

The background of the cover is a night scene. In the foreground, there is a vast vineyard with rows of grapevines stretching towards the horizon. In the middle ground, a large, multi-story estate house with a red roof sits atop a hill, surrounded by trees and a driveway. The sky is dark blue with a full moon in the upper right corner and numerous stars scattered across it.

MURDER IN THE MOONLIGHT

A.J. RIVERS

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CHAPTER ONE

The shot hit Ava dead center of her torso just between her breasts. The impact was massive, like a sledgehammer driving her backward, off her feet. She was flying through the air toward the screaming girl to her back. The air was sucked out of her lungs and her hair closed around her face like a curtain.

“Ava!” shouted someone. It may have been Metford. It may have been Santos. She was too shell-shocked to tell.

Theo pulled the trigger again, but it went wide as he jerked to the side and a volley of shots rang out from the others. Blood sprayed out wildly from the severe impact and he crumpled immediately.

Even before her impact with the unforgiving macadam, Ava had the clear, unadulterated thought that this wasn't the worst outcome possible to this situation, but it was pretty damn close.

Her hip hit the asphalt and then her shoulder blade and back slammed into it. The impact unlocked her lungs and she gasped. She was looking up at the nineteen-year-old Addison North. The girl's eyes were wide between her splayed fingers and her scream

was that of a keening mourner, high and piercing to the ears and the heart.

Every inhalation hurt. Ava was almost certain she had a broken rib from the close range of the gunshot. She struggled to sit up and loosen the vest as she gasped for little sips of air. Metford and Santos hovered over Theo, and Ashton kicked away the young man's gun. He wasn't a threat any longer. He coughed, sputtering out dark blood as he stared up at the unblemished blue sky. There was a hole high in his side and another near his collarbone that Ava could see from her skewed vantage point, and she knew there were more.

Ava wanted to cry. She wanted to do a lot of things, but the pain from the center of her chest was too great.

Addison ran in place as the pure panic took hold and her brain screamed for her to do something but didn't give clear signals as to what that something should be. She continued to scream and cover her face as her legs pumped uselessly at the air and she turned in a circle.

Dane rushed to Ava's side and squatted. "Ava, are you okay?" She quickly pulled the vest away and checked Ava's torso for damage.

"Think I'll live," Ava managed.

"Already bruising. Paramedics are on the way. Stay down until they get here." She helped her lie on her side using the vest to rest her head on.

Ava pointed to Addison. "Help her."

Dane nodded and stepped over to her. Ashton followed almost immediately. They turned the girl away from her gunned-down boyfriend who had also kidnapped her four days prior and who had just pointed a gun at her and pulled the trigger. The poor girl probably didn't know which way was up, let alone what was going on.

Theo was originally from France. He had moved to the US to attend college. That's how he and Addison had met. He was older, so they'd kept their relationship a secret from her parents. All they had known was that when Theo graduated and was getting ready to

return to France, Addison had broken things off with him, and he had kidnapped her. They had no other answers.

And now, they might never have all the answers. Theo wasn't coughing anymore. He was still. Ava closed her eyes and waited for the pain to subside or engulf her completely. It was the first time she had been put down and had to remain down while the scene was still active around her. She couldn't think of a worse thing to endure.

"Damn, you jumped right in front of that bullet," Metford said in a less than appreciative tone as he kneeled beside her.

"Had to. She was too scared to move."

"That was dangerous. What if he'd been aiming just a few inches higher?"

"I'd have a bad case of laryngitis instead of a possibly broken rib?" She didn't smile. She didn't feel funny.

He shook his head. "Tough situation. And your joke isn't funny."

"Shouldn't have ended like this," Santos said from Ava's other side. She dropped her sunglasses back to her face and turned her back to the scene. "They're both so young."

Ava struggled to sit again. Metford put a hand under her neck and head. "Don't sit up. Just be still. Jesus, you already did one crazy thing for today, isn't there like a limit or something?"

Ava continued to struggle up, knowing she shouldn't. She just couldn't lie there any longer. "If there's a limit, I haven't reached it yet. Just help me, will you?"

Santos turned, squatted, and grabbed Ava's other hand and elbow. "I got this. Let go, Mettie-boy." She hauled Ava to her feet in one smooth motion.

The pain was momentarily intense and then she took a breath and it subsided. "Thank you," Ava told Santos as she let go of her hand.

Santos gripped her shoulder. "No problem. But he was right. You should've stayed down."

"I got bigger problems than worrying about bruised ribs right now." Ava nodded toward Theo Allard and her gut rolled.

Theo's wide brown eyes stared up at the sky. Emotionless. Lifeless. Three ragged, bloody holes stared up at her from his chest.

Accusing her of failure. Accusing her of incompetence.

Bracing her nerves, Ava moved closer. She hadn't failed Theo. She hadn't acted incompetently.

Had she?

The twenty-three-year-old man lying dead on the concrete who would never put his brand new, shiny college degree to any use, never have children, never affect anyone else's life, never grow old seemed to think so.

He had traveled to the US from France five years prior to attend college. Nothing more. The kid had only wanted to better himself and see what life was like in the United States of America. Theo Allard had done exactly that, graduating with honors in behavioral biology from Johns Hopkins University.

"That was no small feat," Ava said in a low voice as she looked into Theo's unblinking eyes.

"What?" Metford asked from behind her.

Ava startled, not realizing he was there until he spoke. She nodded at Theo. "He graduated with honors from Johns Hopkins."

"Biology, right?"

"Behavioral biology," she clarified. "He had to be super smart just to get into that program. All for what?" She closed her eyes and turned away, ashamed.

"Hey, don't blame yourself for this."

Opening her eyes, she pulled her shoulders up into a semblance of a shrug. "I don't know. If I hadn't jumped in front of that bullet..."

Metford stepped directly in front of her and then pointed toward Addison North being surrounded by Ashton, Dane, and Santos. "She'd be the one lying on the concrete. An innocent girl who did nothing wrong except get mixed up with the wrong guy. He was older, foreign, worldly, mysterious, good-looking; it was a recipe for some excitement. Were you there when the very first bad decision was made between these two?"

"No, of course not. Just drop it. I know I didn't *literally* cause this. It just sucks. They're both too young to be in this situation." She pressed her hand gently to the center of her chest putting counterpressure on the throbbing pain there.

“He’s only three years younger than you.” Metford cocked an eyebrow and turned toward the ocean. “Can’t save everybody, Ava. I know that sucks, but it’s the cold hard facts of life. We do what we can to the best of our ability. You can’t let the after-effects drag you down either. We have other people to help. There’s a line of cases always waiting for us, you know that.”

“Can you not be my therapist right now?”

“And just let you wallow in your guilt?”

“Works for me.”

“If you insist.” He followed her to the beginning of the scene again, away from Theo and Addison. “Backup is on-scene.” He pointed to the other vehicles rolling to a stop a short distance away.

“Sirens gave it away. I’m not oblivious, Metford. I’m fine. Seriously. Let’s just work.” But she wasn’t completely okay. Theo and Addison weren’t gun runners or part of an international human trafficking ring. They weren’t hardened criminals. They were just two regular young adults trying to figure out life and forge their paths through it.

“Okay, they broke up two weeks ago?” he asked.

“Yes. He slapped her at a party and gave her a black eye. She broke off the relationship and told him she didn’t want to go back to France with him after she graduated anymore.”

Metford nodded. “Seems like she had a solid reason for that. He was lucky she didn’t press charges.”

“Maybe he’d still be alive if she had.”

“She’s young and didn’t know what to do except get away from him.”

“She was pissed about the slap, too. They argued. You know they did,” Ava went on. “They both said stuff they didn’t wholly mean, and she went home.”

“Did he return to his place, or did he stay at the party?”

She thought about it. “I don’t know. Wasn’t in the report.”

“You know we have to talk to her. We don’t even know what he was planning when he snatched her. Where did he take her? Did he harm her? We have no idea what all happened that led up to this moment.”

Ava looked over her shoulder at Addison, who was still standing with her back to the scene. She was some forty feet away and looked even smaller for the distance than she had up close. It was hard to think that she could have been kidnapped and gone through things that no one should ever have to go through.

Like Molly and the other women, the dark voice in her mind vomited forth.

Addison wasn't being kidnapped by a stranger and sold into sex slavery. Theo had been her boyfriend for almost two years. He wasn't the dangerous sort, either. Enrolled in one of the most prestigious universities in the state. Who would have pegged Theo as any sort of threat? He had excellent grades and attendance. He was a full-time student who worked hard and seemed to be making great choices in his life.

And then something snapped in his mind.

Ava pressed fingers to her forehead and willed that dark little voice, that grim reminder of the horrors of the human condition to shut up for a while. Ever since Molly came home, it seemed that voice surfaced more often than ever and at the worst times possible.

"Come on. Let's get you checked out and get this shitshow on the road to being over and done."

"Sure," Ava muttered, walking slowly toward the paramedics.

After a quick assessment of Theo, he was pronounced dead on the scene. The forensic team started their work even while Addison was being examined in the back of an ambulance. Ava had to force herself to focus on her own examination and the questions launched at her in rapid-fire succession by the paramedics, Sal, and the team leaders entering the scene.

A miserable three hours later, Ava and the team stood together back at the office going over the files and reports for the case. They could see into the interview room where the reunited family sat together.

Addison sat in the interview room with a blank expression on her face. Her mother sat to her right, crying into her hands. Her father sat on her left, at the end of the table, looking on the verge of an angry outburst and simultaneous tears.

Ava couldn't stop looking at them.

"What's up? You alright?" Santos asked. She looked from Ava to the family and back to Ava.

"Yeah. I'm fine."

"Bet your chest is hurting like a mother, huh?"

"You would definitely win that bet."

"Broken ribs?"

Ava shook her head. "Just severely bruised."

"And she knows that because she followed the advice of the paramedics and went and had the x-rays done at the hospital," Metford said, shoving his hands into his pockets and rocking back on his heels.

"Oh," Santos said, shocked. "When did you do that?"

Ava glared at Metford.

"Maybe she did that on the drive back to the office. The emergency room probably put a rush on the imaging and reading because they knew she had to be here."

Santos looked confused and shook her head. "You didn't have time to get x-rays done. There's no—"

"No, there's no way I did that because I didn't. Jeez, drop it already, would you, Metford? I'm fine. They're bruised, not broken. I would know if they were."

Sal walked by and paused long enough to say, "Because she went to college and got a medical degree, too." Her mouth lifted in a one-sided smile before she continued toward the interview room.

"I didn't know you had a medical degree," Ashton said, joining the conversation without tearing his eyes from the tablet in his hands as he too walked toward the interview room. "Don't know why you chose this career over being a doctor." He disappeared around a corner.

Metford, Santos, and Dane laughed lightly.

"That's it. Yuk it up. Have a laugh on me," Ava groaned as she closed her file and headed toward the hallway. "Doesn't change a thing, though."

As she opened the door and made eye contact with Addison, all the humor drained from the little impromptu situation, and she was

humbled by the grief and trauma in the teen's eyes.

She had to do what she could for the girl and move on. Metford was right. As hard and cold as that seemed, she had done her job to the best of her ability, and she had even put herself in harm's way to save Addison's life. It was time to close the case, erase it from their board, and start helping the next person.



CHAPTER TWO

Ava smiled as her mother walked around the table holding the huge ham they had picked out together at the Midline Market earlier.

“What are you smiling at?”

“That ham is almost as big as you,” Ava teased. It was her way of dealing with the fact that her mother had returned home much smaller than she had been the previous year. It was a daily reminder of what her mother had gone through while she was out there in hiding, tailing the human trafficking ring all over the world for over a year. If she didn’t smile, if she didn’t tease, she would cry.

She chuckled. “I’m pretty sure I’ve picked up a Volkswagen that weighed less.”

