrible news. Keep on your toes out there, man. I’d love to think this has nothing to do with your assignment, but we can’t be sure. Give me a call if you need to talk.”

In addition to his role with Rocky Mountain Equity and The Association, Paul is a good friend who knows me well. Knowing he’s probably seen more death than I have, I subconsciously nod my appreciation at the sentiment. I consider his comment about the link to my assignment while I tap on the next message and put the phone back to my ear.

“Hi Mr. Morgan, this is Officer Brockmeier with the Detroit Police Department. I wonder if you’d call me back when you get a moment. I’m investigating a case here with the ATF that may have intersected with your visit to this area last week. Thanks, Mr. Morgan. Have a good day.”

Yeah, I suppose that call wasn’t a surprise. I’m sure they’re looking up everyone who spent their last day or two with Mike to see if he was exhibiting any strange behavior. I shake my head and make a mental note to call Officer Brockmeier when I get home.

For now, it’s back to the important task of washing hands and eating lunch.

I keep all the SUV thoughts to myself, and we enjoy our three diverse meals from the diner. I force myself into a healthy chicken salad this time and watch Jamie consume her quesadilla and Kyle make quick work of half a grilled cheese. He always eats half, always insists on taking the other half home, and I always end up eating it later. It’s what we do.

We’re done eating and back at the house by 3PM.

After we've unpacked and settled, I grab my phone and head into my room to call Officer Brockmeier. He picks up after two rings.

"This is Officer Brockmeier." He sounds like he's in a hurry.

"Hi Officer Brockmeier, this is Keith Morgan in Colorado. I'm returning your call from earlier."

I hear him immediately stop whatever he was doing and become focused on my call.

"Yes, Mr. Morgan. Thanks so much for calling me back."

"Sure. How can I help you?"

He pauses and takes a somber tone.

"I assume by now you've seen the news out of Detroit?"

He gives me a chance to respond. I do not. I'm curious how he will phrase the next sentence.

"But unfortunately, I have some bad news to share about that explosion. One of our local citizens, Mike Schwartz, was involved in the explosion and passed away."

Ok, so that's still no reason for him to call me after I already spoke with the ATF agents.

"Yeah, that's absolutely terrible. I saw the news. That was certainly shocking for me to see."

I decide to see if he says anything else before I engage in the conversation. Something about his tone indicates he's also sizing me up.

"Yes, that's the consensus around here, too. Everyone we talk to is shocked. Which is why I wanted to talk to you. I see from the visitor logs at BradComm you had a meeting with Mike Friday morning?"

Ok, here we go.

"Yes, I sure did," I reply.

"And what was the nature of your visit, Mr. Morgan?" he asks.

It seems he's going to start from the beginning without telling me what he's looking for. I'll go along with that plan.

"Rocky Mountain Equity hired me to provide consultation services to BradComm for several months. BradComm is engaged in a substantial software purchase and the team at Rocky Mountain Equity wants me to make sure they select the most suitable vendor. I

expected our meeting on Friday to be the one where we begin financial negotiation with the selected vendor,” I reply.

I don't mention The Association, of course.

“Ok, thanks for that. Let's back up a second. How long have you known Mike Schwartz?” Officer Brockmeier asks.

“I met him when I first became engaged in this project. It would have been about six months ago in April.”

It's an old habit. I only answer what he asks and see how he leads the questioning. I'm getting more curious about where he's going to take the discussion.

Officer Brockmeier continues.

“And how often have you talked to Mr. Schwartz over the last six months?” he asks.

“I'd have to look at my records, but I'd say at least two or three times per week,” I reply.

“Ok, thanks. And you said the meeting on Friday was with the selected vendor? Was that Diverse Data?” he asks, letting me know he has done some research already.

“Yes. They don't know it, but they are the selected vendor,” I reply.

“And why don't they know it, Mr. Morgan?” he asks.

The Mr. Morgan stuff is getting on my nerves.

“You can call me Keith.”

“Ok, Keith. And you can call me Tommy. So, why didn't Diverse Data know they were the selected vendor?” He steers right back to the previous question.

“Well, we never got to that portion of the meeting. Mike got an urgent call and had to cut the meeting short.”

I can hear Tommy typing in the background, probably taking notes.

“And do you know what the urgent call was about?” he asks.

Ok, Tommy is looking for something. Mike's death must not be as clear cut as the news report made it appear.

“No. He stepped into his office and I couldn't hear what he was saying,” I reply.

“Was he happy with the call? Was he sad? Surprised? Angry? Was there any sort of change in his emotional state?”

“Well, I’m not a psychologist, but it appeared he became suddenly anxious and distracted. His facial expression before he left the room showed some agitation, for sure,” I respond, trying to be truthful but cautious.

“But he said nothing about the call?”

“No, not a word.”

“How did he close out the meeting?”

“He simply apologized and offered to meet again in two weeks.”

“He did? Ok. And did he schedule the follow-up meeting?”

“No, he asked me to do it.”

“Is that normal behavior for him?”

Tommy is in a groove with the questions now. I pause and think for a second.

“No, I guess it really isn’t. He normally schedules the following meeting before we leave,” I reply.

“Ok, thanks Keith. And was anyone else around besides you and, uh, Dave Hawkins during this meeting?”

I could hear him looking up Dave’s name as he talked.

“No, just us.”

“And did Mike leave with you when you left the office?”

“No, he didn’t. Dave and I left together, but Mike was still there when we left.”

“Ok, thanks again. If you don’t mind, I may call back later. Just trying to get the details together on Mike’s last days. Typical police work, you know. Have a great day.”

“Thanks, you too.”

And with that, Tommy ends the call.

So, Tommy Brockmeier with the Detroit police department is doing typical work in the same way the two ATF agents were doing at the airport. While it may be typical police work, as he put it, it’s clear this is a thorough investigation into Mike’s death. And it seems they’re not sure who killed him.

And I have a data device from the dead man. Tommy will find out about that soon enough, and I’m sure he’ll be angry because I didn’t tell him about it during this initial call.

But he didn’t ask. And Mike didn’t want it going to the authorities. I need to find out why.

Chapter Sixteen

Mike's voicemail keeps playing over and over in my mind after I hang up with Officer Brockmeier. Why would it be embarrassing if the data on this little device got to the authorities or the media? Is that even true, or was there a different reason Mike didn't want the data exposed? And which authorities was he referring to, anyway? Was it the police? Was it someone else?

As I walk back into the living room, I decide to find out what's on this little device. If it is something that will simply embarrass Mike's family, I'll destroy it. If it's something else, at least I'll know what to do next. I hope it's that simple, anyway.

Before I can even get to the couch to sit down, my phone chimes with the appointment alarm. Without seeing what it is, I remember this is the Sunday night that the kids have dinner with their grandparents. I have set the reminder on my phone to give us an

hour to get ready, as we are often out and about on Sunday and need time to prepare.

Beth's parents, Oliver and Judy, come down from Denver on the third Sunday of the month to take the kids out for dinner. I have no issue with this, and I'm sure Beth would appreciate it. Plus, it seems there is a healthy relationship between the kids and their grandparents, so I'm all about trying to keep their family relationships intact.

Rather than go through the effort of walking to their rooms, I yell at the kids from the kitchen.

"Kids, don't forget grandma and grandpa are coming tonight. You need to be ready by six!"

They always have fun and are never late, and this brief gap of time allows me to prepare for the coming week.

I once again am forced to push Mike's storage device to the back of my mind, but I also resolve to get some help to break into the device. As I consider people who can help me with that task, though, I realize there are limited options. I do know a data engineer from the Diverse Data team who lives in the Colorado Springs area and can probably help.

The data engineer's name is Jennifer Ellis and while I don't know her well, she has been a technical consultant at some of the BradComm sales meetings and has done a great job. She is fluent in data storage and encryption methods, and she helped resolve some challenging technical issues with the Diverse Data installation at BradComm.

She also seems to be one of those technical people who seems to know something about every gadget that exists. Plus, she appears to be professional and close to my age versus some of the younger gen-Z people on the team. Some of those kids can likely help, but they all seem too comfortable with social media for me to trust their confidentiality. Maybe that concern is misplaced and I'm making a broad stereotype of an entire generation, but I'm not planning to take any chances with this device.

Oliver and Judy call me at 5:30PM, just like they always do.

"Hi Keith. We're on our way. Wanted to make sure things are still on track?"

Judy says it more as a conversation starter than a question. She has always been as kind as I could ever wish from a mother-in-law, and is especially helpful when I need a calming, gentle voice of reason.

“Yep, they’re excited to see you guys,” I respond as I scurry around to make sure the kids are getting ready.

“Where are you headed this evening?” I ask, trying to disguise my scurrying.

“We’re thinking we may get some barbecue down in the Springs,” Oliver responds.

“Nice!” I say sincerely. They have some great barbecue places down there.

“Sounds like fun. They’ll be ready when you get here,” I continue.

As I listen, I realize they’re apparently using bluetooth in their Lincoln Navigator as they drive along. I hear the motor ever so slightly in the background. I’m surprised I hear them both so clearly, but that’s not the only thing that impresses me about that vehicle. While it’s not the rugged off-road vehicle I am drawn to for my personal use, there’s something to be said about riding along in that level of comfortable luxury.

Oliver’s taste in cars gives us at least two things to talk about beyond the kids. He loves the fact that I have a ’63 split-window Corvette, even if it spends most of its days in storage. He also likes the fact that I’m a hockey fan. While Oliver and Judy still live in the Denver area and have maintained a reasonably active presence in the kids’ lives, he and I don’t seem to gel all the time. Cars and the Colorado Avalanche give us two fall back topics to discuss when conversation about the kids has run its course and our dialog seems to fizzle.

The fizzling conversation happens often, as my consulting topics don’t always overlap with mergers, acquisitions, and financial topics that Oliver deals with every day. I often sense he feels the need to dumb down his business to talk to me. I’m ok with that, even though I also know it’s unnecessary. He thinks I’m just a software guy. If he knew all the things I deal with from Rocky Mountain Equity and The Association, he’d probably treat me differently, but I’m not getting into that.

Promptly at 6PM, Oliver and Judy are at our front door. They don't stay more than five minutes before they get the kids loaded into the Navigator and they're on their way down to Colorado Springs.

After the kids leave the house with their grandparents, I grab my laptop and try to connect to Mike's storage device. I have to use one of the USB-C cables for my headphones, but the connection works fine. What doesn't work, however, is the fingerprint scan. I can't see anything on the drive. As I thought, I'm going to need some help to get this data.

Deciding Jennifer is the right person to contact, I log into the Diverse Data messaging software. They added me to the project team group chat as part of the project months ago. I don't expect Jennifer to be online Sunday at this hour, but I type a message to her, anyway. Even if she doesn't get the message now, it will be in her unread queue in the morning.

Hey Jennifer.

I have a little project that could use your expertise. Would you possibly have some time in the morning to meet me in town? Coffee is on me if you're free!

I remember they call her Jen, but not sure if she spells it Jen or Jenn. After a brief internal debate, I decide her full name is best and I hit send. Then I open my email to see if there's anything new I need to know before the week gets underway tomorrow. I haven't finished reading my first email when Jennifer responds.

Sure, glad to help if I can. BradComm?

This is more of an equipment challenge.

Cool. Let me know when and where, will see how I can help.

I'm not sure how much to tell her yet, so I stay away from the details. We agree on a small coffee shop in Old Colorado City and set a meeting time for 8AM.

That evening, after the kids are back from their dinner with the grandparents and I'm done preparing for the week, I go to bed confident I will discover what's on this device tomorrow.

Chapter Seventeen

Monday morning, the Morgan crew gets back into high gear. My bedroom is on the main floor of our home, so I get the privilege of lumbering into the dining room and letting Winnie out the back door promptly at six without disturbing the kids. It's still dark outside, but that's fine and I'm used to it. If there are mountain lions or coyotes or bears or any other animals outside, Winnie will let me know with his loud, persistent barking. No barking means all is well out there.

I still have to wake the kids up every day as though they have never done this before. Both of them would probably sleep several more hours if I didn't intervene. I walk into each room and try to be as gentle as I can while still getting the "get up" point across.

"Time to get up. It's 6:15."

Every day it's the same thing.

They get up easily enough, though, and are at the breakfast table with their cereal and banana by 6:30AM. The breakfast menu at the Morgan house is not very sophisticated.

The school bus stops a short way down the hill from our house, so the kids only have to walk about a quarter mile to the bus stop.

“Hey guys, I have to be down in Colorado Springs this morning, so I can’t take you to school. Sorry, but you’ll have to catch the bus.” I hear the expected groans from the two of them at the breakfast table.

Sometimes I take them to school to break up the bus ride monotony, but since I have to scamper down the pass to meet with Jennifer this morning, I can’t give them that luxury. Today they have to be at the bus stop and ready to go by their scheduled 7:30AM stop.

At 7:20AM, they are both ready to head out. We say goodbye with our standard ritual. A hug and kiss on the head. That’s all they will allow these days.

“Have a great day. Love you.”

And with that, the kids are out the door and on their way.

After getting ready and making sure everything in the house is as tidy as it needs to be, I pack up my computer bag with some basic work essentials to head to Old Colorado City. I put Mike’s storage device in my pocket and stop to look around for anything I’m missing. Yes, that should be it.

Heading out to the 4Runner, I remember it is Monday morning, so I can expect a hefty amount of traffic heading down the pass. I evaluate my need for more coffee, aware that I am also heading to the coffee shop to meet Jennifer. Knowing I can load up on caffeine when I get there, I decide to forgo another cup and hit the road.

The trip down the pass is indeed full of traffic, but moves along at a reasonably brisk pace. Old Colorado City is attached to the west side of Colorado Springs and sort of lives up to its name. It is an older area, but has a current and comfortable vibe to it. The main street has dozens of shops and restaurants lining the road, with the sidewalk already full of Monday shoppers, diners, and, in our case, coffee drinkers.

Keeping my eye on my mirrors the whole way, I see no sign of a Black Explorer and decide nobody is following me today. Still, I keep my eyes open as I park in one of the public lots and walk the three blocks to the coffee shop in the brisk October morning air. Upon entering the shop, I see Jennifer already has a table near the front window.

Even though we've only met a few times, the sight of Jennifer always seems to make me smile. It's not intentional, she just always seems to come along with positive karma. Today is no exception. I smile and wave as I head to the line of people waiting to order.

"I'll be back in a second, going to grab a large coffee," I say as I pass her table.

Jennifer is probably near my age, if I had to guess. She is dressed in her typical business casual khaki slacks that match her blond, straight hair and a black sweater. She's professional yet stylish and blends in with the Monday morning coffee shop scene.

"Don't think you need to do that," Jennifer says as she holds up a large cup I hadn't noticed when I came in. It's no secret I am a coffee guy, but it's still a surprising and welcome gesture. She smiles and her brown eyes sparkle as she realizes she surprised me. Her smile earns a return smile from me, again without realizing it had happened.

"Thanks Jennifer, you didn't need to do that! Can I Venmo you for this?" I ask as I stop and take a seat.

"No, you can't. You can get the next one," she answers.

I have no idea where that last comment came from, as we have made no plans for another coffee. We have had coffee maybe once or twice over the last six months. Each of the other times was associated with an impromptu coffee-shop meeting for a project deliverable, so perhaps she expects there will be more of those.

After exchanging a few pleasantries about the weather, how Diverse Data is doing, and some limited discussion on our personal lives, I start in on the topic of the day.

"Well, I guess you've heard about Mike Schwartz by now?" I pause to see her reaction.

She drops her head and nods, clearly as shocked as I was.

“Yeah, I heard. Such a horrible tragedy. He was such a nice guy. And one of the smartest data guys I’ve ever seen,” she says quietly.

I nod and pause for a second before I continue.

“So this is going to sound weird, but bear with me for a moment. I was in Detroit Friday with Mike and Dave Hawkins, trying to get to some final specifications of the deal.”

Jennifer has been involved with the proof-of-concept for this deal, so I don’t have to explain further. She nods and tunes in.

“Well, a strange thing happened after that trip. It seems Mike accidentally dropped this storage device in my bag. It looks like a normal USB drive, but with a fingerprint pad on it.”

I pull the device out of my pocket and hand it to her. I take a sip of my coffee while she looks at it.

“Mmmm, dark roast and no cream or sugar. Excellent!” I can’t help but sound surprised she nailed my coffee type. I may have mentioned it in the past, but it’s still impressive. Most people would never remember that. I take another sip and await her inspection of the device.

It wasn’t much of an inspection.

“Ok, so he takes enough time to encrypt and protect the device but accidentally drops it in your bag? And then he turns up dead a few minutes later?” Jennifer begins, already showing she’s as skeptical as I am.

After a second, she continues.

“We use these too. A typical user would consider this to be rather secure, but in reality, it isn’t. While you can’t simply plug this in and extract data without a fingerprint, the inner workings of this device are the same as other similar storage devices. The flash storage component is virtually identical to any other USB drive, and the biometrics only provide security around the plug itself. The data is still there. You just can’t get to it without the fingerprint scan or by bypassing the biometrics.”

She is turning the device over in her hand and looking closely at it as she talks.

“These devices have come a long way in recent years. This one has a USB-C port, but some now include Bluetooth access. Some

also include GPS trackers, so the owner always knows where it is," she says.

As she is describing the various features of the device, my mobile phone vibrates on the table next to my coffee. I glance casually at the screen to see it's Officer Brockmeier in Detroit. Tapping the decline button, I make a mental note to get back to him later.

If he is a diligent investigator, which he seems to be, it's only a matter of time until he finds a record of the call to me from Mike's phone Friday afternoon. Next, he'll be wanting to know what Mike said on that voicemail. If he has gotten a copy of Mike's text messages already, things will get even more interesting.

"Do you need to get that?" Jennifer asks, as I realize I've been sitting silently after seeing the incoming call.

"No, sorry. It's not urgent. Do you know any way to get data off these things without using the fingerprint scan?" I blurt out.

"Yeah, we can get the data off the device without a fingerprint scan," she answers in a calm, confident voice.

"But there is something that concerns me more." Again, she's calm but sincere.

"What's that?" I ask as calmly as I can, even though I'm also completely intrigued by the fact that she believes she can get this data without a fingerprint.

"Well, like I said a minute ago, some of these have GPS trackers in them. What if this one does?" The gravity of her statement hits me like a ton of bricks.

Now my mind is racing. There was the black Ford Explorer driving by the house twice. I saw it again at the gas station. And I saw it once more out by Willow Creek. At least I think I saw it there.

Were they following me because they couldn't track the device and needed eyes on me? If they were following the GPS signal, they would have been able to track me to my house, as that's where it's been for the last two days. Were they there because of the device? Why follow me around if they knew where it was? This whole situation is fraught with questions.

As Jennifer sits there looking at me, I scan the coffee shop.

Are they here now? Are they watching us as we sit here, at the same time we are realizing they may be watching?

“How quickly can we get the data?” I ask, again more abruptly than I intended.

Jennifer tilts her head and considers the question.

“Maybe only a few minutes if it uses the same power supply as a typical USB stick,” she finally says.

“Ok, where can we get into this without going to either of our houses?” I say, as though someone is monitoring the device's location as we speak.

Of course, I then realize how absurd that is, as I've had the device in my possession for three days already! She must realize the same thing.

“I'm not sure that matters at this point. If someone is watching us right now, we're already in trouble,” she says.

Good point.

“Fair enough. Is your house nearby?” I ask.

“It's not far. We can take it apart there at my house. I have plenty of other devices similar to this. We can try to swap the connector with a different model of flash drive and see if the storage is accessible. If not, we'll likely destroy it in the process. But I don't think we have any choice if you really want to know what's on it,” she says.

“Should I ask how you would possibly have the skills and spare parts to tackle this sort of task?” I ask as I look at her out of the corner of my eye.

“No, you shouldn't ask. Just be glad I have both the skills and the parts. At least I hope I do,” she says with a smile.

Jennifer is speaking as if she has already emotionally embedded herself into this situation, which makes me angry with myself. If this is something more than family embarrassment for Mike, Jennifer was now an accessory to my lack of disclosure to the police.

That concern continues to nag at me as we leave the coffee shop and head to our vehicles.

Chapter Eighteen

After collecting our vehicles at the public parking lot near the coffee shop, we pull out into the Monday morning traffic. Jennifer leads the way, and I follow her Jeep into Colorado Springs toward her house.

During the drive, my attention is constantly changing from the back of Jennifer's vehicle to all the other traffic. I haven't used my tracking detection skills in years, and never in a city environment that resembles this one, but I do my best. While I'm suspicious of every black Ford Explorer I see, I decide there is nobody following me. Or maybe there is, but I certainly don't see them.

Jennifer lives in one of the many suburban areas in northern Colorado Springs. Her house is on a cul-de-sac street with lots of other similarly pleasant houses, all with neatly manicured lawns. Given the lack of large trees in the neighborhood, it feels like the whole thing came together in the last few years.

We quickly park in the driveway and lock our car doors, with me scanning the area while we head to the door and go in. I see no black Ford Explorers in the vicinity. The front door opens into a family room with a dining room directly to the rear and a kitchen to the right.

“Make yourself comfortable,” Jennifer says as we get into the house.

As she says it, Jennifer takes off her coat and hangs it on a hook near the front door and heads into the kitchen and opens the door to the garage. She drops her keys on the table and motions for me to have a seat there. I suppose that is where our USB drive surgery will take place.

The house is neatly decorated and comfortable feeling. There are fall decorations all around, with plenty of pumpkins and Halloween items thrown in. There’s also a smell that feels like fall. What is that, apple cinnamon? Maybe it’s pumpkin? Whatever it is, it smells like fall. And it smells nice.

There are also no obvious signs of anyone else living here. I suspected Jennifer was not married, and didn’t know if she lived with anyone else. As I consider that point, I make myself curious.

Why did I suspect she wasn’t married? Did I ask her? Was it shared during one of our brief conversations before? Did someone tell me? Or did I simply notice she doesn’t wear a wedding ring? And if so, why was I noticing that in the first place?

Once again, I’m probably over-analyzing my own thoughts.

The pictures on the mantle and bookshelves appear to be of a reasonably large extended family, but the ones without that extended family include only Jennifer and a Golden Retriever. As I’m sitting there, I notice a dog scampering around in the garage, and I expect it is the one in the picture. And right on cue, the garage door opens back up, and I am greeted by that same Golden Retriever, jumping and yipping as he finds me in the kitchen.

“Stay down, Ruger, stay down!” she orders repeatedly as she follows the dog in from the garage. She’s carrying a box with several different types of USB drives, tools, and other devices.

Ruger does not stay down. After a couple of high energy seconds, he sits still while I pat his head and Jennifer sits down at

the table and sorts her tools and devices. Within a few seconds, she gets to work.

The look of resolve and determination on her face makes me look on with the similar emotions. She has already jumped into this whole situation with me, again making me feel a little guilty. She clearly doesn't care, though, and has the look of someone who will not be denied as she takes Mike's device apart.

"What?" she asks as she looks up at me. I then realize I was smiling and not looking on with the determination I was feeling inside. Oh boy.

"Was just thinking about your dog's name. Ours is Winchester. Sounds like we're both gun people." I don't tell her what we really call our dog.

"That's funny." She smiles.

It seems genuine, but I make a mental note not to get caught staring at her and smiling anymore. That was embarrassing. She's going to get the wrong idea if I keep that up.

I sit silently petting Ruger while Jennifer works. She has more tiny screwdrivers and USB drives than anyone I have ever seen.

"Did you know I was coming with this thing, or do you always have that many drives around?" I ask to break the silence.

She doesn't look up from her work.

"I am a technology pack rat, I guess. As long as these things work, I keep them. Some have so little storage they're worthless, but in a case like this, I just need one that has a microcontroller that works with the flash storage chip on Mike's device."

I realize I have no intelligent response to that, so I resume my quiet Ruger petting.

After about ten minutes of mumbling, taking apart three different drives, reassembling them, even breaking out the soldering gun for a minute, Jennifer sits back in her chair.

"This is as close as I can get," she says and shrugs, as though she doesn't know for sure if this will work.

"I found one that has the same size storage chip casing and was able to swap them out without messing with the circuit board."

Again, lost without an intelligent thought, I respond with the best technical jargon I can muster.

“Okay.”

Wow, I impress myself!

I am about to say I’m a business guy and not a hardware guy, or something similar to save face, but I decide to keep that piece of self-promotion private for now. Plus, she probably expects little technical aptitude from a consultant, anyway.

Jennifer moves into the family room where a laptop sits on a small computer desk in the corner. I notice lots of books and paper packed around the dual monitor setup extending past the edge of the desk. This must be where Jennifer works day in and day out. It’s interesting how it would feel so sterile in an office building, but here at home it feels somehow intimate to see her workspace. Weird.

“It’s not the exact size, so I can’t put the cover back on, but it looks like it’s plugging into the casing fine. Let’s see here.”

She presses the device into the USB port on her laptop and waits. Nothing happens. She reaches over and presses the circuit board and chip together, and a File Explorer window opens on her laptop.

“Ok, so if I squeeze it together, the computer recognizes the device,” she says with limited enthusiasm.

“Now let’s see if it recognizes the data.”

She lets go of the device to use her mouse, and the window disappears.

“Yeah, I was afraid of that. The chip doesn’t really seat in the case without being held together. Can you hold this?” she asks.

She shows me how to squeeze the chip into the case.

“This won’t shock me, will it?” I ask as I replace her fingers on the case, immediately regretting the question.

“Don’t think so, and only a little if it does.” She smiles when she says it, like a kind school teacher to a second grader. Luckily, the File Explorer pops up again and we can move on.

“I see quite a few files on here,” Jennifer says as she clicks away on her laptop.

“It looks like these are all the tables from our software. So, if there’s a file for each table, that means one of two things. Either someone copied our database and dumped each table into a file, or they were creating files with data to load the database. It’s hard to

say which. During our customer engagements, we build files like this when customers are getting ready to load the Diverse Data system for the first time. Then we unload the database into files like this when we're researching errors sometimes. Let me see if I can open them."

She highlights and double clicks one of the filenames. Within a few seconds, a spreadsheet program opens and a long list of data is visible.

"Yeah, this looks like the Diverse Data database. Hmm. Apparently, Mike has a copy of the Diverse Data database from the BradComm test system, but why would he do that?"

And hearing that observation of the data, I now know Mike's voicemail was a lie.

"Good question. Honestly, I have no idea what it might be." I sit back and cross my arms as I consider what might be going on here.

As I sit silently, Jennifer is once again busy pulling pieces out of the BradComm device and holds something up to the light.

"And this is the GPS transmitter," she says proudly and cautiously at the same time.

Chapter Nineteen

After realizing the storage device may have been transmitting a GPS signal all along, the gravity of that knowledge sets in. Without realizing what I'm doing, I stand up and walk around the family room for a minute, trying to put all this together.

"What's wrong?" Jennifer asks.

That question pulls me back into the moment and into a new path of action. I need to get Jennifer out of this whole mess, whatever this mess is.

"I'm sorry, Jennifer. I should not have brought you into this. Let me take this device back with me and let's pretend this never happened."

She sits back in her desk chair and inspects me for a moment. Then she crosses her arms and looks at me out of the corner of squinted eyes.

“There’s more to this story, isn’t there?” It’s a question, but it’s more a realization.

“Jennifer, I just don’t want to get anyone else involved in this data mystery of Mike’s. I’m sure it’s not a big deal, but knowing he’s apparently been targeted in an explosion makes me want to be careful.”

I’m lying, of course. What I could have said is that everything is pointing to something serious, probably lethal, being in this data.

Jennifer sees right through it.

“Look, Keith, I think we’re past that. If the GPS transmitter was working, it was transmitting while it was here at my house. Although I’m not really sure anyone is watching. I’d guess Mike was probably the one who would have been watching the tracking app based on the rest of your story. But, if someone is watching, then they already know where I live. So, if there’s something else going on, I’d like to know what I’m dealing with.”

Her lips are smiling, but her eyes and her crossed arms are sending a different message. She’s intent on finding out what else I know.

I take a breath, sit down on Jennifer’s couch, and start putting the last few days into words.

“I’m not sure where to start. This may go back further than I am putting together, but I’ll start with the meeting on Friday.”

I rub my eyes as I begin. Jennifer relaxes her posture to listen.

“Several weeks ago, Mike had scheduled the meeting with Dave to finalize terms for the deal. We had agreed Diverse Data was the leader in the evaluation and the pilot was going well. Mike was ready to start negotiating pricing and terms.”

Jennifer nods as I continue.

“The meeting started just fine. Mike was sharing the BradComm strategy with Dave. The tone was good, and we were heading toward the point of a financial discussion. In fact, we had wanted the meeting to be on site because we thought we would be closing a commitment on a seven-figure deal for software licenses. It was going to be a big handshake moment.”

I take a breath and resume.

“During the first several minutes of the meeting, Mike was very engaged. He was going through our planned talking points and moving toward the last portion of the slides, where we planned to hit Dave with some financial demands and service level commitments. Everything was going fine when he got a call on his mobile phone. It happened moments before we got to that final discussion.”

I pause and concentrate to make sure I recall everything.

“He walked into his office to take the call, then stepped out and cut off the meeting. No reason given, no real commitment to meet again. He just said we can talk again later. That’s it. Then I got to the airport and had a voicemail from Mike. It said he thinks he had accidentally dropped a storage device in my laptop bag, and it might have some embarrassing data on it. He said it would be embarrassing for his family, and especially embarrassing if it got to the authorities or media. I don’t recall the exact words. The way he described it, I’m thinking it’s a sex video or something like that, but the story isn’t adding up. He said he’d send a mailing address where I should send it while he’s on vacation next week, but he never sent an address. After finding the device in my bag, I tried to get in touch with Mike over the weekend, but he didn’t respond. Then, of course, I hear about his death and realize why.”

I’m considering whether to tell her about the call from the Detroit police when she responds.

“I don’t see how a Diverse Data database would have anything embarrassing for Mike’s family. So, there’s something else on here that Mike didn’t want going to the authorities or media,” she says.

“Yeah, it seems so.”

“And he clearly dropped this in your bag on purpose if he called you that quickly. If he lost it, he would have said that. He didn’t lose it, he dropped it there on purpose,” she continues.

“Right,” I reply.

I stop short of telling her about the call from Officer Brockmeier, whose latest voicemail is still sitting on my phone. I also avoid the topic of the black Ford Explorer because that tidbit is still not verified evidence. There are too many black Ford Explorers in the world to make that one sound like it links in with the rest of the story.

Jennifer sits back in her chair and sighs.

“Whew. That’s a lot. Then I think I’m going to smash this piece if it’s alright,” she says, holding up the GPS transmitter.

“YES!” I yell before I can even register a thought.

Is someone tracking us right now? Are they sitting outside? Are we safe? There are a lot of unknowns here and it’s driving me crazy.

“Can you put this data on a device I can take home that doesn’t have a GPS tracker on it?” I ask, smiling?

Jennifer smiles and grabs a drive she hasn’t yet disassembled. She plugs it in the laptop.

“Can you hold this thing together again? Once we get the data off here, we won’t have to do this again.”

I hold the chip in the casing again while she copies the files. It only takes a few seconds.

“Let me go look through this and see what this stuff is. I’ll compare it to the test data to see if it’s the same or if there is something unique here. I’m not sure where the smoking gun is, but I can’t help but think this has to be related to Mike’s strange behavior on Friday. With that said, we both need to be careful here. Clearly something is off, given Mike suggesting we don’t go to the authorities or media. While I doubt anyone is receiving the GPS transmissions, since Mike is no longer with us, I suppose it’s possible someone else may be receiving them.”

I try not to sound too ominous, but Jennifer clearly gets what I’m saying.

“Sure. Here you go,” she says as she hands me the device with the copied files. This one requires no fingerprint.

As I head out the front door of Jennifer’s house, I casually glance up and down the street. I recognize there are lots of SUVs in every neighborhood like this in Colorado Springs, but there are no visible black Ford Explorers on Jennifer’s cul-de-sac. In fact, there are few cars on the street at all. Most are in the garages attached to every house. I conclude there is nobody watching me or Jennifer at this very moment and breathe a little easier. There’s no need to say anything more to Jennifer for now. We can catch up later.

Hopping in the 4Runner and pausing for a minute, I remember I have a voicemail from Officer Brockmeier on my phone, so I decide

now is the time to see what else he wants to share. I tap my phone to listen to it while I sit in front of Jennifer's house.

"Hey Keith, this is Officer Brockmeier again. I have a few more questions I'd like to ask you when you get a moment. Can you please call me back as soon as you can?"

Ok, so he will not leave any clues in the message. No surprise there, I guess. I make a mental note to call him when I get back home. I need to think about how much I'm going to tell him.

I navigate out of Jennifer's neighborhood, heading back to the pass that leads toward Woodland Park. Completely aware of vehicles coming and going, I am especially vigilant for anything that resembles a black Ford Explorer. I see three of them coming the other way as I ascend the pass, but none on my side of the road.

As I drive along, my mind is so consumed with this morning's discovery that I don't dip into my fit of sadness when I pass the marker of Beth's crash. At the moment, all I can think of is what might be in this data that had Mike behave the way he did.

And if this data made him behave that way, did it also cause his death?

Chapter Twenty

Rather than drive directly to the house, I play my own detective game to see if anyone is following me. Calling on skills I gained years ago in Afghanistan and applying them to this Woodland Park, Colorado setting, I pass by the turnoff to our neighborhood and drive into town. Before exiting into the mountains, I turn right, then right again to retrace my route two streets over.

Most of my training on detecting and losing a tail involved the on-foot version. Plus, the limited vehicle training I received was in remote mountains and desert terrain, not a small American mountain area like this. After a couple of mindless circles around random city blocks, nobody makes the turns I've made or seems to pay attention to my route, so I determine I am not being followed at the moment. I head back to the house.

I'm eager to get into the data to see what was possibly so important to Mike that it needed to be protected with biometrics and

dropped into my bag. With what I've already learned, I've decided he put it there on purpose. It wasn't an accident. In fact, I'm beginning to think I know when he did it. I thought he was holding me back in the conference room to talk about scheduling a follow-up, but now I think that's when he placed the drive in that outside pouch that was easiest to access. That's why he seemed so distracted and unfocused, and I recall him leaning in strangely close and whispering for no apparent reason. Once he dropped off that device, he was mentally moving on. I wonder if he knew his fate had already been determined?

I watch out the garage door until it closes and see nobody pulling in behind me or passing the driveway entrance. Good. The adrenaline I'm feeling is odd, as it's usually isolated to my more intense assignments. I haven't felt it very often since Afghanistan, and never here at home. This sensation, and the skills it invokes, are not meant for use here at my house and the feeling is uncomfortable. Taking a deep breath to calm myself, I open the door and head inside. Now I can start digging into this data.

Once inside, I change out of my work clothes, get my laptop out and plug in the USB device Jennifer gave me. The file explorer pops up with the same files we saw before. Since I already know these files to be data for each table in the Diverse Data software, I pull up the customer file first as that's the one table with data with text I can easily recognize. I scan the data initially, looking for anything peculiar or anomalous.

Within a couple of seconds, I realize this approach won't be helpful. There are lots of companies and individuals listed, with over three thousand rows of data in total. With that amount of data, a visual scan isn't especially useful. Then I get an idea. I know Mike pulled lots of live data into the Diverse Data proof-of-concept project, so maybe I can run a quick compare of the customers in that project database against this data to see if the data is exactly the same. This would at least tell me if this was simply a copy of existing test data or something more.

Since I don't have the project data on my laptop, I have to get it from someone on the Diverse Data project team. I consider calling Jennifer to help with this task, too, but decide against it. She's done

enough already and I'm uncomfortable pulling her deeper into this unknown risk.

Instead of contacting Jennifer, I send a message to one of the other Diverse Data engineers from the BradComm project to get a copy of the project database. They know who I am, so I make up a story of why I need a copy of the data to help evaluate the business case, and the database copy is in my encrypted email inbox within minutes.

While I wouldn't call myself a database expert, I've learned to find my way around data and spreadsheets enough to be dangerous. Some might even say that's an understatement. It only takes me a few minutes to write a simple macro to compare customers between the files on Jennifer's device with the test data files I received from the project team.

The macro scans the two files and searches for customers that match, listing out the ones that are not found in one file or the other. When it completes, it shows a list of thirty-three unique records that were on Mike's device but not in the test data. Well, that's interesting, but not really informative. Either BradComm added those customers since the last test copy was taken, or someone explicitly excluded those records from the test data.

Taking the analysis a step further, I write a similar compare for the rules file. After listening to the Diverse Data team for months now, I'm pretty sure that rules file holds the real secret to how BradComm selects their campaign activities.

Reviewing the rules table, I find a long list of rules associated with those customers. Of course, that makes sense, as each of these thirty-three customers can have many specific rules. I consider the potential logical reasons for the data anomaly and wonder if I'm being too much like a conspiracy theorist with this research. This certainly could be just a group of customers added recently. Or perhaps they're duplicates or unused customer records.

It only takes a few seconds for me to decide I'm not being paranoid. Given Mike's death, the ATF agents at the airport, the possible tail I've seen, the call from Officer Brockmeier in Detroit, I decide I'm not paranoid at all. Plus, I've got to know why this device was dropped into my bag.

The most obvious reason this data may have been so important puts me on edge. Perhaps these records were left out of the test data on purpose, and maybe that is why Mike has them saved separately. My adrenaline pumps as I consider this thought and come up with one more idea of data to research.

I see in the rules file there is a reference to a customer number in each row. That makes sense, as the system always relates each rule to the customer it applies to. Knowing these rules are what BradComm uses to define their PR strategies, I realize this combination of data will give me a picture of the activities BradComm was deploying for these customers. I start typing a new macro to generate the next report, understanding this one will take a few minutes to write.

The macro is not yet complete when I get a call from a number I don't recognize. With everything going on, I'm a bit on edge, so it startles me. The number is from Detroit, which adds to my concern. Realizing I haven't returned Officer Brockmeier's call, I decide I can't ignore another call from Detroit again.

I tap my phone to accept the call.

Chapter Twenty-One

“This is Keith,” I say without even considering that I just gave away my first name to an unknown caller.

“Good morning, Mr. Morgan,” a pleasant voice begins. So much for the concern about divulging my name.

“I’m sorry to disturb you, but this is Melissa Smith from the BradComm office in Detroit.”

I don’t recall the name, but I have met lots of people at BradComm, so that’s not completely surprising.

“Oh, hi,” I respond as if I remember her.

The pleasant voice continues.

“We believe one of our project team members for the Diverse Data project may have made a mistake that you may be able to help with. It seems they may have inadvertently placed one of their project storage devices in your bag when you were here last week. Their bag is the same brand as yours and they didn’t realize the

mistake until today. We had to backtrack through the visitor log to find your name and number.”

This all sounds somewhat plausible, but I’m suspicious of this story. My laptop bag was never near the project team at all last week. And how would they know the brand of my bag? Plus, she hasn’t even mentioned the explosion or Mike’s death. That would have been a huge topic of conversation there at the BradComm office. I decide to test the caller.

“Oh no, that’s crazy!” I say, trying to sound surprised.

“I can take a look. What kind of device is it? Is there anything important on it?” I ask.

“It’s a small biometric storage device. It’s similar to a typical USB drive, but with a fingerprint pad on it. You’ll certainly recognize it when you see it.”

She ignores my question about the importance of the data. So, I ask it a little differently.

“Ok, got it. Is this project data? Do they need this to get sign-off on the proof-of-concept? I know everyone thought they might get approval from Mike last week.”

This was a lie to test the caller. The sign-off was obtained two weeks ago.

“Yes, it sure is. It is basically a copy of some of the analysis results and things.”

No, ma’am, it is not. And now I know this call and this caller are not authentic. And again, she says nothing about Mike, even though I asked about him specifically.

“I haven’t seen anything, but I can’t say I have looked for it. Can I check and call you back?” I say, realizing I need to buy time.

“Sure, that’s fine. In the meantime, we have found a courier service in the area that can pick it up from your house and ship it for us. Given our business, we are sensitive to how our data is sent from place to place. I’m sure you understand,” she says in a semi-condescending tone.

“Oh, absolutely. I will see what I find and let you know,” I respond, catering to her cautious warning.

“Great! Thanks for your time, Mr. Morgan. I look forward to hearing from you soon,” she says as we end the call.

I am now even more sure about the authenticity of the call. This is someone trying to recover data that was copied that clearly means something to someone. And why I have it is beyond me. The one wild card I seem to have is that they are behaving as though they are not sure that I have it or know what it is.

It makes me wonder if they know more than she let on, however, because I have seen the GPS transmitter in the device. It also makes me wonder whether they tracked me here with that chip or if they were tracking me all the time with their black Ford Explorer. The SUV lurking around still seems suspicious, but makes no sense if the device gave away my location, anyway.

I sit back and consider what I now learned from the bogus BradComm phone call. Whoever that was, they apparently believe I have the device. The way she was questioning me, they think I don't know about it, or at least I don't know the data. Or I suppose there is another option. They may think I am in on the theft of the data and that I am hiding it. Perhaps they even think I'm going to sell it to someone else. And that thought makes me worry about my meeting this morning with Jennifer. Before my mind goes too far down a rabbit hole, as it is prone to do, I decide to stop it right there.

The fact that she mentioned a courier service tells me she has reason to believe I have the device. Why wouldn't she think anyone else would have it?

The other person at the meeting, Dave Hawkins, must be getting similar treatment as I am. If they truly don't know where the device is, they will contact him as well. I decide to compose a little test.

I dial Dave's cell phone number and clear my throat.

Dave doesn't answer, and the call goes to his voicemail.

"Hey Dave, hope your Monday is going well. I wanted to catch up on the next steps with the BradComm deal, given they're understandably reeling this morning. Give me a call back, we can chat. Thanks Dave."

I end the call and smile at my savvy move. Dave will either tell me he's already heard from BradComm like I supposedly had, or he won't have an update. That will tell me whether the data seekers are casting a broad net or focusing only on me.

Now, back to my task of decoding the data. I finish the macro to isolate rules for those extra customers that were not in the Diverse Data test data. After ten more minutes of tinkering with my typing mistakes and logic errors, the macro runs successfully and produces a report.

The report now shows a series of PR campaign activities for the thirty-three customers. A quick scan of the rules makes me sit back in my chair.

BradComm lives in a rather dirty world of public relations, so I am aware they sometimes have to build strategies around very sensitive topics. The strategies in this data, however, appear to target specific populations of people tied to political topics. If I was a gambling man, I would say these are political campaign rules. The business itself is no surprise at all, but it feels almost dirty to be seeing the actual methods laid out in data terms.

There are rules that appear to isolate specific topics across a variety of internet data sources. These rules outline some focused geopolitical criteria and political issues, with strategies for each of them. Once the strategies are identified, the software seems to be configured to trigger another workflow that goes outside the Diverse Data software.

After scanning and comparing a couple of these customers, I see similar, although not identical, workflow and rules. While I'm not yet running the Diverse Data software to see how this would work, my initial scan tells me the data for these thirty-three customers is targeting specific voting populations, then triggering social engineering workflows.

After a quick look at the customer creation dates to see when all this was setup, I get more insight into what I'm looking at.

The first customer was created three months before last year's election cycle. The next was created just a week later. There's a pattern here. After looking at the rest of the thirty-three customers, I see twenty-seven that were all created in the months leading up to last year's election cycle.

The larger question, however, still remains: why weren't these included in the test data? There are many other election-related PR strategies in the test data already. BradComm is one of the premier

PR firms in the industry and political campaign strategies are a huge revenue stream for them. I've even seen the team review them during our proof-of-concept status meetings.

Now I know there is data on this device that was excluded from our test data, but I'm still not sure why it's worth the effort Mike went through to hide it. And why didn't he want it to get to the authorities? Would he perhaps be implicating himself and his own PR strategies and methods? Is that why it was so important to him?

With way more questions than answers right now, I need to find out what's so special about these twenty-seven BradComm customers and their PR campaigns.

Chapter Twenty-Two

I don't get to think about the data I have discovered on the device long at all before my phone buzzes again. I look at the screen to see a call from another Detroit number. These people are relentless! Suspecting it's another ploy like the fake BradComm call earlier, I decide I'm going to tell them I can't find the device and I accept the call.

"This is Keith." This time, I'm not concerned about giving away my name. They know who I am.

"Good morning, Mr. Morgan. This is Special Agent Lee Warfield from the Federal Bureau of Investigation field office in Detroit. Do you have a few minutes?" A confident male voice asks.

This appears to be a new tactic for the data seekers. I suppose they believe it would be more forceful to say they are the FBI. I decide to play this one along a bit to see if I can get more information.

“Yes, sure, Agent Warfield. What can I do for you?” I ask.

“You can call me Lee. And to be honest, I’m not really sure what you can do for me. We have an investigation that seems to have crossed paths with some of the work your company is doing for BradComm. Does that ring a bell?” he asks in a sincere tone.

Well, this is starting out much differently from the other call from the fake BradComm employee. I decide to push this further.

“Absolutely. I was there last week at a sales meeting. I’ve been consulting with them to select a software vendor. We don’t have a signed deal with the vendor yet, but it’s getting close.”

I leave the story open and intentionally avoid mentioning Mike’s death. Let’s see where Lee, or whatever his real name is, takes this conversation. I’m skeptical the FBI would be calling so close to my last call with Officer Brockmeier, though. It seems the FBI would know the local police are already working it.

“Yeah, we saw your name on the visitor log. That’s part of the reason we’re calling. I am not sure if you have seen the news, but the individual you met with that day, Mike Schwartz, has unfortunately been killed.”

This guy is giving me a much more realistic vibe than the woman who called before. Either they have changed tactics within a few minutes or these are two totally different groups.

“I saw that in the news, yes. I can’t tell you how shocked I was! We had just met with him Friday morning. And I understand he was killed later that day?”

I say it as though it’s a question, but it’s really an attempt to confirm the story I’ve already read.

The caller who says he is an FBI agent continues without skipping a beat.

“How close were you to Mike Schwartz?” he asks.

It’s a quick shift in tone and topic, but seems in line with an FBI investigation and matches the way Officer Brockmeier started his line of questioning.

“We never met outside the work environment. I had met with him maybe ten times over the last six months. All of those meetings were at their office in Detroit. I recall maybe one or two team dinners he

attended, but that's it. He rarely socialized with the project team," I reply.

"And were you involved with the data analysis project itself? Like in the day-to-day details?" he asks.

"Not really, no. I am mostly involved with the feature and functionality discussions. Diverse Data and BradComm both have teams of engineers who handle the technical analysis, configuration, and testing."

"Ah, ok. So, you have no direct interaction with actual live BradComm data or anything?"

It seems he is beating around the bush on the stolen data, so I decide to keep him going to see what I can learn. Plus, he seems genuine so far.

"No, not really. I know the project team had gotten some copies of live data at various points in the project. That's how we make sure everything is working correctly before the customer signs off on our configuration. Is there something specific you'd like to know? I can look something up for you if you want?"

That question seems to get Lee a little energized.

"Well, yes, there might be. Are you able to see actual detailed records for customers outside the Diverse Data software? More specifically, do you see any financial data? Like billing transactions, payment records or other data like that? Or do you only see the data inside your software?"

It sounds like he's looking for something related to the BradComm business beyond what we are dealing with around their PR campaigns. That's clearly outside my scope. If he's really FBI, and if he's tying Mike Schwartz's death to something related to BradComm financial data, then this is much bigger than our little Diverse Data software acquisition project.

It's time to shut this down.

"Oh no, we wouldn't see financial data. This software is more aligned with the customers' PR campaigns themselves. Our project includes historical data analysis, internal and external integrations, social media, and publicly available data. But that's where our scope ends. We wouldn't deal with financials of BradComm or their customers."

I can hear the wind leave his sails as he lets out a deep sigh.

“Ok, it was worth a shot. We have another large case that we think may overlap with this BradComm situation, but we need more than that. We really need the financial transactions for the customers. Not that the public relations stuff isn’t valuable, because in this case it is extremely important. I’m just not sure it gets us the evidence we need.”

Wait a minute, so he doesn’t care about stolen data? He’s trying to tie BradComm to something bigger that may have resulted in Mike’s death? Is that why I have this data from Mike in the first place? Oh boy, what have I been dragged into?

My mind races again. Do I tell this guy about the device? He seems legit, but do I trust him? It’s been barely a two-minute conversation. Do I put all my eggs in his basket because of that?

I remember Mike’s concern about getting the data to the authorities and decide to stop right there. I need to think before I put all my trust in this Agent Warfield character.

“Sorry I couldn’t help, Lee. Let me know if you need anything else. I’ll do what I can. Mike’s death has us completely shocked.”

“Understood, and thanks, Mr. Morgan.” He sounds disappointed.

We hang up and I immediately look for the last call from Officer Brockmeier so I can call him back. I need to ask him some questions, as he’s the only person I’ve talked to from Detroit who I’m quite sure is real. Finding his number, I tap my phone to give him a call.

“Hey Mr. Morgan, thanks for calling me back,” he answers quickly and eagerly.

“Sure, Officer Brockmeier. Sorry for the delay. I was in a meeting.”

“No worries, I understand.” Then Tommy lets out a deep breath and changes his tone.

“Unfortunately, I don’t think my original reason for calling matters much. I’m no longer involved in this case.” Tommy clearly sounds dejected.

“What? Why not? What happened?” I ask.

Even as I ask the questions, I expect I know exactly where this is going. Tommy is about to tell me the local police are being removed

from the case, the FBI is now involved, and I'm about to learn Agent Warfield is indeed real.

"This investigation has been taken over by the FBI. It's now a federal case," Tommy says.

Oh boy. Hearing that, I conclude the last call from Agent Warfield was legitimate. And now, I realize I'm sitting on evidence he needs to know. I'll be calling him back right after this! But first, it's time to go digging for information from Tommy.

"Oh wow, that's crazy! What made it go federal?" I ask. Of course, he may or may not tell me.

"To be honest, we don't get all the details on that. It seems it's related to an IRS matter, or illegal cryptocurrency activity, or both. In any case, they'll be asking the questions from now on," he says.

Tommy already has me on a new path. I decide to keep pressing for information. He may not know the specifics of this data, but maybe he knows more about the people who I fear are tracking me.

"I put a call in to Dave Hawkins, the Diverse Data salesman who was with us on Friday. We are hoping to get a meeting with the board at BradComm after they come around. I'm not sure if I'll need to be back there again or not. I certainly don't want to press, but the company was well along the way to moving forward with some new software. Mike would want it to be done, I'm sure. This was sort of his brain-child."

Tommy jumps right in before I even finish.

"Mr. Morgan, that's why I was calling you earlier. I'm sorry to say you're not going to hear back from Dave Hawkins."

Uh oh.

"I feel awful having to tell you this so suddenly, but he was found dead in his home early this morning," Tommy says somberly.

What is going on here? Tommy clearly hears my gasp.

"So, what I was going to tell you is to watch your back. The FBI will be helping, but you need to know this thing is bigger than Mike Schwartz," Tommy says with a sense of urgency in his voice.

Yeah, I suppose it is. Two of the three people from our meeting last Friday are dead, and the third one is me!

Chapter Twenty-Three

After ending the call with Officer Brockmeier, I realize I need to get the details from the last few days to the FBI. That Agent Warfield guy seems legitimate, so I find his number from our last conversation and place the call.

“Mr. Morgan, how are you?” He doesn’t seem to have as much urgency in his voice as I do, so I dive right in. Either he knows more than he’s letting on, or I have more information than the FBI.

“Agent Warfield, I need to tell you something. I apologize for not telling you earlier, but when you called, I didn’t know if you were legitimately FBI or not,” I begin.

Agent Warfield responds without a pause.

“What? Why would I not be FBI?” he asks.

“I’ll get to that in just a minute. First, let me go back to Friday. As I told the cops in Detroit, Mike Schwartz unexpectedly ended our

meeting last Friday to take an urgent call. While it was odd, it wasn't unprecedented, so we didn't think much of it," I say.

"Yeah, I saw all this in the report from Officer Brockmeier," Lee says.

"Sure, ok. Well, there's more to it."

Before I can keep going, Lee interjects a question.

"Let me guess, you didn't know if Officer Brockmeier was a real officer, either?" he asks sarcastically.

Lee is getting snarky, but I understand why. So, I ignore his question and move on.

"I received a voicemail from Mike Schwartz shortly after I left the BradComm office. I picked it up at the airport. I'll share it with you guys, but essentially it said he had accidentally dropped a USB storage device in my laptop bag while I was at the office. He mentioned something about it being potentially embarrassing for his family and he didn't want it to get to the authorities or the media."

Lee seems to get why I didn't share it now.

"Ah, ok. So, I'm guessing you didn't offer it to Officer Brockmeier out of respect to Mike's request. I suppose I see, although that is withholding evidence no matter why you did it," Lee says matter-of-factly.

"Well, yeah, I suppose that's true. But again, you'll find out why I was skeptical of you and Officer Brockmeier in a minute."

I am not being one hundred percent truthful, as I did believe Tommy was real, but I'm not telling Lee after that accusation! Instead, I continue.

"Of course, I did find the device in my bag, as Mike suggested. Only now I don't think it was an accident at all. Mike dropped it in there on purpose," I say.

"Why do you think that, Mr. Morgan?" Lee asks.

"Because he told me he'd email me a mailing address to forward the device even before I responded to say I found it. He knew I had it. It's like he was using me as a mule to carry the device out of BradComm," I say, waiting for Lee to respond.

"Ok, got it. Yeah, it sounds like you're right about that. Go on, Mr. Morgan," Lee says, still sounding annoyed.

“During the weekend, I thought I recognized an unfamiliar vehicle in our area. I think I saw it near our home, in town at least once, and possibly even outside of town when I was fishing with my kids.”

“Whoa, Keith! Why didn’t you tell me all this?” Lee is clearly becoming more agitated at me for withholding information from him. Even if — in my mind, at least — it was for legitimate reasons.

“That’s not all,” I admit, reluctantly.

“Oh brother. There’s more?” he asks, his exasperation growing.

“Unfortunately, yes.” I take a deep breath and continue irritating Agent Warfield.

“This morning, I had a call from a fake BradComm employee asking about the device,” I say.

“What do you mean, a fake BradComm employee?” he asks.

“That’s the reason I thought you were not real, either. A friendly female caller asked me if I had found a device. She said someone may have accidentally dropped it in my bag,” I say, then pause.

“Ok, so why do you know she was fake?” Lee asks.

“I was never around any BradComm employees except Mike. And I’m quite sure Mike didn’t tell anyone about the device. Plus, she said they’d have a courier sent over before I even said I found it.”

I pause again.

“And did you tell her you found it?” he asks.

“No, I didn’t. I told her I’d look for it and let them know.”

“Good, so you may have bought yourself some time. I’m not sure how much you know about this story, Keith, but I need to share something with you.”

I suspect he’s going to tell me about Dave Hawkins. But I remain quiet to let him give me his version.

“The other attendee at your meeting with Mike on Friday, Dave Hawkins from Diverse Data, has been found murdered. It appears it was a home invasion,” Lee says, then pauses.

Well, there it is. Officer Brockmeier’s words are echoing in my head. “... this is bigger than Mike Schwartz.”

I try to appear shocked even though I already heard this news, and I decide to dig for more information regarding what I am dealing with here.

“You’re suggesting the explosion that killed Mike Schwartz was targeted?” I ask.

“Yes, Mr. Morgan. We believe it was, but there’s more evidence than that. It seems Mike was shot before his car was blown up. The explosion was likely intended to destroy any remaining evidence, but it didn’t. I won’t get too detailed about the ATF crime scene investigators, but they’re good. And they found evidence that proves Mike died from a gunshot wound to the head. The car bombing was, we believe, a clean-up act,” Lee says.

My mind races as I consider what these people may know about me. The first thought that comes to my mind is my kids! Oh God, they have seen my kids!

“Agent Warfield, I need some help right now. I need someone to watch my kids. If that black Ford Explorer is theirs, these guys have seen me with my kids! Someone has to protect my kids!” I don’t realize how loud my voice has become.

“Calm down, Mr. Morgan. We will certainly get someone to watch the kids. Where are they now, school?”

“Yes, they are. At least, I think they are. Hopefully, they are!” My voice is getting even louder as I talk.

“I’m sure they are, Mr. Morgan, or you would have heard, right?”

“Yes, that’s true.” I calm down a bit. Agent Warfield is right. If the kids didn’t show up, or if they left school, I would have had emails and phone calls by now.

“We’ll get local coverage for the kids. I’m also going to get an agent sent your way. It seems we’re dealing with some relentless people here.”

“Yeah, sure. And there’s one more person to watch. I had a meeting with a data architect from Diverse Data, Jennifer Ellis, at a coffee shop this morning. I didn’t notice a tail on that trip, but I don’t suppose I’d see them every time. They may know about that meeting if they were watching me.” I shake my head with regret once again for bringing Jennifer into this.

“You met with this person in public? Does she know everything you’ve told me so far?” he asks, sounding like he’s typing in the background.

“Not all, no.” I still haven’t told Agent Warfield about the specifics of the data I’ve found.

“Ok, good. We can still put an officer on her, just in case. Is there anyone else?” he asks, sounding only a little annoyed now.

“No, that’s it. Although I have some other information that may be useful. First, though, I’d like to make sure the kids and Jennifer are safe.”

“Fine, Mr. Morgan. I’ll get on it right now.”

“Ok, thanks Agent Warfield. Call me back when they’re safe. Our next conversation may take a while.”

“Done.”

Agent Warfield sighs and ends the call.

Chapter Twenty-Four

After thirty minutes, I've made the rounds to be sure the house is safe. I'm getting more and more concerned about the kids, but finally my phone vibrates in my pocket. I recognize Lee's number and pick up immediately.

"Hi Agent Warfield. Are the kids covered?" I blurt out before he has a chance to say hello. He seems to understand my urgency.

"Yes, Mr. Morgan, they sure are. As you are probably aware, there is already an officer at each of their schools. Both the elementary and middle schools have an officer presence. We simply added another to keep eyes on the two of them. They're safe."

"And Jennifer?" I add, still with urgency in my voice.

"We've posted an officer on her street in Colorado Springs. She's covered now, too. And last but not least, we have an agent from Denver on the way to your house. You didn't ask, but we think it's important. We just need to be more subtle with your coverage so we

don't tip them off too quickly. We don't know what they'll do if they think you're working with the FBI."

I hadn't even thought about myself, as I'm sure I could cover any intrusion that might come my way. There's no reason to tell Agent Warfield about that, though.

"Ok, thanks Agent Warfield. Do you mind if I ask a few questions about Mike and Dave just to see what I'm dealing with here?" I ask, trying to be calmer.

"Mr. Morgan, you know I can't talk about the case. We're still putting this together real-time," Lee says.

"This is my family we're talking about, Lee! I have a right to know what I'm dealing with!" This time, I don't try to hide my anger as I scream into the phone.

Agent Warfield seems to get it. I hear him draw a breath.

"Alright Keith. I'll tell you what I know so far. Just understand the story is spotty and you may not hear all the answers you want. Ok?"

"Fair enough." I settle down to listen.

"By the way, I'm on the way to the airport as we're talking. My ASAC has asked me to come out and deal with this firsthand," Lee says.

Only after he says it do I notice the sound of car noises in the background.

"Ok."

"Basically, we believe the BradComm situation is part of a convergence of two ongoing FBI investigations going back over a year. The killing of Mike Schwartz has pulled those investigations together," Lee begins.

"What type of investigations?" I'm hoping his story will help me understand how the Diverse Data files we found may relate to either of the FBI investigations.

"Well, let me answer that with a question. Are you familiar with social engineering?" Lee asks.

"Yeah, I am. I'm not an expert, but I know a little about using social media to influence public opinion. I also understand the media may be real or fabricated and can target a specific outcome. And I guess I also understand it can be completely innocent, a bit nefarious, or even totally illegal," I respond.

“Well, yes, that’s basically it. And what do you know about cryptocurrency?” he asks.

I won’t tell him how much I know about this one, as it may lead him down a path about my personal situation I don’t want him to go. I have been involved with cryptocurrency since the early days and have grown a sizable crypto wallet of my own. Instead of disclosing that unnecessary detail, I give a generic reply.

“I’m somewhat familiar. Again, wouldn’t call myself an expert,” I respond with a partial truth.

“Ok, fair enough. Those are basically the two originating investigations. There is a political consultant in DC who had long been under investigation for stretching the legal limits of his campaign strategies. Sadly, he’s one of many, but we had been closing in on him,” Lee explains.

“So, he was using illegal social engineering methods as part of his campaign strategies?” I ask before sharing what I know about the data I discovered. But I may be seeing how BradComm was involved already.

“Yeah, we think so. It may be discouraging to hear, but we know this happens frequently during election cycles. Social engineering has been a tool of politics for years now, and when it’s orchestrated and false, it’s obviously illegal. Sadly, it takes a lot of manpower to determine the, what’d you call it, nefarious from the illegal, and we just can’t keep up with it. We’re getting better, and we were narrowing in on this particular suspect in DC. We believe he has been using some intentionally false data to influence results in his customers’ favor.”

“What do you mean by narrowing in on him?” I ask to see how much he knows.

“Well, we believe his consulting engagements were tied to a larger, coordinated effort funded by a foreign interest. That’s how the investigations came together,” Lee says.

“Whoa! Let me get this straight. You’ve found evidence of a foreign party working with someone in DC to manipulate our elections through illegal social engineering? That’s crazy! I mean, suppose I always suspected that happened at some level, but it’s sort of nice to see the FBI closing it down!” I say, unable to hide my

surprise as my mind drifts to the data in the Diverse Data tables Mike had left me.

“I wouldn’t go that far, Keith. We’re a long way from closing it down. As I said, we always feel like we’re one step behind. But we’re definitely getting closer. Before I go any further, let me add some more color here regarding the crypto investigation,” Lee says, changing gears.

“Ok, sure.”

“Over the last few years, the FBI has gotten better and better at tracking cryptocurrency as a payment mechanism for illegal activity. The most public cases have been with drug trafficking payments, but there have been many more,” Lee says.

I am keenly aware of the very public FBI arrests for crypto traffic in Latin America, specifically, but again I keep quiet.

“We have found accounts that link to our friendly neighborhood political consultant in DC, Martin Sanderson, both with incoming and outgoing transfers. He’s been getting paid enormous sums of crypto. We know that.”

“Wow. So, this Sanderson guy was illegally manipulating political campaigns and was getting paid under the table for it using crypto?”

I realize I’m linking the two before Agent Warfield said it, but I’m trying to get to the specifics of the enemy I’m up against. Lucky for me, crypto is one of my, and The Association’s, specialties.

“Well, we don’t exactly have evidence of that yet, but yes. That’s what we suspect,” he says, cautiously.

“Ok, so why BradComm? And why Mike Schwartz? And why Dave Hawkins?” I ask.

“Some of this I can share later, because it’s not so critical to the case. And Keith, I’m getting to the airport, so I’ll need to drop. But I can tell you a few things about BradComm.”

“Ok.”

“We believe, during the last two years or so, Mr. Sanderson has been paying Mike Schwartz a great deal of money to help provide strategies for these campaigns. Some were apparently perfectly legal, some, we believe, were not. What we don’t know, however, is which were which. There are so many campaigns that both the consultant and BradComm work with that we can’t dig through the

linkage. We had barely started down that rathole when this whole situation blew up on us — I'm sorry, no pun intended — with Mike's death."

"Wow, ok. Then why was Mike taking data? If he was getting paid huge sums of money, it seems he should be in pretty good shape. Why upset all that?" I ask.

"That's something we still need to figure out, Keith. I have theories, but that's all they are. We need evidence. Maybe that data you have will help provide that evidence?" He's making a statement in the form of a question.

I decide to wait until Agent Warfield is on the ground in front of me to share the rest of what I know. Plus, he's getting on a plane and I have a little more research to do.

"Yeah, ok. Maybe," I respond.

"We'll talk more when I get there. I'm heading in now. I'll see you in a couple of hours, Keith. Stay safe."

"I will. Thanks Lee."

Yeah, we're definitely on a first name basis. And I'm back at my laptop before the call ends. If they knew all this, The Association was onto something bigger than I originally thought. It's no wonder they kept asking for more data!

Chapter Twenty-Five

Getting back into the data, I now have some focus. Lee has given at least a small bit of a backdrop for the data I've been looking at. The FBI believes BradComm was helping manipulate elections. They also believe this Sanderson guy, the political consultant, was behind the whole thing. And somehow, they paid with crypto. And apparently, Mike Schwartz was engaged to build out the specific strategies.

It doesn't take much deduction to suspect the twenty-seven customers on Mike's device — the ones created last year just before the election — are likely tied to that activity. The challenge will be proving it. I now understand why Lee was looking for payment records, as that would have made this easier. Knowing payments were handled in crypto, though, I suspect there's no record of anything tying Sanderson to these campaigns.

I'm pondering the whole end to end scenario in my mind when my phone vibrates yet again. I see Lee's number again when I pick up the phone and I accept the call.

"Hey Lee, just can't stay away, huh?" I say as the call connects.

Lee chuckles as much as can be expected in the situation.

"I guess so. I wanted to call back with an off-the-record type question."

"Sure, go ahead." This was different.

"I don't know if this is an unnecessary question for a veteran living in Colorado, but can I assume you are prepared to defend yourself?"

Lee's question is more unnecessary than he thinks. There's a pistol in my waistband right now, and there always is. The gun safes in the house and my storage unit also hold an arsenal that would make most hunters, target shooters, and even military collectors proud. I don't want to be too obvious about that, so I consider a tempered answer.

Before I respond, however, Lee continues.

"I mean, I contacted our field office in Denver to get someone out there to your house, and I'm also on the way from Detroit, but it will be at least an hour or more before anyone gets there. So, just to be certain, you have yourself covered, right?" he asks, clearly trying to sound cautious and not fearful.

Since Lee doesn't know that question is almost laughable, I smile at his personal concern for my safety.

"Well, yes, as the matter of fact I do. I grew up with guns and have a few hunting rifles and handguns in my safe. I also have my Concealed Carry License, so I suppose I will take advantage of that if I need to be out and about. Thanks for your concern, though, Lee. I appreciate it," I respond without revealing the more complete answer to his question.

"I agree, and again, I am sorry to put you on alert like this. If you can, I'd ask that you act as normal as possible, whatever that means. But please don't take any extra trips out of the house for now. At least until our field agent makes contact," Lee says.

"I need to make sure the kids get home ok, but besides that I can probably make excuses to miss things for the rest of the evening. I

may send them to their grandparent's house in Denver for the night if there will be FBI agents here. I'd want them covered while they're there, of course, but it may be better than having them here where I know I'm being tracked," I say, thinking on the fly.

"Yeah, good idea. We can certainly get someone to watch the house in Denver."

With that detail confirmed, we say our goodbyes and end the call.

As I have a sip of coffee, I sit back to contemplate the incredible situation I have been thrust into. After another sip, I consider Lee's suggestion, get up and head down to the gun safe to pick out one of my rifles and a couple of handguns.

The holster I had gotten to carry my small SIG P365 inside my waistband has gotten a ton of use, and at the moment I'm thrilled I have it. As I lift my shirt to make sure it's still there and ready to go, I can't help but pull it out quickly just once to make sure I'm prepared to use it. After checking to make sure there is a round in the chamber, I return it to the holster and pull my shirt back over it to make sure it doesn't print too badly. In a situation like this, I'm grateful for what my daughter calls my 'hobo mountain man' wardrobe. The tactical pants, thermal long-sleeve shirt under a flannel button-up shirt make perfect sense at this moment. Plus, who uses the word 'hobo' these days, anyway?

For additional levels of caution, or maybe paranoia, I grab my Winchester shotgun and stand it inside my coat closet by the front door. For the next layer of defense, I pull my 10mm Smith & Wesson pistol out of one of the pockets in the door of my safe. After looking around the living room, I slide it into the drawer of the end table beside the couch. Yes, it may be overkill to store my bear-and-mountain-lion pistol in my living room, but it sure makes me feel better right now.

Even as I stack up my weapons around the house, I continue to be concerned about the kids. How much do I tell them about this whole situation? Do they need to have guns handy even if they head up to Oliver and Judy's? I know Oliver has a few guns at his house, but I doubt he carries one all the time. At least they'll have a local police presence focused on them, based on what Lee has committed.

Other thoughts cloud my mind as I consider this unknown enemy. I know my property has cameras, but do these people have the sophistication to override them? Are they watching our house right now? Should I tell Jennifer what I've just learned?

As all these things and more go through my head, my phone buzzes on the table. I pick it up and am greeted not with another call, but with a camera alert from our driveway camera. This is not unusual at all, as we have cameras all over the property that are constantly triggering alerts.

Our outdoor cameras have gotten more and more sophisticated over time, with the current versions being able to connect to our wireless network. This was a big step for us as the old wired ones were a pain to install.

The bigger innovation came when solar power panels were available for these cameras. That now means we can put them virtually anywhere that has access to sunshine, and never have to touch them.

Those two bits of innovation have allowed me to install cameras all around the house, covering virtually every angle of the property. Of course, they're not perfect and can probably be defeated by someone with special skills, but for us, they work.

The feature that I am especially grateful for right now, however, is the ability to distinguish a car, a person, or even an animal. This ability is not without its faults, but it is quite effective. And right now, it is telling me there is a vehicle pulling into my driveway.

Of course, it is only seconds from the phone alert that Winnie tells me the same thing. He doesn't have a specific bark for an animal, person, or car, but he lets loose a similar string of barks with any of those.

I slip to the window and peer out to see a black Ford Explorer pulling into the driveway. My blood pressure immediately skyrockets and I quickly pull back.

Am I about to face off with the unknown enemy already?

Chapter Twenty-Six

The black Ford Explorer in my driveway has my adrenaline spiked and my mind racing.

I only have a few seconds to decide my next action, and the wrong one could be fatal. I didn't see them following me, but they must think I'm home. Or are they planning to break in? With any surveillance skill at all, they should have seen all the cameras on the property. Or maybe they're so fearless they don't even care?

They've already eliminated the other two people at the meeting, so now they must believe I have the device. But do they know I'm home? Are they watching me or still tracking me somehow? My phone? My car?

As I'm thinking, I'm also moving. I pull the USB drive out of my laptop and run back to the gun safe in my bedroom. With the biometric pad on the safe, the door opens quickly and I stuff the device in there. I close it and hurry back into the dining room and

close my laptop. I get no further than that when I hear a car door close and Winnie goes even more nuts.

I stay back from the window, but I can still see a man stepping out of the Explorer. He looks like a normal guy, maybe early thirties, and has no real extreme features of any kind. I'm not sure what I expected, but this guy appears harmless on the surface.

I see him scan the yard, though, and linger for a second on the two cameras within view of the front door and garage door. Did he linger, or did I just expect him to do that? Either way, I'm on edge as he walks to the front door and rings the doorbell.

Since there is no obvious reason to grab one of the weapons I had retrieved from my gun safe and start firing, I walk to the door to greet him. I do, however, remain keenly aware of the SIG, ready and waiting in the holster on my belt. I am also establishing my plan as I wonder what he is going to say, if anything.

Will he charge me? Will he just shoot and start looking for the data himself? That seems too risky, as he doesn't even know if I have the device here or if I've moved it.

I decide I need to be ready for anything, and start working through all the ways I should handle the potential actions he may take. Upon realizing I was standing still for several seconds, I shake myself and take a deep breath. I need to act as natural as possible here and convince him to leave. That's my simple plan.

The thought of pointing a gun at another human gives me a flashback to my military and security contracting days, but that's only for a second. As usual. I had promised myself to avoid armed conflict as much as possible after those years. So far, I've kept that promise. There were some close calls during a couple of my assignments from The Association, but none resulted in direct combat.

It's also why I'm a consultant now and not something that involves guns, even though I have to admit I'm better with guns than with consulting. My assignments with The Association often require preparation for conflict, but I am always instructed to engage only if absolutely necessary. Yet, here I am staring a potential conflict right in the face.

After convincing myself I am definitely prepared to do what is necessary to protect myself or my family, I open the door.

The driver of the black Ford Explorer greets me with a broad smile and a nonchalant handshake when I open the door. Seeing him up close like this, he looks familiar. I suppose I am surprised he's trying to be so friendly, but I try to keep it to myself.

"Good afternoon. My name is Dave Smith from the Rocky Mountain Courier service, and I'm looking for a Mr. Morgan."

He hands me a business card that says the same. As he does, his sleeve slides up to expose a gold Rolex on his wrist. That's not the watch of a typical courier, I suspect, although I already knew that's not who he was. It's a careless slip, though, and a reminder to stay on my toes.

I have to be impressed by an organization that could come up with this actor so quickly! Looking at this guy, he could be a salesman, a policeman, a military guy, or, as my mind won't let me forget, a stone-cold killer.

It couldn't have been over two hours since I spoke to the fake BradComm employee, and they already have a cover for the guy standing in front of me? And he has business cards? Although business cards are easy enough to create, I suppose.

Where is the nearest Kinko's? Does that company even exist anymore? Where else could you get business cards made so quickly? Should I ask this guy inside?

As is often the case, I'm not sure how long I've been standing silent in my own thoughts when he preempts my internal dialog and continues.

"BradComm in Detroit contacted us a short time ago."

He looks at his phone as if he is reading his notes.

"They told us you have a small electronic package that requires shipment back to their office?"

He raises his voice at the end, to imply it is a question.

As he is standing there, however, I remember a crucial element of the conversation with the fake BradComm employee.

I never told them I had the device! I only said I would look for it. Someone somewhere has assumed that I have it. Either they are incredibly bold or they have gotten their stories mixed up.

I manage to put a questioning expression on my face as I decide to hit this detail head on.

“Oh, I apologize, Mr. Smith.”

That’s a genius cover name, by the way. I believe the fake BradComm employee used the same last name. They could certainly use some lessons on creativity.

“As I mentioned to BradComm when they called, I have found nothing that resembles such a device.”

Ok, here we go. Game on, Mr. Smith.

The statement seems to give him a brief pause, but he is clearly not going to let me drop it that easily. I’m curious how he is going to play this, as his courier getup will only allow so much pressure before he will either have to take a different approach and force his way in or he will need to back off.

“Oh, I’m sorry. She must have misunderstood. The notes I have here say I need to pick it up and immediately send it back. Should I come back later this afternoon?” he asks, without skipping a beat. He’s clearly not rattled easily.

I’ve bought some time, and that’s all I need at the moment. If I can just get the FBI here before this guy comes back, they should be able to take him in. They said they could be here in about an hour, so I’ll try to buy some more time. Mike and Dave’s murders are blaring in my mind as I force myself to stay calm.

Now I’m trying to play off what he said, thinking on the fly.

“Well, I have a conference call with one of my international clients that will take most of the evening. I’ll look when I get done, though, and will call you in the morning. I have your card. Does that work?” I ask, trying to sound helpful.

I can see him measuring how much he wants to push, but he backs off. Either I sold him or he has a different plan. After a few seconds of consideration, he responds.

“I’m sure BradComm will be concerned, but I’ll call and let them know,” he says.

The fact that he is still standing on my porch is a good thing, and I wonder if he notices I have been completely uninterested in inviting him inside.

Does he sense I’m deflecting? Should I offer something more that shows I don’t know what he’s talking about?

“They mentioned this data is critical to completing the sale for the Diverse Data software, so you can bet I’ll be digging through every pocket of every bag I have trying to find it. My contract doesn’t get paid until this project is complete!”

It’s a lie, but I’m trying to sound like this is just as important to me, too.

“Sure, Mr. Morgan. No problem. I appreciate you getting back to me as soon as you can. We can have someone here quickly if and when you find it. As I mentioned, BradComm was most concerned and they are putting pressure on us. Talk to you tomorrow.”

And with that, the fake courier turns and walks back to the black Ford Explorer. A muted sigh escapes as I attempt to smile. I force myself not to stand there and watch the car get all the way out of the driveway, but I do watch the camera footage to ensure he heads out.

As I watch the fake courier leave on the security cameras, it finally strikes me why he looks familiar. He has shed the leather jacket and Italian loafers, but this is the guy who was watching Jamie’s hockey practice Saturday morning when Dawn and I were talking! There wasn’t an urgent call to a new actor for this role, they just reused their driver as a courier. Maybe they don’t have as many resources as I thought.

What concerns me now is he saw me sitting with Kyle watching Jamie’s practice! I suppose I suspected he saw the kids before when we were fishing, but now, I’m sure. This guy knows my family and has been following us since at least Saturday morning. The stakes have just gone up.

So, my conversation with the fake courier has bought me some time. Now what am I going to do with it?

Chapter Twenty-Seven

I have a couple of hours until the kids get out of school, and the FBI should get here before that. Knowing this device is at the core of my current predicament, I decide I'm going to get more of an idea of how this data aligns to the story Agent Warfield shared. I'll be glad to give this device to the FBI as soon as I can, but I'm also trying to gather data for The Association. Plus, I'm curious. I retrieve the USB drive from my gun safe and plug it back into my laptop.

This time, I'm determined to make some progress on those customers who are missing from the test database. Those must be the ones that hold the deadly link to the Sanderson fellow in DC and the crypto payments. The results from the macro I ran earlier are still showing on my laptop when I turn it back on.

Knowing The Association is seeking more definitive data on these campaigns is an additional motivation as I start scrolling through the data. Before I can even review a single customer, I'm

interrupted by another phone call. An exasperated sigh escapes as I pick up my phone to see who it is.

Is this the fake BradComm employee again? Did she hear from the fake courier already? I guess I need a story for her to show why I haven't called back yet. I'll reuse the same one I just gave the fake courier, I suppose.

I look at the caller ID and get a pleasant surprise. It is not the fake BradComm employee this time. It's Jennifer. As I accept the call, I realize I have been totally out of touch with the BradComm and Diverse Data teams today. I assume there hasn't been much going on, as I'm sure BradComm is likely closed due to Mike's death. Plus, the team at Diverse Data has probably heard about Dave Hawkins by now. Or maybe not. Let me see what Jennifer says about it.