Ava took the ham and hefted it onto the counter. “The tag said fourteen pounds. I just wanted to be sure there was enough for everybody.”

“Ten pounds of potatoes, fourteen pounds of ham, a dozen burgers, and a dozen brats for the grill, over a gallon of pasta salad, half a gallon of sweet peas, and twenty ears of corn,” Elizabeth said through tight snickers. She motioned to the table. “And just look at

that. The Mount Everest of bread right in the middle of my kitchen table.” She shook her head but looked delighted. “Honey, I think there’s going to be enough to invite the entire neighborhood, your coworkers, your father’s coworkers, my coworkers, and still have enough leftover for the next day.”

Heat rushed to Ava’s face. “Overkill?”

Hank grunted as he toted in a box laden with more of the haul from the market. “Whatever could you be referring to, Aviva?” Gently, he set the box on the edge of the table and sighed. “All this food?” He pulled a deep, comic frown and shook his head. “No, no. It’s not overkill.” He turned and kissed Elizabeth on the forehead. “Better get to cooking, though.”

“Dad, the dinner isn’t until Saturday. You know that.”

Elizabeth laughed and slapped his chest playfully. “Stop it, Hank.”

He grinned at Ava. “Then you should have started cooking yesterday if you planned on having it done by Saturday.”

They all laughed and then Hank hugged his girls. “I have a meeting. I’ll be back in time to go catch a movie and grab dinner, though.” He turned to Ava. “You’re still going to be here, right?”

“As far as I have planned, yes. Unless something—”

“Comes up at work. Yes, yes... I have come to realize that the old saying about the fruit not falling far from the tree is so true.” He smiled and then turned to Elizabeth.

“I’m not taking the blame alone for making her a workaholic,” she said.

Ava rolled her eyes. “Alright, stop. I’m not a workaholic.”

Her parents feigned expressions of outright shock. Or maybe they weren’t fake expressions. She couldn’t tell.

“You’re both equally to blame,” Ava said. “Now, you get to your meeting before you’re late. Mom and I are going to the park and to a new place for lunch and ice cream. But we’ll be back before you get home.”

“You two be careful. Love you both.” He left the house whistling happily.

Ava was glad to hear that whistling. It had been far too long since her father had been happy. The bounce in his step had returned, his shoulders were once again straight and level, his stride long and confident, and his eyes clear and piercing. All the things that had rapidly deteriorated during her mother's absence.

"Shall we leave most of the items in the box and just set it in the pantry so it'll be simple to get to when we do start cooking?"

Ava turned her attention back to the food haul spread over the kitchen. "I think that might be a good idea. I'll take care of it. You need to sit down and rest for a while. We've been at it a while."

"I'm not that fragile, Aviva. I'm in perfect health."

Ava stared at her mom for a moment. She didn't want to argue with her. Didn't want to dispute what the doctors had told her, either, but she also knew the mental toll had been far greater than anyone had been willing to talk about. There had been nearly zero discussion about her mother's mental situation since returning.

"Don't look at me like that, young lady. If I say I'm fine then I'm fine. I'm not even tired." She grabbed a few cans of vegetables from the table and breezed past Ava and into the pantry.

"I know you're not tired. You don't even look winded."

Elizabeth swooshed past her again and grabbed a few bags of buns, turned, and went back to the pantry. "That's because I'm not. All that fatigue I was dealing with a couple of years ago has just disappeared. I don't know exactly what happened, but I'm kind of glad it's gone. I've been able to get so much more done. And let me tell you..." she said, chuckling conspiratorially as she came back for more bags of bread. "Your poor father, God love him, he is no housekeeper. I had my work cut out for me when I got back here. Really, do men ever think to move the trashcan and sweep or mop *behind* it? Sheesh," she exclaimed from the pantry.

Ava picked up the ham and carried it to the fridge. After scooting a few items around on the bottom shelf, she was able to push the ham in, but the door wouldn't shut. "Houston, we have a problem," she called.

Elizabeth looked at the situation and laughed. "Well. We find ourselves in a conundrum. Will it fit in your fridge?"

Ava cocked an eyebrow and shook her head. “Barely ten cubic feet.”

“Mm. How do you... Never mind.” She put her hands on her hips and drummed her fingertips. “We could take it back and exchange it for two smaller ones.”

“I don’t think they do exchanges for food, Mom.”

“You’re right, of course. Don’t know what I was thinking.”

Ava didn’t either, but she hoped her mother had been making a joke.

“I know. We can go pick up another fridge. A small one for the garage. Hank has been on about getting one forever. Now’s the chance. What do you say? We can pick it out, pay, give them the address, and they’ll deliver it today.”

“Don’t you have to let them sit plugged in for like twenty-four hours before using them?”

Elizabeth scoffed and flapped a hand. “Nonsense. That doesn’t matter. Come on. Let’s make a quick run to the Home Depot before we go to the park.”

“What about the ham? We can’t just leave it like that.”

“I have an insulated grocery bag. We’ll put ice in it and put it in the sink. That should keep it just fine until the fridge gets here.”

They made all the preparations and then headed to Ava’s car. Before they got inside, Ava stopped with the keys in her hand. “Mom, I don’t think this is a really good idea. I mean, Dad’s not even here to discuss this. Maybe we should just ask Molly if we could put the ham in her mom’s fridge until the weekend. That would make more sense, right?”

Elizabeth blinked at her from across the hood of the car. She looked like a deer caught in headlights. It wasn’t a look Ava was accustomed to seeing on her mother’s face.

“I don’t think we should bother them with that. They’ve been through so much already. Let them rest.”

“Yeah, but we’re not asking them to cook it, just to let it sit in their fridge.”

“Your dad’s been talking about the fridge for the garage anyway.”

“But this...” Ava was at a loss. She couldn’t justify buying a fridge to hold a ham. “Mom, let’s just go to the park and grab lunch. I’ll text Molly about the ham and we can take it over later if they have room for it.”

Elizabeth didn’t look overly enthusiastic, but she got in the car without argument.

After a walk in the park and enjoying the calm quietude of the pond, her mother seemed less restless, less hectic in thought and action.

Ava took out her phone to call Molly about the ham. Sal’s name and number popped up on the screen before she could open the phone app.

“I have to take this. It’s Sal for work.” Ava’s heart leaped into her throat. It wasn’t a good time to be called into work, but what could she do if that was the case? She needed to sort out what was going on with her mother. There were still plans to finalize with the weekend dinner.

“James,” she said as she tried to withhold the apprehension from her voice.

“Ava, we’ve got a major situation. We need you up in the office. The team is leaving for California in less than two hours.”

“California? Are you serious?” The incredulous tone was there before she could stop it. What was in California for an East Coast team of agents?

“Yes, California, and yes, I’m serious. Get here as soon as you can. Julian Garcia called for help, and we’re going to help him. You’ll be working side-by-side with his team lead, Jason Ellis. And don’t worry. Jason’s job is practically a mirror of yours just like Julian’s is a mirror of mine. You’ll be investigating the murder of the last Croatian princess in Napa Valley. I’ll give you the files when you get here.”

There was no argument, no further discussion. That was that.

Ava pulled the phone from her ear. California. Last Croatian princess. Murder. Right in the middle of her own dilemma with her mother, she had to pull up stakes and go investigate a murder on the opposite side of the country.

“Is everything alright?” Elizabeth asked as she walked closer.

“Yes, but I’m going to have to go. I’m sorry, Mom. I wanted to have lunch with you today.”

“It’s okay. I understand.”

“We need to go. I need to run by the house and get my things. We’re leaving for California in less than two hours.” Ava felt like a heel.

“California is great,” Elizabeth said, her eyes bright and her smile instant. “So warm, and there’s so much going on out there all the time. It’s the sunshine, I’m sure of it. It never really gets cold, and…”

She continued to theorize why Californians were so energetic as Ava drove them back to the house.

“You go. I’ll take care of the ham.”

“I won’t be back in time for the weekend get-together, so don’t bother with any of those plans. You and Dad just go ahead and use up the food for that however you see fit, but don’t let any of it go to waste. We’ll plan another dinner when I get back.” Ava hugged and kissed her mother before leaving.

She pulled into the lot of the office building a little over an hour later. She couldn’t deny that she was highly disappointed to postpone the big party, but she also couldn’t deny that she was pretty excited to go to San Francisco and work with a West Coast team of agents and see how they did things, how they worked together, what kind of dynamic they had.

And of course, it would all be happening between San Francisco and Napa Valley. Sun, sand, music, food, wine country, and ocean views. At least the setting would be stellar.



CHAPTER THREE

Two agents waited for Ava and the team as they stepped off the plane in San Francisco. They looked like something straight out of a movie, complete with matching dark glasses.

“Wow, even the FBI agents out here have tans,” Metford remarked as he stepped beside Ava.

“Please don’t be a nuisance right off the plane,” Ava said.

“I’m offended.”

“Won’t be the last time, snowflake.” She gave him a quicksilver grin and turned her attention back to the man approaching her.

“Special Agent Aviva James?” he asked.

“Yes, sir,” she answered.

“I’m Special Agent Jason Ellis, and this is Special Agent Morgan Quinn. We’re here to take you and your team to the location of the murder and get you acquainted with the particulars of the case. Or, at least what we have so far.” He shook Ava’s hand and stepped aside.

Quinn stepped forward and shook with Ava. “Which, at this point, isn’t very much. There’s still a lot of work to be done.”

“And we’re happy you and your team are here to assist,” Ellis said.

He was a hard man to read. His eyes were a gray-green and he was handsome. His jawline looked as if it might have been carved from stone, and his expression was different from any Ava had ever encountered. It wasn’t angry or emotionless, but it was impossible to pin an emotional tag to.

Flat, it came to her after a few seconds. *He’s emotionally flat.*

But that wasn’t quite right either.

After a quick round of introductions, Ellis and Quinn led Ava and the team back toward their cars.

“Not the friendliest guy in the world,” Metford whispered as they walked.

“Can’t you just enjoy the warm sea breeze, the sound of the gulls out in the distance, something? Stop being so judgy.”

He chortled. “Okay, so he looks like he might have been sculpted by one of the old masters, but you don’t have to get so defensive.”

Refusing to engage, Ava shot him a warning look and got into Ellis’ car. Metford got into the back, and Dane joined him.

“Great Dane, awesome you’re riding with us,” Metford said, holding his fist out for a bump.

Dane scoffed, but she was grinning as she humored him with the bump. “At least you dropped Robotic from the nickname. I suppose that’s an improvement.”

“Hey, if it offends you...”

She held up a hand and shook her head. “Trust me, it’s fine. I’ve been called much worse.”

“We’re going to the location?” Ava asked Ellis as he turned the key.

“Yes. It’s Leonardo Bianchi’s estate in Napa Valley. I hope you don’t mind the ride.”

“Whatever it takes to get the job done.”

“That’s my philosophy, too.”

Ava smiled politely. Was that his philosophy? So many people said that and then ended up not really meaning it at all. Others had said the same thing and then thought she was obsessed with her

job, or that she was a total workaholic, which wasn't true in her opinion.

"So, what do we know so far?" She took the folder he offered her, liking the fact that it was a folder instead of a tablet. Was Ashton in the other vehicle having a mental meltdown at the lack of technological utilization even in San Francisco?

"Our victim is Ivana Baruch, a Croatian princess. She was found murdered and her body was hidden in a wine barrel on the estate of one Leonardo Bianchi. Ivana was the last Croatian princess, actually."

"She was a Croatian citizen then?"

Ellis shook his head. "No, she was born in the US. She was a social media influencer in her own right."

"I didn't think there was a king or queen in Croatia," Dane offered from the backseat.

"There isn't," Ava and Ellis said in unison. They glanced at each other. He seemed as shocked as she was.