"Hey Jennifer."

"Hey Keith, how's it going?"

Jennifer sounds a little stressed, or excited, or something.

"Good. What's up?"

I didn't mean to sound eager to get off the phone, but I fear I did.

"Keith, have you had a chance to look at this data yet?" she asks.

And now she definitely sounds concerned. I remember she had a copy on her laptop, so I guess I shouldn't be surprised she has looked at the data since I left her house. Knowing she's a data person, I'm eager to find out what she has discovered.

"I have glanced at it a little, yeah. Why do you ask?"

I decide to start the conversation as though nothing is wrong. If need be, I can change that approach later.

"Well, to start with, this is mostly the same data we have in our test environment for BradComm. That means much of it has been visible to us, and to all our test team members, for months now. I can't imagine that data has anything criminal in it."

Ok, so she has done exactly the same initial analysis I did. Let me see if she uncovered the same anomaly.

"That is refreshing, I guess. But that's not all that is on there," Jennifer says as she continues.

Ok, so now she will tell me about the thirty-three customers that are not in our test data. I decide to head her off at the pass and let her know I, too, am aware of those records.

“Yeah, I did a quick comparison myself and found those thirty-three extra customers listed and all their rules,” I interject.

I assume that is the end of this part of the conversation and we will move on. Jennifer, however, has done some more digging.

“Right, so you found the same count I did. Plus, some are tied to our new social media integration capability. Which, of course, sent me into my typical data analysis mode. Keith, there are some crazy things here,” she says with even more caution in her voice.

Uh-oh, she has uncovered something I didn’t see. So much for keeping her out of it! The way she keeps saying my name only intensifies her obvious concern. Now I’m getting nervous.

“I did some searching on the customer names, creation dates, the rules they were using, and how they were integrated with the social media campaigns. I can’t see all the details on the social media accounts, of course, but I can get the gist of it. Six had social media integration. Again, I can see what they did. Clearly, they were analyzing data and triggering a workflow that executed some level of social media blast,” she says, now with more energy as she gets into the details.

Everything Jennifer was saying was aligning with the story Agent Warfield told me. I decide to keep quiet about that, however, as up to now Jennifer is simply doing data analysis and has not gotten into anything illegal. Or anything that might be worthy of murder.

I don’t speak, and she continues.

“The twenty-seven without social media campaigns, oddly enough, were all created just before last year’s elections. Which I thought was weird. Not only that, they are the most specific workflows and rules I have seen. Which led me to do some Google searching on the specific elections in the locations where the rules were targeted. I haven’t gotten through all of them, but I searched a few of them so far. Get this: the local elections in those locations had exactly these scenarios played out.” She pauses after the crescendo of that last sentence.

I decide to act surprised to keep her out of the FBI discussion. I also recognize she hasn’t mentioned Dave’s death, which means it hasn’t hit the news at Diverse Data yet.

“What? Let me see if I’m getting what you’re saying. BradComm was creating specific strategies for specific candidates? But they didn’t execute any social media blasts with those rules? So the social media work must have been done manually? That would be a huge effort, Jennifer,” I reply, taking note I have more information for The Association once again. This is the type of evidence they want.

“It would, yes. But I’ve only gotten into a couple of these customers so far. And here’s another thing. Remember, I said customers sometimes use these files to load data at the beginning of our projects? Well, I think that might be what this is. Our team built a long list of extraction routines to take data out of the historical files at BradComm. Mike had created some complex Excel-based systems that we had to extract into files. Those files were used to load the Diverse Data software for testing. I think that’s what these are. I think Mike deleted those twenty-seven customers from our test database, then kept a copy for himself. I’m not sure why, but I have to believe that’s the point of this whole copy. If someone is willing to kill for this short list of customers, I’m willing to bet something in this data is going to show why.” She stops again.

I sigh as I realize I need to let Jennifer know at least some of what’s going on. Plus, her ability to sift through this data so quickly may end up helping solve this whole mess.

“What?” she asks.

Apparently, I sighed louder than I thought.

“Have a seat, Jennifer. I need to share a few things with you that I learned in the last couple of hours.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

It's strange how much more intense this whole situation feels now that Jennifer is involved. Since the analysis she's already done begins to corroborate Lee's story, I feel the need to pull her into this whole discussion with the FBI. It's sort of ironic that it is her keen data analysis that is driving the need for her own safety.

Of course, she never would have needed safety if I hadn't called her to help. That thought has plagued me from the moment I realized the data wasn't really Mike's personal data, as he had said. I should have known. If I could go back, I would never have included her. But here we are.

"Well, you probably already see this, but I suppose I can tell you, anyway. First, an FBI agent contacted me today about some of the work that BradComm had been doing for a political consultant in DC, some guy named Sanderson. Once I was sure the caller was FBI, I

told him about the storage device I found. He believes the data on that device is why Mike was killed.”

I hear Jennifer gasp on the other end. She quickly recovers.

“Whoa, that’s heavy stuff, Keith. What do you mean once you were sure he was FBI? Why wouldn’t he be FBI?”

That’s a good question.

“Well, that leads me to the second thing I learned today. Before the FBI guy called, I had another call. Someone impersonating a BradComm employee was asking me to leave the device with a courier. I told them I hadn’t found it,” I say.

“Keith, that’s nuts! If they know who you are and know your number, they obviously know where you live, then.”

Jennifer’s voice is growing louder, although it’s not fear I’m hearing. I recognize her adrenaline is pumping just like mine does.

“Well, yeah, I am aware they do. Because the person impersonating the courier didn’t give me a chance to call the fake BradComm person back before he showed up at my door,” I say, trying to remain calm.

“What? Keith, this is insane! You need to get out of there!”

“Well, it seems that little device is the only thing they want. Although I am constantly reminded they killed twice for it.”

“Twice?” She caught that immediately.

I pause and carefully choose my words.

“I’m really sorry to have to tell you like this. I just learned a few minutes ago that Dave Hawkins was the second victim.”

“What?” Jennifer screams into the phone.

“Why didn’t you tell me that first, Keith? That’s horrible. I’ve worked with Dave for years. His family will be devastated! Oh, no.”

For a moment, I’m saddened to realize I didn’t even know Dave had a family. Lee didn’t mention it either. I suppose I can get to that later. I’m more saddened I didn’t mention it at the beginning of our call. She’s really not happy about that!

“Yeah, I’m really, really sorry, Jennifer. I honestly didn’t know if I should tell you or let the Diverse Data team share it with you. So sorry it’s coming out like this.” I soften my voice and slow down, as though it’s in reverence to Dave.

“Wow, Keith. I thought we were beyond the formal lines of communication on this thing already. There’s a cop at the end of my block, for God’s sake! I’m digging through data that apparently got someone killed.”

She pauses.

“Well, now I guess I’m learning it has gotten two people killed,” she says, eventually.

“So, there’s a cop at the end of your block?” I ask, remembering Lee had agreed to bring in a local officer.

“Yeah, sort of sticks out like a sore thumb here. There are lots of SUVs in my neighborhood, but most don’t have a guy with sunglasses sitting in them while I jog by,” she says.

Point taken.

“Yeah, I guess that’s true. I mentioned our meeting to the FBI agent who called, so he sent someone over there. Nobody knows how far these guys will go. In fact, the FBI is sending someone from their Denver office to Woodland Park today, so they’ll be at my house soon. The agent from Detroit is flying out, too,” I share, trying to get everything I know in the open.

“That’s good to hear,” she says, sounding a little less annoyed with me.

“Yeah, with all you’ve uncovered, it seems we are finding the details the FBI needs to link a couple of cases together, and ultimately find the person or persons behind this. I’m still not sure why Mike was copying data, though. Unless he was working with the authorities somewhere. His voicemail message gives me reason to believe that’s not true. The other option is perhaps blackmail. Or maybe he was working his own angle to make money off the data. It’s hard for me to pin a good motive on his actions,” I say.

“Yeah, we’re seeing some questionable stuff here, for sure, but it seems we’re missing something,” she says.

“Is there any way you can isolate the specific elections that were targeted by the customer campaigns they ran? Maybe it’s the elections themselves that hold the answer?” I ask.

“Yeah, I think I can do that. It will take some time, but I can start messing with that now.” Jennifer sounds excited to dig further into

the data. Maybe she's just happy to have a distraction from the news of Dave's death.

"Ok, thanks. I'm not sure if it will help or not, but it's worth a try. There's something in there, somewhere. I've also got a couple of things to find out from Detroit. I'm going to put a call in to a local officer I've spoken to, even though he told me he's off the case. The FBI has officially taken over his work, but he seems to have good instincts," I say.

"And at the top of all this, whatever it is, is a threat in Woodland Park that is strong enough to send in your own personal FBI agents? This is surreal," Jennifer says.

"Yeah, tell me about it. But so is the fact that Mike and Dave are gone. That still just makes me sit and shake my head. Unbelievable," I reply.

"Yeah, this is a crazy situation," she says, probably shaking her own head on the other end of the call.

"Well, there is one more thing that may make this even crazier. I don't mean to sound like an alarmist, but with everything else going on, that seems impossible. I suspect I have been followed several times since I returned from Detroit. I didn't want to tell you since I wasn't sure, but over the last few hours, I guess that would fit the rest of what I've learned," I say, disclosing the last remaining element of this crazy story.

"So, you were being followed at the coffee shop and to my house?" she asks.

Jennifer's voice shows concern, but oddly, she doesn't seem angry anymore. I'm a little surprised and relieved, as I am quite certain I would be furious to find something out like this.

"I didn't see them at the coffee shop or the house, no," I am happy to admit.

"But they called and even stopped by the house shortly after I got home, so I think they picked me up when I got back into town," I add.

"This thing is scary, Keith. And remember, the device had a GPS transmitter on it, so are you sure they weren't just staying behind and watching where the device went?" Jennifer asks, echoing a concern I had earlier.

“That doesn’t explain how they knew when I got home. Also, I only saw the tail a few times and haven’t seen it recently. And I’ve tried to keep my eyes open for a black Ford Explorer, believe me,” I say, trying to sound confident.

Jennifer jumps in and doesn’t hide her concern this time.

“Did you say a black Ford Explorer? I saw one in our subdivision when I took Ruger out earlier today. I only remember because I thought it was the police, the way the windows were blacked out. But that was before the police arrived. And the police car that’s here now is different,” she says.

Before I can think, I blurt out a question.

“Did it have a bike rack on it?”

“Yeah, in fact, it did. No bikes, though,” she says.

“Ok, I have a new thought. I took a crazy route coming home from your house and didn’t see anyone behind me. Either they didn’t care or they didn’t need to follow me anymore. This may be a spy novel question, but I wonder if they tagged me or my vehicle somewhere along the way. I know I saw them at the gas station and when we were fishing, so there’s no telling where else they were following me. Then, suddenly, they weren’t. My 4Runner is in the garage, so I’m going to go look it over real quick. I will call you back shortly.”

And with that, I end the call and shake my head. I’m not sure why I didn’t think of this before. If it’s possible to track a little storage device with GPS, it’s certainly easy enough to track a 4Runner.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

As I walk out to the garage, a series of questions reverberate in my brain. Are these murderers tracking me? If so, how far have they gone? Are they listening to my phone? Are they watching me now? Have they hacked my internet and my cameras? Just how sophisticated are they?

Ok, I need to slow down and take this one step at a time. I step into the garage to scan the 4Runner for any obvious tracking devices. Before I begin looking, I grab my phone and do a quick google search to see what modern versions might look like. I've seen my share of tracking devices, but that was several years ago. They may have changed since then.

By the time I am standing in the garage doorway, I have googled maybe a dozen different magnetic GPS tracking devices on my phone. While they were all different, they also looked similar in size. The search turned up numerous little devices that were all about the

size of my key fob for my car. I'm sure a government agency or investigative service would have smaller ones, so I decide I'm looking for something between the size of a coin and a key fob. That should cover it.

One good thing about the 4Runner during a magnetic-tracking-device-search exercise is the height of the body. The lifted body on the 4Runner means the undercarriage is more exposed than a typical vehicle. I remember hiding extra keys in the wheel well of my first car many years ago, but a key box hidden in the wheel well of our 4Runner would be clearly visible. No, that location wouldn't work. If there's a tracking device stuck on here, it has to be somewhere else.

Still, I look underneath the vehicle and see nothing. Next, I open the door, step on the floor and reach up to feel around the rails of the roof rack. That also seems unlikely since it would be visible from one angle or another. After another minute of searching, I decide there is nothing on the roof rack either.

Next, I move to the front of the vehicle. There are numerous gaps and holes in and around the grill, so that area takes some diligence. After several minutes of looking around with my flashlight, I see nothing suspicious. I'm running out of options.

Last, I move to the back of the 4Runner, where the spare tire rack is bolted on. This particular rack is an aftermarket version I had installed shortly after I bought the vehicle to hold the larger wheel size I put on the 4Runner. The rack swings wide to allow the hatch to open easily, even with the large spare mounted on. I swing it open and stare in amazement.

Right there, inside the rim of the spare tire, is a small magnetic GPS device. It's not even a special version. It looks exactly like the ones I found in my google search earlier! I take a quick photo on my phone and head back inside. This explains why I haven't seen the black Ford Explorer as much lately! They don't need to follow me anymore. They know where my vehicle is at all times.

I frantically text the photo to Jennifer and to Lee at the FBI. Then I make a quick call to Jennifer to make sure she got it. She picks up immediately.

"Hey. You found one?" she says, not really asking.

“Me too,” she adds before I can reply. I’m more shocked by her find than she seems to be.

“Wait, you already searched too?” I ask, only slightly surprised.

“Well, yeah. I wasn’t going to just sit here and wait!” she replies. I can almost hear her smile when she says it.

“Jennifer, I’m so sorry about that. I had no idea these guys were going to track your vehicle when I asked for your help. Now you’re being tracked by God knows who because of me!” The guilt is getting to me, even though Jennifer is showing no anger toward me at all.

“Look, Keith, we’ve been over this. It’s not your fault. Stop apologizing and stop worrying about it. At least we know what they’re doing! And the device on my Jeep is the exact same device in the same place. These guys aren’t very creative,” she says, moving right on from my apology.

She’s right, this seems sloppy. I text a note to Lee explaining that Jennifer is being tracked, too.

“Ok, so we know they’re tracking us. That probably means they aren’t following us directly, at least not all the time. And of course, they don’t know we found the trackers. The FBI may want to use this find to help learn more about our followers. Unfortunately, this also means they probably suspect you have seen the data,” I say, slowing down with the last sentence.

“Yeah, I knew that from the beginning, Keith. That’s another reason the police on the street and the FBI involvement make me feel a little better,” she says.

“I’m really sorry I got you into this, Jennifer,” I say again. I just can’t stop saying it, or feeling it, even after she asked me to quit.

Chapter Thirty

After ending the call with Jennifer, I decide I'd like to get a little more background information to help fill in some gaps. I find Officer Brockmeier's number and give him another call.

"Hi Mr. Morgan, how are things out there?" Tommy answers in a lively voice.

"Well, it seems things are heating up a bit. As you said, the FBI is now involved and they're about to swarm in. They also gave me some of the background on this case, but I'm still a little unclear on a couple of things from Mike and Dave's murders. You have a minute?" I ask.

"Mr. Morgan, you know I can't talk to you about this case anymore. You'll have to ask the FBI," Tommy says.

"Look. My family has been put in harm's way by whatever this is. I don't have time for any policy showdown or red tape. I just have a couple of specific questions."

My voice tells Tommy I'm at the end of my rope, and he concedes. Sort of.

"Ask your questions," he says, without saying he'll help.

"Do you know how someone knew Mike had copied data from the Diverse Data server?"

That one had been bugging me from the beginning.

"I do not know how, no. But you are on a path we were going down before being pulled off. Someone knew. Whatever mechanism they used to know about the data copy is likely still in place," he says.

Ok, so that's something.

"Thanks for not answering that question. Now for the next one."

I'm probably pushing it, but I need his help.

"What was Mike Schwartz planning to do with the data?" I ask.

"Once again, Mr. Morgan, I cannot divulge the details of an ongoing case. You should assume he was not going to do anything with the data."

The non-answer is another answer from Officer Brockmeier.

"Alright. So, Mike was copying the data to keep? Maybe to ensure his own safety? Or to blackmail someone? Or for some other reason, but the simple fact he had the data was more powerful than giving it away?" I ask, but I'm really just seeking confirmation.

"If I was still on the case, I would investigate whether Mike Schwartz ever intended to return from his planned overseas vacation next week," Tommy says.

His answer was not at all related to my questions, but it answered them just the same. Tommy apparently believes Mike Schwartz was going to use the data on that little device to leave the country and secure his future safety. Clearly, his plan didn't work. If he was planning to use the vacation trip as his getaway, he got sadly close!

"I'm most grateful for your lack of answers, Officer Brockmeier," I say with a smile.

"My pleasure. Stay safe Keith," he responds.

"Thanks Tommy. I'll do my part."

With that, the call ends. A few small holes were now filled, but some sizable gaps in this case remain.

I decide now is a good time to get an update to The Association, so I give Paul a call.

He responds quickly, as always.

“Hey Keith, how are things down there?”

“Good, going good,” I reply, “but there are some updates I should share.”

“Great. The Association believes you’re really onto something here, and it’s exactly the type of thing we feared was happening,” he says.

“Well, then this latest bit of information will disturb them a little more,” I say as I take a breath.

After retelling the story about finding the device, I can hear Paul taking notes in the background.

“Keith, this is nuts. We had no intention of putting you in harm’s way with this assignment. We thought it was more of a data gathering task,” he says.

I can hear the concern in his voice, but I’m still going.

“Well, that’s sort of true, but now with an added layer of complexity. Or maybe many layers. Since Mike and Dave’s death, it has become obvious there is something lethal in this data. We’ve started digging, and without knowing everything yet, we believe Mike had copied some data onto this drive using the extraction tools the Diverse Data team had designed. To make a long story short, I believe he copied it to carry with him while he left the country. And I don’t think he was coming back.”

I hear Paul pause as he considers what I’ve said, then I move on. I realize I hadn’t spoken to him about Dave’s death before, but he clearly knows about it already and he doesn’t say a word.

“And not only that, I now believe I’m being followed out here. If they know Mike didn’t have it and Dave didn’t have it, that just leaves me. But they’re being careful. I’m not sure if they think I’m going to sell it, or if I’m hiding it somewhere, or what, but it’s getting tense. I’m going to send the kids to Denver, and it seems the FBI is converging on my house to find out who’s trying to get the data.”

Paul finally speaks.

“Does the FBI see what The Association was concerned about?” he asks.

“I think so, but not in enough detail to have hard evidence yet. We’ll get to it, but we have to do more digging,” I respond.

“Great, Keith. First things first, though, you need to be safe. If you’d like any help from me or The Association, just ask. You know we can help you. But if the FBI is already on the way, maybe that’s best for all of us. Especially if you can help them get to the same evidence we’re seeking. We suspected there was someone using BradComm capabilities for their own cause, and you’re validating that suspicion. If the FBI gets to the same conclusion with your help, even better!”

“Yeah, maybe they will. I’ll let you know,” I say, as we end the call.

If the FBI gets all the evidence that caused Mike’s murder and nails down an election fraud criminal, I’d say this was a good assignment. And it explains why The Association had me on a data gathering engagement in the first place.

Chapter Thirty-One

Since the FBI is on the way to my house, I call the Browns down the hill to make sure they can bring the kids home from school. That has never been a problem before and it isn't this time. They're happy to do it. Plus, it's so common I don't need to do much explaining.

As expected, I get a call from the FBI office in Detroit around three in the afternoon. An agent from Denver is approaching the house in a blue Toyota Camry and should be there any minute. They ask that I please don't shoot her. That's a fair request. Not wanting the agent to see what I've been doing, I close my laptop and put it away. Then I return the USB drive to my gun safe.

A buzz on my phone alerts me to a car pulling into the driveway. So does Winnie. As a gesture of friendliness, I head outside to greet the agent as she arrives. Special Agent Simone Mason becomes my

first introduction to the FBI field office in Denver when she steps out of the blue Toyota Camry, smiles, and sticks out her hand.

She's almost an exact representation of what I would expect a female FBI agent to look like. She's not very tall, maybe five-six, and lean. Her dark, wavy hair is pulled back from her eyes but hanging straight to her collar in the back.

She looks somehow comfortable, but tough as nails. As though she could tear someone apart with her bare hands while maintaining a graceful smile. Yeah, there's a quiet fierceness about her. She's dressed in a dark pantsuit with a white blouse, which I would depict as the stereotypical FBI uniform. As I think about it, I realize that's probably because she was pulled from whatever she was doing to head to Woodland Park to babysit me.

"I suppose you're Mr. Morgan? Hi, I'm Simone Mason. Everyone calls me Mason," she says. Her voice is friendlier than I expected and sounds genuine.

I shake her hand firmly and invite her inside.

Regardless of what she looks like or how she fits my stereotypes, it does feel good to have an agent here. I also take comfort in the fact that she is near my age and looks and acts like a seasoned veteran. Part of me wants to handle this whole mess by myself, but I also realize that's not good for me or anyone else. I'm sure she can see some of that relief as I smile and introduce her to Winnie, wagging his tail in the doorway.

"Great to have you here, Mason. Thanks for breaking out of whatever you had going on today. And you can call me Keith."

As I lead her into the house, I begin to question some of my internal assessments. Why do I always think people my age are more professional? There are certainly some younger and older people who behave professionally. Do I have some internal ageism thing going on? Is it from my days in the Army, and remembering what a flake I was at first? Maybe that's one more thing for the long list I should have checked out by a professional.

Mason seems on top of things, which makes me more grateful for her presence. After a brief introduction, she walks the entire property, making sure our cameras are working and we have good visibility across all angles. I'm secretly proud to hear her say we're

covered after her exhaustive review, acknowledging I would have argued if she said otherwise.

She asks about access points and sight lines, looking for ways my house might be watched from afar if someone so desired. That concern, of course, was one of my own and was covered years ago with strategically placed trees and fences. Mason once again offers her approval, this time of our adequately concealed house.

We also discuss all the black Ford Explorer sightings, the phone call from the fake BradComm employee, and the visit from the fake courier. After all those topics are covered, we step into the garage and look at the GPS tracker that is stuck to the back of the 4Runner. She takes several pictures and sends them for review. She also gets a copy of the security camera footage that reveals the fake courier and the black Ford Explorer. It's easy to read the license plate, which she jots down and texts to someone else to do more research.

While Mason is sending information to her team to check out, I call Oliver and Judy to see if they can help with the kids while the FBI agents are here at the house. I know they were here only yesterday, but I'm sure they'll understand. They wouldn't want the kids in the middle of this any more than I do.

"Hello?" Oliver answers with a friendly voice when I ring their home number. They are probably the only people I know who still use a landline for their primary telephone!

"Hey Oliver, it's Keith. I need some help and was wondering if you and Judy might be able to bail me out?" I ask.

I instantly realize that was a bad choice of words.

"What? Bail you out? Please tell me you aren't in jail?" he asks, sounding shocked.

Yeah, those were certainly the wrong words to use.

"No, no, Oliver. It's nothing like that. Remember those BradComm guys I've been working with for the last few months? Apparently, they've gotten themselves into some trouble and the authorities are concerned someone may want to loop me into the fray because of my consulting engagement with them."

I try to leave it as vague as possible to avoid a long conversation.

"Oh wow, that's awful! Are you ok? Are the kids ok?" he asks. He sounds less shocked than before, but is still very concerned.

“Yes, yes, we sure are. Everything is fine. I just don’t really want the kids around here for the next day or so while the authorities are here. It might freak them out. Do you possibly have time to come get them and have them spend a day with you guys?”

Finally, I got to the point.

“Absolutely, Keith. We’d be glad to help however we can. We can head down right now. Is there anything you need? Are you going to have to stay holed up at the house?” he asks.

This side of Oliver is oddly comforting to me. He is genuinely concerned, and it’s clear in his tone.

“Thanks so much, Oliver. That’s really all I need, and it will be a huge help. There may be an extra car or two here when you arrive, but it’s all ok. I’ll try to have them ready,” I answer.

“Great, Keith. Again, I’m sorry to hear about this. We’ll see you in a bit.”

“Thanks again, Oliver. Bye.”

I end the call and take a deep breath. This was my primary concern from the first moment I realized I was being tracked. With Julie and Oliver living in Denver, their house is a long way from the GPS tracker on the 4Runner.

With the kids taken care of, it’s time to get back to the next steps for our project at home. Mason ended her call while I was on the phone with Oliver, so as I put my phone down, she’s queued with some questions.

The next topic Mason brings up lets me show off some of my favorite toys.

Chapter Thirty-Two

“Hey Keith, Agent Warfield says you have some guns here in the house. Do you mind if we take a look?” she asks.

I wasn't expecting that to be the first question Mason asked, but it's no issue. First, I pull up my shirt to show the SIG holstered inside my belt in the appendix position.

“Sure, here's the first one. I also have a 10mm pistol in the drawer by the couch and a shotgun in the coat closet. Both are loaded, and the pistol is chambered.”

I look at Mason to gauge her response. She simply nods as I continue.

“The rest here in the house are in my bedroom in a safe. Do you want to see those, too?” I ask.

“There are more outside the house?” she asks. I didn't mean to tip that off with my phrasing, but she caught it.

“I have another safe in the garage, and one in a storage unit in town. The main one is here,” I respond, disclosing as little as possible.

She seems to realize she’s stepped into a sensitive subject for me as I see one of her eyebrows raise ever so slightly, but she nods nonchalantly.

“Sure, let’s stick to the one in the bedroom for now,” she says.

Mason follows me into my bedroom, where I rest my finger on the biometric scanner to open my gun safe. When the door opens, she stops. This time, both her eyebrows raise for a brief second. My safe contains sixteen rifles and ten pistols, covering a variety of calibers and purposes. I don’t know what she was expecting, but apparently it wasn’t this.

After a quick recovery and a survey of my inventory, she nods as though she has realized something.

“You’re a veteran,” she says. It’s not a question.

“Well, yes, I am. Is it that obvious?”

“I guess it is, yeah. I see a sniper rifle, various sizes of AR rifles and pistols, hunting rifles, and shotguns. Plus, you have a mix of handgun sizes and calibers to cover about anything. They’re not really relics, they’re functional, so this is not a collector’s safe. They’re all sparkling clean, so you’re not a casual gun owner. The pistols in the door pockets are arranged by size and caliber for easy access. The ammunition at the bottom is stacked neatly by caliber, so you can get to it quickly if you need to. I’m guessing you have a much larger stash of ammunition somewhere else that is similarly arranged.”

She pauses, but all I can do is nod. Then she continues.

“You carry a 9mm, you have a 10mm near the front door, and a shotgun with easy access. You’re prepared for conflict escalation with common sense defenses. You have all these other rifle options, but you know most of them are for long distance targets, which you don’t need if someone is in your driveway or at the door. You also mention other safes elsewhere, which I suspect are equally equipped, but may contain some actual military-style material. That way, you have somewhere to go if your home is ever compromised.”

Ok, so she's making sense. I have to admire her quick and accurate assessment.

"But the real giveaway is the BDU name tag and American flag patch on the door of the safe."

She smiles when she points to the far more obvious clue of my days in the Army.

"Why didn't you tell me before?" she asks.

I look at the name tag and flag, grin a little, and go somber for a few seconds. The next few sentences I share with Mason are about as personal as I get with people who don't know me well.

"Honestly, I didn't think it was relevant to any of our discussion so far. Believe me, I'm proud of my service and honored to have served, but I don't ever lead with that. I find people treat me differently when the first thing they know about me is my military background. Sometimes it gets me free drinks, but sometimes it makes people too cautious, or worse. I want people to know me for who I am. Eventually everyone finds out I was in the Army because, at some point, the pride bleeds out. It usually takes longer than ten minutes, though."

I return to my normal smile as I turn around and look at her. Mason is nodding with an understanding smile as I finish my explanation. She knows what I mean. On a hunch, I ask.

"You?"

"Yeah, only two years. Army as well."

She offered no more, and I didn't ask. I understand there are many possible reasons for an abbreviated response. But at that moment, we had established a rapport and respect. It's a veteran thing.

"Is that the data we're concerned about?" she asks, nodding toward the USB drive sitting on the top shelf of the safe.

I nod, and she does too. She doesn't ask to copy it or send it anywhere at this moment. I'm sure Agent Warfield will want to do something with it when he arrives.

As I'm closing the safe, my phone buzzes with an alert of a car in the driveway. Mason sees it and reaches for the Glock on her hip. I raise my hand to stop her.

“It’s ok, it’s just the neighbors bringing the kids home from school. My in-laws should be here soon to take them to Denver. I’ll introduce you as a coworker for now. Is that ok?”

Mason smiles and nods.

“Sure.”

Within seconds, the kids come busting in the door, the same as most days.

“Dad, whose car is that?” Kyle is yelling before they even look around.

“Kids, I’d like you to meet...” I pause awkwardly as I realize I have forgotten Mason’s first name already!

“Ms. Mason. We are working on a project together. In fact, we’re going to be working late and potentially through the night. There’s a big deadline we have to hit by tomorrow morning. I’ve asked grandma and grandpa to come pick you guys up to spend the night. They should be here within a half hour, so you guys need to pack up.”

“Alright! No school tomorrow?” Kyle is too excited about that prospect to care about anything else.

“That’s right. I’ll call you guys off.”

My reply sends Kyle running into his room with a yell. Jamie, on the other hand, pauses with a thoughtful look.

“Dad, you know I have hockey practice tomorrow night. Will I be back for that?” she asks.

“Not sure, hon. I think so. But if not, I’ll call and make sure coach doesn’t take it out on you,” I reply.

She nods, accepting my reply. Then, as she’s walking around the corner and out of Mason’s earshot, she turns around and gives me an evil grin.

“Working through the night, huh?” And she glances at Mason.

How old is this kid, ten or thirty?

I decide to leave it right there. I can catch up with them later and close out any necessary details. That includes shutting down that crazy interaction with Jamie just now.

I turn around to see Mason looking at her phone, then typing something. She looks up when she senses me watching her.

“It looks like the agent from Detroit has landed and is on the way from DIA. We’ll have company in another hour and a half or so.”

With that timing, I realize the kids will be gone before he gets here, which is good. I don’t want to have to do any more explaining to the kids if I can avoid it, even if Jamie is going to Denver with the wrong idea in her head. It’s safer than the truth.

As I’m standing there, I realize I haven’t eaten since breakfast and it’s almost three PM. I head to the refrigerator and yell to Mason.

“Hey, I’m hungry. Do you want a sandwich or something? Maybe something to drink?”

“No, I’m good. Thank you,” she yells from the front window, where she continues to look outside and assess everything and everyone.

I grab a restaurant take home box I know contains the other half of Kyle’s grilled cheese from yesterday. It’s not much, but it will suffice in the moment. It’s in the microwave and cooking while I open my bottle of water and sit down. As I think about the last few days, I can’t help but shake my head. Life can sure turn in a moment.

Before I can get too deep into my thoughts, the microwave dings and my sandwich is ready. I sit on a barstool at the kitchen bar and eat the sandwich quietly.

Mason is still moving from window to window, as if she’s expecting the fake courier to show up any time. Which I guess is a possibility. That thought, plus the last bit of the grilled cheese, takes away my hunger for now.

As I’m cleaning up around the kitchen, Kyle and Jamie come down with their overnight bags for their trip to Denver. Both are used to this from spending numerous weekends at the grandparents, mostly during the summer, so it’s not a big deal to them. They both grab granola bars and bottles of water from the pantry and start eating them while they sit at the bar.

Mason heard them coming and left her window-watching to sit on the couch casually. It’s a welcome gesture, as her constant vigilance at the windows may have made the kids anxious. They chat with each other as they eat their snacks, and I head to the couch.

Mason subtly gets my attention and quietly talks where the kids cannot hear.

“The Detroit guy wants to bring Jennifer into this. They think she may be at some level of risk, too,” she says.

That thought makes me feel better about Jennifer’s safety.

“Sure. And sorry about that. I got her help before I had any idea what we were dealing with,” I say, again feeling the regret of having Jennifer involved.

“Yeah, understood. I wouldn’t let it get to you. You couldn’t have known where this would go.” Mason does her best to sound comforting.

The kids are throwing away their wrappers and putting the caps on their water bottles when my phone buzzes with another car in the driveway. This time, it’s Oliver and Judy. They seem to have made record time, probably because they’re so worried. I meet them outside to explain how I’ve introduced Mason.

They both chuckle when I tell them how Jamie responded to Mason’s presence. Then I lose my smile for the next bit of conversation.

“I need to tell you guys, there’s going to be a discrete police presence around your house while the kids are there. It’s nothing to worry about, but I asked to have someone watch for anything suspicious.”

“Dear God, Keith. What is going on? Are the kids in danger? Are we in danger?” Judy can’t hide her concern.

I try to dissuade her fear with a smile, knowing it won’t do much good.

“I honestly don’t think so, Judy. I just want to be sure. I can fill you guys in when I know more, but for now we need to make sure the guys who are going after BradComm are in custody before we relax.”

From that point on, Oliver and Judy are all business. When we get inside, they try to make light of the whole situation and quickly say their goodbyes and load the kids into the Navigator for the trip back up to Denver.

Oliver, Judy, and the kids are barely gone when another buzz on my phone lets me know Agent Lee Warfield has arrived. Mason and I step outside to greet him as he pulls up toward the house and maneuvers his car beside Mason’s Camry.

Chapter Thirty-Three

I'm dying to sit Agent Warfield down and see what I can learn about this whole BradComm situation. I decide I can hold off from the questions, however, to at least greet him first.

Mason and I head over to the car to greet Special Agent Lee Warfield as he turns off his car. Lee has questions for me. I have questions for Lee. But we're both cordial enough to withhold those questions while Lee exits his very FBI-looking silver Ford Taurus.

"Hi, I'm Lee. You must be Keith?" Lee says after grabbing an overnight bag out of the back seat. He looks more like a desk agent than Mason, and is even closer to my age, if not older. Lee's a dark-skinned guy with a stocky build that makes him look shorter than he really is. He isn't in an FBI uniform as I would call it, but is dressed more comfortably in a business casual style outfit with a navy Columbia down jacket, a light blue button-up shirt and khaki trousers. He has a short, crisp haircut and an air of confidence,

almost arrogance. I internally refuse to give him a score of any kind, as I want to stop judging people like that after my internal age debate regarding Mason.

Lee closes the door to his car and faces Mason and me.

“Hi, Agent Warfield. Keith Morgan,” I say, as politely as I can.

Lee shakes my hand and nods.

“Hi, Keith. Nice to finally meet you in person,” he says.

Then Lee turns and greets Mason by name.

“I suppose you’re Special Agent Mason from Denver,” he says as he shakes her hand. It’s a statement, not a question.

“I am. It’s a pleasure,” she says in return.

Clearly, he knew she was here, although it’s also clear they have never met before. With the introductions complete, we head into the house.

Before I can even start my questions, Lee is first to launch.

“So, Mr. Morgan, where is this device that’s causing so much commotion? I need to get the data back to the lab to analyze. Then I’d like to get your assessment of what you’ve found with the data so far,” he begins.

Well, ok then, I suppose this is how we’ll get started. I don’t know what I expected, but it annoys me that Lee believes the FBI can get to the answers faster than someone who knows what the data is.

I decide to withhold my opinions for now and motion to Lee to follow me to my room. Again, I unlock the safe with my fingerprint and pull the door open. I grab the USB drive off the top shelf and hand it to Lee. As he grabs the drive, I can see him scanning the safe and the door.

As I close the door, Lee shifts to a solemn tone.

“Thank you for your service. I saw your bio on the flight. You’re clearly not the typical software consultant. Army reconnaissance? Security consultant with Hart International?” he says.

I nod in appreciation as he looks me in the eye and continues while leaning inches from my face. He’s being solemn, but not completely polite. His countenance changes so that he’s almost glaring at me.

“Just don’t plan to go all Rambo on me, you got it? This is my program to run. I will ask for your help when I need it, otherwise this

is an FBI investigation.”

Ok, so it appears battle lines have been drawn on this investigation. Lee wants me to know he’s the boss. Fine.

“Understood. I have no interest in solving federal cases, Agent Warfield,” I respond with as much respect as I can muster, given his unexpected outburst.

I guess my bio and the inside of my gun safe scream out louder than I realize. Although if Lee saw my record, even if only the official part, he didn’t need to see the safe to know I could shoot.

Lee slowly accepts my response with a nod, and we return to the others. Lee may be running this case, but I’ve got some questions.

“So, Lee...”

I decide to start my questions as we enter the room where Mason is seated on the couch. I take a seat on the couch next to Mason and begin as Lee sits in the chair on the other side of the living room.

“As you might expect, I have a ton of questions about this whole situation. And even more since we last talked. Should I fire away, or do you want to start from the beginning?” I stop there and see if he responds, knowing I’m not likely to get the entire story while the case is still in flight. Not without at least a little pushback.

Lee looks at Mason and back at me.

“You know I can’t tell you everything.” He sets the baseline and pauses thoughtfully before continuing.

“Let me give you the high-level story, and I’m afraid you’ll have to accept that for now. Then we can see what questions you have left.”

He waits for me to nod my agreement. I do.

“As I said before, there were two cases here that came together. I was working on a case involving suspected campaign fraud in our last election cycle. We had found a political consultant in DC named Martin Sanderson, who had received substantial financial transfers from a known Russian account in the Caymans. Those payments went to a crypto account belonging to Sanderson. We assume this wasn’t done just because they were friends, but the details are hard to link from there. That’s about all I can tell you about that one, and that’s where the other case came in.”

I can’t help but jump in with a question already.

“Wait a minute! Russia? You never said Russia was the foreign entity behind this? We’re being hunted by Russians? Did the Russians kill Mike?” I ask, unable to hide my concern. I’m not sure why, but I never even considered the plot was being driven by the Russians!

Lee shakes his head and raises his hand toward me in a cautious gesture.

“Now, wait a minute. We won’t get very far if you jump in every few seconds, Keith. I don’t think the Russians killed Mike or Dave,” he says, clearly trying to stay calm, so I do the same.

His answer gives me no comfort, but I nod anyway. Lee continues the story.

“The second case was an IRS lead tied to some cryptocurrency payments that BradComm was receiving but had not reported. We were able to tie those undocumented payments to Mike Schwartz.”

Lee looks at me and at Mason before he starts again.

“So, the IRS had discovered payments going from bank accounts of a handful of companies in the US to a crypto wallet. Our investigation revealed the wallet belonged to Schwartz. The payments weren’t illegal in themselves, but he didn’t report all of them. Not only that, he quickly moved a substantial amount to some Latin America crypto wallets that can’t be traced so easily. That’s where he messed up.”

Lee pauses long enough for me to jump in.

“Ah, so Mike was trying to replicate the drug cartel scheme. That’s crazy,” I say as I shake my head.