"Well, I guess I skipped that day in history class," Metford said. "Because I had no idea there was no longer royalty in Croatia."

"The old bloodlines held on as long as they could, but these days, it's more just the titles and some land. And the money, of course. Maybe a little political pull, but no real power," Ellis said.

"That sucks," Metford said. "Is that why her family moved here?"

"We're not sure," Ellis answered. "We still need to interview a lot of people and do a lot of research to find out for sure what was going on before she was found murdered yesterday."

"How'd she get in a wine barrel in this guy's estate... what's his name?" Ava asked.

"Leonardo Bianchi. Big time winemaker out here. He imports from Italy and makes his own wine here in Napa Valley. From vine to distribution right there on his estate. The man's practically got a small town to himself just of his employees. Anyway, the night before she was found, there was a big party, some sort of high-society shindig. Ms. Baruch was in attendance, as were several business leaders, investors, socialites, et cetera."

Ava looked down at the printed screenshots of social media posts detailing the event. Ivana's smile dazzled in the photos and her luscious dark hair stood out even in the midst of dozens of pretty people wearing clothes more expensive than her yearly salary.

"And none of these people saw anything?"

Ellis shook his head. "A worker accidentally knocked the barrel down the morning after the party. It wasn't where it was supposed to be, so when he moved it, it broke open, and he discovered her body."

"Jesus," Ava muttered. "And how many attended the party?"

"Still working on a definite number. But it's a lot. Then you include all the staff, and for good measure, all the people in Ivana's extended network online, and you're looking at the population of a small town," Ellis said.

"You think one of her followers might have done this?" Metford asked.

"Not likely, but we can't rule out anyone at this point."

The ride to the Bianchi estate was scenic, to say the least. Lush green landscapes undulated with small dips and rises all the way to the horizon. Flowers of every color grew in great bold clusters in some places and in dispersed, sprawling arrays that covered entire fields in others.

Then came the turns and twists in the road. They weren't few and far between. They were unrelenting for miles and miles. They were tight and unforgiving in spots, with the forest pressing in on the roadway in grand claustrophobic fashion.

Ava adjusted in her seat and sighed as she fixed her eyes on a spot far ahead. Her stomach rolled as Ellis sped around one tight curve after another. The grade wasn't steep, but it was a gradual climb through those places.

"Everything okay?" Ellis asked without looking directly at her.

"Yeah. I just wasn't expecting this road." She took another deep breath to put her stomach back where it belonged. Yakking in Ellis' floorboard before they even reached the crime scene wouldn't leave the kind of first impression she was going for.

“Oh, sorry. I guess I could have warned you. I’ll drive a little slower. That should help.” He slowed the car by about seven miles per hour. After about five minutes, he glanced her way. “Better?”

“Yes, thank you.” But it wasn’t much better.

“It would be even better if we could just charter a helicopter back out,” Metford said.

Ellis laughed shortly. “Going out is never as bad as going in.”

“Said no one. Ever.”

“I think I had the wrong idea about this place,” Ava said.

“How’s that?”

“I thought it was going to be like San Francisco. You know, the gridwork roads. The colorful houses and trolleys and stuff.”

Ellis laughed again and shook his head. “Only in the city. We’re almost there, though. You’ve made it through the worst part already.”

“Thank God,” Dane said quietly.

It had been almost two hours, and Ava didn’t think she could have made it through much longer even without the curvy sections of the road. Her body was stiff from being confined to a flight and then the car ride. The bruise she sustained when she had been shot only a few days prior still hurt like a mad bastard every time the car hit a bump in the road, and she wasn’t completely healed from the wounds she had sustained in Molly’s rescue case.

The car slowed at a long, sloped drive, and Ava turned her thoughts away from Molly’s case and her own injuries.

“Here we are. As far as you can see to the left and to the mountains in the back, all belongs to his estate. To the right, the property butts against another winery. You can see the clear demarcation between the properties there.” Ellis pointed out the boundaries as he spoke.

“I don’t see any fences or walls,” Ava said.

“There are deer fences around the vineyards, but no property markers like you’re probably thinking. Some owners have privacy fences around their backyards and smaller ones at the front, but not all the way around these huge properties. They let the land mark the boundaries.”

“Why wouldn’t they put up fences of some sort?” Metford asked.

“For one, and probably the most important reason, it would cost a small fortune to do so, and it would accomplish practically nothing. There would be the constant expense of having it repaired, if it’s over a certain height, there are permits to get, and if it’s within the limitations of height, it won’t keep out people or wildlife.”

“Damned if you do and damned if you don’t,” Metford said.

“That sounds about right,” Ellis said. “And, if a deer or other wildlife happens to hop a fence and panic, it can do a hell of a lot of damage to the vines in that state of panic. It’s best to leave it completely open, or to put up the mesh deer fencing to keep them out. That stuff doesn’t cost a fortune, at least. And if it has to be replaced, it’s not a big expense or a huge hassle to do.”

“Are there guards or anything like that?” Dane asked. “I’m just asking because it seems to me that a place like this has a lot of valuable tools of the trade, and probably a lot of very valuable wine just sitting around.”

“There are a few guards that watch over the place but again, not like you’re thinking. Their job is to keep an eye on the fencing, make sure kids aren’t coming up here trying to sneak onto the property and party or vandalize anything. This isn’t a place where you normally have to worry about violent crimes. It’s a very affluent and diverse community. The residents are tolerant, well-educated, well-traveled, savvy businessmen and women.”

“Understood,” Ava said, hoping she was speaking for her entire team. “I guess sometimes it’s easy to get into a rigid mindset about people who commit murder and the places where murders happen.”

“When all you’re exposed to is the dregs of society and the worst of the worst slums day in and day out, yes, it’s very easy to get stuck in a rigid mindset. I can completely relate to that. Leonardo Bianchi’s estate is worth at least three-hundred-and-fifty-million dollars right now. And that’s not even getting into his other investments.”

Metford whistled. “Three-hundred-and... Wow.”

“Like I said, his operation isn’t small-time. But it’s far from the largest based out of Napa.”

Ellis drove them toward the mansion situated on a large hill overlooking acres and acres of vineyards. The view was

breathhtaking. It was one of the places Ava would have loved to visit when she wasn't working a case. It would be perfect for spending a week, or even a weekend away from the hustle and bustle of the cities. She let herself imagine going to tourist traps in the mornings, wine tastings in the afternoons, and having dinners in exotic restaurants in the evenings while her phone remained silent and there were no cases bending her brain and demanding her attention. It was a short-lived little fantasy, and not particularly all that fun. She might enjoy the wine tastings, but she doubted she would ever deeply enjoy any of the other activities. At least, that's what she told herself as she recalled the last time she'd tried to take a vacation.

"We're going to walk to the storage area where Ivana was found just to give all of you an idea of locations and timing," Ellis said.

Quinn pulled up and parked her vehicle beside Ellis's. Ashton and Santos got out.

"You good, Ash? Lookin' a little pale," Dane asked quietly.

He nodded and then shook his head as he wiped sweat from his forehead. "I'll be fine. Motion sickness, I think."

"That road was a beast in a few places, eh?" Metford asked, grinning.

"I don't know what everybody is whining about," Santos said. "I thought you all were from the East Coast, where there are hardly any straight roads. Especially the farther south you go."

Quinn chuckled and gave Santos a fist bump. "Especially in the rural areas of the south. Someone followed a drunk lizard when they were cutting those roads. Awful."

Santos nodded.

"Okay," Ellis said sternly as he turned away from the group. "Let's get moving. I want to get them up to speed."

"Yes, sir," Quinn said and hurried to catch up with him.

From the main house, it took the group seven minutes to walk to the storage building where Ellis and Quinn stopped. There were barrels stacked two high lying on their sides down a forty-foot wall. Ellis pointed to it.

"This is where the barrel that contained Ivana Baruch's body was," Ellis said. "The worker said he was trying to move it back up to

the section where it should've been when it broke open.”

“Cause of death was strangulation,” Quinn added. “We surmise that means she was probably killed here on the estate. Likely close to the storage building or in it.”

“What we don't know is who did it, who had a reason to want the princess dead, why, and exactly when,” Ellis said.

“And we're sure she attended the party all night?” Santos asked.

Quinn nodded. “We've got social media corroboration as well as, oh, I don't know, dozens of witnesses. We don't know what time people stopped seeing her. There are hundreds of people who still need to be questioned.”

“And that's where we come in,” said Ashton.

Ellis nodded. “There is a skeleton crew still here, and Leonardo Bianchi is still here. Most of the others have been sent away for a few days so we can investigate the scene with minimal interruptions and contamination. Quinn is going to get you up to date on what we know.”

“Leonardo Bianchi is forty-five. Princess Ivana was thirty-three. They had been dating exclusively for the last three years. Ivana's mother died years ago. Filip Baruch, Ivana's father, lives in San Francisco and is a friend of Leonardo Bianchi's. There are estate managers, property managers, business managers, underling staff, groundskeepers, secretaries, assistants, you name it, the position exists somewhere on these eighty acres. Bianchi's wine is known all over the world. He imports his grapes from Italy. He exports everywhere, and he distributes locally. They hold wine-tasting events here on the estate along with tours and educational outings for kids of all ages from grade school through high school.”

“What she's saying, then, is a lot of people come through here all the time,” Santos said.

“There are always hundreds of people on this estate,” Ellis said. “As you can see, this is going to be a massive undertaking. Our teams will work together and we will have a few of the local police at our disposal at certain times, but law enforcement out here is stretched pretty damn thin right now. I don't know the situation out where you're from, but out here, they're suffering, so we're going to

have to work this mostly on our own and not depend on other agencies for much of anything.”

“It’s bad back home, but probably worse out here,” Ava said. “When do we get to meet the rest of your team? We’re ready to start anytime you are.”

Ellis nodded tersely. “The rest of the team is back at the office. You’ll meet them when we get done here. You can start your investigation right now, though. There’s no need to wait. Look over the scene, the property, we have access to everything. Question anyone who’s still on the property that you have access to, look over the scene. The forensic reports are in the files with the photos. Let’s get this show on the road, shall we?” He raised his eyebrows questioningly at Ava.

Nodding, she glanced back at the team. They were already turning to their own work. She nodded approval. “By all means, let’s get moving. Is Leonardo on the property?”

“In the mansion.” He nodded in the direction of the house.

Ava liked Ellis’ style. He wasn’t hard on the eyes either. His energy seemed to match her own when it came to work and wanting to be on the move. “You’ve already spoken to him?”

“Of course. He was one of the first people I interviewed. I have no problem talking to him again and giving you the lead, if that’s what you want.”

“That’s where I would like to start.”

Ellis nodded and motioned for her to join him on the walk back to the mansion.



CHAPTER FOUR

The mansion was magnificent by any standards, and Ava had no doubts that it took a small army to keep it running smoothly even if Leonardo Bianchi was the only resident. The cleaning alone would have been a full-time job for several people. The closer she and Jason walked to the house, the larger it seemed, and the smaller it made her feel.

“I’m not so sure I care for places like this,” Ellis said in a low voice.

“More like a compound than a family home.”

“Waste of money,” he stated hotly.

Ava cocked an eyebrow at him but he didn’t see it because he had already stepped in front of her to ring the doorbell. Finally, something approaching a personality coming out of the man. Apparently, Ellis wasn’t so much of a fan of the lavish lifestyles of the upper crust. Ava usually had no problem with it—not that she ever spent too much time surrounded by millionaire wine magnates—but apparently Ellis did. At least it seemed that way.

A slim woman in a tidy gray pantsuit uniform answered the door. Her expression was wary and severe at the same time.

“Yes? May I help you?” she asked as if she didn’t know who they were.

“Agents Ellis and James. We need to speak to Mr. Leonardo Bianchi.”

“Identification?” She looked at them mistrustfully and didn’t move from the doorway to allow them entry.

Simultaneously, Ava and Ellis pulled out their badge wallets and flipped them open for her inspection. She nodded and backed up.

“Come in. I’ll let him know you’re here.” She pointed to a long, green Chesterfield sofa against the right wall of the entry hall. “Would you like something to drink while you wait?”

“No, and we don’t want to wait. If it’s possible,” Ellis said.

“But I must announce you to Mr. Bianchi. I can’t just—”

“Did you miss the part where his girlfriend was found murdered on his property and we are federal agents?”

Ava opened her mouth to interject some form of social nicety but closed it again. This was Ellis’ part of the world. He knew the social standards better than she, and it was best to let him handle it even though it gave her pause.

The woman clamped her mouth shut. Probably against a rebuttal and only because she was being faced by federal agents. She turned on her heel and started walking. Ellis followed without a word. After they had gone several steps, Ava started walking hurriedly to catch up. Things were done differently in California.

The woman led them through rooms that were as large as Ava’s house. The vaulted, glass-ceiling rooms were used for what exactly? She couldn’t imagine. The super-rich were strange, in her opinion. Maybe Bianchi held banquets or balls and invited his millionaire friends over for a good time in those enormous rooms. She had gone her whole life believing that money couldn’t buy friends, and she still believed it. Maybe having stacks of cash in the bank could rent some friends from time to time, though. Like enough friends to fill a place like the Bianchi estate with laughter and riotous good times for a

night or two. Is that how the elite tried to fit in? Is that how they tried to feel normal?

At the end of what Ava could only call the grand tour of the ground floor, the woman stopped outside closed, solid double doors. "Mr. Bianchi is in his study. I'll let him know you're here."

Ellis said nothing. Ava nodded and gave the woman a little smile of thanks. She couldn't help it. Maybe it was all her years of living on the East Coast where such social actions were drilled into her from her earliest childhood.

The woman didn't return the smile or the nod. She knocked on the doors once, twice, and waited.

"Yes?" a baritone male voice asked from within the room.

"Mr. Bianchi?"

"Yes, Jamie, you may enter."

She opened the door a crack and stuck her head through. She announced Ellis and Ava and then pulled her head back out and stepped away from the door.

The doors swung inward and a refined man stood there. He was about six feet tall, broad at the shoulders, and narrow at the hips. His hair was mostly silver and cut very short. His short beard and mustache were also mostly silver. The piercing dark blue of his eyes contrasted perfectly with his deep tan to make his expression striking, to say the least. It took Ava a few more seconds than it should have to realize the man had tattoos peeking from under the cuffs of his long-sleeved blue silk shirt.

"Agents, please come in," he said, motioning them into the study.

There was no smile on his face or in his expression. The red rimming his eyes and the bags underneath suggested that he had been crying recently and hadn't slept well.

Immediately upon entering the study, the first thing Ava noted was the pictures of Leonardo and a beautiful dark-haired woman she knew to be the late Ivana Baruch sitting in silver frames on the large walnut desk, a couple of the side tables, and even on one of the windowsills.

In all the photos, the couple seemed to be blissfully happy. As if they didn't have a care in the world and everything was wonderful.

Looks could be deceiving. Photos could be only posed moments that meant little and used for appearances' sake. But those two weren't married. They each had their own separate identities. She was thirty-three. He was forty-five. They were independently wealthy. It made no sense to pose and stage photos for the sake of societal appearances.

Leonardo sat in the chair behind his desk. Ellis and Ava took the dark leather wingbacks on the opposite side.

"What can I help you with, Agents?"

"Mr. Bianchi," Ava started, adjusting in the chair. "I'm Special Agent Aviva James. I know Agent Ellis has already interviewed you, but I'd like to ask a few questions, if you don't mind."

"Of course, of course." Bianchi looked at Ellis. "I guess this means you're no closer to knowing what happened to my Ivana or who did it."

"The investigation is still ongoing, and we're doing all we can. Agent James's team has come to help us with it."

"Mr. Bianchi, how was your relationship with Miss Baruch in the time leading up to the murder?" Ava asked.

His chin quivered and he quickly covered it with his hand and took a shaky breath. "We were happy. Very happy. For the last three years, we were so damn happy, but..." his voice broke as his breath hitched in his chest and tears sprang to his eyes. He turned aside and held out a hand. "I'm sorry. Forgive me a moment." He stood and paced to the window where the picture of him and Ivana sat. He looked out over the vineyards and wiped his face with the palms of his hands.

Ava looked over at Ellis. He shook his head and laced his fingers in his lap. His expression, as per usual, was unreadable as he stared at Bianchi's back.

Bianchi turned after he had his emotions under control again. "We were happy. I was still happy, but something happened on her end in the days leading up to the... the... the *party*." He spat the word as if it were poison he had to eject from his mouth.

"What do you mean? I don't understand."

He shrugged, screwed up his face into a mask of confusion, and shook his head. "I don't know. She was distant with me. Cold, even. It was completely out of character for my Ivana. She wasn't like that at all." He picked up the frame from the windowsill and looked lovingly at it before turning it toward Ava. "See? She was warm, loving, caring, and she always made me feel as if I was the center of her life. As if she loved me more than anything or anyone around. And I believed that was true." Tears slipped down his face again and he turned away to replace the photo.

"This happened how many days ahead of the party?"

"I noticed it for the first time about a week before the party. It was minor at first, but then it grew more pronounced. I tried harder to rekindle what I thought was a waning flame. I thought I had done something to offend her. Something, but I couldn't figure out what because I hadn't done anything different."

Ellis sat forward. "Mr. Bianchi, you didn't even know Miss Baruch was missing. You didn't report her missing after the party. Why?"

Ava couldn't hide her surprise at that line of questioning. She hadn't seen that in the report. Had she overlooked it in her haste?

"Because she told me she was going to a silent retreat in some little rural village in Mexico for a week immediately after the party. I just thought she had gone to that and would return to me afterward. I tried to call and text her anyway." His face crumpled and he paced to the desk, where he dropped into his chair and pulled out a handkerchief. "I'm sorry. I just can't."

"It's okay. Take your time," Ava said. Her heart twisted to see the man's obvious grief. Raw emotions always made her want to evaporate, and she was only hanging on by a thread. A handsome, successful, strong man like Leonardo breaking down into tears made her feel icky all over. She looked over her shoulder. Both doors were closed. Sweat crawled down the nape of her neck toward the collar of her shirt as she waited for Bianchi to get control again.

"And you didn't worry when you got no response?" Ava asked before he turned around to face them again.

He shook his head. "I thought she was at the retreat. It was a silent retreat. No electronics. No phones, no television, no

computers. That was the whole point of going there. It was her way of escaping all the technology for a while.”

“Why was she going to the silent retreat to escape technology, Mr. Bianchi? Wasn’t she a big deal on the internet?”

“Yes, that’s exactly why she was going. It was all getting to be far too much stress for her to handle and she needed a break. It hadn’t been easy on her since her mother’s unexpected death a few years ago, but she pushed through and kept her online presence up as best she could through all her highs and lows. It was just that, every now and then, she needed a break from the spotlight. She said it felt like it was taking over every aspect of her life. I tried to take her away from it as much as possible, but she was stubborn and still worked far too much, in my opinion.”

“What happened to her mother?” Ava asked.

“She died of an aneurysm. Otherwise, she had been a very healthy woman. So loving and virtuous. I think Ivana was a lot like Lana. I didn’t know Lana personally, but I’ve heard many stories about her from Ivana and Filip. That must be where Ivana got her temperament and personality from.”

Once more, Leonardo had to turn away. He stood and paced from the desk to the window and back several times. “I can’t believe she’s dead,” he exclaimed. One hand clutched at his chest over his heart and he pounded the other side of his chest with the other hand.

“And on my property. It was to be her property, too, after we were married. It happened right under my nose, and while I was having a fucking party of all things.” His voice grew raspy from the stress and emotion.

Ava stood and Ellis watched her with that unreadable, flat expression. She couldn’t sit there while Bianchi was having another breakdown. Her palms sweated, her gut knotted, and the air was getting too thick to pull into her lungs.

“Mr. Bianchi,” she said firmly.

He didn’t turn to her.

“Mr. Bianchi,” she said again, more firmly.

He looked toward her as he continued to slowly pace as if seeing her for the first time. “I’m sorry, are you leaving? My manners.” He

started for the door.

“No, not yet. We’re going to need a list of all the people who attended the party that night and a list of all the employees who were here, also.”

He turned to the side and picked up his desk phone. Ava hadn’t paid attention to the landline until then, thinking the phone was a vintage piece of décor.

“I can have that for you in a few moments,” he said.

All traces of the former tears and emotion had vanished from his voice. He spoke to someone on the other end of the line, instructing them to print out and bring the list to his study on the first floor. “My personal assistant will be here shortly with the list once it’s printed out. I hope that’s an acceptable format.”

Ava gripped the top of the wingback she stood behind and smiled. “Printed is always acceptable.”

“Good. Hardcopy is like cash. Still accepted at many locations.” He smiled. His features were fine and handsome even though they looked puffy and chafed from the crying. If not for the redness, Ava would have had a hard time knowing anything was wrong in Bianchi’s life at that very moment.

“Unlike hardcopy, we don’t accept cash, Mr. Bianchi. That’s called a bribe. I hope that’s not what you were hinting at,” Ellis said, not cracking a smile.

Bianchi looked shocked and a bit scared. “Of course not. Why would I be…” He looked from Ellis to Ava and back again, clearly confused. Then a hard expression formed on his face. He glared at Ellis, never breaking eye contact. “I don’t know what kind of man you think I am, Agent Ellis, but I had nothing to do with Ivana’s death, and I’ve not built my success on bribes. I resent that implication.”

Ellis nodded once but didn’t apologize.

The fine beads of sweat trickled underneath the back collar of Ava’s shirt, tickling the fine hairs and nerves at the top of her spine and sending a wave of goosebumps over her arms.

There was a knock at the door.

“Come in,” Bianchi called in a strong voice, only breaking eye contact with Ellis after the command.

One door opened slightly and a tall, thin man dressed in a finely-tailored white suit that would have been completed with a Panama hat walked to the desk and held out the papers to Bianchi.

“Give them to Agent James,” Bianchi said, pointing to Ava.

Ava took the papers and thanked the man.

“What was his name?” Ellis asked.

“Alessandro Moretti,” Bianchi said in a flat tone.

“Is his name on that list?”

“I’m sure it is, as he was present the night of the party. Most of my staff were here, so you’ll find most of their names on that list. If you require the full list, I can also give that to you, but that’s not what you asked for, Agent Ellis.”

“Oh, I didn’t ask for anything. That would have been Agent James. You can get that other list ready. We’ll pick it up at the front door if that’s not too much trouble. It would expedite the investigation.” Ellis stood and straightened his jacket.

“I don’t see that it speeds anything along. You’re wasting your time investigating me and my staff. My staff is vetted as if they were going to work in the White House. They are among the safest and most trustworthy staff in California.”

“Noted,” Ellis said as he turned away.

“I trust you can show yourselves out while I call for the list?”

“Yes, sir. Thank you,” Ava said, offering a small smile.

Outside, Ellis was silent until they had walked a hundred feet from the house. “He was really laying it on thick with all those tears.”

“I don’t think they were fake. I’ve seen fake tears. The man was in a great deal of distress over his lover’s death,” Ava replied.

“No. Some of it was real. Some. By no means was that whole show the truth.”

“Okay, I know that seeing such raw emotion from such a powerful and influential man is unusual. Not unheard of, mind you, but it is unusual. But you need to remember that the woman he’d been dating for three years, the woman he loved and planned on marrying, the woman he loved deeply was murdered on his property while he was hosting a party.”