“That’s right, yes. Schwartz was using the same scheme being used by some of the drug cartels that were already under investigation. I won’t call it luck, but we found the links in and out of his Bitcoin wallet using that same approach,” Lee says.

“Ok, so Mike was being paid in cryptocurrency that he wasn’t reporting. What does that have to do with Russia? Or this political consultant?” I ask as I’m trying to link this all together.

“Boy, you’re not a patient guy, are you, Keith? Well, we found the Russian link in a slightly different fashion. Without account numbers, wallets, transaction numbers and alias names, this whole crypto thing is like looking for needles in haystacks. But with the Russian

case, we had an account in the Caymans that was flagged. There are lots of offshore accounts we have flagged for suspected criminal activity. While we can't do anything with those accounts, we can at least see what goes in and out. In this case, we saw some massive transfers going to three crypto accounts. As I mentioned earlier, one was Sanderson. As luck would have it, that same crypto account was one of the ones paying Schwartz."

"Ah. So, the suspected Russian account was paying Sanderson for something, who was, in turn, paying Mike," I say, more as a clarifying statement than a question.

"Right. And that something is exactly what we believe Mike Schwartz found. I think he somehow knew about Sanderson's scheme, whatever it was. And given he copied a bunch of data onto a device that someone seems to want badly, I suspect the link must be hidden in that data you found," Lee says.

The Russian twist has given this whole thing an even greater sense of dread. I'm shaking my head as I lean back on the couch and wonder how I fell into this mess.

Paul didn't mention this, but I'm beginning to wonder if The Association knew about this Russian connection all along.

Chapter Thirty-Four

After a few moments, I gather my thoughts and lean forward for a few questions of my own. Lee had his turn. Now it's mine.

"Ok Lee. I get this whole payment scheme between the Russian account, then the Sanderson guy in DC, down to Mike Schwartz at BradComm. But the whole reason we're here is because Mike copied files off a server to a USB drive. Do you have any idea what he was copying or why?" I ask, already sensing I know some of it from our initial data analysis.

"Well, to be honest, we don't know those details. We'd actually like to get your help with that one. I understand you're a consultant with some expertise on data and analytics? Does that mean you may have insight into the data structures on that drive?" Lee says.

It's good to hear he acknowledges the need for help, but I'm not done.

"Ok, and why would he do it? Was he working with you guys?"

“I can’t get into much detail on this, so you’ll have to take my word.”

Lee leans in this time and gets strangely stern as he prepares for his next statement. He doesn’t know I already have insight from Tommy on this topic, and I can’t divulge that knowledge. I see Lee contemplating his words carefully, so I wait to see if he’ll acknowledge Mike’s plans.

“The FBI had no dealings with Mike Schwartz. None. I have reason to believe, in fact, that Mike was setting up an exit from the country and was likely using this data to buy his safety. Since you and I last talked, we found travel plans for Mike that included a trip next week to Costa Rica. With a little research, we also discovered he had established at least one local relationship and had set up a long-term residence there. We suspect he was not planning to return.”

Ah, there it is. So, Tommy’s story was accurate. Lee sits back and continues.

“Mike was privy to Sanderson’s schemes at some level, and had become a rich man himself. Nowhere near the level of Sanderson, of course, but he was going to do very well in Costa Rica. Had he not gotten that fateful call on Friday.” Lee stops to take a breath, so I jump in.

“Ok, so you know what that call was about? You weren’t going to share? Who called him and what did they say?” I’m getting irritated that Lee is only giving partial information.

“We don’t have a transcript, Keith.”

He pauses and stares at me to make his point.

“But the call came from Sanderson, moments after Sanderson received a call from the Russian owner of the bank account in the Caymans, Mr. Ivan Filipov. That’s all we know. We can surmise, of course, that Filipov somehow knew Mike had copied data and sent Sanderson to fix it. Sanderson immediately called Mike. Then the call from Sanderson, we believe, prompted Mike to stash the drive in your bag,” Lee says.

“You’re saying I was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time? An opportunistic way for Mike to get the data out without carrying it

himself?" As I had many times over the last few days, I find myself shaking my head.

"That's right, yes," Lee nods.

"How, then, did they know he had copied the data?"

"We're looking into that."

"You think Sanderson had a mole at BradComm?"

"Possibly."

"Do you know who it is?"

"We have our opinions, but we have no evidence yet. We expect to take that person in as part of this process as well."

At least Lee is answering my questions now. So I keep going.

"Why would the Russians want to pay a political consultant? Why wouldn't they just run these campaigns themselves? They have to be good at this stuff by now."

"We have ideas, but we'd like to dig into the data from BradComm to see. We suspect they wanted to take advantage of the political savvy of Sanderson, combined with the data analysis capability of Mike and BradComm. Or perhaps Sanderson brought in BradComm all on his own. It really doesn't matter, because we believe it's Sanderson who orchestrated this."

Then the reality of Lee's predicament dawns on me.

"You have no idea how to tie this together, do you? You need us to mine this data to find out if Sanderson or the Russians killed Mike Schwartz and Dave Hawkins. And if they did, you need evidence to show why. And you believe that little USB drive holds the key to solving your two cases."

I'm making statements now instead of asking questions.

"Boy, you really need our help!" I blurt out, realizing it may have been a bit too loud.

Now Lee leans back in his chair. He steepled his fingers and nods quietly. I continue with my purposely random batch of questions.

"I already told you I need your help, Keith. I don't know why you're acting like that's new information." Lee is glaring at me now.

Trying to change the temperature in the room, I switch the line of questioning.

“You said Sanderson’s crypto wallet was one of three receiving transfers from the Russian account. Who were the others?” I ask.

“Yes, there were two more that seem to be based in the US. At least two that we know of,” Lee says.

“Do you have the wallet addresses for those three crypto wallets?” I ask.

“I suppose I can get them. Why do you ask?” Lee says with one eyebrow raised.

“Maybe we can find references to those addresses in this data somewhere,” I lie in response.

“I’ll see what I can do,” Lee says as he types on his phone. He bought the lie with no hesitation.

“It sounds like we need to take some time to dig into that data. I know you are sending a copy back to the FBI. We should bring Jennifer in to help with this. She’s an expert on the Diverse Data database and can help identify the type of information you’re looking for. She can do it faster than me, in fact.”

“Do you have a copy of the software here?” Lee asks.

“Yep, both Jennifer and I have copies on our laptops.”

Now Lee looks at me suspiciously.

“You’ve already looked at it, haven’t you?” he asks while giving me a side eye glance.

“Of course, I did. You expected me to just sit on it?” I respond.

Lee shakes his head and leans forward, putting his head in his hands and rubbing his temples.

“And she has seen it too, I suppose?”

It’s a statement and a question.

“Yeah, she helped me figure some of this out.”

I stop short of telling him we had to destroy the original device and copy the data, and that she and I both have extra copies right now. There’s no need to hear how risky that was.

Lee is smiling this time as he sits up, shaking his head. He pauses long enough for me to ask another question.

“One more question, Lee.”

He nods.

“How much crypto was transferred to Sanderson from Filipov’s account in the Caymans?”

I realize I'm pushing it, but it's an important factor in how serious this is. I know people are killed for only a few bucks sometimes, but this doesn't feel like that.

"I can't tell you that, Keith. But, let's just say..."

Lee takes a deep breath before he finishes.

"It's in the nine-figure range."

While I'm recovering from the shock of that last bit of information, Lee jumps in again.

"Look, there's no reason to think this BradComm deal is one hundred percent tied to that money. We know Sanderson was working with several PR firms around the country. BradComm was simply his apparent favorite. Sanderson walks among the elite in DC and is always in the shadow of the person doing the talking. Are you guys familiar with him?" Lee asks.

There are shaking heads all around. I look him up on my phone to get a photo.

"Yeah, well, he's a piece of work. He looks as slimy as he is. He's probably in his mid-forties, has that slicked back hair, always a shiny suit and tie. I think he's been divorced a time or two, but no wife now. If he has kids, I'm sure they wouldn't admit it. I understand he drives a Bentley around DC even though it's basically a symbol of how screwed up the whole system is."

I google a photo of Sanderson, and he's exactly as Lee described. In fact, he's not even the main person in the photo, but is standing behind a senator at a podium. I pass the phone around, watching everyone else acknowledge the accuracy of Lee's description when they see the photo.

Lee is looking at me, trying to help me recover from the nine-figure statement. I can also hear the disdain in Lee's voice toward Sanderson. He hates the guy.

"We also know the Diverse Data software wasn't installed when all this election stuff occurred, so I'm not sure it's even relevant. Unless, of course, BradComm was using old data to help with their testing of this Diverse Data software. I know that's how most companies would test a new software package, so I hope they did, too. Am I right about that?"

I guess it was Lee's turn to ask questions again.

“Jennifer and I found some indication that data may have been pulled from historical BradComm campaigns to test their new software, yes. It has to be reassembled into a working database, however, to be sure. There are lots of tables there. It’s hard to figure out everything that’s happening just by looking at the files themselves. We need to load it into the software.” I say, buying time in case I need it.

“Sure, that makes sense. But you said you have a copy of the software here? So, you’ve already looked. Or maybe Jennifer has.” Lee keeps digging.

“I do have a copy, yes. But we should probably have Jennifer come show you how all this works. I know the business side of the equation, but she is better at assembling all the tables and setting it up,” I admit.

“Fair enough. We’ll go get her. You want to call her and let her know? We’ll have to be discrete about it in case she’s being watched, but with the pictures of the GPS transmitters you sent me earlier, I doubt anyone has eyes on her.”

“Sure, I can let her know you’re coming. And the local police apparently have a car there already, so you can probably just have them pick her up.”

Lee shakes his head in response.

“Yeah, ok. I’ll make a call.”

Chapter Thirty-Five

While we wait for Jennifer to arrive, I show Lee and Mason what I know about the Diverse Data software. After only twenty minutes, I've exhausted my knowledge and have gotten through about as much functional overview as I can give. Thankfully, that's about the same time my phone buzzes to announce Jennifer has arrived. There's only so much I can talk about with Lee before I need Jennifer to walk through the finer details.

As the police officer from Colorado Springs gets to the door, he holds it open for Jennifer to come in. As Jennifer enters the room and looks around, I find myself smiling again. I'm surprised to see her gaze pause, not on me or Lee, but on Mason. At the same time, Mason inspects her with a questioning look.

"Mason?" Jennifer asks expectantly.

"Ellis, is that you? When I saw your name on the report, I wondered if this was the same Jennifer Ellis!" Mason says and

smiles as the two embrace like old friends. The rest of us are looking on curiously.

Jennifer is smiling broadly as she claps Mason on the back.

“Well, look at this. Mason is in the FBI now? That’s awesome for you. It’s been, what, five or six years since Afghanistan?”

My mind is trying to grasp what I’m hearing and seeing. Jennifer is a veteran? Not only that, she was also in Afghanistan just after I was? Well, this is a collision of worlds for me. I look over and see Lee seems less dumbfounded than me. I guess he doesn’t know Jennifer as a data engineer the way I do.

“Yep, about six years, I guess. I went straight into the FBI from the Army and landed in the Denver Field Office. How about you?” Mason says.

“I took the technology route. Used some of my tech skills from the Air Force to go into the commercial sector and moved out here to Colorado Springs. I guess that’s how I got the opportunity to participate in this little situation.” Jennifer says.

She smiles and glances over at me after softening the fact that I dragged her into this case.

Mason sees everyone staring at them and offers an explanation.

“Ellis and I were stationed together for nearly a year at an outpost in Afghanistan. We were part of a small joint forces detachment and were the only two females on the site. There was no alternative but to become good friends. We sort of lost touch after we got back to the states.”

We nod our heads as if we understand any of that statement at all. I, for one, can completely understand the bond. And boy, do I have some questions for Jennifer when we get a chance to talk. I suppose, however, I’m getting some insight into why all this danger doesn’t bother her so much.

Lee lets me absorb the relationship that was just described in front of us, then tries to get everyone’s attention. He speaks loudly, so we all turn his way.

“Look, I know we’ve got a lot to deal with tomorrow, but I’d like to see if we can get the details of these election strategies tonight. If we can find evidence of fraudulent activity here and get it back to my

SAC tonight, we can probably put a bow on this whole thing tomorrow.”

He’s staring at me, then Jennifer, while he pauses.

“Remember, we have criminals in Washington DC and potentially somewhere else to apprehend in addition to the local threat we have out here.”

And with that resounding motivational speech, we sit down and begin our quest to assemble the deadly puzzle from the data on Mike’s USB device. Before we start, I have a question for Lee that he has never mentioned.

“Hey Lee, a couple of things real quick. What was the consultant’s first name? We may need it to help with the search criteria in the database,” I ask.

“The DC consultant’s name is Martin Sanderson. I suspect you’ll find him in there multiple times.”

I remembered the name. That was just a softball question to start him talking. It’s the next question I really want answered.

“You also mentioned you have all three crypto wallet addresses the Russian was sending to, including Sanderson?” I ask.

“Yeah, I got them from the FBI’s crypto team. Give me a second and I’ll text them to you. I suspect there are two other political players, just like Sanderson, sitting out there somewhere.”

Lee starts swiping and tapping on his phone.

“They’re headed your way,” he says after a few seconds.

“Thanks. We can search for those in the database as well.”

Everyone else in the room ignores that statement, except for Jennifer. She knows there is no payment information in the database, especially crypto wallet information, and glances at me when I say it. The glance doesn’t linger, but she has noted I’m on a different path with those wallet addresses. She’s right.

“Anybody want coffee?” I ask to the group.

“I can get a pot going. I’d like some myself, but I can do a single cup if nobody else is interested?”

Both Lee and Mason raise their hands.

“If it’s not too much trouble, I’d appreciate a cup,” chimes Mason.

“No problem at all. One pot of coffee coming up,” I say.

I head into the kitchen to get out our coffee pot. I don't use it much, as most of my coffee comes from the single cup versions on the Keurig.

I'm filling the filter with coffee grounds when Jennifer slips in. We're the only two in the kitchen.

"So, looking for crypto wallet addresses in a system that has no financial data at all, huh?" she asks, looking at me with a suspicious smile.

"Yeah, I saw you noticed that. I've got a buddy who does some work with data mining and blockchain analysis. He's especially good at crypto mining. He's been doing it for years."

I try to answer her concerns without being specific.

"Wow. Everyone needs a buddy who knows how to deal in crypto!" she says, only half joking.

"Yeah, I suppose they do," I concede.

"Where'd you meet this guy?" she asks. The answer gets a little too deep into my past, so I generalize my answer.

"Well, as a matter of coincidence, I was also in Afghanistan. Just before you and Mason, apparently," I reply.

"Oh really? You don't put off that vibe," she says.

"Well, it was only a few years, and it was a long time ago. And as luck would have it, my crypto buddy was around during those days as well. You didn't say anything about your military background either. Air Force, huh? What'd you do there?" I ask, trying to change the subject.

"Yeah, four proud years. I was a software engineer initially, but got into the Rangers for the last two years. That's why I was over there and met Mason," she says.

"Air Force Rangers? Wow! Good to have a resume like that on my team right now!" I stop short of telling her she also doesn't put off that vibe.

I'm trying to stay away from the crypto topic, but Jennifer is still looking at me as though I'm intentionally leaving something out.

"So, that was back before crypto was really a thing. You're not one of those guys who knew a blockchain nerd ten years ago and got into Bitcoin before it took off, are you? Who else would know so much about this stuff?" she asks.

I'm hoping she doesn't see my shock as she nails part of my personal history. Most of the Bitcoins from my initial investment twelve years ago are still in my wallet today. But I don't want anyone in my house tonight, or this town for that matter, to know about that.

Beth was the only one to know about that wallet and its value, which is even bigger now. It has grown substantially since her death thanks to the crypto craze. And, of course, thanks to The Association. Sure, the crypto value took away any concern for our financial future and made our private vacations rather fantastic, but nobody else knows. Beth was so adamant about keeping the kids' lives, and our lives, as normal as possible.

"I wish! If he had any insight into the future of Bitcoin, he sure didn't map it out for me!"

That's partially true. He told me it would be worth ten times its value in a few years. The increase of twenty thousand times was nowhere in the discussion.

Jennifer continues to look skeptical as she backs away and slowly heads back toward the door to the living room.

"So, you just asked for the addresses to see who the other political players are?" she asks.

"Sort of, yeah. I also want to make sure they're not missing a thread. We already know someone at BradComm had to be in on this, since Mike's copy was discovered so quickly. Lee seems to think Sanderson was behind that connection. I hope he's right."

I try to stop there, but Jennifer doesn't let me.

"What if he's wrong?" she asks.

"Well, if Sanderson isn't the one who killed Mike, and killed Dave, and setup this ruse out here in Colorado to get the data back, then someone else did."

Again, I stop before filling in my suspicions. And again, Jennifer doesn't let it go.

"Like perhaps the Russian guy, Filipov?" She picked it up without my help.

"Yeah, like him," I say more solemnly.

"I'll have some coffee too. And good call on the crypto research. I'm guessing your buddy will be faster than the FBI," she says after a deep sigh.

I'll find out soon.

Steve Chandler is one of the few people I know from The Association. He's also the crypto mining master I met during my time at Hart International. I text him the wallet addresses and back story before I follow Jennifer out of the kitchen.

Chapter Thirty-Six

While the coffee is brewing, we all gather around the dining room table with laptops. I decide I want to set some informal expectations before we begin, so I carefully frame a question to Jennifer that everyone else can hear.

“Hey, Jennifer. I know you’re the most knowledgeable on the Diverse Data database structures BradComm was using, so can you give us all an update on what you’ve found before we get going?”

Jennifer takes off without hesitation, and I’m sure she completely understands I’m setting her up as the data expert. It’s important Lee knows who in the room knows what’s going on.

“Sure. Here’s what I’ve found so far.”

Before she can get started, Lee interrupts in an unnecessarily loud voice.

“Listen up, everyone! This is important.”

There was no need to say it, and it made Lee look silly, but obviously he feels he needs to be the one in charge. It's not a pretty side of him, and it's not the first time I've seen it. But again, that's fine.

"The device that Mike Schwartz dropped in Keith's bag had a group of files on it. Those files were not a backup of the database as we had originally thought, but were actually pre-load files. They were the files we used to load the BradComm data into the Diverse Data database."

I don't want to make this a conversation between just Jennifer and me, but her introduction allows me to fill people in by asking a couple of questions.

"This data was never loaded into the Diverse Data software?" I ask.

"Not all of it, no."

Jennifer looks at me as though she knows I have another question. She's right.

"What does that mean?" I oblige with the follow-up question.

"Well, most of it is in our test system. There are a handful of customer records, though, that were on Mike's device but weren't loaded into our test system," she says.

"And is that the only difference between Mike's device and the data the team has been using for months in the test system?" I ask, again leading Jennifer for the benefit of the other two in the room.

"Yeah, it is."

"And where does the data in these files come from?"

"Good question. The first part of our project with any customer is to identify their existing data sources. For most customers, that means Excel workbooks, old databases from years gone by, or even other applications. In BradComm's case, they had a ton of data in old Excel workbooks that were created by Mike himself. He had built some pretty sophisticated rules in Excel that had to be reproduced in the Diverse Data system. That's why we always called him the brain behind the data. Well, we didn't call him that to his face, of course," she explains.

"Ok, so is it possible these customers were simply recent additions to Mike's old Excel workbooks that weren't there when the

Diverse Data test system was loaded?” I ask.

I already know the answer from previous discussions with Jennifer, but I ask anyway so everyone else can hear.

“Well, some of them are, yes. There are six records that are exactly that: they are new customers created since our last load. That leaves twenty-seven others that are in the data on Mike’s device, but not in the test data.”

I look around to make sure everyone is getting this. It seems they are.

“What do we know about the twenty-seven, then?”

I ask the question that will launch our evening tasks.

“Unfortunately, not much. All we know is they were all created in the months leading up to last year’s presidential election cycle. That’s about it. They appear to be spread out geographically and include multiple candidates, but I haven’t gotten any further on that yet.”

And with that, Jennifer sits forward in her chair and starts typing, like she just thought of something she needs to make a note of.

And not unexpectedly, Lee seizes that opportunity to give some guidance.

“Ok, so that’s where we are. It looks like we need to find out as much as we can about those twenty-seven campaigns. And when you say campaigns, you mean election campaigns, right?” Lee asks, trying to make himself seem knowledgeable.

We could trample Lee’s assertion but decide not to. Jennifer is the one who responds.

“Yes, in this case, we do. While the team at BradComm talks about PR ‘campaigns’ in a broader sense, these twenty-seven appear to link to election campaigns across the country,” she says with a nod to Lee.

“So, how can we help if we don’t know the Diverse Data system?” Mason asks.

“It would probably help to know how BradComm was setting up the Diverse Data system,” I say, directed at Jennifer.

“Yeah, it probably would. So, let me share a few points about how BradComm setup the software. Think of the software as a framework for data and activities. It’s not smart, has to be told what to do and

where to look, but can get into some sophisticated analysis pretty quickly. It gets smarter as more and more data is available. Diverse Data uses a concept of workflows to tie together a sequence of activities with data.”

She has everyone’s attention, and is clearly trying to keep the discussion high-level to avoid losing the non-techies in the room.

“BradComm created a massive set of rules based on all their PR campaigns over the course of their business. Like tens of thousands of rules. You can think of rules as parameters to use for an activity,” she says, her energy increasing the more she talks about Diverse Data software.

Even Lee is now engaged.

“Can you give us an example of a rule?” he says.

“Yeah, sure. Good question,” Jennifer begins, giving Lee a nod.

“A rule can be something like a geographic limitation, something specific about the person, a political issue stance, or virtually any other piece of data you might want to act on. They could, for instance, establish a customer with rules for male, liberal, rural, Wisconsin, middle-aged criteria. But there are thousands more. The data is very specific. That’s why I tend to think of them more as parameters, regardless of what BradComm calls them.”

Jennifer pauses to see if Lee has caught the concept.

“So basically, the rules define the customer with their attributes?” Lee asks to be sure he understands.

“Yeah. At least the attributes they care about for this campaign,” Jennifer nods.

She looks around to make sure everyone else is onboard. We are, so she continues.

“Then there is the concept of activities. BradComm, using Mike’s model, created a long list of activities. Let me give you a couple of examples of those. They could be things like raising poll numbers, lowering poll numbers, increasing public perception, recovering from sexual misconduct, increasing consumer awareness, and many, many other activities. Again, they get very specific,” she says.

Once again, Jennifer stops and looks around. Everyone is still engaged, so she continues.

“The part of the Diverse Data that is most meaningful for our customers, including BradComm, is the ability to take those rules and activities, and apply search criteria from historical data and existing internet data. The system uses that data to determine what to do next based on predefined workflow steps. Using our examples here, our software can literally take the criteria of a candidate, determine what needs to be done to increase or decrease that candidate’s election outcome, and then execute tasks to achieve that outcome. It’s BradComm’s version of artificial intelligence, although it’s not really all that sophisticated compared to modern AI implementations.”

I’m looking around at the team and I can see bells going off in Lee and Mason’s heads.

“Wow. So, sticking to politics: you mean you can tell this software you want to change poll numbers by three points up or down and it can decide how to do that? And you said it can surf the web to see what type of things make that happen? Based on historical and real-time data?” Lee asks.

He is clearly impressed, as he looks at Jennifer with eyebrows raised.

“Well, yeah. You just made a perfect sales pitch for our software,” Jennifer replies and continues.

“And not only that, you can tie all this together in a workflow, as I mentioned earlier. And with our latest innovation, you can link social media to the whole thing. You could, if you set all the accounts up, trigger a social media blitz that executes your campaign for you. BradComm was planning to use that capability, but I can’t see that they were using it with these specific campaigns. That whole process can get incredibly complex. That’s probably more than we have time to get into tonight.”

Jennifer stops there rather than getting too far into the weeds with the Diverse Data social media integration.

Lee nods and sits back in his chair.

“That’s impressive, and a little disturbing, but I can see why someone like BradComm would want to use this. And Sanderson, for that matter. But back to my original question: how can we help?” Mason asks.

“Ok, here’s what I think we should do,” Jennifer says as she begins to type again.

“I can create a report for each of these twenty-seven customers that shows which rules and activities they were associated with. We can use that data to dig into elections that fit that criteria and find out exactly which political campaigns were being targeted by these rules. I tried it already, and the rules are so specific it’s not that hard. It just takes time.”

She looks over at me.

“Keith, do you have a printer I can use?”

“Sure, it’s wireless. Here, let me get you my Wi-Fi details and printer details.”

I scribble the details on a sheet of paper and hand them to Jennifer.

“Great, thanks. Let me get this set up and I’ll have a list out in a few minutes,” she says as she types frantically on her laptop.

And with that, our evening of research has been defined.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

I retrieve the printouts from my office as they complete, running out of paper twice during the process. I'm thrilled my ink cartridges made it, because I have no spares! After distributing cups of coffee around the table, we get started.

We pass the stacks of paper around by customer and start digging into the data tied to each of them. Jennifer also looks into the Diverse Data instance she had created from Mike's data to see if she can get any new insight.

After a few minutes, Lee is struggling with his stack.

"I wish we knew what we were looking for! This is like trying to find a needle in a haystack, without knowing what a needle looks like."

I decide to provide some guidance.

"Maybe you're looking too hard at the data and not the target. Let me suggest a slightly different approach. Take a few attributes, such

as age, gender, location and any defined political views, then step away from the data and search the internet. Campaign data is freely available and politicians are some of the easiest to track. Their bios are all over the place, so you should be able to narrow it down rather quickly. I know the data itself is cumbersome, that's part of the beauty of BradComm's approach."

I look at Lee to see if he gets what I'm saying.

"Yeah, ok. Let me shift gears here," he nods.

Jennifer looks up from her laptop and sits back in her chair.

"This is crazy," she starts.

"It looks like that Martin Sanderson guy has used Diverse Data literally hundreds of times. There are that many customer records out here. They had quite a thing going even before last year, apparently," she says.

She shakes her head as though she's frustrated with that discovery. Lee decides to take that opportunity to share some of his knowledge.

"Yeah, I suppose that's not surprising. These political thugs, for lack of a better term, get paid a lot of money to deliver results to these campaigns. Some of it they can do themselves, of course, but these days it's difficult to do it all alone. Sanderson is one of the best. And because he's good, he's also one of the rich ones. Not all of them carry the swagger he does," Lee says.

"Interestingly, I don't see links to the social media side for all of them, but what's here is pretty slick. BradComm had built a sophisticated social media integration that not only scanned and analyzed data but also launched the actual accounts. It's amazing they were doing this manually for all these accounts," she says.

Jennifer is once again energized as she shares her detailed knowledge of BradComm's use of the Diverse Data software.

"It's sort of dirty sounding, but they had developed scripts to log into specific social media accounts, thousands of them, and post, share, and like stories that fit their campaigns. It was like an end-to-end social engineering mechanism. I mean, there's a table I just found with literally thousands of social media account names and passwords. It's even named the bot account table. When you add all

these rules into the mix, especially for political campaigns, it's pretty disturbing what they could do."

She pauses and shakes her head again before continuing.

"And there is no way to know if this stuff is true or false, right or wrong, verified or not. It's just story after story, share after share, like after like, of accounts that are completely unverified. I'll have to see if they used this for our twenty-seven customers. Seeing how they implemented this process is crazy," she says, clearly beginning to get frustrated by the bigger picture she's uncovering.

"Look Jennifer, Diverse Data software isn't the only one being used in this way." I try to soothe her concern, even though I realize as I say it, I'm probably doing the opposite.

Lee tries to help as well.

"We like to think the political process is a finely tuned engine of truth and justice, but unfortunately, it's not. It's not at all. In fact, it's an ugly business full of lying, cheating, dirty deals, and public coercion. It's just that both sides do it, so there's some sort of strange balance in the end. But still, the FBI is trying to weed out all the illegal stuff embedded in the process as best we can. It seems technology is always a step ahead, but we're trying."

Lee is nodding and looking back and forth at the three of us while he's talking.

"To make matters worse, Sanderson isn't even loyal to one of the parties. He's purely a hired gun. He takes the side of whoever pays him and develops plans for their specific candidate or issue. He's an anomaly, of course, as most consultants are exclusively aligned with a specific party or group. That lack of loyalty, however, makes him particularly dangerous. We know he has flirted with ethics violations and even illegal activity for years. It's just hard to prove. We even believe he has used overseas news generators to propagate false news stories to aid his campaigns when he can't win legally. In fact, we're tracing his crypto accounts right now to build evidence for that case," Lee says.

As Lee is talking, my phone vibrates in my pocket. Taking it out of my pocket, I see a message has arrived from my crypto guru, Steve. I put the phone right back in my pocket without fanfare and continue with my own stack of BradComm customers. I look up to see

Jennifer has noticed my phone distraction and gives me a knowing glance.

I slide my chair back and stand up.

"I'm going to get another cup of coffee. Be right back," I say and head into the kitchen.

"I'll take one, too." Jennifer will not lose the chance to find out about the message I just got.

"That was your crypto guy?" she asks as we get into the kitchen.

"Yeah, it was," I respond, with no more detail.

"And does he know who the wallets belong to?" She gets right to the point.

"Yes, and no. He identified owners of two of them. One we already knew, Martin Sanderson. The second was the CIO at BradComm, Dwayne Tolliver. I suspect he is the one who identified Mike's data copy."

I stop there, as that's all I know.

"Yeah, I wondered about that. He could have installed a sniffer on the server or any number of things. It would have been easy for him to track everything going on there. Even a camera in the corner of Mike's office or the server room would have probably done it."

Jennifer is obviously pretty sharp with this stuff.

"Yeah, you're exactly right. That's what I was thinking when I heard it," I reply.

"Do you think Lee knows this already and just isn't telling us?" she asks.

"I'm not sure. Don't quite have him pegged yet," I reply, honestly.

"And you said there was a third. Who owns the third wallet?" Jennifer asks.

"It seems that one is going to take more time. Apparently, that owner is savvier, and has immediately routed their crypto across multiple wallets in a variety of countries. My crypto guy will get it, I'm sure, but it will take longer," I say, keeping my opinion on the owner to myself.

"You know who it is, don't you?" Jennifer asks as she squints and stares intently in my eyes.

"No, I'm not sure," I reply, somewhat honestly.

"Ok, then. Let's get back to work so we can find out."

We nod to each other, and Jennifer and I head back into the dining room to resume our research.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Over the next couple of hours, mixed in with dinner delivery, we set off to see what details we can uncover from the twenty-seven customer records in Mike's data. Everyone is doing research their own way, but we're tracking similar data points. We want to identify the candidate, the office, and the result of the election.

By 8PM, each of us has a fair idea what went on with our customers and we stop to summarize.

Mason begins.

"First off, I have to say this is the craziest thing I've ever seen. I suppose I knew this type of thing happened, but to see the data and actual campaign strategies is a little disturbing. It's almost we're seeing the sausage being made here, and in this case it certainly ends up making sausage taste terrible from now on."

She's shaking her head as she's talking.

“But to the data. I have five customers here. Let’s start with the names. None of them used the specific candidate names, of course. I did find, however, that they were close to the names of political organizations operating in the area. Take this one, for instance.”

She pulls out one of the sheets of her notes and begins reading.

“The customer’s name in the system is Pennsylvania Action. A brief internet search pulled up an actual nonprofit organization called Action Pennsylvania. It’s sort of weird, but they all appear to be nonprofits with similar names. All of them talk about action or liberty or something like that.”

Mason looks up and Jennifer chimes in.

“Yeah, I found the same thing. It’s not like they’re very creative with their organization names.”

Lee offers a bit of background on the names.

“I guess that’s not surprising. Nonprofit organizations manage most campaigns in the country, especially for the federal offices. That gives them a lot more flexibility in how much money they use and what they do with it. The campaigns themselves have strict limits on spending and activity, but the nonprofits can target specific candidates without those limits. It’s just how it works.”

He’s nodding as he talks and looks at each of us.

After a brief pause, Mason continues.

“After a couple more clicks, I found this organization funds campaign activity for local Democrats across Pennsylvania. Which, of course, Lee’s explanation seems to substantiate.”

She flips that page over and reads from the next page.

“Then, I used the rules in the BradComm data to isolate the candidate’s location and general election actions. Come to find out, the specific activities noted in the BradComm data played out during the campaign! The BradComm data says they wanted to reduce the candidates’ poll numbers for a conservative male, Pittsburgh area, and several other rules. Then I find this headline about a guy, Stanley Reeder, winning the election for Pennsylvania’s 18th congressional district because of a late plunge in the polls by his opponent.”

She stops and looks around before continuing.

“This Reeder guy, who is a Democrat, won because of a last-minute discovery of illegal campaign donations. Which, of course, was especially bad for a conservative guy running on ethical campaign promises.”

This time, Mason stops and sits back in her chair.

“Are you guys all finding this same type of stuff?” she asks as she is obviously struggling to come to grips with what she’s finding.

I watch as the others nod. Lee is clearly not surprised at all, Jennifer seems a little perturbed by her discoveries, and I try to show some reaction myself, even though I’m not surprised.

“Wow, this is nuts,” Mason continues and leans in to reengage with the conversation.

“So, I have five candidates. Three are male, two female. Four are Democrat and one is Republican. All five were running for congressional seats. It’s hard to see a pattern, though, as some activities were to win and some were clearly to lose, like that Reeder situation in Pittsburgh.”

She stops there and looks at the rest of us again.

“Let me suggest we add one more column to our tabulation to include the winning candidate. It looks like BradComm would push a candidate up or down in the polls, so I think it’s really the winners we’re after here. Right, Lee?” I ask as I try to get him to share what he knows.

“Yeah, that’s a good idea, Keith. If we tabulate the winners in each of these races, we’ll at least know if there’s a trend toward a particular issue or not.”

Lee nods as he talks, looking each of us in the eye.

“Lee, looks like you need some more coffee. Come on in the kitchen and I’ll grab you some,” I say to Lee as I stand up.

He follows me into the kitchen, and I close the swinging door. I shake my head as I look at Lee and whisper.

“You know exactly what you’re looking for. Why don’t you just tell us?” I’m trying not to hiss as I whisper and get closer to Lee. He’s almost my height, so we’re standing about a foot apart, nose to nose.

“We’ve wasted three hours on this research and you knew what we’d find already. You’re the one trying to build the evidence for your

case. You could have saved all of us a bunch of time and simply pointed us to the data you want us to find,” I whisper in frustration.

Lee gets equally stern as he whispers in response, getting even closer.

“It’s not that easy, Keith. If I point everyone to the answer, I won’t be able to use the data. It’s sort of like leading a witness. I needed the team to find it for themselves. It’s the linkage across the data that’s important, not the answer itself. Yes, I need the evidence. In fact, the only reason I’m here is to get this evidence. I’ve been trying to nail this Sanderson guy for years. If I can take down Filipov at the same time, so be it, but that’s not the target. I have a few hours tonight to get enough data in to our SAC to approve the arrest. The teams are ready to go, but with no data, we’re screwed.”

Lee backs up after he has made his point. He relaxes his posture and crosses his arms. I fill our cups with coffee, even though neither is empty.

“I’m not buying that one, Lee. You should have led us to the target campaigns. The data shows what the data shows, regardless of how it’s discovered,” I say, trying not to sound defiant.

Lee squints and looks at me while I hand him his cup.

“You know what I’m looking for, too, don’t you?” he asks.

“Let’s just get back to work, Lee,” I say as I pass him and head into the dining room.

Lee grabs my arm as I try to walk by.

“Remember, you’re the only one left from that meeting, Keith. You should be abundantly helpful with this investigation. The longer these guys are out there, the longer you and your family are in danger.”

I jerk my arm away and get right in Lee’s face.

“Don’t ever threaten me and my family! Ever. You got that? Now, let’s go solve your case.”

I return my face to a smile before I move away.

Lee glares at me as I pass by and follows me back into the dining room.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

As Lee and I walk back into the dining room, I see the team is well down the path to assembling the list of winning candidates. I quietly look at their list and go back to my list of researched BradComm customers. Mine, not surprisingly, follow similar patterns to Mason's.

As we're writing, I decide to probe a different part of the story.

"Lee, does the FBI have payment records for all of these campaigns from this Sanderson guy?" I ask.

"Yeah, we do. Why do you ask?" he responds.

"Well, I'm wondering who typically pays him?"

Lee can see where I'm going.

"It's usually the same names you're finding in this customer list. Typically, a nonprofit looking to secure victory for a candidate sympathetic to their cause."

“But what about for these twenty-seven? Do you have payment records for these?”

“No, we wouldn’t since we are just now tabulating them here at this moment.” Lee smirks as he answers.

“Do you think you know what we’ll find?” he asks me.

“Nothing. You’ll find nothing,” I reply as I continue writing down my candidate details. When I’m finished writing, I stare at Lee.

“You’ll find nothing because the campaigns didn’t fund Mr. Sanderson for these activities, did they? Since that’s true, I’d think there would be enough evidence in the lack of payment to convict him of going his own way. Is that not true?” I ask.

I’m extending our conversation from the kitchen without the rest of the team knowing it. He catches it and responds without emotion.

“That would be great, but not really. The lack of evidence makes this more circumstantial. That’s why it’s important for us to dig into these campaigns to see if there were illegal activities hidden in the BradComm data. Plus, we need to track the whole crypto scheme as well. Yes, this shows how easy it is for an outside influence to get involved here, as I’m sure Mr. Sanderson didn’t work for free. But it doesn’t implicate anyone else directly. We need more,” he says calmly.

Lee nods back at me with a semi-polite stare.

Once my portion of the list is complete, I tell the team I’m going to step away for the moment, and step into my bedroom to call Jamie’s phone. I want to make sure I check in with them before they head to bed. It will probably be hours before they actually go to bed, but I’m going to pretend like 9PM is their bedtime there, too.

“Hey dad, how’s Ms. Mason?” Jamie asks with a grin I can hear through the phone.

“She’s fine, hon. How are you guys doing?” I ignore her little poke and move on.

“Good, we’re getting ready for bed,” she says.

I’m pretty sure she’s not being truthful, but I have to admire the effort.

After a brief chat with Jamie and Kyle, then Judy, I head back into the dining room to catch up with the team and their list of candidates.

“Ok, here we go. There are twenty-seven candidates from various locations and backgrounds. They’re all congressional candidates but there’s no recognizable pattern across the information contained in the BradComm data,” Mason says and sits back from her scribbling.

“So, why were these election results worth killing for?” she asks.

“I don’t think the answer is that obvious,” I reply.

“Let’s look at a couple of things. We know these candidates were pushed into office for a reason. It appears it’s not because of a party affiliation or candidate attribute, so it has to be bigger than each individual. Can we see what issues were voted on in the current congressional session?”

I’m clearly leading the team down a path, but trying not to destroy Lee’s quest for uncontaminated research.

“Yeah, I think so,” Jennifer chimes in.

“I found voting records in my searches for some of the candidates. Give me a minute here.” Jennifer clicks away as she looks for the data.

“Here, I’ve got it. Whoa! There have been hundreds. Let me count them.”

She continues clicking before sitting back in her chair.