Ellis immediately shook his head. "I'm not buying it. That's just not how it works in the real world. Maybe in those romance novels women read, but not in real life. Not with men like Bianchi."

"Well, for your information, I've never read one of those romance books, but I am a human being, and I think I have a pretty good grasp of how a person reacts to trauma on an emotional level."

He did grin then. It was a bit of a sarcastic grin. "Like when the crying jag became too much to handle and I thought you were going to bolt from the room to escape it. Or was that my imagination? That's your good grasp of how a person reacts to trauma on an emotional level?"

Stung, Ava glared at him. Maybe he wasn't such a good guy after all. Maybe he was just a jerk in a semi-nice suit with a good title and a median-paying job who took out his angst on others.

Or maybe she was overreacting to the truth. Because what he said was nothing but the truth. He had seen that in her actions and he didn't know her at all. "I'm disagreeing about his tears. I sort of understand why he was so upset. And no, I don't like raw emotion. Unlike you, I can't sit there like a lump on a log as if I don't see it. I'm not that good of an actor."

He chuckled. It was a short burst of laughter that sounded more like a rattle. "Not yet. I think I have a few years on you, Agent James. You'll get there, though. We're all good actors in the field. And in our everyday lives. It begins to bleed over from work to life. You'll see."

"I'll just have to disagree with you on that, too, then, because I just can't believe that."

"Have it your way."

They walked toward the storage shed in silence after that. Ava had time to wonder about Jason Ellis and her task of working closely with him on the case.

They could be at each other's throats with jibes and quips all day every day. They could work together in shared exasperation with each other's views. They could find some common ground and possibly learn from one another.

Those were the three possible outcomes that she could foresee. She hoped for the last one, but feared the first two would combine to

become her new reality for the duration of the case.



CHAPTER FIVE

Ellis hadn't lied about the ride out of Napa Valley seeming shorter than the ride going in. It seemed much shorter and much less curvy even though they took the exact same route. Ava was glad to see San Francisco, although she was also glad she didn't have to deal with the heavy traffic every day.

"Are the streets always this crowded?" she asked Ellis.

"No. This is the evening rush. We get several rushes every day. Morning, late morning, noon, afternoon, evening, late evening, night."

Ava laughed. "Sounds like the streets are always this crowded."

He cut his eyes toward her. "No, there are rushes during those times, and then the traffic thins. There's a difference."

"Okay. Got it," she said as she fought another quip.

"I take it traffic isn't this bad where you live."

"Sometimes it gets bad, but not like this, no."

"Not unless we're in the middle of DC and in a hurry," Metford said.

“Then it would be quicker to walk to the destination,” Dane added.

“I don’t think I’d like working that close to the capital,” Ellis said.

“No different than working in any other city,” Dane said.

“Really?”

“I worked New York City for a long time. All cities are more or less the same, in my opinion. Sure, you’ll have little quirks here or there, or random features, but at the bare bones, they’re all the same: hard and ruthless.”

“She’s the optimist of the team,” Ava said.

“But she’s not wrong,” Ellis replied.

Ava didn’t like that answer. She knew it was the truth. In their line of work, they couldn’t help but see all the bad, but she wanted to believe that there was more good in the world than what they dealt with on a daily basis. Their view was like saying that all people were essentially bad. Ava didn’t believe that either. How did people hold that opinion of the world and still get out of bed every morning?

“Golden Gate Avenue, everyone,” Ellis announced. “We’re finally here.” He pulled into the parking area and turned off the engine.

“Where are we staying?” Metford asked.

“The Embassy Hotel over on Polk.”

“How far?”

“You can walk there in about ten minutes from the office.”

“Well, at least we won’t have to worry about one of those traffic rushes,” Ava said.

“I hope they have something to eat because I’m starving,” Metford said.

“We’ll go meet the team and introduce the new findings and then you’re free to go for the evening. Be here at seven in the morning to start again,” Ellis told him as he stepped out of the car. “There are plenty of restaurants, diners, and bars around to get food.” He walked toward the elevators.

“Hope this doesn’t take long,” Metford said just loud enough for Ava and Dane to hear.

Quinn parked beside Ellis’ car. Ashton and Santos got out and caught up with Ava.

They got off the elevator and followed Ellis and Quinn to the office. Ellis' team followed him without being told to do so. Was that a sign that he was a hard man to work under, or a sign that his team respected him that much? It was hard to tell anything about him.

Introductions ensued. Ava put names with faces.

Casey Elliot and Tate Oliver seemed to work together within the team, as did Avery Jasper and Finley Byrne. Jasper and Quinn were the only women and looked to be about the same age, but Quinn had a harder look in her eyes and a more determined set to her face. As a matter of fact, Ava noted that Quinn looked shrewder than the rest of the team. As if she would be just as comfortable in hand-to-hand combat as she was in the cubicle behind the computer. That was the most likely reason she was with Ellis in the field while the others were at the office, Ava determined.

A Latino man walked into the meeting. His smile was one-sided as his dark eyes roamed Ava and her team. He held out his hand to her immediately, as if recognizing her.

"Agent James, I presume," he said.

"Yes, sir," she replied. Although she didn't know him, it was clear by the way he carried himself that he was Ellis' boss, Julian Garcia.

"I'm Supervisory Special Agent Garcia. It's good you're here. We appreciate the help."

"Yes, sir. We're glad to be here."

"You're in capable hands with Ellis, but if any of you have any questions or concerns, my door is always open."

"Thank you, sir," Ava said.

He turned to Ellis. "Any progress yet?"

"A little. We have the names of all the party attendees and all the staff at the estate. Agent James and I spoke to Mr. Bianchi again, and she got some new information from him that I feel will be useful. We're here to pool information and make a plan for tomorrow before we're done for the day."

"Good, good. Don't keep them too long tonight. Let them get something to eat, too. Not everybody's a machine like you." He clapped Ellis on the shoulder and headed out the door.

“Everyone should pull files on the case and share information. Update the files accordingly with any new findings from today,” Ellis said to the teams. He motioned Ava toward his office. “We should go over the lists.”

She nodded and followed him. Back home she was in charge, she knew best most of the time, and she motioned people into her office when necessary. It was odd to be following Ellis and feeling as if she were playing second fiddle.

He pushed the door closed behind her and pulled up a chair at the front of his desk to join her. “I think we should make our own list. There are so many people working to keep that estate running. It would be nearly impossible for one or two people to speak with each of them and the party attendees.”

“That would take weeks if not longer,” Ava agreed, looking at the stack of papers in her hands. “Where do you want to start?”

“Where would you start?” Ellis asked.

She looked up sharply at him. Why ask her? Why not just take control as he normally had with all the other situations? Was it a trap to get her to answer just so he could tell her why her answer was the wrong one? So many men had done her that way over the years. Was Ellis the same as them?

She looked down at the papers. In her opinion, there was only one place to start that would speed up the process. “I would start with the managers, overseers, and all the assistants who work there. At some point, we also need to know any low-level employees who would have been on the estate during the time of the party but weren’t *at* the party.”

“Why start with the employees first?”

“By talking to them, we can check their stories and alibis, quickly narrowing the list. They have jobs, careers that make them easily traceable, easily found. The party attendees are a bunch of rich people, playboys, globetrotters, international models, and the sort of people who aren’t in one location very long. They will be harder to pin down for an interview, and I hate to say it, less reliable, in my opinion.”

“Why do you think the attendees would be less reliable sources than the employees?”

“The attendees have interests to protect, reputations to protect, not to mention they were drinking and doing God knows what else at the party. Millionaires and billionaires don’t play by the same set of rules as most people, as I am sure you’ve noticed in your career. Their celebrity status among their peers tends to make them natural boundary-pushers and a harmless celebration can turn sideways and into a drug-fueled frenzy for the history books pretty easily.”

Seemingly satisfied, he gave her a slow nod. “You’re not wrong, Agent James. I like your insights. Let’s get that list together so you and your team can get settled for the night.”

By the end of the meeting, Ava and Ellis had a list of twenty-two employees they could speak to within the span of a day, and ten more they could speak to another day if necessary.

“Are we Ubering our way to the hotel, or what?” Metford asked as he met with Ava at the front of the office.

Quinn stepped between them and handed Ava a set of keys. “Your vehicle is in the lot beside mine. We’ll get another later if your team needs it, but the one is all we have right now.”

Ava took the keys. “Thank you.”

Quinn nodded and gave her a quick smile. “See you at seven.” She went to the other elevator and pressed the call button as she pulled out her phone and pressed it to her ear.

“Even on the West Coast we’re the last ones out of the building,” Santos griped.

“Did you see all the updated tech they have? Their equipment is more advanced than ours by at least a couple of generations,” Ashton said with a loopy grin on his face.

“You guys know you’re in the Tenderloin District, right?” Jasper asked as she walked up to them.

“The what?” Ava asked.

“Tenderloin District,” Jasper reiterated.

“One of the most dangerous places in San Francisco. That’s where the Embassy Hotel is. Just inside the Tenderloin,” Dane said.

She had been pretty silent on the subject of the hotel, but Ava had noted her look of mild surprise when Ellis had told them about it.

Jasper nodded. "Watch yourselves and don't go wandering around out there on foot. Just saying, it's not safe. The homeless population is... well, you'll see, but I wouldn't recommend touring the place. Especially after dark."

"Homeless people aren't always dangerous. They are people just like us," Ava said hotly.

"Not in the Tenderloin," Dane said.

"How do you know that?" Ava asked, anger bubbling just under the surface. Displaced people couldn't always help the circumstances in which they found themselves. Especially not after the wild boom-bust cycles of the economy these days. Was she the only person who understood what a true tragedy it was to see homeless men, women, and even children forced to live on the streets never knowing if they would even live to worry about where their next meal would come from?

"Because this isn't the first time I've been to San Francisco or the Tenderloin. The city hands out new hypodermic needles because they want junkies to use clean needles to stop the spread of diseases. They're dangerous, Ava. She's right. And they're not just run-of-the-mill homeless people who find themselves in tragic and transitory situations. Trust me, I've seen some things in New York and this is another level."

Ava shook her head. She'd heard these arguments a thousand times before, and simply didn't agree. Would anyone in their right mind choose to live under a bridge and beg for scraps? No. And how long would they stay in their right mind if they were forced to do it?

People were just hardened to the situations and circumstances of the less fortunate. People didn't want to admit that but for the grace of God, that was them. They might be hit with a medical bill or a surprise layoff and find themselves shut out of every door they knocked on. Especially in a city as expensive as San Francisco.

But she had to admit, at the same time, that she didn't exactly want to wander down there for herself.

Ava didn't join in the small talk as they rode the elevator down, nor did she try to join in as she drove them the very short block and a half to the Embassy Hotel. Disappointment in Dane and in Jasper silenced her, made her want to withdraw.

They stepped onto Polk Street, and Ava made a point of looking up and down the road. What she saw did not encourage her to start a conversation about the place. Tents had been fashioned from blue tarpaulins and wires attached to lamp posts as she looked down Polk. The farther down the street she looked, the more tents she saw.

"This end of the Tenderloin doesn't seem to be as affected as that end at least," Santos said.

"No, but the problem is creeping this way," Dane said. "It's worse now than the last time I was here. Watch how close you get to any of them. They've been known to jab people with their needles, knives, broken bottles. Whether you like to believe it or not, some of them will attack completely unprovoked. The drug problem is so bad, you have to watch where you step the deeper you go into the district. You crush hypos under your shoes as you walk. God forbid you have to break into a run there."

Ava had a hard time believing it was really that bad, especially after her experiences in St. Louis and Memphis. This was Golden Gate City. Where high-powered Silicon Valley execs threw money around like it was going out of style. She chose not to start a fight, though.

A black car rolled to a stop and the window slid down. "Everything alright?" Ellis asked.