“Three hundred and eighty pieces of legislation have been passed since the last election,” she says.

She sounds exasperated by the volume, so I try to simplify it for her.

“Let’s look for anything that has to do with oil drilling. Is there anything related to that issue?” I look at Lee as I ask it.

Lee’s eyes are burning a hole in my skull, but I ignore it. He should have sent us down this path earlier.

“Yeah, there are a few,” Jennifer responds without looking up.

“And where did our twenty-seven candidates vote on those pieces of legislation?” I ask, already pretty confident I know the answer.

“I’ll need to look them up individually. Let me check. This may take a few minutes.” Jennifer once again starts searching and tallying.

While she's looking up the votes on oil drilling legislation, I step into my bedroom to make another quick call. Officer Brockmeier picks up immediately.

"Hey Mr. Morgan, what's up?"

"Hey Tommy, thanks for answering. We're just in the middle of the whole BradComm thing with the FBI out here and I had a couple of questions, if you don't mind."

Tommy is quick to respond, but noncommittal.

"You know I can't answer everything, but I can try. Why aren't you asking your FBI friends?"

"Well, that's part of the problem. I'm not sure who my friends are," I respond, trying not to sound dramatic.

"Oh, wow. Ok then, what do you need?" Tommy asks.

"How involved were you in the larger investigation involving the political work BradComm was doing?" I ask in response.

"I'm afraid I can't help you with that one, Keith. I only heard about that when the case was taken away from us. Once it shifted from a local murder to a plot against America's election system, I was no longer involved."

Tommy sounds a bit disappointed about that.

"Ok, thanks Tommy. Now, one last thing. I had asked the FBI to put some coverage on my children while they're in Denver with my in-laws. Is there any way you can make sure that was done? My gut tells me there's still more we don't know here."

"Sure, I can check on that. Text me the address and I'll get in touch with the local precinct," he responds, suspiciously.

"Do you want to tell me what's going on?" he asks.

I don't.

"I don't think so. It's probably nothing. Thanks Tommy. Appreciate the help."

"Any time, Mr. Morgan," he says.

After we end the call, I send a text to Tommy with Oliver and Judy's address in Denver and head back into the dining room.

Chapter Forty

Jennifer is finishing up her tally of legislation votes when I return to the dining room. She sits back as she realizes what she's looking at.

"Well, it seems we have a possible theme here. Every one of our twenty-seven candidates has been against drilling oil in the United States. They have, in fact, helped stop legislation to expand domestic and offshore drilling."

I watch to see the story begin to sink in with Jennifer. And with Mason, as she's the next to chime in on the topic.

"If the Russians are involved here, they would have been glad to pay huge sums of money to help keep their oil imports flowing to the US. With no domestic drilling, I guess that would be assured, right?"

She pauses and looks at the rest of us as we nod. Then she continues.

“Well, I guess we see what he was paid to do. But, knowing these PR firms do this type of election work all the time, how do we *prove* Sanderson was doing something illegal?” Mason is shaking her head as she puts the story together.

Lee is happy to answer her question.

“There are two things to look for that will help us. The first is blatantly false allegations propagated by these twenty-seven campaign activities. Everyone denies them at first, but I’d expect by now some have been proven to be false. If you can find that proof in any of these strategies, that will help,” Lee says.

“The second,” Lee continues, “is to see which were sent to any of Sanderson’s overseas news agencies to distribute. Jennifer mentioned these twenty-seven campaigns didn’t use the Diverse Data social media connectors. That’s really not surprising, as Sanderson wouldn’t want the whole operation in one box. If he distributed the social media portion elsewhere, it would be more difficult to trace those stories back to the campaign strategies that spawned them. I’ll give you a list of the fake news agencies we know about from Belarus, Morocco, Algeria, and a couple of other places. I’m sure there are new ones we don’t know about, but these will give us a start. If Sanderson is using these guys to produce the stories linked to the campaigns we’re finding here, we have a link that we can use to fortify the evidence. If our team can find payments to these agencies, it’s even better, but the stories themselves will be enough to build a case. I’m printing the list now, just a second.”

Lee is typing as he finishes speaking, and everyone sits for a minute while they absorb what Lee is saying. Once he sends the list to the printer, he continues.

“The whole concept of fake news has taken on a life of its own in recent years. It was originally a rare and sort of taboo topic, but now it’s so common you can build a fake news story for your own social media just for fun. But these guys aren’t doing it for fun. And if it’s being leveraged as truth in order to influence an election, we have fraud. That’s what we’re looking for.” Lee stops and heads into my room to retrieve the list of fake news agencies.

The team stretches and takes some deep breaths while we all wait for Lee to return. When he returns with the list, he passes it to

each person. Each of us either writes down the names or types them into our laptops before passing the list to the next person. After we all have a copy of the list, we start digging into google searches and news stories again to see which of our pre-election stories have proven to be false.

The task is tedious, but with the shaking heads and raised eyebrows I see over the next few minutes, I assume it's also at least marginally successful. My own list had produced five matches with Lee's list, meaning Sanderson had used a known fake news agency for at least five of these stories. I also found three that were officially refuted after the fact. Apparently, Sanderson had altered the results of those three elections by blasting news stories that were ultimately proven to be lies. And he had done it using the exact stories the BradComm campaign strategies had recommended.

After seeing the team slow down, and knowing I had come to a conclusion from my list, I sat back in my chair.

"So, what are we finding?" I ask the group.

"I'm finding that I'm really disappointed we didn't catch this sooner," Mason says in disgust.

"I've already found five stories that were distributed by the agencies from Lee's list. And two of those, so far, were proven false," she adds.

Jennifer and Lee offer a similar response.

"Yeah, I found the same," I add.

Jennifer shakes her head and sits back to ponder the end-to-end scheme we have all uncovered.

"Let me see if I have this right. Filipov decides he wants to ensure Russian oil imports continue to the United States. He knows that means the US must not vote to expand drilling here, so he pays Sanderson to work his magic with campaigns across the country. Sanderson picks the campaigns he believes will keep expanded drilling off the table and goes after any opposition to those candidates. To do that, he uses BradComm to build the strategies against those candidates," she says.

"Then they use the crypto payments to hide the financial side of it. Filipov pays Sanderson with crypto, and Sanderson pays Mike with crypto," I interject.

“Oh yeah, that’s right. They’re paying for this stuff off the books. Then, Sanderson buys the election-influencing strategies from BradComm, knowing Mike Schwartz and his team have the best tools to get the job done. And last, he has the strategies executed by overseas fake news agencies. By knocking off enough candidates that might have voted to expand US drilling, he saves Russian imports for at least the next election cycle and earns his payout.” She pauses and looks at Lee.

“Well, yeah. That’s pretty much it,” Lee says.

Jennifer sits back and sighs heavily. I continue from there.

“Then Mike decides, for whatever reason, to check out of the whole thing and bug out of the country. That, I suppose, was too risky for Sanderson and Filipov, so they decide to shut the whole thing down and clean up any evidence, including Mike himself,” I say to make sure we don’t forget it was Mike’s death that started this whole investigation.

Everyone nods and sits back as it sinks in. After a few silent moments, Lee jumps in with renewed energy.

“This is good work. I’m going to need to put together a case to get to my SAC on this. We’ve been looking for hard evidence to tie Sanderson to the Russians. These campaign strategies and the offshore news links may be just enough. I’ll try to get this together real quick,” he says, his excitement growing.

Lee looks at me.

“Is there somewhere quiet I can go to compile a report and get it out the door?” he asks.

“Sure, you can use my desk in there.” I point toward my bedroom where my makeshift office is and lead Lee toward the desk in the corner.

“Does your SAC know the report is coming? This seems like a short turnaround to get boots on the ground in DC to arrest Sanderson and, who’d you say the other arrest would be?” I ask as we head into the room.

“I didn’t say.” Lee smirks as he sits down at my desk.

I suppose he realizes I’m trying to sneak information from him.

“I’ll need about thirty minutes to complete this report and get it to the SAC. Once they have it, we’ll be in the clear to arrest your fake

courier and close down Sanderson's operation."

Lee doesn't look up from his keyboard while he says it.

As I walk out of the room, I hear Lee talking on the phone.

"What do you mean, she's not available? When will she be available?"

Lee pauses after his angry question and listens.

"Ok, then I'll get them to you right now." He puts down his phone before I close the door.

"Everything ok?" I ask.

Lee looks back, apparently not aware I hadn't yet gotten out of the room.

"Oh, yeah, everything is fine. It just seems the SAC is at an event tonight and won't be able to review the case files. That was the ASAC, Shawn. He says he can get them filed and get her ok to move forward without a physical signature."

"Good," I reply as I grab the door handle to close it.

Before I click it shut, I stick my head in the door.

"Does the ASAC know the urgency of this whole situation? I mean, my kids are in Denver and I'm here with you guys. I know they're out of range up there, but it sort of feels like we're all sitting ducks here in my house right now," I say with honest sincerity and urgency.

"He knows, Keith. He helped me get this whole trip approved, so he knows." Lee seems irritated so I decide to back off.

"Got it. Good luck with the report."

As I'm leaving the room, my phone vibrates with a text message. It's from Tommy.

Checked with Denver PD. Kids are good, the house is secure.

I sigh with relief and respond immediately as I head into the living room where everyone has now settled.

Awesome. Thanks Tommy!

As I enter, Jennifer has clearly been thinking about something, as she sits with a furrowed brow, watching my arrival.

“Hey, Keith. What if that fake courier comes early and sees all the cars here? Won’t that tip him off that something is up and his plan has gone astray?” she asks from the couch where she’s sitting with Mason.

“Yeah, I wondered about that myself,” I reply as I sit down on a chair next to the couch.

“I suppose we are relying pretty strongly on their trust of those GPS tracking devices,” I add, as I lean back in the chair.

“I think we can use the fact that they have the GPS devices on the cars and lure them in, then use the fake courier getup against them,” Mason chimes in.

Jennifer and I look at her and nod.

“Ok, you’ve clearly been thinking about this. We’ll have to see how Lee wants to play it once he gets approval to proceed.”

After about thirty more minutes and lots of idle conversation, Lee emerges from my bedroom office.

“Well, they’re all on the way now. The ASAC is going to package them up and route them for approval right now. We have one to go to the SAC for approval of the arrests across the different jurisdictions, and the other package has to circulate through the crypto team to get approval to seize the wallet.” Lee says as he heads into the kitchen for a drink.

I follow him into the kitchen to get a drink of my own.

“So, you’re telling me you have all the data you need to make an arrest of this fake courier and the Sanderson dude in DC?” I ask as I grab a couple of bottles of water out of the refrigerator.

I’m not sure why he’s not telling me about Dwayne Tolliver, the BradComm CIO who I already know owns one of the other crypto wallets the Russians were paying. It’s almost like Lee needs to have something to hold over me, so he knows more about the case.

“That’s what I’m saying. I just need to get the crypto links between Sanderson and Schwartz, and we’ve got what we need there. This fake courier will seal his own fate when he pulls into your driveway, claiming to be part of the scam. Then I’m sure we’ll be able to get what we need from his phone records, etcetera. I would bet he’s been talking to Sanderson this whole time.” Lee proudly summarizes his case between sips of water.

“Well, it sounds like you’ve got it all figured out, then!” I say as I turn to walk out of the kitchen.

“What is that supposed to mean, Keith?” Lee raises his voice this time.

“Nothing at all. Why?” I respond, trying to be sincere.

“Stop trying to do the FBI’s work, Mr. Morgan. We’ve got this. You just stay out of the way and let us apprehend this guy.” He is picking up his buzzing phone as he scolds me.

Lee can’t hide his anger at whoever is on the other line.

“You’re what? Why are you doing that? You flew me all the way out here to stand down?” Lee is yelling into the phone as he quickly shuffles back into my room and slams the door.

It seems someone is stepping in on Lee’s case.

Chapter Forty-One

After some heated discussion between Lee and whoever he was on the phone with, he once again emerges from my room. This time, he's rubbing his temples.

"Well, it seems we're going to have some visitors out here before the sun comes up. The SAC has notified the local field office of our situation and has asked them to take over this piece of the operation. I'll be heading back to Detroit tomorrow."

"Wow, sorry to hear that, Lee. I know you've put a lot of work into this," I reply as everyone else looks on.

Even with the obvious tension between us, I am sincere with my statement. Lee sees it and nods. Then he continues while looking directly at me.

"They have decided on a high-level plan for tomorrow, as well. Since the fake courier is expecting you to call him in the morning, they'd like to use that to our benefit."

Lee nods at me while talking, although he is clearly now emotionally detached from what he's saying.

"The approach they'd like to use is simply to lure him here and pick him up when he arrives. No fanfare, just simply carrying out the ruse he's already begun," Lee says flatly.

I must have inadvertently raised my eyebrows because Lee turns my way and seems to take offense to my demeanor.

"Something wrong, Keith?"

"Oh, no. Not at all. I'm just wondering what evidence they're using to arrest this guy? I mean, do you have anything good enough to take him in?"

I'm still trying to put together the FBI's version of the big picture.

"Well, yeah, we think we do. The ASAC ran it by the SAC today, and she believes we use what we know. We can leverage the fact that the whole courier scheme is set up under a false pretense. He's also looking for the device we now know contains evidence, and he's using the BradComm company name. Plus, the evidence points to Mike being killed for this data, and now Dave Hawkins as well, so those things give us lots of reasons to get this guy off the street."

Ok, that explanation seems fair enough.

"Got it. Ok, how should I play this then?" I ask, trying to sound enthused.

"It's pretty simple, really. They just want you to call the fake courier and tell him you found the device. We're all pretty sure he'll run right over here to pick it up. Then we'll have the FBI team from Colorado Springs pick him up. That shouldn't give him a chance to raise a ruckus or put any civilians in danger," Lee says, still void of emotion.

"Ok, that seems easy enough to me," I reply.

Then Jennifer pipes in from the couch.

"Do I really need to stay here, then? It sounds like you guys have this wrapped up already?" she asks.

"Yeah, we'd like you to stay, Jennifer. Until we get this guy in custody, we can't be sure he's not out there snooping. If he was to see you moving about while the GPS transmitter was still in your garage, it would make him suspicious. Tonight, we'd like you two to hunker down here at the Morgan residence to remain out of sight.

Hopefully, Keith can help us all get as comfortable as possible. Mason and I will take turns staying awake to make sure we keep an eye on the cameras. You two can get a good night's rest before we rein this in tomorrow."

Lee seems resolved to let this play out tomorrow. I'm not quite convinced yet.

"Lee, you mentioned you were sending in the case files to get everything approved. Are you saying the other arrests are going on tomorrow morning also?" I ask.

"Well, that's being finalized now. I had quite a package to send out, and it takes some time to get through it all. The ASAC is getting all that together to review now. I expect it to get done by morning, though, yes. This whole thing needs to be delicately coordinated, or Sanderson may get spooked."

That statement prompts a question.

"So, you're focused on Sanderson, and not on the Russian funding of this operation?" I ask, repeating a previous theme.

"Well, for now, yes. The Russian link will need to go through another layer of diplomatic challenges. But these guys, starting with Sanderson and his group of murderous thugs, are my responsibility to detain. I mean, they've already killed at least two people and were not likely to let you live had you not held that little device from them. I'd say you're a lucky guy with that move!"

Lee nods my direction with that last sentence.

"Are you sure this is all Sanderson's doing? Have you gotten any direct evidence to corroborate that theory?" I ask.

I may be pushing it, but it seems Lee is having trouble seeing my suspicions. Instead of acknowledging my concerns, he rolls right over me.

"Look, Keith, I'm sure Sanderson is trying to cover up something for his Russian partner. But, I've got to deal with what I know. We have linked Sanderson and his cohorts at BradComm to a deliberate, and sadly successful, attempt to manipulate the US political system. We have been looking for that a long time and we can finally prove it. I simply can't ignore that."

Then he realizes what he said and amends his point.

“Of course, we couldn’t have gotten there so quickly without your and Jennifer’s help, so thank you,” he adds.

He gives a half-hearted smile to me and Jennifer, which I counter with my own half-hearted smile before responding.

“You believe my family and Jennifer will be out of the woods, so to speak, when you get the fake courier and Sanderson arrested?” I feel certain there is more to this, but Lee seems to disagree.

“Well, yes, I do. Like I mentioned, we have another related suspect in Detroit at BradComm as well. Someone was working with Sanderson to identify Mike’s data copy. The most important one for us, however, is Sanderson. We believe getting him off the street will cut off the funding source for any other potential damage. The fake courier, for example, wouldn’t exist without Sanderson pulling the strings,” he says confidently.

“I see. Well, ok. Sounds like you’ve got it covered.”

I give him an intentional smirk and drop it for now.

“What’s next for us, then? If the local FBI guys are swooping in, where do we all go from here?” I ask, sincerely this time.

“Well, here’s what we’re thinking.” Lee sits down on a chair in the living room and leans in as he begins to share the FBI’s plan.

“First off, we’d like to make sure you and Jennifer are safe from all this. We know they’re tracking your vehicle, so we want to leave that here, of course. But we’d like you and Jennifer to be away from the house with one of our agents to avoid any potential hiccups that might occur when our courier friend is taken in.”

I can’t hide my concern over that idea.

“Lee, this is my house! You want me to leave my house to you and the FBI so you can arrest that guy on my property? All while I just drive around?”

Lee holds up his hands to stop me.

“Now, wait a minute, Keith. I didn’t say we’d lure him all the way to the house. There is a more readily available intercept point at the bottom of your neighborhood. We believe we can set up a collection point at the end of the street before he makes his way up near your or your neighbor’s houses. We’ll use a typical pullover scenario when we see the black Ford Explorer turn the corner. There’s nowhere for him to go at that point. But just in case, we’d like to

make sure you and Jennifer are a safe distance away,” Lee says, making this whole thing sound awfully simple.

“Ok, so you mentioned earlier that you’d like me to call the guy. I just call him and sit in town waiting while your team picks him up? And it’s all over?” I ask.

“Pretty much, yeah. I’m not sure staying in town is the best choice, because we don’t want him to see you, but other than that, yeah. Of course, we’ll have similar actions in DC, where Sanderson will also be picked up at the same time,” Lee answers.

“Ok. Well, let me go set up some sleeping arrangements for us, then.”

I head to my room to make a couple of phone calls.

Chapter Forty-Two

As I walk into Kyle's bedroom to get it setup for one of my visitors, I pull out my phone and dial Officer Brockmeier in Detroit.

As usual, he answers quickly.

"Hey Mr. Morgan, what's up?"

He sounds surprisingly chipper for ten PM.

"Hey Tommy, sorry for the late call, but I have a couple more questions. I'm sitting here in my house with two federal agents, and this agent from Detroit is telling me they're wrapping up the whole Mike Schwartz killing tomorrow. He has said nothing, however, about who actually killed him or how. He also seems way too comfortable with the whole thing to me."

I pause to get Tommy's reaction, which is quick and loud.

"Now, wait a minute, Mr. Morgan. Are you saying you think you're somehow being played by an FBI agent? Or that he's somehow

involved in this? Or that he's totally incompetent? What exactly are you suggesting?"

Tommy is clearly not onboard with my caution.

"Or maybe he's just really confident he's got everything lined up, I don't know. Something just doesn't feel right. But let's put that aside for a moment. I have a couple of specific things to ask you."

"Ok, shoot. As always, I'll answer if I can," Tommy says.

"Let's start with the murder of Dave Hawkins. Do you have any specifics on that murder? Maybe how the intruder got in, what type of vehicle was used, what type of weapon, anything?"

I realize I may be pushing too far, but it's worth a shot.

"Well, yeah. As the matter of fact, we have put some of that together. It seems the intruder bypassed Mr. Hawkins' security system and was simply waiting for him when he got in. When Mr. Hawkins entered the interior of the home, he was shot once in the head and once in the chest with 9mm armor-piercing rounds. There's no way it was a kid off the street and there's no way it was an accident. They rummaged through drawers and closets and made off with a couple of things, including a computer, but we know it wasn't a failed robbery. It was an expert hit."

He already answered my fear, but I don't want to sound like an alarmist, so I keep it to myself.

"Interesting. And I assume nobody saw or heard anything?"

"No, they didn't. It seems Mr. Hawkins was estranged from his family, so nobody else was there. The shooter positioned himself inside the home so Mr. Hawkins would have closed the door and walked around the corner toward his bedroom before he was shot. The flash and sound would have been minimized to anyone outside."

Tommy pauses again, then continues.

"I'm telling you too much, Mr. Morgan, but most of this will be in the news soon, anyway. The public will be concerned, so there will be a full-scale manhunt outlined by the Detroit Police Chief. Unless, of course, the whole thing gets sorted out with evidence the FBI team finds out there."

"You don't sound very confident that's going to happen?" I ask.

"Mr. Morgan, whoever did this was a professional. The people you're dealing with there are good. They're not hacks. I doubt they

left any trace of who they are or who they're working for. All the best to the FBI, but I suspect this one will be tough."

Yeah, no kidding. But Lee isn't acting that way.

"Ok, thanks Tommy. Can I ask one more thing?"

"Sure, Mr. Morgan, with the standard rules for my answer."

"Do you guys get involved if the FBI wants to make a local arrest?" I ask.

"Most of the time, yeah. Why do you ask?" Tommy responds.

"Well, this FBI agent, Lee Warfield, keeps talking about another arrest coming in Detroit but he is deliberately not saying who it is. Either he's just following protocol to keep from divulging, which, given his other disclosures, seems unlikely, or he's not really sure who it is."

Tommy puts on his official police voice to respond to this one.

"Or he knows who it is but doesn't want you telling anyone because you may ruin his case. Mr. Morgan, remember he's a federal agent and you aren't. I don't know if we're helping pick up anyone else in Detroit, and if I did, I wouldn't be able to share. He's probably just following protocol, as you stated."

I'm not convinced, but I sense I'm pushing Tommy too far.

"Yeah, you're probably right. I've asked too much. I'll catch you later, Tommy. Thanks again."

"You got it, Mr. Morgan. Be careful."

With that warning, I make one more call.

"Hey Keith, what's up?" Says Steve.

"Hey Steve. Would it help your research on that third crypto wallet if I could perhaps narrow the search to a couple of names?" I ask.

"Yeah, it might. Although these guys typically use aliases on the foreign crypto exchanges, names help us when identification is required. That's becoming more and more common, so it might help. What have you got?"

"Well, this may go nowhere, but start with Lee Warfield."

"Ok. Got it. Who else?" Steve asks.

"Well, to be honest, I don't know the other names. Is there any way you can get a list of the leadership chain in the FBI in Detroit, starting with Lee?" I ask.

“Wait a minute, Keith. You’ve got me looking up FBI agents as potentially receiving payments from Russia? Are you nuts? What have you gotten into out there?”

Steve doesn’t try to hide his surprise. Or his concern.

“Look, I’m not sure it’s anything. Something just doesn’t feel right out here.”

I don’t want to get into everything that feels out of place, so I leave it at that.

“Ok, Keith. You be careful out there, man. But, to answer your question: yes, I can find out who the leaders of that FBI field office are and add them to the search criteria. Like I said, it may not help, but it’s worth a try. And as always, let me know if you need anything else. I’ll get back to you as soon as I find anything.”

“Thanks Steve. Again, not sure if this is anything, but I appreciate you trying.”

“No sweat, Keith. And remember to call if you need any help at all.”

“Got it. Thanks Steve.”

After ending the call, I finish preparing Jamie’s room, moving away all the kid stuff so there’s somewhere for an adult to sleep. At least nobody will need to be on the couch, so Mason and Lee can rotate between Kyle’s room and the couch while they’re watching the cameras.

I head back into the living room to let them know we’re all setup for the night.

Chapter Forty-Three

After getting everyone settled on the sleeping arrangements, I decide to share my concerns with Jennifer.

“I’m going to grab a bottle of water. Anyone else want one?”

I say as I head into the kitchen. As I pass by Jennifer on the couch, I subtly motion for her to join me.

“I’ll have one,” she says as she jumps up.

As she steps into the kitchen, she clearly notices something is up.

“Hey, what’s wrong, Keith?” she asks with a concerned look on her face.

“Well, probably nothing. But I have a few questions. First off, you spent time in Afghanistan, so I’m curious. Does an armor-piercing 9mm handgun bullet mean anything to you?” I ask.

Jennifer nods and looks out of the corner of her eye.

“Yes, it does. It probably means it’s a Russian round,” she says cautiously.

“Why do you ask?” she says.

“Well, I just found out that’s what killed Dave Hawkins. And not only that, it was a professional job. They avoided the security system, knew where to go in the house to minimize the risk of shots being noticed, and left no trace of evidence. Except the bullets in Dave’s body, of course. Lee described it as a home invasion. Either he doesn’t know all this or he’s avoiding telling us for some reason.” I say, trying not to sound too sinister.

I pause to see Jennifer’s reaction.

“I have to be honest, Keith, this sort of sounds like a big conspiracy theory. Maybe he just isn’t divulging everything about an ongoing case because it’s still an ongoing case.”

She responds as I hand her a water bottle from the fridge.

“Maybe,” I say, shrugging as I continue.

“But why did they send him all the way out here in the first place, then decide to handle the arrest of the fake courier with local agents?” I ask.

Again, I pause to see if my line of thinking is making sense.

“Well, sending him out here is a curious move. I mean, using the local agents makes perfect sense, especially if they’re working alongside the local police. Which I believe they are, from what I’ve seen. Lee’s presence does seem to be overkill. I’ll agree with that. But maybe they wanted him here to take care of the data transfer itself.”

Jennifer seems to be trying to apply some logic, and her questioning look makes me think she believes her logical view versus my more pessimistic spin. I decide not to push it any further for now.

“Yeah, you’re probably right,” I say as I take a deep breath and nod toward the door.

“I suppose we should head back in and settle down for the night. Although it’s not like I’m going to sleep at all. If those guys could avoid Dave’s security, they can probably get around my Best Buy camera system I’m relying on for my own security here.”

I chuckle as lightly as I can, but it’s not really a funny thought.

“Keith, I think you’re over thinking all this. The courier will come back when you call, they’ll snatch him then, and with the other arrests, this whole thing will be over.”

Again, Jennifer is trying to be the voice of reason. She nods to confirm her own statement and heads into the living room.

I offer a tired smile as she walks by, and I follow her into the room. Lee is frantically typing on his phone as I enter.

“Everything ok, Lee?” I ask.

He keeps typing without looking up.

“Yeah, everything’s fine.”

His tone clearly indicates otherwise.

“Just trying to make sure those reports get filed and our whole setup gets approved for tomorrow. Right now, they’re only approving the fake courier pickup based on your report. We need more links to Sanderson before they pick him up. Apparently, the cryptocurrency wallets I had sent over didn’t lead to much.”

That statement gives me pause because I apparently know more about those wallets than Lee does.

“Oh, sorry to hear that,” I say.

“Yeah, well, they’re also hoping the fake courier will lead us to more evidence. They believe he will probably have some sort of communication with Sanderson, or will provide us with enough information to take him in. The whole thing is frustrating, that’s all.”

Lee is shaking his head as he talks and types.

“I guess they’re probably concerned about the connections Sanderson has in and around DC. Without rock solid evidence, he’ll walk. Everyone on the FBI side wants to make sure we’ve got all our ducks in a row. Again, I understand it. It’s just frustrating.”

With that, he stops typing, sits back on the couch and sighs deeply.

“Well, I suppose we should get set up for the night. Keith, can you please add me and Mason to your camera notifications? I mean, we have good eyes, but not as good as those cameras, especially in the dark. We’ll keep watch through the night while you guys sleep.”

Lee says as he turns to Mason.

“I’ll take the first shift, Mason. You get some sleep and I’ll come get you in two hours,” he says.

“Sure, no problem. We’re a couple hours earlier time zone from you. Are you sure you don’t want me to take the first one?” Mason asks Lee.

“Nope, I’m fired up enough now to stay up well past that, but I’ll just go with two hours for now. We can adjust in the night if necessary,” Lee says.

“Sounds good,” replies Mason.

“So, do we know when the agents from Colorado Springs will arrive? It sort of seems like we could use more boots on the ground up here tonight,” Jennifer asks Lee.

“They’re supposed to be here before daylight. After they arrive and unload, I’ll ask them to park down the hill. In fact, we should move the extra cars down there now,” Lee says.

“I’ll get mine,” says Mason.

“Me too,” says Lee.

“Keith and Jennifer, you guys can hang here. We’ll be right back,” Lee adds as he nods at us.

With that, Lee and Mason head out to move their cars to the bottom of the hill, leaving me and Jennifer standing in the living room.

“So, it’s Monday night and I’m sitting in Woodland Park waiting to make sure a murderer doesn’t get to me. I’d have to say that’s not how I saw this weekend going when it started Friday afternoon,” Jennifer says.

She’s shaking her head as she speaks again.

“No, me neither,” I add.

“Two murders and FBI agents hanging out in my house? No, I would say I didn’t expect this either. And they expect us to sleep? I don’t see much sleep happening tonight,” I say in an unintentionally grim tone.

I find myself shaking my head along with Jennifer.

“Oh, come on, you were in Afghanistan too. I’d guess you can sleep anywhere if you need to. And Keith, you need to let this whole conspiracy thing go. Agent Warfield is just doing his job. I think you’re trying to create problems where they don’t exist. Plus, I trust Mason with my life. There is no way she’s involved in anything shady on this.”

Jennifer gets stern as she mentions Mason.

“Look, I don’t have anything negative to say about Mason at all, Jennifer. Please don’t read that into my questions. I just wish I was as confident as you are about Lee’s position in this whole thing.”

We sit in silence for several moments until my phone buzzes with a camera alert. Lee and Mason have moved their cars and are walking back up the driveway.

Chapter Forty-Four

After we're all back in the house, we settle into the night's sleeping rotation. Jennifer takes Jamie's bedroom, and Mason gets Kyle's room while Lee takes the first shift watching cameras. It's around eleven when we are all in our initial sleeping spots.

Lying in my bed with three other people in my house leaves me with very little expectation of sleep. Jennifer was right, however. I had learned to sleep almost anywhere long ago, but hadn't needed to use that skill in years. Tonight, I have to leverage those skills to get even a little sleep. Focusing on stillness, darkness, and blanking my mind, I do find a few hours between Mason and Lee's shifts.

At about 4AM, I am awakened by Lee's voice in the living room. I turn the corner to hear his side of a phone conversation.

"What? You've got to be kidding me!" Lee is exclaiming, not trying to hide his amazement.

"The detonator matched the mobile number?" Lee is asking.

“And when will we get the ballistics?”

Then Lee pauses to listen while I watch from the edge of the living room. Mason and Jennifer also hear the talking and join me to watch Lee talk on the phone. All three of us watch intently while we wait for Lee to end the call and offer some sort of explanation.

After several uneasy moments and some excited questions and pauses from Lee, he ends the call and looks over to see the three of us staring at him in suspense.

“Well, that was completely unexpected,” Lee starts with a rather obvious statement based on what we’ve heard, then continues.

“That was the ASAC, Shawn. It seems they found Sanderson there in the Detroit area. That in itself is unexpected. Even crazier, they found him in a car that had a burner phone. That burner phone’s call log had a call to the cell phone that detonated the explosion of Mike Schwartz’s car. On top of that, he had a pistol with some rounds missing.”

Lee pauses for effect with that statement.

“Whoa.” I’m the first to respond as Jennifer and Mason look on with their chins dropping as I continue.

“You mean it was Sanderson who shot Mike and blew up his car? Then he kept the burner phone he used to detonate the bomb? Then he killed Dave? And he kept the murder weapon?” I ask.

“Well, apparently,” Lee responds.

“What does he say about it? Why did he do it? Did Mike find out more than he was supposed to know about Sanderson’s operation?”

I can’t stop the questions from flowing out.

“Well, he has said nothing. Because apparently, he took his own life. They found him in a vacant parking lot outside Livonia. He had a self-inflicted bullet wound to his head. It seems he realized his entire scheme was about to be uncovered and he decided he didn’t want to face the music.”

Lee nods as he says it. Now I realize why he was asking about ballistics.

“So, you expect the ballistics from Sanderson’s pistol will match the ones from Dave Hawkins’ and Mike Schwartz’ murders?” I ask, expecting I know the answer.

“You heard that, huh? Yeah, that’s what we’re expecting. Sanderson was cleaning up his mess,” Lee says.

“Wow,” I say as I look at Jennifer.

“Where does that leave us? Surely the fake courier is aware Sanderson has killed himself,” Mason says.

“I assume we’re expecting him to bail on this whole data thing?” she asks.

“Well, I’m not sure Sanderson sent out a notice about his intentions, so I don’t know that our fake courier is aware of his demise. At this point, we’re going to continue with the plan. His testimony would still be useful to help tie up some of the loose ends,” Lee says.

“Like how someone knew Mike had copied data in the first place? Or who was arranging this whole fake courier thing? And who was making the calls pretending to be BradComm?” I blurt out.

I could have added a few more, but I stopped there to see how Lee responded. Clearly, he sees fewer loose ends than I do.

“Now, Keith, you don’t think I’ve given you the details about the entire investigation, do you?” He sneers as he replies.

“We’ve got more going on than you’re aware of,” he says.

I take a deep breath as we all absorb what we just learned.

“Ok, I won’t be getting any more sleep. Who else wants coffee?” I ask as I head into the kitchen.

“Me!” replies Jennifer.

“Me, too,” says Mason.

“And might as well add me, too,” adds Lee.

“Ok, I’ve got a couple of flavors in here. Come in and make your selection. It’s faster than making the whole pot.” I admit, wearily.

And with that, we all head into the kitchen.

We spend the next few minutes selecting our Keurig coffee flavors and taking turns getting our cups filled. First Mason, then Jennifer, then Lee sets his cup on the tray and pushes the button to brew his coffee.

He takes a step back to wait and looks at his phone.

“Looks like the agents from Colorado Springs are here. They should pull into the driveway any minute,” he says as he grabs his cup from the machine.

I put my cup in the machine, load my coffee, and hit the start button.

As I turn around, I see relief on Jennifer's face as she heads into the living room with her coffee. I get why she feels that way. I have to admit; it feels more comfortable to have a couple more agents here when we know the fake courier in the black Ford Explorer is still out there. I'm skeptical he'll even show up now that Sanderson is out of the picture, but we'll see.

After my coffee is done, I grab my cup and head into the living room where Lee and Mason are looking out toward the driveway and Jennifer is sitting on the couch. My phone buzzes to tell me the same thing Lee is about to say. Next, Winnie gives his own warning.

"Here they are. The agents are pulling in."

Lee heads to the door and I take his place at the window, just as a newer model Toyota Land Cruiser pulls into the driveway. It seems odd, although totally in vogue, for the FBI to be driving such a nice vehicle. I can't see the color well in the dark, but it's a light shade, maybe even pure white. It looks nice and is certainly worthy of the Colorado terrain.

As I'm watching, two rather stereotypical male FBI agents step out of the vehicle. Both are tall and slender, with short and crisp hair. Both have dark slacks and light shirts on with sport coats. Upon initial scan, the only difference I can see between the two men is one is slightly taller and has a gray jacket while his less tall partner is wearing blue.

The new arrivals greet Lee in the driveway while the rest of us watch. I assume he is filling them in on any missing details about what is soon to take place. This is his case, after all, and I'm sure he wants to make sure it ends well.

Jennifer walks up next to me as I watch.

"I guess the cavalry has arrived," she whispers.

Chapter Forty-Five

Lee introduces the latest arrivals when they walk through the front door. Winnie is perhaps the most excited greeter, but we all stand up to greet them in our less excited ways.

“This is Agent Henry Porter,” Lee says as he motions to the taller man.

“And this is Agent Ryan Dillon,” he says as he points toward the other.

“They have arrived from the Pueblo field office to take the reins on any local police engagement. In fact, they tell me they have already notified the locals about the situation with our fake courier and are on the lookout for the black Ford Explorer. Agents Porter and Dillon will handle the pickup and booking. We expect this arrest will give us the evidence we need to tie him to Sanderson and the rest of the case.”

Lee nods and seems resolved to sitting out this portion of his operation, perhaps only because that's what he's been told to do.

"I thought you were getting agents from Colorado Springs? That's certainly much closer," Mason asks Lee as we all shake hands and introduce ourselves.

Agent Dillon answers for him.

"The SAC in the Springs called because they were short on available agents. We got a call last night to get ourselves up here ASAP. We all work together pretty closely with each other down here, as well as with the local police departments and the state police. It's not like Denver, where everything is more compartmentalized. We have a lot of mountain territory to cover and have little choice but to work together."

Agent Dillon smiles at Mason, and she gives a polite smile in response. I can't tell if that was a shot at her for being from the Denver office, or just a matter-of-fact description of how they operate. In any case, we know why they're here.

I attempt to shift the conversation.

"Looks like the Pueblo office must be doing well. That's a sweet company car," I say as I smile at the two agents.

"Well, sadly, that's not one of our office vehicles," Porter responds.

"You guys happened to call during one of our fleet maintenance cycles, so we had to go to the local rental agency. We don't normally get to drive around like this. Although I must say it's pretty nice. And to be honest, we probably blend in better with that vehicle than we do with our fleet cars," he says with a grin.

With the introductions and explanations out of the way, we get down to the business of arresting our fake courier. Lee begins the conversation.

"Alright. Knowing we likely have this guy hanging on your potential phone call, we've done a little homework. We ran the phone number he gave you, Keith, and as expected, it's a burner. When we tried to triangulate his location with local towers, it didn't help much. That just told us he's here in Woodland Park."

Lee shrugs and looks around to see that we're all following him.

“Your security video gave us the license plate number, which we also ran. Again, no surprise, it’s from another vehicle in the area. He had swapped the plates. But, it gave us something to search for. We got in touch with the local and state police departments to put out an APB on his vehicle. And in a stroke of luck, we found the vehicle parked about a block from a small motel downtown. It hasn’t moved all night.”

“We’re sure he’s been there and hasn’t been watching us all night?” I ask what seems to me to be an obvious question.

“We are as sure as we can be, Keith. He would have needed another vehicle, which is certainly possible, but your location out here makes physical surveillance rather difficult. Given your security camera coverage, you would be likely to pick up anyone driving by before they even saw your property. I suspect you set it up like that on purpose.” Lee says as though he’s waiting for a response.

He’s right, but I keep myself from responding. He continues.

“Using that to our advantage, we’re going to have you call the guy this morning. We’ll have you and Jennifer out of here to be safe. But, as I said before, we plan to intercept him down at the base of the neighborhood using some local officers. That should lessen his suspicion that he’s being pulled over because of the BradComm thing. Once they take him in, we’ll simply call you guys and you can resume life as though this whole thing never happened.”

Jennifer jumps in at this point.

“Except that we have two of our acquaintances dead and a third guy apparently taking his own life because of this same situation. I wouldn’t say any of us will be living like this never happened!”

She snaps at Lee with that last sentence, and her sudden outburst clearly startles him.

“Of course, of course, Jennifer. I should have worded that differently.”

Rather than dig himself into a deeper hole, Lee stops there. That allows Agent Porter a chance to take over.