Ava bent and eyed him. "Fine. Why wouldn't it be?"

"I told Jasper to warn you because I forgot to. If you're going to wander around after dark, skirt the Tenderloin. They don't care that you're federal agents, and they aren't particularly scared of guns, either."

"Why the hell are we booked in a hotel here, then? Weren't there any others?" Ava asked.

"Not my doing. I didn't make the arrangements. Just be glad it wasn't a hotel deeper in the district. At least you have free Wi-Fi at

the Embassy. Probably not much else to speak of, though. Put in a request to be moved if it's too much to deal with."

She smirked and stood. "We'll be fine. Thanks for the heads-up." She moved toward the entrance of the hotel. "See you at seven."

The car rolled away down Polk in the direction that Ava didn't particularly ever want to travel.

Ava collected her room card and went to the elevators. Had it really just slipped Ellis' mind to warn her of the dangers in the Tenderloin District? She couldn't quite believe that.

Metford came with the others close behind to catch the elevator to the fourth floor.

"Situation's bad with the—"

"Don't say it, Metford. I don't want to talk about it." She kept her eyes on the doors as they trundled slowly open. She stepped inside and punched the four on the keypad.

Metford stepped in and held the doors for the others. "First time I've ever known you not to want to talk about a case."

"The case?" Ava asked, shocked. "I thought you were talking about—"

"The homeless scene? No. I was talking about the case. It looks like a herd of buffaloes trampled through the crime scene after the fact and before the princess was discovered. It's going to be tough finding anything of help there other than the barrel and the forensics already collected."

Chastened, Ava nodded. "I was afraid of that. Not to mention we have about a hundred people to interview between just the managerial employees and the party attendees."

"How many people were at that party?" Ashton asked.

"Eighty-two of the ninety invited showed up."

"That means we still have to interview the whole ninety?" Santos asked.

"If they don't have alibis that put them out of range for the date, yes."

"I'm going to Whitechapel for something to eat in twenty minutes," Metford said. "Anyone want to join me?"

Santos, Dane, and Ashton accepted the invite at once and with enthusiasm.

“Where’s it at? Not farther into the danger zone, is it?” Santos asked.

“Nope. Just next door. I saw it when we were coming in,” Metford said. He grinned. “You coming, Ava?”

“The food is good. They have a chef there who worked in Michelin star restaurants in New York City and Boston. I ate at a place he worked a few times in NYC,” Dane said.

They stepped into the fourth-floor hallway. Ava turned to Dane. “Do you know him personally?”

Dane shrugged and then shook her head. There was a definite sadness in her eyes. “Not really.” She walked away toward her room.

“I think maybe she does know him,” Metford said.

“And the plot thickens. Who is she? Who is he?” Santos asked as she flipped her sunglasses to the top of her head.

“Love interest, you think?” Ashton asked.

Ava shrugged. “Don’t pry. If there’s a story there and she wants us to know, she’ll tell us. If not...leave it be.”

Santos and Ashton went toward their rooms.

“She looked lovesick to me,” Metford commented.

“And you know all about how someone looks when they’re lovesick?” She scoffed as she headed for her door.

“Well, that’s what they always look like in the movies when they’re missing their boyfriend or whatever.”

Ava laughed. “That’s what I thought.” She pushed her door open and stepped inside.

“You coming?”

After a second of deliberation, she shrugged. “Why not.”

He smiled. “Even you can’t resist finding out what that story is.”

She pushed her door shut. Was that the real reason she was going? Had that dash of intrigue changed her mind? There were cheaper places to eat in town, she was sure. There was surely a fast-food joint close by, and that would sate her appetite, be much quicker, and let her get back to her room to study the case sooner.

“So you’re intrigued and Metford was right,” she mumbled at her reflection in the mirror above the dresser where she dropped her shoulder bag. “Not the worst thing in the world.”

She grabbed clothes and took a quick shower. Twenty minutes later, she stepped out of her room to join her team for dinner.

Whitechapel was an experience, with its Victorian subway aesthetic and all the Gothic Victorian décor. It was like stepping into a bygone era. Even small details such as the drinkware, serving plates, and table service sported a Victorian flair.

She had the fish and chips. It wasn’t bad, but it was different from the food back home. Metford’s burger was, too. After three bites, he stopped making faces at the cranberry pesto aioli sauce, and the waitress looked at him as if he might be crazy when he asked for more ketchup.

At the end of the meal, they left without ever seeing the chef. Dane never mentioned him again, either. That did nothing to curb Ava’s curiosity about how her coworker knew the man, though. Dane was full of surprises, and Ava wanted to know the story behind the newest one. Somehow, she thought it might explain a bit more about Dane’s toughness and determination.



CHAPTER SIX

At six-forty-five the next morning, Ava and the team arrived at Ellis' office. He was already there, which didn't surprise her.

"Ah, just what I like to see. Eager to get the day's work started," he said, greeting them.

"We would have brought coffee, but we didn't know everyone's preference," Ava said. "Sorry."

"Not a problem. Oliver and Jasper usually bring plain coffee and we have plenty of creamers and sugar in the breakroom."

"No cranberry aioli sauce for the coffee, I hope," Metford said.

Ellis wrinkled his brow at Metford. "Aioli isn't for coffee. It's a sauce for food."

Ava and the others laughed.

"I don't think there's anything on the menu at Whitechapel that didn't come with it," Metford said.

Ellis' eyebrows shot up. "Oh, Whitechapel. That's a decent little eatery. The ambiance is different, for sure."

Ava nodded. "What's on our menu for the day?"

“First, we’re going to follow Matteo Barese on his morning routine. He would normally be going to work, but since there’s only a skeleton crew there for another few days, I’m not sure where he’ll go. If all goes to plan, we will speak with him well before lunch.”

“He’s the man who found Ivana’s body, right?”

“Yes. That automatically makes him a suspect until we have evidence that he’s not.”

“How long has he worked for Bianchi?”

“Ten years. I’ve been doing some research since I came in this morning.” He handed her some printed papers. “Your team will stay here and work with my team.”

Ava looked over at Metford and the others. “Okay. That works.”

“Great. You ready to go?”

“Sure.”

In the parking area, he turned to her. “You want to drive since we’re just following Barese this morning?”

“No, that’s okay. I’ll just let you handle the traffic since you’re used to it.”

He grinned. Again, it was as quick as a camera’s flash and then it was gone as if it never happened.

“Where are we going? Where is Barese now?”

“In Berkeley. He lives there, but he leaves the house before eight to take the kid to school.”

“I guess he takes the kid to school and then heads to work.”

“Sometimes.”

So, he wasn’t one to elaborate without being asked to do so. Ava wasn’t sure how she felt about that, but she didn’t ask for any further details.

“Can Barese afford to live in Berkeley by working for Bianchi? It looks expensive here,” Ava said.

“Cheaper than the city. Even has the kid in a private school.”

“He’s making some serious money unless he married into money.”

“No. He makes good money with Bianchi. Bianchi is known for paying all his employees top wages. Especially the ones he takes a liking to, and apparently, he likes Barese a lot.”

“Why’s that?”

“He’s kept him on at the estate for a decade and gives him a raise at least once a year. Maybe it’s because they’re both Italian, who knows?”

“Is there anyone else Bianchi favors like that?”

Ellis nodded. “A few, yeah.”

“Are they all Italian?”

“No. Some are Croatian.”

“Like Ivana,” Ava said, feeling the first tenuous threads of something trying to weave together in her mind. It was still just a teasing feeling that something was there, just under the surface, waiting for her to discover it, but it was there nonetheless.

“Like Ivana except without the royal bloodline. At least, I don’t think they have any royal heritage to claim.”

Ellis parked across the street from a medium-sized Italian-Renaissance house. “That would be Barese’s house right there.”

“He’s got good taste. Have to give him that.”

“Right. It’s a nice house to be sure. It probably breaks him up just paying for it and the kid’s school, though.”

A broody-looking man with thick black hair and a boy of about eight exited the house and made their way to the car in the driveway.

“That’s Barese,” Ava said, looking from the photo on the paper and back to the man.

“And his son, Antonio.”

Ellis tailed them to the boy’s school and then followed Barese to a bank. From the bank, he went to an Italian diner where he stayed for over an hour.

“We could just go in there and talk to him,” Ava suggested.

“I’d rather talk to him in his house.”

“What if he doesn’t go back there?”

“Cross that bridge if we come to it.” Ellis shielded his eyes against the glare of the sun on the diner’s front windows. “He’s moving. He’s done. All his buddies left the table.”

“You think anything went down?”

He looked over at her. “Like what?”

“I don’t know. He went to the bank and then came here where a bunch of men sat with him but weren’t eating with him. They stayed there for over an hour, and now everyone is leaving. Payoff maybe?”

“I like how your mind works, but no, I don’t think so.” He looked back to the diner. “But maybe.” He looked back to Ava. “I don’t know now. If he did it, maybe he was paying for an alibi.”

“Or paying for safe transport out of here if the heat gets turned up on him,” she offered.

“It’s something to think about.”

They followed Barese back to his house and let him get inside before approaching the door. Ellis knocked. Three sharp, loud raps.

“FBI, Barese. Open up.”

Barese opened the door almost immediately. He looked at them suspiciously and then seemed to recognize Ellis. “About the murder?”

“No, about the candy store robbery two blocks east. Of course, it’s about the murder. May we come in?”

“We need to ask you some questions about what you found that morning,” Ava said.

He scowled at her. “And you are?”

“Agent James. She’s with me,” Ellis said.

Was Ellis going to turn out just like so many of the other male chauvinist pigs she knew in the business? If he did, it was going to be a very long and very unpleasant case.

Barese opened the door and motioned them inside. After they stepped in, he stuck his head out and looked left and then right. He locked the door after shutting it. “Go in the den to your right. We can talk there.”

They went where he requested. Ava remained standing, but Ellis helped himself to a seat on the nice couch there. Barese settled into a lounge chair opposite him.

“Mr. Barese, walk us through exactly what happened when you found the body,” Ellis started.

“I was working. It was my turn to move the empty barrels into storage. I noticed that one of them wasn’t in the area it was supposed to be. So I tried to put it with the stack so I could take them

all down. I was using that new piece of shit hand mule, and it was heavier than I expected, so a bunch of them tumbled out, and that one..." he said, looking down and wiping a hand down his cheek. "... it broke and hair was sticking out in the dirt. Long, black hair. I was so scared." He shook his head and scrubbed at his cheeks with his palms.

"What did you do after you saw the hair sticking out of the barrel?" Ava asked.

"I ran around to the barrel and got down on my knee to see what it was because I wasn't sure. I was but not really, you understand?"

Ava nodded.

"The whole top of the barrel had come off. There was a woman in the barrel. She was staring up at me with gray eyes like smoke in glass globes. It was awful. I was sick and scared and I didn't know what to do."

"Did you touch the barrel, Mr. Barese?" Ava asked.

"I don't know. I suppose I did. I likely did. I was kneeling down there."

"Did you touch the body?" Ellis asked.

"No, no. I didn't touch her. I would remember that. I saw it was a dead woman and my hands curled to my body. I wanted to run away but I knew something must be done so I called the police."

"You didn't tell your boss or a coworker first?" Ava asked.

He shook his head. "I called them right there where I stood. She was dead in a barrel where we worked. I didn't know who might have killed her. I didn't want anyone knowing what I had found."

"Do you think any of your coworkers are capable of killing someone like that?" Ellis asked.

Barese looked at him but said nothing.

"Mr. Barese?" Ava asked.

He looked at her and then back to Ellis. "I don't know who is capable of what these days. I trust no one. That's the safest policy. You understand?"

"But is there anyone you think might be capable of doing that?" Ellis pushed.

Barese shook his head. "I don't know many of them that well."

“But you’ve worked there ten years.”

“I keep myself to myself for the most part. I have few friends. But no one I know personally would be capable of that.”

“Where were you the night of the party?” Ava asked.

“I was at a friend’s bachelor party in the city.”

“Name of the friend?” Ellis asked.

“Dan Rizzo. You’re not going to go harass him with all this, are you? The man is about to get married this weekend.”

“We have to confirm your alibi, Mr. Barese,” Ellis said. “It’s all part of clearing your name from the case. I’d hardly call that harassing anyone, would you?”

“No.”

“Where was the bachelor party?” Ava asked.

“The Lion’s Den. We were there until two in the morning. I had an Uber pick me up at two and bring me straight home. You can check the records.”

“And we will definitely do that, Mr. Barese,” Ellis said as he stood. He turned toward the door.

“Are we done?” Barese asked.

“For now,” Ellis tossed over his shoulder as he turned the doorknob. It was locked. He looked back at Barese questioningly. “You locked it behind us?”

“I told you, I trust no one. It’s a dangerous world. Take no unnecessary chances.”

Ava and Ellis left the house, and the distinct sound of the locks turning followed them off the stoop.

Ellis had his phone to his ear before they reached the driveway. “Elliot, take Jasper and go check out Barese’s alibi for me. I’m texting you the information now. Get back to me as soon as you find out anything.” He disconnected the call and sent the text as he was getting back into the car.

“Efficient,” Ava said.

“Thanks. Isn’t that how you do it back home?”

“It is.”

“I say we go back to the office and split that list of partygoers between the others. Frees us up to go to the estate to interview the

people on our list and go over the crime, the scene, the evidence.”

“And run a few possible scenarios?”

The grin stayed on his face a little longer, but it was still gone fast and left no trace. “I like that idea.”

“My boss and I started doing that the first time we met and it just became a thing we do. I’ve not done scenarios with any of the others on the team, though.” She hadn’t realized that until then.

“Why not?”

“Just to be honest, I’m not entirely sure. Do you enact scenarios with anyone or just one person on your team?”

“Oh, I’ve only ever done them in my head. No one on my team has the imagination to bounce realistic scenes back and forth in real time.”

“How do you know if you’ve never tried?”

“Because I know my team,” he said simply.

“Touché.” She looked out the window and let the sun hit her full in the face.

Was it just her imagination, or was the sun somehow warmer in California? She let her eyes close for the briefest moment, and in that moment, an image of Ivana, pale, gray-eyed, gape-mouthed filled her vision. She opened her eyes and looked toward Ellis quickly as guilt shot through her. Had she dozed? They were still on the move, and he said nothing. She hoped that meant she had not dozed.

Soon, the familiar streets came into view again. They were heading back across to San Francisco. There was no way she had time to doze and start a nightmare, then. Relieved, she relaxed in her seat again.

“Something wrong?” Ellis asked.

“No, why?”

“You startled back there and then looked guilty as a kid caught with her hand in the cookie jar before dinner.”

“No, I’m fine. Everything is fine. Just the case getting in my head, I guess.”

“Better not let them do that to you or you’ll end up old before your time and jaded beyond help.”

“That explains a lot,” she said lightly.

He scoffed, and his mouth inched up on the right side as if he thought about smiling.

“There’s ninety on the list. How do you think we should split it up?” she asked.

“There’s nine of them.” He glanced in her direction. “Ten each, I say.”

“If there are enough vehicles for everyone, I say go for it. That should speed things up a lot.”

“Don’t get your hopes up. There will still be delays because of the nature of the lifestyles.”

“Yeah. I almost forgot. They move around a lot.”

He nodded once. “Call your team and let them know what’s up. We’ll get more done if you call ahead. No telling what my team has them into right now.”

“Why? What’s right now?”

“Lunch.”

“Is that bad?”

“No, but they might be eating at some sketchy roadside dive thirty miles away.”

Ava pulled out her phone and hit the speed dial for Metford. He answered on the second ring, and she told him about the list and their plans to split it between all of them.

“We’ll be there in a few minutes—”

“Ten at the most,” Ellis said loudly.

“Ten minutes, Ellis says.”

“Got it. We’ll be ready to go,” Metford said.

Ava hung up. “They were in the office still.”

“Good. Means my team is behaving for once.”

“They don’t seem like the types to do otherwise,” Ava said.

“Looks can be deceiving. They get rowdy sometimes, but then again, don’t all agents and law enforcement officers get rowdy every now and then?”

Ava pursed her lips but said nothing. It just felt like the safest thing to do. She didn’t know him or his team well enough to pass any

sort of character judgment on any of them, and she certainly couldn't speak for the whole of law enforcement.

"You and your team never let your hair down and get wild after a particularly hard case?" he asked.

"We do have our little moment of celebration for a case closed successfully, and we drink beers, eat burgers, whatever, but I don't know if I'd call it 'getting rowdy.' It's just a thing that we started after our first case together and we've kept it up ever since."

"Like a baseball player who wears his lucky socks as long as the team is winning and refuses to wash them?"

She chuckled. "We wash our socks, I assure you."

"No, I mean it's just a sort of superstitious ritual that you stick to now."

"Well, when you say it like that, it sounds...weird."

Ellis shrugged. "We all have our rituals and routines. Every single one of us. It's human nature and there's no escaping it. Nothing weird about it. We do something similar after cases."

"And now I don't feel like a complete oddball. That's a plus," she said.

She wasn't sure if it really made her feel any better or not, though. She had never considered her team's ritual after successful cases as anything other than what it was—a way to put it behind them, show that they were grateful it ended well, and move on. But now that she thought about it, it was superstitious. None of them wanted to break the ritual for fear of bringing something bad to their work in the future.



CHAPTER SEVEN

“Do you want to stop for lunch before we go back to Bianchi’s estate?” Ellis asked Ava as they left the parking area of the office building once again.

“I’m good with just grabbing something on the fly, if you are.”

“Veggie wrap, salad, what do you want?”

Ava wrinkled her nose. “I’ll take a burger unless it has weird stuff on it.”

“Weird stuff? Like?”

“All the weird sauces. Just a plain burger with mayo will be fine for me. From anywhere.”

“I wouldn’t have guessed that,” he said with a crooked grin and a head shake.

“Why? Because I’m a woman you just expected me to eat like a rabbit?”

For the first time, she saw emotion flash over his features. It was shock. “No. I just assumed—”

“Don’t make assumptions. You know what they say about assuming things,” she interrupted.

He clamped his mouth shut. “You’re right. A burger it is. There’s a diner I frequent on the way.”

He pulled in at a little roadside diner that looked as if it came straight out of the fifties. The diner was constructed from an old cream-and-red train car with a shiny silver top. There was a single door smack in the center of the long side. Old neon signs sat across the top announcing it as Peggy Sue’s American Roadside Diner. Ava laughed as she looked at the throwback to another time.

“It’s a relic from a better time in our history,” Ellis said.

“Hmm,” Ava replied skeptically. “I mean, women couldn’t have their own bank accounts.”

Ellis chuckled. “Well, the food’s great at least. Want to go in and check it out while I order?”

“Hell, yeah, I do. Has this seriously been here since…” her voice trailed.

“The mid-fifties, yes, it has. Peggy Sue’s is a landmark. Very popular place.” He got out, spinning the keyring on one finger before dipping them into his pocket.

“The staff even dress in uniforms from the fifties. Totally immersive experience.” He opened the door and held it for her.

“Let’s just hope it’s not *too* period-accurate,” she said as she stepped through.

The lyrics of “Blueberry Hill” in Fats Domino’s smooth voice greeted her and helped transport her back in time. A woman in a perfectly proper beehive ‘do wearing a bright pink waitress dress greeted them.

They ordered, and while they waited, Ava took the opportunity to look around at the décor. The place was like an oasis. It was as if the horrors of the outside world didn’t exist while she was in that diner. It would have been easy to imagine that what was happening inside Peggy Sue’s was reality and the world outside was a nightmare.

Maybe, of course, it had always felt like that, even back in the fifties. It wasn’t lost on Ava that many of the current societal problems had always been there, and in fact had been worse back then—intolerance, bigotry, and injustice, lurking right underneath the

cheery music and bright colors. It had a beautiful facade, but that's all it was: a façade.

Back in the car, she took a bite of her burger and moaned. "No wonder people come here. The place is great. Thanks for showing it to me. I'll have to share it with the team."

"You're welcome. I think it's a good place to get grounded and centered without the noise and chaos of the city and the job clogging my mind with negativity."

She looked over at him. "Do you meditate?"

"Not a chance." He took his wrap from the bag. "You?"

"No. I exercise to get myself on track. Running. Martial arts. The gym sometimes."

"That's why you're not afraid to eat real food."

She nodded as she took a bite. "How's your wrap?"

He turned it toward her briefly. "It's a crispy chicken sandwich with aioli wrap. She just cuts it up for me and puts it in the wrap so I can eat while I drive and not drop it all over my lap."

"I'm impressed."

"We're even, then." He drove them back onto the road.

During the curvy part of the drive, Ellis turned on the radio. Ava wasn't at all surprised to hear golden oldies rolling out of the speakers. He changed the station to modern soft rock. She was a little disappointed. After the diner experience, she was in the mood for some more Fats, Elvis, The Platters, and even some Ella Fitzgerald. She didn't say anything. Her philosophy was that the driver picks the music and the passenger listens.

"How you holding up?" Ellis asked as he finished the last bite of his wrap.

"It's not as bad this time. At least I don't feel as if I should have brought a barf bag with me."

"We should talk to the staff first and go over the crime scene afterward."

"Which ones do you want to talk to?" she asked.

"I'll take the business managers and the ones outside the house, if you'll talk to the staff inside the house. I'm not very comfortable

with making nice, and they seem to be easily offended. Or maybe it's just that they're offended by me."

She grinned but didn't say anything. "My grandma would say you don't have much of a bedside manner."

"I don't even understand that," he grumbled. "They're not in bed. I'm investigating a murder, and I want to get it done as quickly and thoroughly as possible."

"Being nice never hurt anyone and it's free," she said.

"I guess we all have our lessons to learn."

Did he mean that she had lessons to learn? It sounded as if that's how he meant it, but she wasn't going to argue her point with him.

His phone rang. "Ellis," he said, pressing it to his ear and taking the remainder of the curves with only one hand on the wheel without losing any speed.

"You're certain it was Barese on the video?" he asked. "Thanks. Get to work on finding and interviewing the people on your lists. Call if you find out anything significant to the case. I'm going to the estate with Agent James to speak with the staff and go over the scene again."

"Barese's alibi check out?" Ava asked.

"It did. There's even CCTV footage of him arriving and leaving the Lion's Den just like he said. The Uber records show that he was picked up at five after two in the morning and dropped off at his house about thirty minutes later. Driver confirms that Barese was wasted. Said he fell asleep in the backseat and had to be woken up at his house."

Ava had expected as much, but it was still disappointing to have their only lead so quickly squashed. "One off the list and about a hundred to go."

"Progress. That's the important thing to remember. We're making progress."

The estate rose on the horizon. The picturesque sight was reminiscent of tranquility. If one didn't know the work going on there all the time, they would have no idea that it wasn't as peaceful as it seemed from a distance.

“How big is Napa Valley? I mean, are there a lot of winemakers and vineyards up here that would be in competition with Bianchi?” Ava asked. “Maybe someone’s trying to squeeze him out.”

“Napa County is about thirty miles long and five wide. There are more than 450 wineries up here, so there are a lot by any standard. Tens of thousands of acres of land are planted vineyards. Bianchi has eighty acres for his entire estate.”

“Not much in the grand scheme, is it?”

Ellis shook his head. “Seems like a lot, but he doesn’t even crack the top fifty.”

“I don’t understand how he makes so much money with that size enterprise.”