“Let’s set this up. Lee will take you and Jennifer away from the house for a few hours.”

As Agent Porter begins his explanation of the plan, he clearly takes Lee by surprise.

“Wait a minute, who made this decision? I realize this fake courier guy is probably just a foot soldier in this overall scheme, but I need to be here to interview this suspect!” Lee says.

“Look, Agent Warfield, we don’t make these decisions. I believe it was coordinated between the Detroit SAC and the local office. They were clear they wanted you to be responsible for the safety of Mr. Morgan and Ms. Ellis.” Agent Porter is apologetic but firm.

“I’ll be making a phone call on that one. What time is it?” Lee says as he looks at his phone.

“It’s only 6:30 in Detroit, but I’ll be calling the SAC to get this straightened out,” he adds.

“That’s fine, Agent Warfield. But for now, we have our orders,” Agent Porter continues.

“Once you are in a safe location away from the house, you can let this courier know you have found the storage device.”

Agent Porter is looking at me now. As he’s talks, I sense a subtle accent in his speech. He’s well-trained, but English isn’t his first language.

“You can let him know he’s free to come over any time and see what he says. We suspect he’ll be over within minutes, but you never know. He may want to make some calls and get direction first, or maybe verify logistical plans with someone. In any case, we will wait for him here at the entrance to your street, as Agent Warfield described.”

Agent Porter pauses and gives me a chance to formulate a question.

“What if he tries to call Sanderson and gets no answer?” I say, feeling like it’s an obvious question.

“We have that phone as well. If he calls that number, we’ll see it. That still doesn’t change the plan. Even without Sanderson answering, we’re confident he has his marching orders and will come after the device,” Lee answers.

“And why didn’t you pick him up when you found his vehicle?” I ask what feels like another obvious question.

It’s Agent Porter that picks up that one.

“Well, to be honest, we can’t be one hundred percent certain where he is. The motel has a record of someone arriving with a cash

payment that fits his description, but to barge into the room would risk exposing our intentions if he wasn't in there. And in addition to exposing us to the suspect, it might also put innocent civilians at risk if he got aggressive. That downtown area is not crowded by big city standards, but there are lots of houses directly next to the motel. Not to mention the risk to others staying in other rooms."

Agent Porter watches my reaction before continuing. I nod and he moves on.

"We plan to have Agent Mason stay here at the house, in case something goes a little off and we need backup. That gives us three agents on site to support the local officers. That should be plenty."

He nods at Mason before continuing. She nods in return.

"So, we'll take the suspect into custody, we'll book him, and then we'll handle the necessary paperwork. Since he hasn't really done anything illegal here in Woodland Park except the license plate theft, we'll have to use that as our reason for his arrest. That should, however, make it an easy booking. From there, we'll get the paperwork processed from the FBI side to handle his transfer into federal custody. It should all be done in a few hours. We'll let Lee know when it's safe to return to the house. During that time, Lee's team will handle any other necessary arrests elsewhere."

Agent Porter stops as he completes the plan for his involvement in this case.

I nod and look around to see Lee frantically typing on his phone. He's clearly not happy with the plan, regardless of the justification. Jennifer is nodding along with me.

Agent Mason, however, is now focused on her own phone, although I seem to be the only one to notice.

Chapter Forty-Six

We're all still absorbing the plan when my phone alarm jolts us all from our thoughts. I had set it earlier than my standard Winnie alarm to make sure I was awake for the guests. Clearly, that plan has been altered.

"Well, I suppose it's 5AM. I didn't realize I'd be up already when I set this alarm. If it's ok, I'm going to take a quick shower. After that, I suppose we have time for breakfast? It might seem suspicious if we called about the device this early," I say to the team as I stand up.

Everyone nods in agreement, and I head into my room. This whole situation still feels surreal. And a little too anticlimactic, almost orchestrated.

As I get into the shower, I begin to absorb the fact that I will leave the safety and security of my home in the hands of a group of FBI agents today. They were clear that Jennifer and I had to leave to be safe, which I guess I understand, but it's still uncomfortable. By the

time my ten-minute shower is over, I decide I might as well embrace it. I probably don't need to be around to watch an FBI agent make an arrest, anyway. I just hope they don't do something that freaks out Winnie. Or the neighbors.

By 5:15AM, I step out of my bedroom with Winnie tagging along and head to the kitchen. I'm letting Winnie outside the kitchen door when I'm surprised to see Lee standing behind the door.

"So you know, Keith, I'm trying to change some of the planning for this morning. I really want to be here when we take this guy in. I know the SAC has ordered differently, but I'd rather stay here and have Mason watch over you and Ms. Ellis. No offense to you, of course, I just wanted you to know," Lee says, as though he's confiding in me.

"Is it normal to have the local guys pick up suspects in their areas?" I ask.

"Well, I suppose it is. But this was my case. They sent me out here to solve it, not to have a vacation," Lee responds after considering my question.

"Yeah, I guess I understand how frustrating that might be," I reply.

"I got in touch with the ASAC already this morning, and he told me to enjoy the time in the mountains. Can you believe that? Literally, like it's a vacation! He said my case files were submitted, the arrest was approved, and the SAC has aligned with the local field offices to handle the details. He says we should enjoy the success of our investigation and let this last detail get wrapped up locally. So yes, I suppose it's normal, but that doesn't mean it's comfortable."

Lee is shaking his head as he hisses out his complaints.

"You're still going to complain to the SAC? Even after that message from the ASAC?" I ask.

"Well, I told the ASAC how I feel, but I'm going to get an email to the SAC, too. She needs to know how I feel about this one."

It feels like Lee is resolved to the course this day is taking, but still wants to get his complaints off his chest.

As we're talking, Mason comes in from the living room, stretching like she may have had a rough night.

"You get any sleep at all?" I ask as she stretches her arms above her head.

“Yeah, I’ve slept in worse conditions,” Mason responds. Given what I now know about her background, I suppose I understand the comment.

“Ok, I’ve got eggs, sausage, waffles, cereal, and yogurt. Oh, and maybe some fruit over there if it’s still good. And coffee, of course. What would you guys like?” I say, trying to get everyone moving.

“You don’t have to do that, Keith. I can help.” It was Jennifer, coming into the kitchen behind Mason, looking like she was ready to run a marathon.

The sight of her energy causes another involuntary smile. Again, I contain it quickly to avoid giving the wrong idea. For a brief second, I also wonder why I feel so guilty about the smiles she triggers. The thought doesn’t linger, and I move on.

“What about everyone else? I’ve got a big frying pan if anyone wants eggs? I can make them any way you want them as long as it’s scrambled!” I yell loud enough for the agents in the living room to hear, too.

As I’m saying it, I realize I’m trying to use dad jokes on my adult guests. It seems, though, that they go over better with these guys than with Kyle and Jamie.

I take orders from everyone in the house and start gathering ingredients from the refrigerator. Agent Dillon steps in while I’m putting things on the counter.

“Hey Mr. Morgan, we’d like to take a quiet look around outside. We’ll not make any noise or alert the neighbors, just want to get a lay of the land,” he says.

“Sure, no problem,” I say.

Mason hears the exchange and jumps in.

“I’ll show you guys around. I’ve already been out there a few times and looked things over,” she says.

“I’ll let Winnie in first so he doesn’t go berserk,” I say as I head to the kitchen door.

“All clear,” I say as Winnie steps in and heads to his food bowl.

Dillon nods at Mason, and they head outside.

After about fifteen minutes, the food is done. Mason has returned with Agent Porter and Agent Dillon, and everyone has something to eat and drink.

The surreal nature of the situation again strikes me when I sit down at the table. Here I am in my dining room with Jennifer, Mason, and Lee while the Agents Porter and Dillon sit at the bar. This is certainly not a typical morning at the Morgan house.

I'm still mulling over the oddity of the situation when I see Lee shift from his state of frustration into a more opportunistic mindset.

"Well, the ASAC tells me I need to enjoy a couple of free hours here in Colorado before I head back to Detroit this evening. What all do people do around here for fun in October?" he asks as he looks at all of us locals.

The team offers suggestions in typical tour guide fashion. They mention Pikes Peak, the Garden of the Gods, the Air Force Academy, and several other tourist destinations in the area.

After listening to all of those, Agent Porter chimes in.

"I saw a bunch of fishing gear out there. You should have Keith take you fishing at one of the local hot spots. I bet he knows some great places out here, away from the crowds," he says.

Lee looks up at me and blurts out, "I saw your fishing gear in the garage, too. I've always wanted to try fly-fishing out here. Is that something we could do with only a few hours on our hands, though? I want to make sure I'm back here around noon to interview our friendly neighborhood courier. The ASAC even mentioned a fishing trip when I was venting to him this morning. In fact, it wasn't even on my mind until he brought it up."

He continues to look directly at me while he continues.

"Even though I'm against missing the arrest, I have to admit I've been a fishing fan since I was a kid. In fact, I've been fly-fishing plenty of times around Northern Michigan. Never been fly-fishing in Colorado, though."

Again, he looks expectantly at me. This situation keeps getting more and more strange by the moment.

Apparently, Lee sees the surprise on my face and quickly retracts.

"I'm sorry, that was a stupid idea," he says.

"No, no, that's actually not a problem at all. As luck would have it, that's one of my passions. I'd be glad to take you out for a few hours if you'd like to go."

I remember as I'm talking, Jennifer will be with us. I look her direction while she digs a last spoonful of yogurt out of her cup.

"Absolutely. I never turn down a good fly-fishing trip," she says.

She sounds sincere and confident.

"I wish I would have known yesterday. I would have packed up my gear. I will need to call my neighbors to let Ruger out, though," she says as she throws away her empty yogurt cup.

"Sure," Lee says.

Ok, so maybe she's been fly-fishing before... more than once.

I look around the table and stand up.

"Well, I guess it's settled. Jennifer and I will be taking Agent Warfield fishing this morning."

Chapter Forty-Seven

“**W**here should we take our FBI agent fly fisherman today?” Jennifer asks as I bring my breakfast dishes back into the kitchen from the dining room.

Trying to test her real knowledge of the area, I decide to pin it back on her.

“Well, where would you go if you were taking an agent out?”

She seems to know she’s being tested.

“Well, since it’s Tuesday, we won’t hit the weekend crowds. So I would say Deckers, Cheesman Canyon or Eleven Mile Canyon should all have some space. But if it was me, I’d take them away from the tourist areas to somewhere more remote.”

I feel a smile growing while she’s talking. Jennifer is, after all, speaking my language. I don’t have a chance to answer before Lee steps into the kitchen with his empty plate and coffee cup.

“Well, I suppose we need to get out of here and get this whole plan in motion.”

Lee still seems to be struggling with the idea and doesn't sound completely happy about it anymore.

“Where are you guys going on your fishing trip?”

Agent Porter chimes in from the living room. We walk into the room and all grab seats on the sofa and chairs.

“I'm sure Keith knows plenty of out-of-the-way places around here that only the locals know about,” he adds with a smile.

“Yeah, we were just talking about that.” I nod toward Jennifer. Then I turn back to Lee.

“Would you rather hit up a typical tail water river like the South Platte, or a smaller, out-of-the-way place like Agent Porter mentioned? We'd probably catch more fish if we are more remote, but it might take a little longer and give us less time on the water.”

I look at Lee, who is considering the question. Before he can answer, Special Agent Dillon joins the conversation.

“Hey, I'd love to find out where some of those local trout hideouts are. I hear some of those places are worth the trip just for the scenery.” He nods in my direction as he talks, but directs his comments toward Lee.

“That sounds great to me.” Lee is quick to agree to the idea.

“Alright, let's do it,” I say to the group.

And with that, we all nod at each other. As Jennifer and I stand up, I set the stage for the next few minutes.

“Ok, let's get some water and some light snacks we can put in the car. Lee, do you have a jacket or a couple of layers to wear up there? It can be cool this early in the morning.”

“Yep, I do, in my overnight bag,” Lee replies.

Jennifer doesn't bother to acknowledge the layers topic. I assume she feels that is an obvious question for a local.

“Ok, great. Let's meet in the garage in five.” After they acknowledge, I head to my bedroom. This is a part of the trip I don't choose to share too obviously with the other two. I grab one of my tactical backpacks, head over to my gun safe, and open it.

As I stand there contemplating gear for the day, I remember I left my 10mm pistol in the table drawer in the living room. I decide I don't

want to make a scene by grabbing that in front of everyone, even if they are FBI agents. Instead, I pick out one of my favorite Smith & Wesson pistols, a 1911 .45 caliber.

I pull out the holster for that full-sized, stainless steel-framed pistol that will clip on my belt similar to my SIG, except this one goes in the small of my back. It's too bulky to be in the front. Plus, I prefer it out of the way while I squat and crawl around the stream. This caliber is not quite as much of a punch as the 10mm pistol in the living room, but it's close. It will still be effective enough to send away any bears and mountain lions, should we encounter them. And it gives me a bit of comfort given my unconfirmed concerns about Lee.

Since I'm still not fully comfortable with this whole fishing trip idea and Lee's sudden tolerance of it, I'm also going to pack in some more protection. I don't want something too big to lug around, so I select my short barrel Daniel Defense DDM4 with a folding stock that packs up nicely. I throw it in my backpack and add a few boxes of defensive ammunition. It makes my bag heavy, but I'm used to it. It's how I trek to these fishing locations most of the time when I'm by myself.

Knowing Lee probably doesn't have Colorado outdoor clothes with him despite saying he did, I grab a couple of layers from my closet and fold them into the bag as well. That should be all I need from my room today.

I pause for a moment to reflect on anything else I might need, look around my room, and decide I'm ready. This should be enough for a day of fishing with an FBI agent, if that's what really happens. The thought of that, once again, has me shaking my head.

While I'm zipping up the bag, I notice someone else coming down the hallway. Shutting my safe quickly to avoid another discussion on why I have so many weapons, I turn around to see Jennifer quietly shuffle in while keeping an eye behind her.

"Hey Keith, I don't want to sound weird, but what made you change your mind about Lee? A little while ago, you were not sure he was on the up and up, and now you're taking him fishing? An idea which, by the way, is way off the charts weird given what's going on here," she says.

“Well, to be honest, I still don’t trust Lee. And you’re right, this whole fishing idea sounds odd. So does the Sanderson story. Worst case, it’s a setup. So, I’m getting prepared in case he’s taking us out to take us out, if you know what I mean.”

I open my bag and show Jennifer the contents I’ve just packed. She nods, thinks for a moment, then responds.

“Ok, then. In that case, I’m wondering if you have an extra pack I could borrow for the trip?” she asks with a look of determination.

“I’ve been thinking about our chat earlier. The thought of a Russian conspiracy has me a little uneasy. Plus, I never go out in the woods unarmed. So, if you don’t mind, I’d like to carry a weapon myself. You’re clearly still concerned, and you no doubt have plenty of options in that safe of yours. The agents won’t see it as weird if we use the backpacks to hold some fishing gear, or layers, or snacks, or other stuff.”

Jennifer is looking at me earnestly as she asks. Now it’s my turn to discount the Russian involvement like Jennifer was doing earlier.

“Oh wow, I’m sorry I took you down this Russian conspiracy path. I’m sure there are no Russians out here in Woodland Park, Jennifer. You were right. But if it makes you feel better, I have no issue with you bringing something from the safe along with you.”

I open the safe again as I’m talking. Jennifer seems relieved when she looks inside.

“What caliber are you taking? It might make sense to use something of the same caliber so we can share ammunition if we need to.”

“Well, unfortunately, I’m taking this, and I have nothing the same caliber that would fit into a pack.”

I open my backpack and pull out a magazine of 5.56mm cartridges. All my other weapons in the safe that are the same caliber are longer rifles and would not fit into a backpack, which I am regretting as we now look at options. Although in my defense, I don’t often experience these crazy circumstances here in my house. Without skipping a beat, she continues.

“Ok, that makes sense. I’ll take this one, then. Do you have some 9mm hollow points in here?”

She asks as she pulls out my Ruger PC carbine. It breaks down small enough to fit into a backpack, so I understand her choice immediately.

“Sure, here.” I grab a couple of boxes of ammunition and hand them to Jennifer.

“I may not have another 5.56mm pack weapon here at the house, but I do have another backpack over here,” I say as I head to the closet.

After grabbing the pack, I turn around to see Jennifer has already broken down the rifle, so it would fit inside.

“Awesome, thanks,” she says and grabs the pack from me, securing the rifle and ammunition in seconds.

As she zips up the pack, she notices me staring. I catch myself doing it, but a moment too late.

“What? I have one of these at home. It’s a great camping rifle. And you know my dog’s name. I named him after this very weapon!” she explains.

And with our backpacks ready for any potential non-fly-fishing circumstances, we’re ready.

Chapter Forty-Eight

Jennifer and I return to the kitchen dressed and carrying our backpacks. When we get there, we throw in a couple of protein bars and water. We shouldn't need more than that for a brief trip like this. Nobody seems to notice we both have backpacks and that they're strangely heavy, which would be suspicious to a trained observer.

After zipping my backpack with water and protein bars inside, I look around to see Jennifer and Lee are watching me patiently. Apparently, they are ready to go. Mason, Agent Porter, and Agent Dillon are all watching us as we walk over and pause at the door to the garage, ready for the outing.

"Alright, are we ready?" I look over at my two fishing mates and get a nod from each of them.

Lee now appears to be excited about the trip once again. His excitement is throwing me a curveball given my suspicion of his

behavior, but I refuse to let my guard down. Maybe this really is helping him get over being removed from the culmination of the FBI operation here in Woodland Park. Or maybe he's part of this whole thing and is using this as a ploy to get us out of town for more sinister reasons. I still can't be sure.

"Do you have enough gear for us? Will we need waders and stuff?" Yeah, Lee is definitely sounding like he's acclimating to the trip.

"Yep, we should be set. I have several rigs because the kids always go with me. Plus, the place we're going is small enough we won't need to wade. Our boots and shoes will be fine," I reply.

That seems to satisfy Lee, and he opens the door to head into the garage. I'm doing my best to exhibit the same excitement as Lee.

"Where did you say you were going?" Agent Porter asks as we're heading toward the garage.

"I think we'll head to a little brook trout stream that me and the kids like to go to. We call it Willow Creek, but I'm honestly not sure what the real name is."

Nobody pretends to have a clue, even Jennifer. But they all nod in agreement.

"Sounds like fun. Don't get so excited about the fishing trip that you forget to call our fake courier. We do sort of need him to show up to make this whole day worthwhile. And hey, why don't you guys take the Land Cruiser?" Agent Porter offers, surprisingly.

"We only have that one for a few days, and I have to admit it's a treat to drive in these Colorado mountains. Plus, we know the suspect can identify your vehicle. You shouldn't be driving that through town," he adds.

That offer makes sense and has me raising my eyebrows and looking at the others for their response. When I see similar responses from them, I decide that's a pretty good idea indeed. There's more room and plenty of off-road capability in that vehicle, and it will make the drive to Willow Creek more luxurious for all of us.

"Sure, if you guys won't need it. And no, I won't forget to make the call. I'll need to do it before we head out of Lake George. The signal gets sketchy beyond there," I reply as I gather gear out of the 4Runner.

“Ok, gotcha,” Agent Porter says.

“And no, we won’t need the vehicle. We’re going to stay around here. Plus, we have Mason’s car if we need to go anywhere,” he says and nods toward Mason.

I’m nodding my head as I take the keys from Agent Porter. Lee hands over the keys to the Taurus.

“That’s awesome, thanks, guys. Here, take these in case you need another vehicle,” Lee says.

We all head out to the garage, where I open the garage door and finish packing up enough fly rods, reels, and gear for the three of us. All our rods and reels are in their tubes, so it only takes a minute to find a few lightweight rigs we’ll need today.

“Hey Keith, you ready to learn a few things about Colorado small creek fishing?”

Jennifer is smiling as she helps load the Land Cruiser. Given our conversation a few minutes ago in the bedroom, I am now aware it’s an uneasy smile. It’s the same uneasiness I can’t remove from my return smile.

“Sure, I’m always glad to learn more about the important things in life!”

Despite the uneasy circumstance, I smile further as I enjoy my comeback.

Within a few minutes, we’re all packed up, we’ve said our goodbyes and we’re ready to take off. I instinctively open the back door on the driver’s side, knowing this is an FBI vehicle and I am not FBI. Lee seems to feel the same way as he hops into the driver’s seat. That leaves Jennifer to take the front passenger seat. She notices what we’re doing and protests immediately.

“Hey Keith, you should probably sit up front to help navigate. I don’t know where we’re going,” she says as she slides into the door I’ve just opened.

I argue mildly, but after a brief exchange, I nod and head around to the front passenger seat. As I slide into the Land Cruiser, I immediately appreciate the decision to take it. There’s plenty of room and it’s definitely more comfortable than the front seat of my 4Runner.

It's still early and cool, and we're all hesitantly optimistic about the day even though nervousness abounds. I'm nervous about Lee's intentions and leaving my house to the FBI for a few hours. Lee is nervous about leaving the culmination of his case to the Denver and Pueblo field offices. And Jennifer is nervous about Lee and the Russians being involved in this case.

Despite the uneasiness of each passenger, we all head deeper into the mountains, trying to appear nervous about nothing.

If, however, Lee has something planned, Jennifer and I will be ready.

Chapter Forty-Nine

Before we pull out of the driveway, Lee turns over to face me. “Listen, I’m going to try to have some fun today, but I’ll warn you ahead of time I’m not happy about this situation. The only reason I agreed to leave your house while they arrest that fake courier suspect is I honestly doubt he knows much. I’m sure we’ll be able to tie his phone to Sanderson, but that’s probably about it.” He is clearly disappointed, but tries to cover it with a smile as he puts the vehicle into gear.

“Yeah, you’re probably right,” I say as we pull away from the house.

As I see the house disappear behind the trees when we drive away, I once again am overtaken by a sense of uneasiness. The thought of leaving my and the kid’s home to the FBI agents we left behind doesn’t sit well with me. I’m also concerned about

Winchester, but he seems to get along with Mason. Even fly-fishing in the mountains can't dissolve the uneasy feeling.

"So, you have the arrest in Detroit lined up?" I ask Lee, fully aware he hasn't disclosed they're arresting the CIO at BradComm.

"Yeah, the ASAC says they've got that one lined up already," Lee says.

I pull out my phone and send a quick text to Officer Brockmeier in Detroit to validate Lee's statement. Something still feels uncomfortable in this whole situation, and with Jennifer's newfound concern this morning, I'm especially vigilant.

As we continue, we talk about the finer aspects of fishing in the small stream we call Willow Creek. I talk about hiding, crawling, sneaking, and moving with stealth, all to catch an eight-inch fish. To my surprise, Lee seems genuinely excited to try it. That only makes me talk more, even with my lingering concerns.

In fact, I'm talking so much the time flies right up to when we are pulling into Lake George. Lee has to pull over and wait for me to make the call to the fake courier, in case our service fades after we leave the two-lane highway. I hurry to make the call, knowing I'm holding everyone up.

"Hi Mr. Smith, this is Keith Morgan," I say as the fake courier answers.

"Yes, Keith, how are you?" It's not past seven AM, but he sounds plenty chipper.

"Great, thanks. Hey, I wanted to let you know I did indeed find a little storage device this morning when I was getting ready for work. It was inside an inner pocket of my travel bag somehow. Weird." I pause to allow him time to respond.

"That's great news, Keith. BradComm will be so relieved. Should I come now?" he asks.

"Absolutely, whenever you're ready. I need to head into Colorado Springs around nine, so hopefully you can get here in time to pick it up before then. If not, I'll be back later this afternoon."

This is the dialog Lee and the other FBI agents had agreed would ensure the fake courier heads over quickly.

"Oh, I can certainly be there before nine. I need to get BradComm off my back." He sounds truly grateful.

I have to admire his dedication to his role as fake courier.

“Great, see you soon then. Take care.”

With that, I end the call and complete my portion of this not-so-elaborate FBI operation.

I then decide to make a quick call to the kids in Denver, and I dial Jamie’s number and wish her and Kyle a good day skipping school. As I’m talking to them, I make a mental note to call the school when we get back into town.

When I end that call, I see there is action in the driver’s seat. Lee is already on the line with Detroit and seems to be agreeing with what’s happening there. If the case is really lining up like he says, I suppose it’s sort of impressive to see it all sync up like this.

I take a deep breath and wonder if I’m being too much of a conspiracy theorist. Maybe I should put these concerns behind me for the next few hours. It really would be great if we could have a great day fishing while the FBI does their job back in Woodland Park. It takes some internal convincing, but I’m doing my best to get my mind in that mode.

As I’m leaning back in my seat, I notice Jennifer reading a long text with some photos or videos embedded. I don’t want to snoop, so I sit still as though I’m just taking in the scenery. But then I see her tilt her phone in my direction, with a strange look on her face.

“Hey Keith, look at this video from work,” she says with an awkward smile.

I take her phone and read the same text messages she was reading, already suspicious as there’s no reason she would have anything from work that I should see. No, these messages are not from work. They’re from Mason back at my house. As I read the message Jennifer has on the screen, I have to force myself to keep smiling.

Hey. Something’s wrong here. These guys are not FBI. I checked and there is no record of these guys from the Pueblo office. And there is no auto fleet maintenance going on, so their story about the Land Cruiser is not checking out either. Plus, they said they were on smoke break but I saw them tinkering with something outside. Going to check out there when I can.

That was the first message. If that wasn't bad enough, the next one was a photo. It's all I can do to stay calm while I scroll down Jennifer's phone. When the photo is finally in view, I'm completely floored to see a stick of C4 wired to a small detonator. And it was stuck to the foundation of my house!

Again, it's all I can do to keep from screaming while Lee sits beside me completely unaware of what I'm seeing.

Before I can change course, my mind races to assess what's going on. Here I am out in the mountains with a guy I thought was FBI. Now I'm questioning that he's FBI at all. If the other two guys aren't FBI, is he? It seems Mason is an actual agent, else she wouldn't be trying to help like this. Did Lee ever show a badge? Would I have challenged if he did?

I'm still evaluating whether Lee is on the right side of this when he disconnects his call and shares what's been happening. Or at least what he wants us to think is happening.

"Well, it looks like the Detroit arrest was handled without incident. Now all we need is to lock down this fake courier guy and we should have the entire ring," Lee says.

"Are you guys sure that's all there is?" I ask.

"Well, yes, except for Ivan Filipov, who we're tracking separately. I think this morning's arrests will put this thing out of commission. Of course, it will take time and some slick diplomatic maneuvering to get to Filipov, so I'd say this is all we can do now. This whole area of large-scale misinformation and disinformation is a never-ending challenge for us. Plus, it gets more sophisticated every day. It's all we can do to keep up, so a big take down like this will send a message to everyone else in this ugly game."

Lee keeps rattling on about the challenges of this type of case while he takes off again and we traverse the curvy roads down to Willow Creek. I don't hear a word of it.

The big question for me right now is how to get my pistol out of the holster on the back of my belt without Lee recognizing what I'm doing.

Chapter Fifty

While Lee is driving down the curvy blacktop toward Willow Creek, I continue to try to put this whole thing together. Is Lee being played or is he playing us? If I was on the Russian side, I'd want everyone who knows about this whole crime to be rubbed out. And they've been slowly doing that moment by moment. If Lee is part of that clean-up crew, he's driving us out here to get rid of us.

I look to the back seat and see Jennifer also trying to put a good face on. As I'm glancing her way, she subtly points to Lee in the front seat. She is clearly thinking the same thing I am: Lee Warfield is not who he says he is.

Turning around to face forward and consider our options here, I feel my phone vibrate with a text message. I look down to see a message from Officer Brockmeier in Detroit. It's short, simple, and terrifying.

What? There was no arrest for BradComm CIO. We have no activity with FBI this morning.

So, Lee is lying.

We're about to the gravel road that leads down toward the Willow Creek valley and I've got to make a plan. I look over at Lee, and he seems oddly comfortable. For a guy who certainly appears to be a desk jockey, he's either way over confident in his plan or he has help out here waiting for us. That thought puts me on full alert.

I decide to text Jennifer when I realize I'm still holding her phone. I am about to hand it to her when another message arrives from Mason. This time, it shows the C4 that was on the house, but it has been unwired and set aside. It seems Mason has saved the house for now.

"Yeah, that's good stuff. We will need to work on that when we get a minute." I'm trying to keep my voice and words aligned with Jennifer's work comment from earlier when she handed the phone to me. I give it back so she can see the latest picture from Mason. A small sigh of relief escapes as she takes the phone. At least my house is still standing.

While she looks at the picture, I am considering my options to take Lee down. If he is part of the team who was tracking me out here when I went fishing with the kids, they know exactly where we're going. I'm keeping my eyes out for any vehicles, but so far, there are none. If someone is out here, they're hidden.

My phone vibrates again.

This time it's a forwarded picture from Jennifer that came from Mason back at my house. It's all I can do to keep my face still.

The photo shows Special Agents Porter and Dillon hopping into a black Ford Explorer with a bike rack on top. Someone else is driving. I have to believe it's the fake courier, and now I also have to believe he's part of this setup.

Mason's next message is simple.

GET OUT! I'm calling for help. They were going to blow me and Winnie up with the house!

By the time the last message comes, we have gotten to the gravel road. Jennifer and I apparently have the same opinion: we are probably better off making a plan outside the vehicle versus inside. We still see no other vehicles or humans on the gravel road.

When we get to the last stretch of dirt road, there are still no humans. It seems Lee knows his way around a four-wheel-drive trail better than I expect. He expertly navigates the path down to the small parking area while following my directions. If he's aware of the situation back at my house, he's masking it well.

Driving out here, though, takes all his concentration. He seems to have no interest in me or Jennifer. If he's planning to take us out, it must be at the end of the drive. With no visible cars or people, that must mean he plans to do it by himself. Or perhaps he will just go along with our trip and wait for the black Ford Explorer to arrive and do it for him. Of course, he's not aware we know about that part of the ruse.

At the very least, that means we have a little time to deal with Lee and formulate a plan for the others. This plan, I suppose, will be me and Jennifer against at least four combatants of unknown skill.

We arrive a few minutes after the sun has emerged over the eastern side of the creek valley.

Upon arrival, we all get out of the Land Cruiser and Lee takes a moment to stretch and appears to admire the scenery. The morning air is crisp but not too cold. We can see our breath in the air as we step out of the vehicle, and the smell of mountain fall is in the air. There's still a hint of evergreen in the air, but it's mixed with falling leaves and the dust from the road we just turned up.

I don't even take it in. This feels like my chance to get the upper hand on Lee and I'm going to take it.

Lee is casually fidgeting with the buttons to open the back of the Land Cruiser with his hands about chest high on the lift gate handle with his ribs exposed. For him to make that mistake further exemplifies his lack of hand-to-hand tactical skills. I use his arms up position to my advantage and I step into a stiff palm delivered to his rib cage. With his layers, I don't hear or feel any ribs break, but the move surprises Lee. He immediately crumbles to the ground, clutching his ribs and trying to catch his breath.

If he was expecting to take us down, he should have been more prepared. It's not a proud moment for an FBI desk jockey as he lays there, gasping for air, while I turn him over and put my knee on his back.

"Alright, Agent Lee Warfield, or whoever you are. This game is over!" I am having no trouble subduing him as I let him know he's caught.

"What are you talking about?" He eventually struggles to yell between gasps.

"What game is over?" He's putting on a good show.

"Jennifer, grab his phone. Let's see what he's been saying to his team members this morning." I nod toward Jennifer.

She grabs Lee's phone out of his back pocket and holds it in front of his face to unlock it. After taking a minute to swipe and tap looking for messages, she pauses with a sheepish look on her face.

"Keith, you need to look at this. And you can probably let Lee go. I don't think he's involved with this like we thought," she says as she holds the phone out for me to see.

The first message is from Agent Porter.

"Take down was completely flawless. We have him. Give us three hours to process and he's yours."

There was a photo included of the fake courier with his hands behind his back.

Of course, we had Mason's photo of how it really went down. We know there was no arrest of the fake courier. Lee is being played.

Chapter Fifty-One

After a few uncomfortable minutes reviewing his phone and his pockets, it becomes clear Lee Warfield really is an FBI agent from the Detroit field office. Everything else we've been discussing and believing for the last couple of days, however, may or may not be true.

His messages from Detroit talked about agents coming from Pueblo. They also directed the fake courier was to be apprehended. And they suggested Lee should enjoy the mountains. The more we read, the more we realize Lee was being setup exactly like me and Jennifer.

Someone is in clean up mode but it's not Lee.

During the struggle with Lee, we had not paid attention to what had been happening on our phones. When we do, we realize I have a new text message and Lee has a new voicemail. Each of them

lead us to know who was orchestrating the events over the last couple of days.

My text message is from Steve, my crypto expert. It points to a name I didn't recognize.

Third crypto wallet belongs to Shawn Holmes. Detroit FBI.

As I look up to ask Lee about Shawn, I see him listening to a voicemail with a blank stare on his face. It's clear he doesn't like what he's hearing. He walks around the parked Land Cruiser aimlessly kicking up dust as he listens. After about two minutes, he drops the phone to his side.

"What?" Jennifer asks.

"Well, I've just found out everything I've been working for on this case is a complete sham. I walked right into a trap, and unfortunately it looks like I've brought the two of you with me," Lee says, while he rubs the ribs I punched a short time ago.

"Ok, Lee, just a minute. Let's take a step back and go over what we know. Then we've got to figure out what's next. We have maybe a half hour or forty minutes before the black Ford Explorer shows up. So, what do we know?" I ask.

Lee leans against the Land Cruiser and rubs his temples like he's struggling to put his thoughts together.

"The black Ford Explorer is coming here?" he asks with sincere shock, or perhaps fear, in his eyes.

"Before we get to that, what was your call about?" I ask, taking control of the dialog.

"That call was from the SAC. She didn't know about any progress on this investigation. She had no idea I was in Colorado, and she definitely didn't approve all the arrest activity we've been setting up the last few days. It seems the ASAC had kept her completely out of it, and had, in fact, been framing a totally different story in his reports to her. Here I thought he was helping me out, and it seems he was actually setting me up."

Lee shakes his head and alternates between rubbing his ribs and his temples. It seems he's having trouble framing his thoughts with all this new information.

“This ASAC wouldn’t be named Shawn Holmes, would he?” I ask.

“Where did you get that name?” Jennifer pipes in.

Before I can answer, Lee jolts upright.

“Yeah, that’s his name. How do you know that?” He fires at me.

“Before I get to that, finish your story. How isolated are we out here?” I ask, stating the nature of our situation in my question.

Lee looks at me questioningly. He’s clearly concerned about how I got Shawn’s name, but he continues.

“Last week when Mike was in the car bombing, it was clear he was shot and that explosion was to cover up the evidence. Honestly, I suspect this whole thing would have been brushed under the carpet had the ATF and the Detroit PD not done such a good job uncovering the anomalies there,” Lee begins.

“Back up a second, Lee. You didn’t talk about the data theft itself. Someone had to know about that, and they triggered this whole thing. It wasn’t the car bomb that started it, it was the data copy that someone didn’t want exposed,” I interject.

I don’t want to get Lee too fired up knowing I am also aware the CIO at BradComm was in on this, so I’m giving him the chance to tell me.

“Yeah, yeah, I forgot you guys weren’t involved in that. So, our forensics guys found a sniffer on the server where the Diverse Data software was stored. This sniffer would alert the CIO via text message of any data copies out of the database. Obviously, most of them were just your typical testing backup processes. But Mike’s copy of the entire set of old BradComm data files to a USB storage device put him directly in the crosshairs of the CIO. We recently discovered he was an insider to the Sanderson scheme. And as we’re now seeing, he apparently involved a Russian hit team. Or he took Mike out himself,” Lee says.

Not knowing I already have more information on the larger scheme than he does, Lee comes clean about what he knows.

“To back up even further, let me tell you how we knew about the CIO.”

Lee takes a deep breath before he continues.

“I came to know about this whole thing based solely on the crypto wallets that were being funded out of the Russian bank account in

the Caymans. That's where this started. We were quickly able to isolate two of them. One was Sanderson, the other was Dwayne Tolliver, the CIO at BradComm. We haven't uncovered the third, as they were much better at aliases and hiding their transactions," Lee says.

I let him continue, noting I will need to disclose I know who the third wallet belongs to at some point.

"So, we knew we had to determine what Filipov was doing with Sanderson, knowing he had also put a spy into BradComm itself. Clearly, he knew Sanderson was working with BradComm to execute this large-scale election scheme. It wasn't until I saw your analysis from the Diverse Data database copy Mike had stolen that I realized exactly what they were doing. The payments to Sanderson, as best we can tell, were upward of one hundred million dollars. Now he had to pay all his minions out of that, including the millions of dollars he paid BradComm. Still, it was an enormous sum even for a large political maneuver like this."

Lee is shuffling his feet and still rubbing his ribs repeatedly as he continues.

"Of course, when you realize a vote for the United States to retain foreign oil imports would keep Russia's multi-billion dollar export business with us intact, it's easy to see why they'd pay that much. This whole thing with Mike Schwartz, BradComm, Diverse Data, and well, you guys, simply fell in my lap after Mike's murder," Lee says.

"You mean the FBI didn't know how BradComm had laid out the strategies to manipulate all these elections? You had to know that stuff was happening?" I ask, a little concerned this could happen right under the FBI's nose. It also takes me back to my conversation with Paul. It seems The Association had me here to lead the FBI to the source of this criminal empire when the FBI was part of it all along.

"Oh, we would have gotten there eventually," Lee concedes.

"We know, of course, this type of thing happens on a localized basis all the time. It's rampant. And, we can often find the anomalies if we spend enough hours on the case. But, like I said before, the cases are usually isolated to a specific politician or issue. Rarely, as in never, have I seen something of this magnitude. This one is really

disturbing, actually. But yes, we found out about the magnitude of the program when you guys showed it to us,” Lee says regretfully.

“So, how did this Shawn fellow orchestrate this whole thing?” Jennifer asks.

“Well, I’m probably not getting all the pieces to that yet, but this is what I know,” Lee says.

After a brief pause, he takes a breath and continues.

“I had left a message on the SAC’s mobile phone and sent an email to vent about not being included in the arrest of the fake courier. That message I just received was from her. It surprised her to hear I was in Colorado, and she told me the ASAC had not been in contact with her for a few days. The whole time I’ve been communicating with him since Friday, he was setting this thing up. We think he sent me here so they could watch me. When my investigation got close to the truth, he began cleaning up. Looking back, it wouldn’t surprise me if he was involved with everything that’s happened so far. I mean, he knew about Sanderson. I shared with him you had the device, but that was after he had already taken out Dave Hawkins. Poor Dave was simply an innocent piece of collateral damage.”

That thought really bothers Lee, and he pauses for a second before continuing.

“I’m sure these guys are the ones who took out Sanderson, if he’s really dead. For all I know, he’s alive and well in his office in DC as we speak. They could have fabricated that whole thing! And I had originally assumed some other political consultant was the third crypto wallet Filipov was paying. Now, I’m guessing that third crypto wallet probably belongs to Shawn. But here I am sitting in the mountains of Colorado waiting to be hunted down with no evidence to prove any of this.”

We all sit in silence for a moment, taking in what Lee has said when he continues.

“You know what? I’m thinking this whole location was even setup. Remember Agents Porter and Dillon going on and on about how you should take me to a remote spot? Even Shawn suggested a fishing trip. They all knew we’d be here, or somewhere like this. They

wanted us in a remote location so they could hunt us down without interference from anyone else,” Lee says.

Seeing how distraught Lee is at his lack of insight into the real plot, I realize it's my turn to fill in some blanks.

Chapter Fifty-Two

“You asked a few minutes ago how I knew Shawn Holmes’ name. I’m going to tell you some things now, but I don’t want you to fire questions at me until I’m done. You’ll probably be mad at how far I’ve gone with this on my own, but you need to understand where I was coming from.”

I look at Lee and wait to continue until he nods. He does.

“As you noted when you called out my background, I spent some time doing contract work after my stint in the Army. I won’t get into any details, but you need to know I made some friends there who have turned out to be very helpful. I’ve leveraged their skills a few times over the years, including in this case.”

I look at Jennifer to see if she’s surprised. Apparently, she is not. I continue.

“I also came to know an officer in Detroit who was helpful in understanding some missing pieces of this situation. I cannot name

any of those people, nor can I bring them into the case at all, but I will share the evidence they uncovered and why I was skeptical of you.”

Jennifer stops me there, realizing I’m trying to keep her out of the accusations of Lee.

“Keith, you know you weren’t the only one who was skeptical.”

She looks at Lee.

“I was just as suspicious of you as Keith was, if not more. Both of us saw some things that made us question what was going on,” she says.

Lee leans back against the Land Cruiser again and looks back and forth at the two of us, his mouth slightly open.

“You mean it was this obvious to you guys all along and you said nothing?” he finally asks.

“Look, Lee, you have to put yourself in our shoes,” I begin again.

“You show up out here from Detroit when there are local agents who could just as easily handle the recovery of the USB drive. When I asked you if it was normal for the locals to handle arrests, like with the fake courier, you said it was. If that’s true, why would the FBI fly an agent from Detroit to pick up a little device like this? It makes no sense for you to be here at all!”

I pause, so Lee tries to answer my somewhat rhetorical question.

“Well, they told me it was to see if I could assemble evidence with your cooperation. But looking back at it now, I guess I could have done that from Detroit,” he says, sheepishly.

“That was the first one. Then the entire focus of your investigation seemed to be on Sanderson as the murderer. Yet an expert clearly killed Dave Hawkins. Not only was he killed by an expert assassin, but I would guess it was a Russian expert assassin. They used armor piercing 9mm bullets to shoot him. Almost nobody in the US uses those. But Russians do. And it was probably also a message to everyone else to stand clear of them. Plus, I doubt Sanderson has the skills to handle that type of hit. As a rich political dude with a long history of running around with the suits in DC, I would be shocked if he would ever do anything like that himself. I’d bet he pays people to walk his dog and cook his food, much less handle a murder like that.”

Lee is nodding as I finish talking about Dave's murder.

"Then the cleanup of Sanderson was just way too convenient. The weapon shows up on the scene? He's got the burner phone that blew up Mike's car in his possession? He kills himself before the authorities can get to him? Come on, that's too much."

I pause once again.

"That was the evidence, Keith. I know it looks obvious now, but that was the evidence. At least that's what they told me." Lee is getting agitated as he interrupts to make that point.

"Yeah, ok, it was the evidence they exposed you to. Now we know the true story now. The next curiosity was the way this entire scene in Woodland Park was setup. You kept me and Jennifer right there so you could monitor us, then brought in outsiders to handle the actual pickup of the fake courier? Then you pulled us out here in the middle of nowhere? And..."

Lee interrupts before I get any further.

"Ok, ok, I see your point. You had reason to be skeptical. But why did you decide to drop the hammer on me when we got out here to the fishing spot? If you had all this skepticism before, why not stop earlier?" he asks.

"Well, I guess that was a miscalculation on my part. To be honest, I had decided you were taking us out to kill us or to drop us off where someone else would do that honor. This morning, it was Jennifer who was skeptical and feared we might be heading into an ambush or setup of some kind."

I look at Jennifer when I say it and remember the extra weapon in the Land Cruiser that we brought because of her concerns.

"But all of it came to a head after we left the house this morning. While you were leaving the voicemail with your SAC, Jennifer and I were busy with some text messages of our own."

Lee raises his eyebrows.

"So, that wasn't a work video you got back there, was it?" he asks.

"No, Lee, it was not. The first message I got was from an acquaintance who is an expert at crypto, blockchain and data mining. He was able to uncover the links between Filipov's bank account you had given me and the unknown crypto wallet owner.

That owner, it turns out, is Shawn Holmes. That's how I knew his name. You were correct when you assumed that a moment ago."

I pause to let Lee absorb that one. He looks at the sky and sighs deeply, then shakes his head.

"It wouldn't surprise me if Shawn never even sent our data to the crypto team. And now I understand why he was hiding the third crypto wallet owner. In fact, as I think about this, I bet nothing I funneled to him was reported to the SAC the way I was sending it to him. He controlled the whole narrative," Lee says.

"I don't have any information on that one. But we do have these photos from this morning that you need to see," I say. Then I nod to Jennifer to show Lee the photos from Mason we had received during the ride up here.

"There are a few photos here. Agent Mason has been doing her own investigation back at my house. It was her text message that blew this wide open for us," I say as Jennifer shows them to Lee. Then I continue.

"First, you can see the imposter FBI agents from Pueblo had wired my house with explosives. Those degenerates were going to blow up my entire house, probably with Mason in it, to help cover this whole thing up!"

My voice gets louder and angrier as I share that piece with Lee. I pause there and shake my head, thinking about the memories my family has in that house. I have to force myself to resume.

"The next photo shows Mason had disabled the detonators, saving my family's home. But the next one put you on my list. As you can see, those two agents are getting in the backseat of the now infamous black Ford Explorer. We can't see the plates, but I'm pretty sure we know the fake courier is driving it."

Having finished all I'm going to share, I look at Lee, awaiting a response. Instead of responding, he's frantically swiping at Jennifer's phone, trying to enlarge the last picture from Mason.

"What's going on, Lee? What are you looking for?" Jennifer asks.

"Did you guys not wonder why the two agents were getting in the back seat and nobody got in the front passenger seat?" Lee asks while he continues to swipe.

“I guess we didn’t get that far into it, but yes, that is curious,” I ask as he finally stops swiping and shows us the phone again.

“It’s because there is someone in the passenger seat already.”

Lee has expanded the photo to show a somewhat grainy side view of a person in the front passenger seat of the black Ford Explorer. He’s wearing a hat and is barely visible, but I suspect I know who I’m looking at.

“Should I assume this is my introduction to Shawn Holmes?” I ask as Jennifer and I look closely at the photo.

“The one and only,” Lee replies.

“He looks familiar,” I say as I expand the photo further.

Then it dawns on me.

“I’ve seen him before! Getting out of the elevator at BradComm, on the day Mike died! This guy was talking to Dwayne Tolliver when the doors opened. Dave and I got out of the elevator and Dwayne stepped by us into the elevator. This guy went into the parking garage.”

Then the timing of the whole encounter hits me.

“I bet I saw this guy right before he planted the bomb in Mike’s car!”

Chapter Fifty-Three

“**A** lright, let’s discuss where we stand after all that because we’ve got some decisions to make here. I would assume we all agree those four are in that same vehicle right now, headed our way. Knowing what I know now, I’m sure this Land Cruiser is being tracked somehow. It could be tracked by the Toyota mobile app or by the same type of device they put on Jennifer and my vehicles. Given how easy that would be, I would say they’re coming. Rather than taking the time to figure that out, I say we use that to our advantage. I’d also suspect the FBI is getting some sort of search and rescue party together based on your call to the SAC, Lee. With that knowledge, we could try to hike out and leave the Land Cruiser here, or we can set up a counterattack and wait it out. We might need to use it, we might not, depending on who gets here first.”

I stop and look at Lee, then Jennifer, then Lee again. They’re both deep in thought. Jennifer is the first to respond.

“I don’t think hiking anywhere is a good option. I’m not really dressed to do a long one, and Lee isn’t either. Plus, we don’t know what sort of skills these guys have. They could track us down before anyone gets here. Your description of what happened to Dave makes me think they’re not your typical office guys. I say we find a place to counterattack if needed, and trust a cavalry will arrive before things get out of hand. There are plenty of places in this valley for us to find cover to wait.”

Now Jennifer is looking at the two of us. I, in turn, look at Lee to see what he’s going to say.

“Lee, what’s it going to be? We’ll need your support in this,” I say.

“Look, guys, I’m not a war veteran with combat experience like the two of you. I work at a desk all day. I about died when you hit me in the ribs a few minutes ago. If we’re going to set up an ambush, or counterattack, or a defensive position, or whatever, I’m going to need you guys to take the lead on that. I’ll do what I can to support you,” he says with a burst of humble honesty.

Now it’s Lee looking at me and Jennifer for an answer. I notice he doesn’t even offer to hike out, which tells me he doesn’t feel comfortable with that option. I decide to take the lead and start planning.

“Alright. First off, we should assume they know we’re here. We could move the Land Cruiser to confuse them a little, which will buy a little time and a little surprise, but I’m not sure that’s worth it. I’d say it’s good enough where it is, and we know they’ll start their search around that location. They are probably twenty to thirty minutes away right now. We have no idea what kind of firepower they’d come with, but it’s got to be enough to light up this valley and to do it from long range. There’s a reason they wanted us in a remote location.”

My adrenaline has me on a roll now.

“What weapons do we have?” I ask as I pull my AR15 pistol out of my backpack and Jennifer pulls the Ruger out of hers. We also grab the boxes of ammunition we had brought along.

Lee looks surprised as he stands there holding up his Glock with two extra magazines. It looks like a standard issue setup for him, and now he sees how little we trusted him as we packed for this trip. I ignore his look of surprise and move on.

“Ok, so we’ve got some short-range options here, but nothing we can use for long distance,” I admit.

Jennifer is already assembling her Ruger carbine. I smile as I see her expertise in action. I remember she said she owns one, and watching her, it’s clear she has used it many times before.

“Ok, so we have an FBI 9mm Glock with about forty-five rounds, one short barrel AR15 with about a hundred rounds of 5.56mm, and a Ruger carbine with... how much ammo, Jennifer?”

Jennifer holds up two boxes of 9mm rounds in response.

“Ok, so between the two of you, there are about 150 rounds of 9mm. The Ruger has a scope, but it’s not a long-range version. It’s just nine x. I rarely shoot it over a hundred yards, and that may be a stretch.”

I hold up my 5.56mm as well.

“Of course, this AR has a scope, too. But it’s only six x. Looks like we won’t be taking any five-hundred-yard shots today.”

As we’re talking, I remember the 1911 on my belt, and I take it off and hand it to Lee.

“I forgot I had this. Do you want a little extra firepower? You have two hands, after all.”

I smile at my pitiful attempt at humor in this awful situation. Lee doesn’t smile, but after looking at me for a second, he takes my 1911 and two extra magazines. He probably won’t need it or be able to use it since he already has his Glock, but he probably assumes two guns are better than one. I would too.

“A 1911, nice. That’s perfect for my old school ways,” Lee says.

After a brief smile at Lee’s recognition of his old school style, I continue our discussion by stating the obvious nature of our tactical strategy.

“It seems we have enough to do some damage, but we need to be close. Given we don’t know who will get here first, the Explorer or the FBI, we should prepare for the worst. The worst, in my opinion, is a vehicle with four assassins arriving with long-range weapons before the FBI arrives. We should prepare for that situation, then hope it doesn’t happen.”

I pause to get agreement. They both nod and I continue.

“We’re going to have to use what they don’t know against them.”

They both watch as I gather up all the fishing gear and pulling out all the bags and backpacks that are in the Land Cruiser.

“They don’t know we are aware they’re coming. They also think we’re out for an intense day of fishing. We need to make them think that’s exactly what we’re doing.”

The two of them look at me with eyebrows raised as I fill my arms with gear.

“Grab this stuff and help me carry it down to the stream. We’re going to create a fly-fishing still life,” I say.

The idea makes me chuckle even in the face of a potential military-style conflict. The jokes and chuckling used to happen to me all the time in my military days. It must be a strange mechanism my mind uses to deal with these high adrenaline situations.

While we pack up, I mumble to myself. And to anyone else within earshot, which right now means only Jennifer and Lee.

“This terrain and entry point remind me of a recovery mission in the mountains of Afghanistan. We were pinned down in a valley, not unlike the one below us, and had to lure the enemy in as far as we could before we outflanked them. There, we had more numbers and more rugged terrain, but the idea is the same. If we can pull them in by making them think we’re down here fishing, we can outflank them and get them where they don’t expect it.”

We spend the next few minutes navigating the path down to the creek. While we’re walking, I try to share what I’m thinking.

“Here’s what I’d like to set up with all this stuff. First, let’s take these hats, vests, backpacks, fly rods, and anything else we can come up with to make it look like fishermen from a distance. I have to believe they won’t be walking right up to us. That would be too risky,” I say.

“How do you know they won’t try to come up with some story about wanting to join us to fish?” Jennifer asks.

“Good question, and they might do that. But my gut tells me they would have mentioned that in their message to Lee. Which they didn’t do. They simply told him they arrested the courier. We also know they have four guys now, and one of them is recognizable by Lee. Plus, they know at least Lee has a handgun, and they probably assume I do, too. Knowing that, we can expect them to take their

shots at a distance. It also makes the evidence gathering much more difficult, although I'm honestly not sure they care about that," I respond.

"Yeah, they have shown little concern about leaving a mess. I mean, they were going to blow up your house!" Jennifer says.

"That's true. They're also tacticians. They'll want to keep what they believe to be a tactical advantage of surprise. We just want to lure them in as far as we can by setting up some fake fishermen at various points along the river. I'm betting they will see them from a distance, then try to position for easy shots from this side of the valley."

I look at the others to see if they're buying it. I see questions on Lee's face, and I watch as he mulls it over and seems to come to my reasoning. Jennifer is all in. After nodding to the two of them, I start setting up a version of what may be a life-or-death fisherman still life model.

"We don't have much time, so I'm sure this will not be our best work. But really, all we need to do is draw them in a little. The rest of our strategy will rely on our own positioning," I say as I begin.

I hang a hat on one of the trees, then maneuver one of my extra jackets and fly-fishing vests around it. Next, I grab some tippet from the vest to tie the fly rod onto one of the tree limbs. The entire process takes maybe two minutes, and up close looks nothing like a person.

From three hundred yards away or more, though, it may give us the advantage we need.

Chapter Fifty-Four

“**A**ll we want to do is take their focus for a few minutes,” I say, looking the direction of the road far above.

“This is probably, what, five hundred yards from where the dirt road begins? At least?” I ask rhetorically.

“Given our short-range weapons, the goal would be to get them much closer. Well, within a hundred yards would be best,” I say as I finish tweaking my first still life fisherman.

“What do we do once they’re here? I mean, I’ve got pistols after all. I’m confident with them, but they’re even shorter range than your weapons. I also don’t have the battle experience you guys have, so I’m afraid I’m going to have to rely on your expertise here,” Lee says, again reiterating his concern about our potential for armed conflict.

It’s amazing how quickly his attitude about my background changes once his own personal protection is involved.

“Well, my goal is to draw them in enough that we can flank their positions on the right and left while they focus on these tree fishermen.”

I take a step back and look at the opposite side of the creek while talking.

“The way these ridges come out to the left and right of this spot, I think we can position ourselves up there in the rocks on the left and right of our little fisherman creation. We’ll be across from the Land Cruiser and above where they think we’re fishing. That should give us a decent vantage point.”

I motion to an outcropping of rocks on either side as I’m talking. They are about one third of the way down the far side of the creek, and should provide cover from any point below.

“The only risk I see to this approach is if they realize too early that we’re not really down at the creek. If that happens and they look for us from up above, we’ll be completely exposed with nowhere to go.”

Realizing I may be getting too far into the risk of the situation and distract them, I point to the rest of the gear.

“You guys want to get a couple more up? We probably only have fifteen minutes before they arrive.”

I’m secretly still hoping the FBI arrives first, but it would risk our lives to rest on that expectation. I won’t do that to myself, my kids, to Jennifer, or even to Lee. We need to be prepared for the worst.

Jennifer and Lee pick up the other fly rods. I follow Jennifer to help set up another decoy a few yards upstream to the right. While we set it up, I can’t help but apologize again.

“Look, Jennifer, I’m so sorry I got you into all this. I didn’t know where this was headed when I asked you to help with that device. It seemed so much simpler at the time.”

I’m shaking my head as I talk, trying to avoid being overcome with regret.

“Keith, don’t be crazy. I know you didn’t foresee all this. Plus, I jumped right in with both feet, if you remember. I could have stayed away, too. It’s just not my nature, I guess,” she answers with a hint of a smile.

And that's about all the sentiment we have time for at the moment. After a brief second and a deep breath, I get back to the task at hand.

"Does the flank maneuver make sense to you, given they'll all arrive in the vehicle, presumably together?" I ask.

She thinks for a minute, then answers.

"Yeah, I think it does. I heard you mumbling back there. This whole thing is giving me flashbacks, too. It's like I'm back in the fight mode I wanted to leave forever. It's a unique adrenaline, isn't it?"

She looks at me solemnly for an answer before continuing. I nod. She's right, there's nothing like the feeling of having to defend your own life, especially when you know it's coming in advance.

"Well, at least this time we are getting prepared. Sort of," she says.

I nod my understanding of the desire to leave the battlefield and that unique adrenaline behind. I suspect there's a much longer story behind her statement about being prepared 'this time.' After a second, she continues.

"My only concern is we don't know their tactical expertise. If they're smart, they'll drop off at different spots on the ridge above. Four of them coming from one entry point is a lot easier to manage than four coming from four different entry points," she says, looking up in the direction of the road we can't see.

I nod at her thoughtful assessment. She's right. If the black Ford Explorer stops with only one person in it, they've setup a far more difficult tactical dilemma. If they're all four together when they park, we have a better chance.

I'm amazed at the level-headed responses and stone-cold emotions from Jennifer. It's clear she has had to think through life-threatening situations before. The way she's analyzing the situation, she could probably drive this strategy herself. I can only wonder how Lee will respond if we have to engage, but after this brief conversation, I have complete confidence in Jennifer.

After we setup another fly fisherman decoy, we head back downstream to see how Lee's doing. He's finishing his decoy when we arrive. None of the three creations look realistic from where we are, but we had to work quick with what we had. This scene has now

developed into what I had referred to as our fly-fishing still life, and it's as complete as we can get it. Plus, we don't need it to look good up close. It's only meant to offer a level of comfort to the distant observer before they move closer and into our trap.

Now we need to create our own tactical plan. Having already been in battle mode for the last several minutes, I start with my ideas.

"Ok, here's what I'm thinking. We have to start with the assumption that they will all enter the dirt road in the vehicle. If they drop anyone off before that, we'll have to adjust. But I don't think they will. They still think they have the element of surprise, so there's no need for them to plan anything that strategic."

I look at the two of my fellow combatants to see if they're with me. Lee nods first, with Jennifer following along after a few seconds of thought.

"We also have to assume they know where the Land Cruiser is, so the positioning of the fly fishermen below the vehicle should make them comfortable. They'll likely try to position themselves close enough for a clear shot but far enough away to avoid a long getaway and risk being seen. There's nobody else out here now to change any of their tactics, but that could always change immediately if another fisherman or a four-wheeler shows up. They'll want to get out in a hurry."

Again, I look at them to get their opinion. Again, they both nod.

"Realistically, we only have two weapons that are effective from the other side of the creek. Lee, I think that means we'll need to find a good tactical location for you nearer the Land Cruiser. I'd suggest a position just above it, as they won't expect that at all. You will need to be careful not to expose yourself too quickly from up there. We want them all in the valley before we reveal our locations. Remember, there are four of them and three of us, and I guarantee you they are better equipped for long range shooting."

Once again, I receive nods from the two of them before I move on.

"Jennifer, how comfortable are you with that Ruger? Would you prefer the AR at this distance?" I ask as I nod at her.

“I’m good with the Ruger. As I mentioned at the house, I have this exact model. I think I’m pretty good a little beyond a hundred yards, but any further is definitely pushing it with this setup,” she answers.

“Ok, I’m probably not going to be effective much further than that myself. Given those range limitations, let’s setup on those two rocky areas.” I nod at the rocky overlooks I had called out before on the other side of the creek.

“You take the left and I’ll take the right. Lee, you head up behind the Land Cruiser and take cover behind that group of boulders above the road. We’ll know in the next fifteen minutes if they’re coming or if the FBI arrives first. I’d love it if they tuck tail and run, but given their behavior so far, I don’t think that’s going to happen.”

We look at each other solemnly and nod. We all understand a showdown may be coming.

“One last thing. Don’t shoot until you have to. Lee, that’s especially important for you. Your pistols will require a much closer range engagement than we want. Jennifer and I will wait as long as we can, draw them in as close as we can, and hope we see an FBI presence before we have to engage. If the FBI doesn’t arrive in time, and if we have to fire for some reason, then and only then should you come down from behind and engage wherever is necessary. I know it’s not a great plan, but it’s what we have.”

I feel bad treating Lee like a rookie in this situation, but he freely admits that’s what he is in this setting.

One last time with the solemn nods, and we head to our assigned locations.

Lee arrives at his position first, having a shorter trek. He finds a tight group of large rocks to tuck in behind where he’s not visible from the road.

Jennifer and I cross the creek and ascend to the rocks we had identified on the far side of the creek. We will both be much further from the road and parking area, but we have slightly longer range weapons than Lee and have the benefit of some magnification from our scopes.

I’m sighting in my scope when a puff of dust catches my eye about a quarter mile up the road. I don’t see a vehicle yet, but I assume I know what it is. I whistle to Jennifer and point in that

direction. She sees it as well. I can't see Lee, but I trust he'll know about the approaching vehicle soon enough.

If this is a black Ford Explorer, we are about to see if our fly-fishing still life and our ten-minute plans are enough to save our lives.

Chapter Fifty-Five

The peaceful escape of Willow Creek does not feel so peaceful right now.

With our adrenaline pumping, it seems like forever before I see another cloud of dust, hear any doors or engines, or see a vehicle. Eventually, though, I spot the vehicle inching down the road several hundred yards from where the Land Cruiser is parked. They've slowed down to make sure the dust cloud and engine noise are minimized, so their entrance is more covert. Jennifer and I can see the Land Cruiser clearly from our vantage points. I look over toward Jennifer and can see her focused in on the arriving vehicle as well.

While watching the barely visible dust cloud, I'm grateful I have brought weapons with scopes — even if they are these limited magnification versions. We'd be at an even greater disadvantage without them. As it is, we're only outnumbered and undoubtedly outgunned, but not surprised.

It's hard for me not to remember similar feelings of adrenaline from my time in Iraq and Afghanistan. I didn't spend a long time in those countries, or the others, but the action was frequent and intense.

During my Army tour, our multi-national team handled recoveries and extractions. None of us were Delta Force, Green Berets, Air Rangers, Navy Seals or any other elite unit. The missions, however, were almost never without enemy fire. We became tactical experts from necessity and survival, not from formal training.

Then there was the time with Hart International as a so-called security consultant. Those missions were even more intense, and it seems we were always at some sort of tactical disadvantage there. If I had to compare, this was feeling like some of those missions. At least this time, we see the enemy coming.

Watching through my scope behind the cover of boulders, I can see the vehicle now. As we all feared would be the case, it's a black Ford Explorer. More importantly, it has stopped about a hundred yards behind the parking spot where the Land Cruiser sits. Based on their approach, I'm sure they believe they have the advantage of surprise, so it doesn't shock me to see four doors open once the vehicle is stationary.

Advantage number one goes to us. They didn't stagger their entry points.

As the four passengers slowly and cautiously exit the car about three hundred yards from my position, I can see well enough to recognize them. There's the fake courier getting out of the driver's seat, with the guys who called themselves Agents Porter and Dillon getting out on either side of the back. The front passenger, who I assume is still the Shawn Holmes character Lee had identified earlier, gets out slowest. He also takes more time than the others assessing the landscape. His behavior definitely implies he's the one in charge of this group.

All but the leader are clothed in full battle dress, but it's not an American print. It is, however, one I recognize. These guys are wearing Russian Mountain BDUs. Of course, in a normal everyday encounter, a person in this gear wouldn't raise any suspicion at all. There are more camouflage prints in hunting gear than any one

person could ever memorize and Colorado sees them all. Here, however, it seems they're establishing their own battle lines. These three Russian-clothed combatants are about to go on a mission.

Watching through the scope, I see them each walk around the vehicle carefully and slowly, closing the doors of the vehicle slowly and gently to avoid making noise. They're probably too far away for it to matter, but they're clearly not taking any chances.

While the other three passengers stand and take in the scenery before them, the driver carefully steps around to the back of the vehicle and carefully opens the hatch. Then they all four disappear behind the vehicle for a few seconds.

When they reappear, the sight of them causes my heart to quicken. I shouldn't be surprised, but the three battle-clad combatants have armed themselves with some type of sniper-style rifle. I can't see clearly, but it seems it's not the Dragunov SVD rifle I remember seeing from Russian snipers in my military days. These are different. I've read about the newest sniper rifle the Russians had, the Chukavin, or SVC, but I've never seen one. Maybe this is it. If it is, those things have a claimed range of sixteen hundred yards! That thought sends shivers down my spine.

I have no way of communicating what I'm seeing to Lee and Jennifer. But as I consider our current positions, my instincts tell me Lee is in a safer spot than me and Jennifer. He has the element of surprise and proximity to the target on his side. As soon as these guys figure out we've set them up with the still live at the creek, they will be scanning both sides of the valley looking for us. Hopefully, they're close enough by then to neutralize their sniper rifle advantage.

While I watch, the three Russian BDU-wearing, Russian sniper rifle-carrying would-be assassins spread out and crouch down to walk through the woods. Their rifles are cumbersome, so they're moving slowly, but their tactical strategy is coming into view. I'm slightly concerned to see the leader stay back with the black Explorer. I'm even more concerned when I see him pull binoculars out of the back of the Explorer and put them around his neck. Fortunately, he's not using them yet.

One of the rifle bearers fans out to the left, one to the right, and one straight down the middle. So far, it's what we expected. My initial question is, how far to the right or left will those two go? I'm still hoping their assumed surprise element will limit their tactics.

Within about five minutes, I have my answer. They stop moving laterally and start descending into the valley well within Jennifer and my positions. We should have the tactical advantage with our positions on the outside of theirs, to the left and right. All three of them are heading down the far side between the two of us. It's a good start.

I'm happily surprised to see nobody has yet started looking down into the creek valley with their scopes or binoculars. They obviously think we don't know they're coming.

Another five minutes go by and the three shooters get through enough of the trees and boulders that they can see the valley below. All three of them are taking positions at almost the same height from the creek below as Jennifer and me. They're almost directly across from us. Clearly, they're not wanting to get too close to be seen, but they need to be close enough to get through the trees and boulders that line these valley walls.

It's surreal to watch them setting up their positions here in this peaceful mountain valley. It's not the first time in my life I've had this 'calm before the storm' feeling, but it's never been in one of my personal retreat areas like this one. The thought of a disrupted peace here at Willow Creek saddens me as I consider what's likely about to unfold.

The shooter in the middle takes up his position almost exactly between my and Jennifer's positions across the valley. He's the first to pause and begin carefully setting up his bipod and start looking through his scope. The other two are doing the same thing from their positions within another few seconds.

Our decoys along the stream are about to be tested.

Chapter Fifty-Six

I scan my scope back over to the black Ford Explorer to see where the leader of the group has gone. He has moved to a position nearer the Land Cruiser just below the parking area where he can get a better view of the creek area below. Fortunately, I still haven't seen him pull up his binoculars and start scanning our fake fishermen. It seems they are so confident they know where we are that they walked right into our little trap.

Knowing Lee has a personal relationship with this fourth guy, I take a moment to scan up to where Lee was hiding above the road from the Land Cruiser. To my dismay, I see him ambling out of his hiding spot and trying to get into position behind the guy I assume to be Shawn Holmes.

Lee's emotions better not get the best of him, or he could blow this whole thing before it starts! I can only watch for a few seconds while he climbs down the hill. He's within fifty yards of his target

when I have to refocus on the three directly across from me. Hopefully Lee doesn't engage, or this could get ugly fast.

Hoping against hope, I look through my scope far off to the left to see if there is any dust from approaching cars. It sure would be nice if the FBI swooped in and took care of this whole thing before we had to do anything. The lack of a dust cloud, however, extinguishes that hope. We're on our own out here.

Jennifer and I need enough visibility of the three to make sure all our shots count. We can only fire at one target each, so there will be a significant risk once we disclose our positions. We need to take shots with our limited range weapons that simply must hit. If we miss and expose our locations to three snipers, the ensuing firefight would be one hundred percent to their advantage.

As I watch through my scope, I can see the sniper on the left lining up his scope toward the decoy fishermen below. It looks like he's targeting the decoy on his right, closest to me. He adjusts his scope, probably calculating windage, elevation and distance, then suddenly raises his head to take another look. Then back in his scope, then raise his head again.

I take a deep breath and look over at Jennifer, who is clearly observing the same behavior. Here we go. It looks like he has discovered our decoys.

Even though he is still over one hundred yards away, further than my comfort zone for this weapon, there is no option for a closer shot. Our element of surprise is about to fade as I assume the others are soon to recognize what the guy on the left has now noticed.

He is looking around and making gestures toward the other shooters, but to my relief, they are focused on acquiring their own targets and do not notice him. His motion also tells me they are here without radio communication, which is another indication they assumed an easy time here at Willow Creek.

We are about to show them they were wrong.

I know I'm going to get a little drop with my caliber of bullet from this distance, so I take my best estimate on a target just above where the shooter is still lying prone atop a boulder. I disengage the safety with my thumb, hold my breath, and pull the trigger.

And in that instant, the cover I had is gone.

The element of surprise we had is gone.

The peace of Willow Creek is gone.

The next several seconds sound like pure chaos, but it's what we had quickly and reluctantly prepared for. My first shot did not kill the shooter on the left, but it startled him and caused him to shift to the side of his boulder. He clearly doesn't know which angle the shot came from, because now he's even more visible to my position.

While I'm lining up my second shot, I hear a shot from Jennifer's position. Hopefully she was ready when I took my shot, because she is also disclosing her location with that single shot. I hear high-powered rifle shots from the far-right sniper just after my shot was fired. At the same time, I see one of the fly-fishing decoys go crazy out of the corner of my eye. It appears the sniper on that side never realized they were decoys at all before taking his shot.

But with that shot and the obvious lack of human flesh behind the vest, he now knows those aren't humans. The temporary confusion, however, works to our advantage. Jennifer has taken him out with two of her initial shots and his body now lies still behind his rifle. She must have gotten him in the head or spine, given his immediate lack of movement.

My second shot becomes a quick three shot burst, the volume being a necessity with the rounds I'm using. This time I don't miss. The sniper on the left struggles for a few seconds, then stops moving. I immediately turn my focus to the right, having no time to verify the kill right now.

The shooter across the valley in the middle remains, and he is fully engaged. As I pivot my weapon and scope, I see and hear the booming shots from his location toward Jennifer's position on the right. When she took her first shots, the guy in the middle shifted his focus to her and started firing.

She is under heavy fire that is slinging dirt and rock shards all around her. The shooter is taking only a few seconds between shots, and doesn't seem to have gotten his sights completely dialed into her position. Still, the deadly shots ricochet around as he continues to fire.

Jennifer takes cover behind the boulder to avoid the onslaught, which gives me a chance to focus on the shooter's position.

When I finally get my scope lined up on the remaining shooter across the valley, I get a glimpse of the group's leader scrambling back up the far side of the valley toward the dirt road. He's still less than fifty yards below the Land Cruiser, and has decided this fight is more than he expected. I'm unsure if he's going back for another weapon or to escape, but I have no time to worry about it. I need to focus on the shooter slinging bullets toward Jennifer.

The middle sniper slides to his left to get a better shot at Jennifer's position, causing her to hunker down behind her cover. She is about to be exposed if he gets any further to his left. He's on a huge boulder outcropping, though, and he takes a few seconds to shift to a new position.

His movement gives me the window of time I need. I reposition myself just above the rocks on my right to get a shot at him, as he again takes aim at Jennifer. When I stick my head up over the rock, however, I expose my position to him and he begins taking alternating shots between me and Jennifer. I'm better protected by the rocks than she is, and her protection is eroding as the shooter continues to shift more and more to his left. In a few seconds, she'll be exposed.

The shooter has the firepower advantage and the range advantage. The only thing we have on our side is his need to reload the chamber with his bolt-action rifle after each shot. He's fast, but not as fast as our semi-automatic weapons.

Knowing Jennifer is at risk of being fully exposed the further the shooter moves, I calculate my next move and check my magazine. I still have at least fifteen rounds, so it's now or never. After one of his shots chips off a piece of rock above my head, I sit up and fire as fast as I can at the shooter's position. I'm too far away to be accurate with my AR, but I continue to fire anyway, sling rocks and dirt around the shooter. As I do, I see him roll off the boulder he had been shooting from over to the far side.

That roll, as I had hoped, exposes him to Jennifer and allows her to take aim and shoot. I can't see him anymore, but I notice Jennifer stops shooting after a handful of rounds. She looks my way and nods.

Now it's only the leader left somewhere across the valley.

Chapter Fifty-Seven

As quickly as it started, the noise and chaos in Willow Creek comes to a halt. There are pockets of smoke where the shots were fired, but no more sounds.

Looking over to my right, I see Jennifer stand up from her position behind the boulders. She dusts herself off, but appears fine.

As I stand up, I realize I'm not completely fine. My left calf is burning and I look down to see why. Apparently, one of the ricochets or rock shards has cut a gash in my leg. It's not severe, but is making a bloody mess on my pants. After a brief test of its function, I'm sure it's not bad enough to tend to right now. I scan across the valley with my scope to see what has happened to Lee and the remaining member of the sniper crew.

Lee isn't in his last position anymore, having vacated it as the firefight started. I don't see, however, where he's gone. I slowly scan from the Land Cruiser toward the black Ford Explorer and eventually

see him sneaking along the rocks just above where the Explorer is parked.

Then I see why.

The guy he called Shawn Holmes is racing toward the black Explorer from where he had been earlier. Lee is positioning himself to intercept Holmes before he gets to the vehicle.

That maneuver was a mistake.

The terrain is dusty and slippery on these valley walls, with deep ridges every thirty or forty yards apart. The ridges and ravines are anywhere from a few feet deep to well over twenty feet deep in some parts. Combined with the associated ridges, they make up the uneven walls of the valley.

Lee is trying to navigate over those ridges and across the crevasses when his footing gives way and he loses his balance. He tries to catch every stone and tree along the way, but despite his efforts, he slides slowly down the ridge on his stomach toward the road.

What's worse, Shawn Holmes has now seen where Lee is and is maneuvering toward his position. Jennifer and I scramble down our side of the valley to get across to the other side. We're a good ten minutes away from their location, even if we make great time.

As we're running through a clear area, I try to look again through my scope to see what's going on with Lee. To my horror, I see him lying on his back against the ridge beside the road with his hands in the air. He has no weapons in his hands and has blood coming from his nose and mouth. He has slid all the way to the road and right into the lap of Shawn Holmes.

We continue to scramble toward their location, jumping across the creek and navigating up one of the ravines that leads closest to their location. So far, it seems we're running undetected.

As we start the climb up the other side of the valley toward the black Ford Explorer, Lee, and Shawn Holmes, we hear two pistol shots. I can't see what's happening, but I fear I know. We continue to climb as fast as we can.

The next sound we hear is a motor starting, then tires spinning in the dirt and a vehicle racing down the dirt road to our right. When I hear that, I stop.

“Wait. Where is he going?” I ask rhetorically.

Jennifer stops, too, and listens.

“He’s going deeper into the woods. He has no idea where he’s going,” she says, obviously having similar knowledge of the area that I have.

“Let’s get to Lee and find the keys to the Land Cruiser. That Explorer can’t get far down those four-by-four trails,” I say as I continue my ascent up the hill.

The climb at speed is excruciating, but within a few minutes, we both climb out of the ravine and onto the road. When we do, we both stop in our tracks.

There, lying a few feet from where the black Explorer was parked, is the body of Agent Lee Warfield. He has been shot through the chest and forehead and is clearly dead. His dark skin is dusty from his slide down the side of the steep hill that ultimately cost him his life.

Jennifer and I look at each other with our mouths half open for a brief second, then head over toward where Lee’s body is. After checking his pulse to confirm the obvious, I reach into his front pants pocket to retrieve the key fob for the Land Cruiser. We then carry Lee’s body to the side in case any other vehicles come down the road, using as much respect as we can in this situation.

After that brief solemn moment, we both take off running back toward the Land Cruiser. As we run, I yell to Jennifer between breaths.

“We don’t have to go after him. We can let the FBI run him down. He killed an FBI agent, so they won’t let him go,” I manage to get out as I run.

After a few seconds, Jennifer responds.

“Not a chance. He shot Lee in cold blood. We’ve got to get him before he gets too far,” she bursts out between strides.

I couldn’t agree more.

Within another minute or two, we are at the Land Cruiser, in the running vehicle and reversing out of our parking spot. Only a couple of days earlier, I had parked in this same spot with my kids and enjoyed a great fishing day. The thought of that peace being

shattered by this Shawn Holmes guy makes me nauseous. If nothing else, he has to pay for that.

It also occurs to me that the hunter has now become the hunted. A few minutes ago, he was in a position where he thought he'd be overseeing the long distance execution of Lee, Jennifer, and me. Now he's on the run and we're going to get him.

I'm pushing the Land Cruiser as hard as I can down the dirt road, knowing the road ends at a little picnic and camping area near the river. For a Ford Explorer, this path is a dead end. That vehicle isn't high enough to cross the river. Shawn will have to stop. The area is a gathering spot for local four-by-four enthusiasts, and it can only be accessed two ways. You can enter the area using a lifted vehicle by crossing the river from the other side, or you can drive down the road we're now on.

"He'll have to stop down here, so I don't want to get too close," I tell Jennifer as I slow down.

Coming around the last corner before the dead end, I slow our speed to a crawl. It's not that I'm trying to sneak up on Holmes, as he could have seen my dust trail for the last quarter mile. I don't want to drive right into an ambush.

As we finally come over the ridge to get a full view of the picnic area, I see the black Ford Explorer parked there in the middle of the road. The door is open.

He's on foot out here somewhere.

Chapter Fifty-Eight

Sitting in the Land Cruiser surveying the trees and rocks surrounding the picnic area, I don't see a sign of Shawn Holmes. Part of me wonders if he jumped into the river and started swimming downstream. That wouldn't be a bad tactical plan if that's what he did, as the terrain around the river is difficult to navigate.

I slowly open the driver's door of the Land Cruiser and hear Jennifer doing the same thing on the passenger side. We close the doors quietly and step around the front of the vehicle to search the landscape for any sign of human life.

We barely get a couple of steps in front of the vehicle with our weapons drawn when a voice behind us reveals our tactical mistake. The time we had taken to run to the Land Cruiser was enough time for Shawn Holmes to park his vehicle and devise his own plan. He positioned himself right next to the point in the road where a follower,

like me, would see the Explorer. It's the exact point I stopped the Land Cruiser.

I'm kicking myself for the oversight when he screams at us.

"Put down your weapons! Now! Put them down and kick them away!" he is screaming from behind us. It seems he is on Jennifer's side of the vehicle, but I can't really pinpoint his position yet.

We have no choice but to comply with his demands. We drop our weapons on the ground and kick them to the side. I am instantly aware, and regretful, that I gave my pistol to Lee when we arrived at Willow Creek.

"So, you thought you had the upper hand, did you? Did Lee finally figure things out? Is that what happened? Or did you two geniuses put things together after you saw the data from that stupid computer system?"

Shawn is talking, which is good for us. It makes me wonder, though, why he didn't just shoot us immediately and drive away with the Land Cruiser. If he walks out alone, he can craft whatever story he wants and potentially come away unscathed. Why isn't he doing that?

"It doesn't matter now, does it? Here we are now at the end of the road, so to speak." He laughs at his own joke, beginning to sound like a madman.

"Yes, I could have taken both of you out already. You drove right into my little ambush here. And you won't be walking away, don't worry. But to keep your kids alive, Mr. Morgan, I'd like us to conduct a little business transaction first." He is sneering as he talks.

"You leave my kids out of this!" I can't stop myself from screaming.

"Aha, hit a nerve, did I? Yes, I know all about your kids at your in-laws in Denver. I suppose that's one benefit of getting all Warfield's field reports. That idiot thought he was getting his case all setup to close, when he was really just providing me with exactly what I needed to shut the whole thing down. And now I have." He was almost laughing now.

"But like I said, Mr. Morgan, let's do a little business first. You see, I know more about you than just your kids. I also know about your background. In fact, I know about both your backgrounds," he says.

Jennifer and I catch each other's eye for a moment, but I only see anger and resolve in her eyes.

"What do you want?" I yell.

"I'll get to that, Mr. Morgan. Before I do, please indulge me for a brief moment. I'll bet you don't know Ms. Ellis here quite as well as you thought. It seems you both have rather esteemed military backgrounds, but neither of you ended them quite as cleanly as you might have liked."

I glance at Jennifer again and see she is staring straight ahead, fuming.

"Ms. Ellis, as it turns out, didn't get her promotion to captain like she should have. In fact, she wasn't given the opportunity to reenlist after her first four years. Did she tell you that, Mr. Morgan?"

I'm not planning to answer, and I don't get the chance before he continues.

"No, I'm sure she didn't. You see, Ms. Ellis decided she didn't want to be as friendly with the commander of her base as he had hoped she'd be. Thinking she could blow the whistle on him, she wrote an official complaint to the JAG. It was very well written, I understand, and I'm sure the base commander was impressed when the JAG showed it to him. He was so impressed, in fact, that he threatened Ms. Ellis with insubordination unless she walked away. Isn't that about how it went, Ms. Ellis?"

Again, he doesn't wait for an answer.

"And you, Mr. Morgan, have quite a story yourself. Those four years in the Army were bad enough, but the years with Hart International were even more eventful, weren't they? I understand there is a certain brutality in the security consulting business throughout that part of the world. One might even say they operate a wee bit outside the law. Wouldn't you agree, Keith?"

It's not a real question, so I don't answer. He continues.

"I'm sure you haven't told Ms. Ellis here, and probably not even your dead wife, about the people you killed back then. You were a killing machine, I understand, Mr. Morgan. Kudos to the two of you. Such distinguished, our should I say shameful, careers. Congratulations."

Holmes claps slowly and chuckles at himself. It's becoming clear this guy is unhinged.

"But oh, that's not why I'm here. You two would be dead shameful veterans by now if that was the end of the story. It may interest you to know, Ms. Ellis, that your friend Keith here has another little secret. I honestly don't know why he keeps it a secret, but he does. It turns out, Mr. Keith Morgan, the consultant from Woodland Park, Colorado, is a millionaire. In fact, he's worth, I'd guess, about fifty or sixty million dollars by now. Isn't that right, Keith?"

This time, Holmes waits for a response. I don't give him one.

"Not going to share, huh? Ok, that's fine with me. As luck would have it, one area I've become quite fond of in recent years is cryptocurrency. You see, crypto has given me a way to hide some of my dealings from the IRS and, well, everyone else. My research of crypto cases in the FBI has also given me insight into some very wealthy individuals. Mr. Morgan here, it turns out, is one of those individuals. His Bitcoin wallet was quite revealing. It seems he was one of the early adopters long, long ago. And now, our Mr. Morgan here is a rich man. He doesn't act like it, does he?"

Holmes is speaking to himself, and we're not answering, anyway.

"His simple lifestyle is something I will never understand, but he certainly does lie low with his money. And he doesn't even hide his money by transferring it to wallets overseas. The moron even pays taxes on his crypto earnings!"

He chuckles, then pauses while he walks around to the front of us.

"I think I might be more comfortable if both of you were on your knees," he says.

When we don't comply immediately, he screams.

"I said get on your knees! Now!" He spits as he yells, moving around to stand in front of us. We slowly drop to our knees, limiting our ability to make any offensive moves.

I am now looking straight into the face of the individual Lee called Shawn Holmes, APAC of the FBI field office in Detroit. And apparently, he's also a faithful soldier for Ivan Filipov. And also, apparently, according to the look in his eyes, he is a madman.

“So, Mr. Morgan, I’m not really a child killer, but I can be. I’m going to give you the chance to keep me from becoming such a despicable character. I’m going to give you the opportunity to indulge my greed instead of my need to cleanup Filipov’s mess.”

He notices my disgusted look, and he stops.

“Oh, you don’t even know why you’re here?” He laughs hysterically.

“Well, let me fill you in. It seems my good Russian friend, Mr. Ivan Filipov, used Sanderson and BradComm to erase any chance of stopping Russian oil imports during the last election cycle. And Sanderson, along with BradComm’s help, did a brilliant job! He did even better than we had projected. Of course, Filipov started getting concerned when BradComm was putting all their data into this software from Diverse Data. Then he went totally ballistic when he found out Mike Schwartz had copied the database. That guy actually thought he could use his knowledge of Filipov’s scheme to retire on an island somewhere? Wow! How stupid can you be?”

Holmes is enjoying his monologue and just keeps talking.

“Then Agent Warfield and you clowns started digging into our little plot. Why’d you have to do that? We had already won. It was brilliant! I tried to misdirect Agent Warfield at every turn, but he just kept on digging. He should have left it alone. Of course, it was ultimately you, Mr. Morgan, who caused me to take this little mountain vacation. All you had to do was turn the device in. That’s it. We’d never have gotten to this point. But you and Ms. Ellis had to keep snooping.”

He smiles and shakes his head, clearly enjoying his own version of the story.

“And all of that, of course, brings us here. Filipov wants you all dead, no questions asked. As far as he’s concerned, you’re just collateral damage. And I will oblige, of course. Once the two of you are out of the picture, I’ll craft the story of your crimes against America, and you’ll be the ones flagged with espionage, not me.”

He nods and smirks as he looks at us.

“But before that happens, I have one request.”

Holmes takes a phone out of his pocket and makes a few swipes while we watch. I now have a feeling I know what he’s doing. While

he's focused on his phone, I begin to dig my toes into the rocky terrain to prepare for an attack if I can get the opportunity.

"It's a good thing I have a satellite phone, because the service out here sucks!" he mutters as he works his phone screen. Eventually he stops.

"Here we go. What I'd like you to do, Mr. Morgan, is to transfer fifty million dollars' worth of your Bitcoin wallet over to me. I'll have it moved away before anyone can find it. And in return, I give you my word your children will live."

Again, he smiles. Only now, his countenance has changed and looks like he's conducting a simple business transaction.

"Here you go. Just enter your account details here and I'll be on my way. That fifty million, along with Filipov's stash, will hide me in luxury for the rest of my long life."

He smiles and flips the phone toward me.

"How do I know you'll not kill my kids? How do I know you haven't already?" I ask as I pick up the phone, continuing to dig my toes into the ground.

"Unfortunately, Mr. Morgan, you don't have another option. In fact, I'm going to let you watch while I increase the urgency for you. I have no more need for Ms. Ellis here."

Holmes raises his pistol toward Jennifer as I throw his phone at his face and launch from my toes.

Chapter Fifty-Nine

Holmes shifts to block the phone from hitting his face as I lunge toward him. The distraction gives me a blast of hope that I can stop him from shooting Jennifer. Before I hit him with my shoulder and push the pistol barrel aside, I see him begin to fall awkwardly forward. And to my delight, I never hear his pistol discharge. I do hear a shot a second later as I tackle Holmes, but it is not from Holmes' pistol. In fact, it's not from a pistol at all, it's from a high-powered rifle some distance away.

As we crash to the ground in a heap, I become aware of Holmes grimacing as he tries to fight back. He's also moving awkwardly and ineffectively, which allows me to toss his pistol aside and subdue him with only a few close-range strikes. He begins to slow down, and I look behind me to see Jennifer glance toward the ridge on the other side of the river.

Holmes is writhing in pain on the ground and his FBI standard Glock is lying in the gravel between Jennifer and me. She picks it up as I easily slide away from Holmes. We both back up with her holding the pistol pointed at Holmes.

It takes a second to realize what has happened.

I stand to collect my thoughts, keeping my eye on Holmes. He's still squirming on the ground with a gaping gunshot wound in his left thigh. It wasn't my fists that subdued him; it was that hole in his leg. Someone shot Holmes from long range just before he could fire at Jennifer.

Jennifer is holding Holmes' pistol pointed back at him while still searching the boulders on the ridge beyond the river. I grab my AR15 and Ruger we had to discard earlier.

Backing into a safe position where Holmes is covered by our weapons, I also start scanning the ridge. I'm still trying to isolate where it may have come from when I hear Jennifer yell.

"Mason, is that you?" Jennifer is yelling up toward the ridge across the river. If that's Mason, she's a long distance away.

After a few seconds, I see a figure stand up at the edge of the ridge. It must be over three hundred yards away. Then I see the figure wave. I can hardly believe what I'm seeing. It is, in fact, Agent Simone Mason waving at us from her vantage point high above the river and this picnic area.

As I strain to see in the distance facing the bright sun, I see Mason standing there with a hunting rifle. The image is strange, as Mason is still wearing her FBI slacks and a white blouse, but it's certainly a welcome sight!

I shake myself back to the reality in front of me and realize Holmes is still on the ground but beginning to look for potential avenues of escape. Before he can make a move, I fall onto him and roll him onto his stomach so I can put my knee on his back. As Jennifer keeps his own weapon pointed at him, I search through his pockets and throw the contents off to the side. There's a pocket knife, two extra magazines for his pistol, an FBI badge, and a wallet.

Sure that he has no more weapons, I back away again and leave Holmes bleeding there in the dust next to the peaceful South Platte River. I move around to the left so Jennifer and I have any potential

escape path covered. He wouldn't get far, but you never know what a madman might try.

"We won't go away that easily, Morgan." Holmes is spitting as he sneers at me.

"I'm not the only one who knows. Other people know. And they'll get to you. Maybe not today, but they'll get to you. Or maybe they'll just get to your kids, but they'll get to you. You've got too much history and too much money to stay invisible." He stops talking as he looks back to the road.

His words have concerned me, but I won't allow him the pleasure of seeing it on my face. Who won't go away? And what do they know about my history? Is he talking about my military history or something else?

Holmes is still distracted by something on the road as I consider what he might mean with his comments.

Then, in that brief quiet moment, I notice the sound of motors approaching. Looking behind the Land Cruiser, I see why Holmes was distracted. A police vehicle emerges from a dust cloud, with officers quickly running over to assess the situation. They begin to scream orders and we drop our weapons while more officers arrive. We both raise our hands and stand still in compliance with their commands.

On the other side of the road, I hear the familiar roar of a Ford V8 motor and look up to see Ed's beautiful Bronco emerge from behind the boulders. It makes its way down the steep valley wall, slowly navigating the four-by-four trail down to the river. The sight of it reminds me of the web of trails that traverse the hills over there.

He pulls up to the river on the other side and emerges with Mason from the Bronco as the officers begin to restrain Jennifer, Holmes, and me.

As she walks toward the other side of the river, Mason screams at the officers while pointing at Jennifer and me.

"Those two are good. Make sure they're ok. It's the guy bleeding on the ground you need to detain!" she yells.

The officers obviously trust what she says as they immediately change their behavior toward Jennifer and me. They release us and they cuff Holmes. He's still hissing and spitting insults at me while

he's loaded onto a gurney, chained to the rails, and rolled away. Jennifer and I are escorted to some boulders beside the road to sit down.

"Hey, did you guys get a chance to take a look at the FBI agent on the road back there? This guy shot him," I say to the officers as I nod toward Holmes.

"Yes sir, we did. I'm sorry," one of the officers replies solemnly.

While the officers bring us bottles of water, I see Ed and Mason get back into his Bronco and slowly drive across the river just above where the chaotic scene is unfolding. With the lifted suspension and huge wheels, Ed's Bronco has plenty of clearance to cross the water and arrives next to the black Explorer a few seconds later.

Mason steps out of the front passenger seat and heads over to where we're sitting.

"Mason, that was a great shot!" I yell, realizing I have lots of questions behind the first comment that spilled out.

As she nods and smiles lightly in response, I see Ed walking up behind her. I'm shaking my head at that sight. Ed, my next-door neighbor, is out here and is somehow involved in this ridiculous situation. I'm going to need to get the story on this one for sure.

Before I can say anything else, Jennifer yells.

"Keith, you've been shot!" she says as she sees my bloody pants leg.

"I'm not sure if it's bullet ricochet or shrapnel, but it's not bad. I'm fine," I say honestly, trying to smile.

Then, as I take a deep breath and feel the aftermath of the adrenaline rush I just experienced, I assess the enormity of what has happened here. Jennifer and I will forever be linked because of this event, and we'll never forget Agent Lee Warfield. Nor will we forget, sadly, Shawn Holmes.

I'm still looking around and internally reviewing the morning's events when a paramedic approaches from one of the emergency vehicles.

"Sir, let me look at that leg. Can you have a seat over here?" he says as he motions to his vehicle.

I sit down on the bumper while he cuts back my pants leg and examines the wound.

“It looks like a bullet graze. You’ll need some stitches. Let me clean this up a bit before we head back,” he says.

I nod and watch as Jennifer slowly walks over.

“That guy is a piece of work,” she says as she nods toward Holmes.

“He orchestrated this whole thing and came out here to clean it up by himself. That’s pretty ballsy of him. Or mad. Sometimes it’s hard to tell the difference,” she says.

“Yeah, I hope he goes away for good. I can’t help but think about poor Lee being shot back there in cold blood, just for doing his job. I wish I would have trusted him sooner. I’ll never forgive myself for not figuring this out earlier,” I say, shaking my head and staring at the ground.

We sit silently for a moment while my leg is cleaned and bandaged.

“You couldn’t have known, Keith,” she finally says.

“It’s a miracle you caught it when you did. And it was your planning that saved us. You could never have known Lee would go after Holmes like that. If he would’ve stayed in the position where he started, he would probably be alive right now. He just couldn’t do it. He was betrayed and the emotion of that probably got the best of him. You’ve been around enough to know how those emotions work,” Jennifer says earnestly.

“Yeah, I suppose I do.”

“Based on what Holmes was saying back there, it sounds like he and this Filipov character may not be done with you,” she finally says, turning to look at me.

I feel her staring at me, but I continue to look down. She’s right, but I’m not going to acknowledge it here.

“Look, Jennifer, that guy was screaming some nonsense back there. I think it’s best we just forget all of that. He wasn’t making sense there at the end and was just trying to get under our skin,” I say, knowing she won’t believe it.

“Yeah, I noticed he might have gone off the rails in those last few minutes,” she says in obvious reference to the skeletons in her own closet that Holmes disclosed.

I look over at her and give her a knowing smile and nod.

“I think we won’t speak of this again, will we?”

It’s a statement, not a question.

Jennifer smiles and nods in agreement.

“No, we will not,” she says.

There is activity all around as I sit on the back of the emergency vehicle, with Jennifer leaning against the door next to me. Mason and Ed are sitting on rocks next to the picnic area watching us. Then, as though it’s a sign of the battle’s end, there’s a break in the noise and I notice the sound of the river flowing behind all of us.

It’s a stark contrast to the last several minutes, but it’s also a reminder of the enduring peace that makes this place special.

Chapter Sixty

Shawn Holmes and the gurney he's strapped to are loaded into a waiting emergency vehicle. Two officers accompany him as they slowly ascend the dirt road away from us. I'm happy to see him go, as he was the only remaining evil in this river valley.

The mountain landscape between us and the original parking spot by Willow Creek is full of federal, state, and local agents. There's a lot of ground to cover and they'll want to do an especially thorough job, knowing a federal agent lost his life in this battle.

I've answered more questions than I can count, and am feeling the fatigue of what I've been through when I hear a new sound emerge. Looking toward the noise, I notice a small helicopter landing in a clearing on the top of the ridge behind us on our side of the valley. Two people dressed like stereotypical FBI agents hunker down as they scurry away from the slowing propeller.

As the two run toward the ongoing activity around us, Mason runs over to intercept them. There's a brief discussion between the three, then Mason introduces us to the two FBI agents who arrived in the chopper.

"This is the Denver Special Agent in Charge, Bob Riley." She points to the older of the two agents. He shakes hands as Mason introduces Jennifer and me.

"And this is the Denver Assistant Special Agent in Charge, Aziz Khalid. He's the one who found this small chopper to get out here so quickly," she says.

Again, we introduce ourselves and shake hands.

"I'm sorry we couldn't get out here sooner. You two did a great job staying alive. I wish the bureau could have intercepted this before it got this far. Again, I'm sorry," the SAC says with a nod in our direction.

"We'll all probably be doing some Monday morning quarterbacking on this whole situation, SAC Riley. But thank you," I reply.

After a few pleasantries and empty water bottles, we sit on some of the boulders scattered at the top of the ridge. It's then that I take a breath and decide it's time to put some of the missing pieces of this puzzle together.

"So, Mason, I am most interested in what unfolded once we left my house in Woodland Park. I mean, we saw the pictures, but I'd really like to know the details," I ask, realizing her SAC is sitting right there and may not want her to talk.

"I mean, that was my house they were trying to blow up. And they clearly had no issue with you and Winchester being inside," I say, trying to add enough emphasis for the SAC to let Mason talk about it.

SAC Riley nods to Mason, who turns back to me as she replies.

"Yeah, they didn't much care about my life, did they? And yes, they had no intention of leaving your house intact. So, sure I can fill you in. What do you want to know?" she asks.

I take another deep breath before I launch.

"Let's start here: you sent those photos of the C4 around the house. How did you know that was there? Did you see it from the

cameras?” I start with the first picture Jennifer had gotten from Mason.

Mason looks down for a second and back at me.

“Well, I initially got suspicious when those two guys claimed to be from the Pueblo office. I guess they didn’t realize we all work together here in Colorado. Yes, Denver is the biggest office, but we’re not so big that we don’t speak to the other offices. So, I simply sent a message to the SAC Riley asking about it. He confirmed there was no such engagement with Pueblo, so from there I questioned everything they said and did.”

I was shaking my head involuntarily while she continues.

“Then they kept taking smoke breaks while we were supposed to be waiting for the fake courier to arrive. They were taking them together, and I saw them on your security cameras walking around the house without cigarettes or anything. One of them would stand in front of camera and block the view of the other while the explosives were set up. Honestly, it wasn’t very clever. You’ll be glad to know Winnie was suspicious, too. He was running from window to window watching them, clearly sensing something wasn’t right. Finally, I saw them head around to the front, so I went out the kitchen door and saw the wires and C4. They were absolutely going to blow your house to smithereens!” She seems nearly as aghast by the idea as I am.

“That’s crazy. I guess that’s an easy way for Holmes to get rid of any incriminating data. Just blow up the whole place!” I’m still shaking my head as I say it.

“Yeah, I guess. Anyway, I saw them walking down the driveway without even acknowledging I was here. So, I snooped around out there until I found the remote receiver for the detonators and disabled it. It was a simple and crude version, all wired to one cell phone receiver. It wasn’t even as fancy as some of the IEDs we’ve seen.” She glances at Jennifer as she makes that point and moves on.

“Once I disabled it, I went back in the house and watched from the windows and security cameras. They stayed in the driveway for the rest of the time. When I saw the black Ford Explorer pull up, I thought they’d continue the charade, but they didn’t. They simply got

in and took off. Honestly, if they would have pretended to arrest the guy and I didn't see the C4, this whole thing would have gone in an entirely different direction."

She pauses and we all consider that thought for a moment. That moment lasts long enough for me to ask my next question.

"And how did Ed get into this picture?" I nod toward Ed, who has been sitting silently beside us while Mason fills us in.

Ed picks up this piece of the story.

"Well, I was coming home from getting an early breakfast at Grandmother's when I saw the black Explorer take off in front of your house. It was odd to see that, but even more odd when I saw Agent Mason here walking out of the house looking after the Explorer. I stopped to see what was going on and she let me know you guys might be in danger out at Willow Creek. As you know, there are plenty of four-by-four trails on both sides of the creek, so we took the east route to come in opposite the main road. It took a little longer to come in from that side, but it turned out to be the right decision."

Ed pauses while I continue my barrage of questions.

"Yeah, I'd certainly say it was the right decision for Jennifer and me!"

I look her way as we both nod.

"I didn't hear you drive up. How'd you keep that Bronco so quiet?" I ask before I consider the obvious answer.

"That's the thing about these ridges and valleys. If you come up on the other side of the ridge like we did, you don't really hear anything until the vehicle is right at the top. That's especially true if you're in the middle of a gun battle like you guys were. I simply stopped the Bronco before we got near the top. Then Mason grabbed one of my hunting rifles out of the back and hiked to the crest of the ridge," he answers.

"Well, Ed, your timing couldn't have been better! And I know I tell you I'm a Toyota guy, but today I'm glad you have that Ford Bronco ready to roll, my man!"

Ed nods while I continue with my questions.

"And Mason, that was quite a shot. And only one shot at that?" It's a statement and a question at the same time.

This time, Jennifer jumps in.

“Mason won’t tell you this, but she’s got the accuracy and temperament of a military sniper. She even filled in as the sniper for our outpost for a while,” Jennifer says, while smiling and nodding at Mason.

I raise my eyebrows at that one.

“Impressive. And thank you,” I say with a nod toward Mason.

Mason nods solemnly and responds.

“Look, I’d be lying if I said I was trying to shoot him in the leg, so it wasn’t that great of a shot,” she says humbly.

“From that far, I’d say it was not only good but closer to miraculous!” I exclaim.

Mason only smiles slightly at my compliment before she continues.

“But you have to give some credit to Ed. Not only was he a master of the trails getting up here. He also keeps a spotless rifle with a dead-on zero. All I had to do was point and shoot.” She nods Ed’s direction.

This time it’s Jennifer’s turn to jump into the question-and-answer session.

“And you got right into the Bronco immediately? How’d you get the SAC involved?” She nods at SAC Riley as she asks the question.

“Well, he was basically one hundred percent engaged from the moment I asked about the Pueblo office. He called your SAC in Detroit, which turned out to be eye opening. She told him she had found that her ASAC had single-handedly orchestrated this whole thing. Apparently, he was falsifying data on multiple cases, was sharing key information with the Russians, and had sent you guys out here to meet your untimely demise,” she says as she pauses.

We all shake our heads before Mason moves on.

“Then she said he completely disappeared over the weekend. That’s probably when he decided to take this whole thing down himself. After she told SAC Riley all that, he got ASAC Khalid involved, and the ASAC got wheels moving to get people out here. In fact, that’s probably them.”

Mason motions behind her as we all hear the motors of more vehicles pulling into the picnic area. I look behind me to see federal

vehicles now arriving to join the growing crowd.

My questions for Mason will have to end there, for now.

Chapter Sixty-One

Non-stop interviews consume the next hour for the four of us. Ed has the shortest interview time and wanders to his Bronco while Jennifer, Mason and I continue answering questions. We all expect this type of grilling, so we do the best we can to cooperate as the noon hour rolls around.

Meanwhile, crime scene experts from a variety of agencies are completely scouring both sides of the valley from the river all the way up to our life-saving, fly-fishing still life. Once again, the peace of Willow Creek is under siege, although this time it's interrupted by people with forensic tools, not by gunfire.

While we are all answering questions, I glance over at Jennifer while she is being interviewed. I still have a deep feeling of guilt for getting her involved in this.

Ok, so I didn't know I was putting her in danger. And yes, she jumped in with both feet. But I would never have forgiven myself if

something had happened to her.

But wow, did she ever know what she was doing! She is quite a woman. I wonder if Beth would have liked her?

I have to shake myself again, hoping I wasn't sitting there smiling like I sometimes do. How inappropriate would that be! Sometimes my brain baffles me.

"Ok, you guys are free to go," SAC Riley says as he walks up to me and nods toward Jennifer. I stand and dust off my bloody and cut pants, becoming more aware of the bandaged cut on my leg as the adrenaline wears off.

"Agent Mason will need to stay with us. We'll be by later to complete our investigation and tie up any loose ends from this episode. But for now, you and Ms. Ellis are free to go. We need to keep your bags and weapons. We'll get them back to you after the forensics are collected."

Jennifer hears the discussion from a few feet away, where she's sitting on a boulder, and gets up. We both take deep breaths and look at each other. For once, I am not sure what to say. I've apologized too many times already, so that doesn't seem appropriate.

Luckily, I don't have to say anything as SAC Riley continues.

"I think you've spent enough time out here today. It appears you have bagged three undocumented aliens, likely from a Russian gang, given their tattoos. We're analyzing faces, dental records, and fingerprints, but we may never know their true identities. Whoever they were, it's clear they were not pillars of the community. Given the rest of your story here, we believe we finally have enough to arrest Sanderson. The BradComm CIO, Dwayne Tolliver, is already in custody. I suspect we'll get what we want out of him once he hears what has happened out here to Shawn Holmes and his thugs. It's no real consolation, but then, at least Agent Warfield's investigation can be successfully completed."

It's good to hear SAC Riley feeling confident about what the FBI has learned. It's a terrible shame Lee had to die thinking the case was lost.

"What about Sanderson's involvement with Mike Schwartz and Dave Hawkins? Was he really in Detroit like Holmes had told Lee?" I

ask.

“What?” SAC Riley looks confused, as I had feared.

“Holmes apparently told Agent Warfield that Sanderson was behind the Mike Schwartz and Dave Hawkins murders. He also said Sanderson was found with evidence somewhere in Detroit, and that he had shot himself,” I answer.

“That’s a creative story, but no, it’s not true at all. We have eyes on Sanderson this morning. If he has any idea what’s going on out here, he’s not showing it. In fact, we’re using all the evidence Lee had packaged together to get him into custody today. Shawn had been intercepting it, but we have Lee’s original emails from our system archives. This time, we’re assembling the real evidence. It’s happening while we speak,” SAC Riley says.

I nod, then shake my head again.

“Anyway, I’m sure you’re tired after going through what you did. Mr. Sutter is waiting over there and is ready to go, too,” SAC Riley says after a few seconds.

He waves to the back of the clearing by the picnic area where Ed is waiting with his Bronco.

After a deep sigh and look around at the ongoing activity oddly mixed with the peace of the valley, I turn toward Jennifer, who is surprisingly smiling at me.

“That could have been much worse. Great job taking charge back there,” she says.

I nod and look at the ground for a moment, then look back at her.

“Jennifer, I have to tell you, you were phenomenal. I had no idea of your background. And to think, a mere four days ago, we were just software people.”

I let out a light, solemn chuckle at the thought before I continue.

“By the way, I’m sorry I had to shoot back there before your target had gotten as close as we wanted. I left you hanging with that move. I’m sorry about that.”

Jennifer shakes her head and responds.

“No, you did what you had to do. And I also know what you did for me back there. You were sacrificing your position so he’d quit firing on mine. Then, to top it off, you lunged at Holmes when you thought he was going to shoot me. You were going to save my life

again. You need to quit apologizing for stuff. I should be thanking you, not accepting your apology,” she says.

I look up and see the sincere gratitude in her eyes.

“It’s what we’re trained to do. You know that.” I smile as much as I can.

“Yeah, I guess it is.” She smiles too, as thoughtful and reverent as the moment dictates.

“I didn’t ask you yesterday, but I’m curious. Why hadn’t you told me you were a battle tested veteran?” I ask a question she could just as easily ask me.

“Well, I decided long ago not to lead with that. I find people treat me differently when the first thing they know about me is my military background,” she replies.

I can’t help but smile as I hear my own feelings echoed back to me by Jennifer. Maybe it’s the comfort of knowing someone else feels the same way. I give her an understanding nod. Nothing more needs to be said about that right now.

“And why do you still do software consulting?” she asks, with an apparent reference to what she had learned of my personal finances. This one will require a careful answer, as I can’t reveal my relationship with The Association.

“I guess it’s the same reason. I don’t want people to know me another way. At least not at first. As you said, I don’t want to lead with that,” I say, looking at the ground.

She returns the same understanding nod I had given her a moment ago.

Again, I turn and look at the creek and surrounding area, and shake my head. Every time I think of what went on, I find myself shaking my head again and again. In fact, I’m still doing it when we walk over to where Ed is waiting.

“You guys doing ok? I’m so sorry you had to go through this today,” he says as he opens the door to his Bronco.

“Ed, I can’t thank you enough for stepping in and dragging the FBI up here. I’m pretty sure we would not be alive right now if you hadn’t done that!” I stop and nod sincerely at Ed as I say it.

Ed returns my nod with the same level of sincerity.

“I feel terrible for you guys, Keith. Agent Mason shared some of the story on the way here. It’s absolutely crazy how you guys have been sucked into this! This is like something you see on television, not in your own neighborhood,” he says.

Ed is right. This whole thing still feels surreal.

Jennifer insists I ride in the front passenger seat of Ed’s Bronco, and she hops in the back seat by herself. At some point we may discuss what we’ve learned about each other from the disgusting interaction with Shawn Holmes, but that’s a task for later. Right now, I’m thrilled to be heading back to my house.

I look back at Jennifer, who is buckling herself in.

“You ready back there?”

“Yep, all good.” She smiles as she adjusts her belt.

I smile back, careful not to let my gaze linger before buckling my seatbelt for the ride home.

Ed fires up the Bronco and heads down the same trail that led them to our rescue. And just like that, we’re on our way home from the deadly morning at Willow Creek.

As soon as we get mobile phone reception, I send Paul a batch of text messages with updates from our morning at Willow Creek. It takes half the trip home as typing on my phone is difficult with Ed’s driving.

Within seconds of sending my last update, I get his response.

Awesome, Keith! As always, you’ve made your country proud! Again, sorry for the danger there at the end. Mike’s murder sent this down a crazy path. It shocked all of us. Take some time to recover from this one. Your wallet will be a little fatter tomorrow.

The wallet he’s referring to is my Bitcoin wallet, which swells after every assignment. It’s not why I do this, but it certainly doesn’t hurt. At the end of each assignment, I always find myself wondering how The Association knows where to send me and why. Clearly, there is at least one associate somewhere who has deep insight into some high-level political activity.

Despite how Paul responded, I’m confident The Association knew the magnitude of this case before they even asked me to get

involved.

Chapter Sixty-Two

It's Saturday afternoon, and the Morgan crew is in the house getting ready to head over to Ed's for his Halloween party. We've already gotten through a morning hockey game and violin lessons, and I, for one, am ready for some relaxation.

Jamie is the first one to pop into the living room where I'm waiting.

"That was a great win, Jamie," I say for the third or fourth time since we left the rink this morning.

"You guys play like that and you'll be league champs for sure. And it looks like you're having more fun out there this year?" It's a statement but also a question, trying to get her to talk.

"Yep. It's fun. This year is fun." It's all I get, but it answers the question.

"That was sweet how you plowed that guy over in front of the net," Kyle adds as he walks in, always helpful to add his opinions.

“Yeah, he was mouthing off the entire game. I think that’s why I didn’t get a penalty, the ref heard him. What a moron.”

Now she’s smiling broadly. Maybe Kyle does know how to get her talking.

“You guys ready to go?” I ask, standing up.

“Yep.” It’s the only word I get from Kyle, along with a nod from Jamie, as they both stand up.

The Morgan crew heads out, closing the door behind us. I bring up the new home security application on my phone and activate it. It’s upgraded from the Best Buy version I had before, and is the primary change I’ve made since the FBI was here.

My phone vibrates as I walk down the driveway with a new text message from Paul.

How you recovering?

Great, thanks.

Good to hear. Out of curiosity, how do you like Nashville?

I love it!

Also good to hear. We’ll keep in touch. Be well!

Will do, thanks.

As I respond, I realize I probably just got the location of my next assignment. I smile as I put my phone back in my pocket. Thoughts about the next assignment can wait. Today it’s party time at Ed’s.

As we get close to Ed’s house, Jamie spots the street hockey game in Ed’s driveway and trots over to join in.

“Catch you later, dad. Let me know when dinner is ready,” she yells as she leaves me and Kyle to walk into the house without her.

We head up the stairs and open the door, and see Ed at the bar across the open living and dining room on his main floor. He sees us too and heads over to greet us.

“Keith, my man, how you doin’ buddy?” he bellows as he squeezes me with one arm, carefully nestling a scotch in the other hand.

“We’re great, Ed, thanks,” I say with a smile.

“How’s that leg?” he asks, trying to be quiet, but failing.

“Really, we’re doing great,” I repeat, in response to his question and raised eyebrows.

“Great! Make yourselves at home. Kyle, I think the boys are downstairs waiting for you to show them some gaming tips,” he says as he lets go of me and nods at Kyle.

Kyle heads off to offer those tips, a task he enjoys doing for the older guys at the party.

“Have a drink, Keith. The bar’s loaded,” he says to me and points to the bar.

Ed heads off to greet the next guest while I casually stroll over to his well-stocked bar. Thankfully, I don’t have to do my own mixing, as he has hired a bartender for the party this year. I’ve said it many times. This guy knows how to throw a party!

“Can you make an Old-Fashioned?” I ask as the bartender requests my order.

“Absolutely! What do you want in it?” he asks.

“Makers Mark, please,” I respond with a smile.

The day is looking up.

I’m still standing there smiling as a familiar and unsettling aroma engulfs me. Before I turn around, I recognize what it is. Oh no, it’s Dawn Kramer, and I didn’t see her coming in time to escape. I have to make a quick decision to either stay and wait for my drink or abandon it and avoid the conversation with Dawn.

I turn away from the smell to run, but it’s too late.

“Keith Morgan, how are things, buddy?” she says as she launches into a floral and fuzzy hug.

“Good, Dawn, good. How are you?” I ask politely.

She is even more in her element here than at the hockey rink. Her party wardrobe is a little more formal, but similarly striking. At least here she isn’t walking on an aluminum floor.

I accidentally smile at my internal joke, realizing it too late. How could I make such a rookie mistake?

“Lovely, thank you. It’s great to see you. What are you drinking?” she asks as she sidles up next to me, facing the bartender.

“Uh, an Old-Fashioned,” I answer as I turn around to see the status of my drink.

“Bartender, a chardonnay please,” she yells as he puts the orange peel on the rim of my drink.

“Yes, ma’am,” the bartender replies.

“So, Keith, where are you staying at that Breckenridge tournament?” Dawn asks.

The team parents know I often stay at different hotels than the rest of the team. I tell them it’s because I want to use hotel points from my travels, but it’s really to avoid awkward conversations exactly like this one. Some parents are awesome and I love being around them. But there are a few...

“Well...” I begin, grabbing my drink from the bar and trying to buy time.

“I’m sorry. Can I borrow this guy for a moment? I need to introduce him to someone.” Another familiar voice emerges from behind me as someone grabs my elbow.

I turn around to come face to face with Jennifer, smiling ear to ear. She ushers me across the room as I wave at Dawn, holding my elbow in one hand and a glass of something that resembles my old-fashioned in the other hand.

“My God, Keith, that was painful to watch. That woman was going to eat you alive,” she says as we walk toward the back deck.

“I think I was holding my own, Jennifer,” I say as she giggles and shakes her head.

“But thank you,” I add, as I concede she was probably right.

“And you can call me Jen now. I think you’ve earned it. Especially since it’s what everyone has called me since childhood,” she says as she smiles and looks over at me.

“Is that spelled with one ‘n’ or two?” I ask to satisfy a curiosity from our messaging interaction the other day.

“Uh, one,” she responds with a questioning look.

“Ok, just making sure,” I say as we sit down in the chairs around the fire pit in Ed’s glorious back yard.

“So, the kids have any idea what happened?” she asks after we’re out of earshot of anyone else.

“Nope. They don’t know what happened at Willow Creek, just like Afghanistan and Iraq. If I can help it at all, they will never know. If they ask, I won’t lie, but for now I also won’t volunteer anything. I

want Willow Creek to be a peaceful, happy place for them,” I reply with a smile.

“Oh, I get that. I really do,” she says.

We’re sitting there silently when Ed appears walking out of the house with his arm around a woman. That’s no surprise, I suppose, but the identity of the woman makes my chin fall.

“Is he with Mason?” I can’t help but blurt out.

“Yeah. Apparently, he’s quite smitten.” Jennifer smiles as she responds.

After a brief pause, she continues with a more solemn smile.

“You know, you should probably get right back out there to Willow Creek. Take the kids. Make it a positive experience. You know, sort of like falling off a bike and getting back on. It should certainly be a happy place for your kids, but it should also be a happy place for you.” I feel her looking at me, but I sit with my head down and don’t look over.

She’s right, and I know it. If nothing else, I need to make it a happy place again to celebrate Agent Lee Warfield.

“Yeah, I know,” I eventually say.

Then I hold up my glass abruptly.

“To Lee Warfield,” I say without explanation.

It turns out I don’t need to explain. Her face tells me she understands.

“To Lee Warfield,” she replies as our glasses touch.

We take a drink and sit still for a few minutes.

I realize I’m getting way too serious for a Halloween party, so I shake myself into a smile before I turn around.

“So, how’s the data business going, Jen, with one ‘n’?” I ask as I turn around and face her smile.

“Well, I don’t think any foreign governments have used our software to manipulate any elections this week,” she answers with a smile of her own and holds up her glass.

“And cheers to that!” I say as our glasses clink again.

So, Jennifer Ellis is a data engineer, a computer hardware technician, a military veteran, a marksman, a fly-fishing expert, and now a counselor too. I look over at Jen and realize I have been

grinning from ear to ear while absorbed in my own thoughts about her again. And this time I don't care.

Sometimes my mind wanders, and it makes me smile.

THE END

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