Ellis made a finger gun and shot it toward the mansion. “That’s a good question, isn’t it?” He turned off the engine. “You have my number. Call when you’re done. If you’ve not called by the time I’m done, I’ll call you.”

“Sounds good,” Ava said.

They parted ways. She headed for the house, and he went toward the detached office building overlooking the fields.

The same severe-looking woman answered the door. “Yes?”

“Agent James. We met yesterday.” Ava showed her badge.

The woman barely acknowledged it. “How may I help you?”

“I need to speak with all the house staff to conduct interviews for the investigation.”

“All at once or separately?”

Ava looked around. She was still outside. “Preferably one at a time. I need to use a room with a table and a couple of chairs. Nothing fancy, nothing to put anyone to any trouble, just a simple setup.”

The woman opened the door and turned away. “Close it behind you.”

Ava did as asked and followed the woman to a room at the back of the hallway.

“You can wait in here. I must ask Mr. Bianchi if this is permissible.” She walked away quickly without waiting for a reply.

Ava was beginning to see that not everyone's philosophy of manners matched her own. Maybe that was why Ellis's social skills seemed a bit jagged most of the time.

The woman returned twenty minutes later. "Mr. Bianchi has approved your use of this room. He instructed me to assist you with anything you might need, but I must tell you up front that I am a very busy woman and I can't be babysitting you for the rest of the day with your useless interruption of my staff. We have a household to run here, and I need my staff working, not chitchatting with you about this murder that they had nothing to do with. You are wasting your time, my time, Mr. Bianchi's time, and their time. Not to mention you are dragging out this whole painful process for Mr. Bianchi when your efforts should be focused elsewhere."

"Where else would you suggest we focus our efforts, Ms.—I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name."

"Because I never gave it, Agent James. Isn't it on your all-inclusive, comprehensive list that I'm sure you used thousands and thousands of taxpayer dollars to compile?"

"Wouldn't it expedite the current situation if you just told me your name? That way I can get on with this."

"Julia Hampton. Head of the household staff. Only the kitchen is under different management, and it would be better under my management, but that's neither here nor there. The kitchen manager, Chef Mitchell Kilgore, will be on your list, I'm sure?"

Ava nodded. "He certainly is, thank you." Her tone was clipped. Ms. Hampton had managed to sour her mood within three minutes of speaking.

"Now, how may I assist you, Agent James?"

Ava handed her the list of names. "If you would have these people come to the room one at a time, please, that would be great. I'll be quick with the questions, and then you can send the next one on the list."

"Some aren't here today."

"That's fine. Mark the names who aren't here today and note when they will be here again. I'll come back."

“Wonderful,” Ms. Hampton said in a tone that made it plain she was being sarcastic.



Two and a half hours later, Ava took the list back from Ms. Hampton. There hadn't been anything of note from any of the interviews of the day. Just as she'd expected, nobody saw anything. Most of the staff hadn't even been at the party that night.

“Thank you for your help. I'm finished for the day.”

“You are?” she asked. She looked confused.

“Yes—except for you, of course.” Ava smiled tightly.

Ms. Hampton's expression darkened. She stepped into the room. She opened a lower cabinet door and took out a plastic canister of antibacterial wipes and went at the chair she would be sitting in with fervor. Ava stood there watching, unsure of what she was witnessing. Was it OCD? Was it some display of a germaphobe? Did Ms. Hampton just think she was too good to put her ass where the asses of her underlings had so recently been?

When she finished cleaning the chair, she took another wipe and scrubbed at the table anywhere she might accidentally touch. As a final act, she took a white cloth and dried everything she had wiped before sitting.

“Could we please proceed so I can get on with my work?” She sat rigidly on the edge of the seat with her hands clasped in her lap.

“Sure,” Ava said, taking her own seat. “Were you here at the estate the night of the party?”

“Yes, of course I was.”

“How late were you here?”

“Until the next evening when I went home.”

Ava cocked an eyebrow. “You stayed overnight?”

“Yes, that's what I said, wasn't it?”

“Is that normal?” Ava scribbled the information on the page in her notepad.

“When Mr. Bianchi has an event that lasts into the morning hours and it’s too late for me to safely drive back home, yes. I have a small apartment at the back of the basement. Chef Kilgore has one, too. His is at the back of the kitchen, behind the stock rooms.”

“Why did you have to stay so late that night, Ms. Hampton?”

“Because I’m in charge of all the household staff. Some of them were here to keep things running during the party. I was here to make sure they did their jobs and didn’t slack. Just because it’s a party doesn’t mean they can act any differently than any other time they are at work.”

“Right. I understand. Why didn’t any of them stay overnight?”

“Because none of them stayed until the party was over. I remained here to make sure the house was cleaned up. And yes, that’s also normal.”

“How well did you know Ivana?”

“Not well. She and Mr. Bianchi were dating. They were serious. Discussing the future as if they might be planning on marriage sometime soon. What little I did know about her was good. No one ever had anything bad to say about her, and her online presence sparkled. I didn’t approve of the way she dressed sometimes, but I am a bit old-fashioned. She did dress more conservatively than most of the women who throw themselves at Mr. Bianchi.”

“Do many women throw themselves at Mr. Bianchi?”

Ms. Hampton chuckled wryly. “Do they ever. Gold diggers mostly. But he’s so handsome and successful, one can’t really blame them for trying. His heart was taken, though. He didn’t even notice those other women. He had eyes only for Ivana.”

“Did anyone ever make you think they might not share your good opinion of Ivana? Employees, Mr. Bianchi’s family, friends, people at the party, anyone?”

Ms. Hampton thought about it for only a couple of seconds and then shook her head. “No. She was lovely inside and out. I know that sounds cliché and makes some people cringe, but it was true. She was never rude to anyone, helped anyone she could, and she was always smiling every time I saw her. Just like in those pictures of her you see sitting around the house. That’s how she always was.”

“Did you notice anyone odd at the party? Anyone that seemed out of place?”

“No. Everyone who was here was invited. Mr. Bianchi is strict about that. They were invited if they were here.”

“Did Mr. Bianchi seem normal during the party?”

“Yes, and so did Ivana for the most part. But she was planning a trip to a silent retreat, so I thought it was due to the stress she was going through with her work. I don’t know what kind of stress there is as a social media star, but apparently there is because it’s not the first time she’d had trouble and scheduled a retreat.”

“But she seemed stressed?”

“Yes. Or, agitated might describe it better.”

“What time did you see her for the last time?”

“Probably between nine and ten at night.”

“You didn’t see her at all after that?”

Ms. Hampton shook her head. “No. I wasn’t an attendee. I was working in here, remember.”

“Right. How did you see her at that time, then?”

“She came in to use the restroom.”

“Was she alone?”

“No, she had another woman with her. I think it was her personal assistant. Maybe her best friend. They look so much alike that I can’t be sure.”

“It was only them and no one else, though?”

“That’s right. They were in the house for maybe six or eight minutes and then went back out to the party, and I never saw her again.”

“What time did you go to your apartment in the basement?”

“I’m not sure of the exact time. Maybe two or two-thirty. The event was over and Mr. Bianchi was back in the house. The alarm system was armed, so probably around two-thirty, two-forty-five.”

“In the week leading up to the party, did Mr. Bianchi act any differently than usual?”

“I don’t get paid to notice every mood change of my employer. I get paid to make sure the household is run smoothly and efficiently. I’m the head of the house, not the mistress of the house, Agent.”

Ava took a deep breath and lifted the pen from the page, clicking the top before sliding it into her pocket. "Thank you, Ms. Hampton. I'll show myself out."

"One thing you don't need my assistance with. That's encouraging." She shot Ava a toothy smile that made her look a little like a cannibal. It was not a flattering look for the woman, and Ava hoped to never see it again.

Stepping out the door, she took her phone out of her pocket and flipped through to Ellis' number.

"I'm right here if you're looking for my number," he called from her right.

She put the phone back in her pocket. "I was. Are you done?"

"Thankfully. You?"

"Yes. You get anything useful?"

"No. You?"

"The latest any of the staff saw Ivana alive the night of the party was between nine and ten. Ms. Hampton, head of household staff and wannabe comic book villain."

Without missing a beat, Ellis squinted at her. "You surprise me again. I wouldn't have pegged you as a comic book reader."

"I'm not. But that doesn't mean that's not where she drew her inspiration for her personality."

"Hope you kept your bedside manners intact after scolding me about mine."

"They're intact but damaged a bit."

He snorted as he walked in the direction of the storage shed. "Let's go do some damage control by getting your mind off it."

At the shed, they stopped to look around the outside.

"I only see about fifty different shoeprints out here, and none of them look old enough to be from the party and they're all different types of shoes," Ava said. She let out a frustrated sigh as she bent to look at the side of the path farthest from the shed.

After several minutes of sifting through the grass and shrubs along the side of the path, Ava stood and dusted off her pants. The path was flat where she stood, but it sloped up as she looked toward the house and down when she turned toward the fields. Any

evidence that might have dropped at the scene could have rolled farther downhill.

A half-hour later, she and Ellis went into the shed to look over the interior again. They went over every inch of the shed looking for any scrap of evidence that might have been missed.

As they worked closely together, Ava decided that not only was she liking the way he looked, but she liked the way he worked, too. He was meticulous, thorough, and efficient.

It wasn't often that she met anyone who thought and processed things the same way she did. Usually, it wasn't even close, and it made her feel closed-off from everyone as if she were working alone.

Metford got her most of the time, and so did Sal, but even they lacked the ability to keep up with her physically. Her drive was still in high gear when everyone else's was done and they were ready to call it quits. Not so with Ellis. His energy hadn't flagged even once, and he hadn't said a word about needing to get another meal since their late lunch.

When they left the Bianchi estate, it was nearly seven in the evening.

"We got a lot done today," Ava said, trying to remain positive.

Ellis said nothing. He was surely thinking the same thing Ava was thinking.

"And we got a whole lot of nothing useful." She let her head fall back against the rest.

"We have a shorter time period for when Ivana might have been murdered. That's something," he countered.

"A very little something for an entire day of investigating." Pessimistic wasn't her favorite way to feel.

"Frustrating."

"Very." She sat straighter in her seat and looked out her window. "We had to have missed something."

"Probably overlooked something simple. That's the damnable part of it all."

"But where and how?"

"I don't know yet," he admitted.

“Some simple little connection somewhere that would point us in the right direction. Just a little road sign maybe. There’s always something that nudges you in one direction, but I haven’t come across anything in this case yet.”

“But you do have that little niggling sensation. The one just under the surface of things trying to connect?”

“Yeah,” she said in surprise. “How’d you know that?”

“Because I have it, too.”

Yes, she was really liking the way he worked and thought and processed things. Being easy on the eyes was just a bonus. One she would take for the duration of the investigation.



CHAPTER EIGHT

Ava called Metford to check what the teams had found out in their interviews. Many of the people on the lists, as she had feared, were not in town and couldn't be reached. The ones who were had nothing to add of any use. Now, while Ava and Ellis drove back to the city, they had all gone to a bar for dinner and drinks.

"You two coming to join us? We've only been here ten minutes. We'll wait, if you want to join."

"No," Ava said. "Go ahead. I'll just grab a burger somewhere. There are some things I still want to get done before I go to bed tonight."

"Of course there are. What about Agent Ellis?" Metford asked, speaking loudly to be heard over the din of the music and the patrons on his end.

Ava looked over at Ellis with his hands on the wheel. "Do you want to join them at Dannon's for dinner and drinks?"

"Absolutely not."

"He said no, but thanks."

"Alright. See you in the morning at six-thirty?"

“Bye.” Ava hung up.

“You don’t like Dannon’s?”

“I do not. Unless I’m drunk before I go inside. It’s too loud, and that’s precisely the type of place I was worried my team would take yours during the day. If any of them come in showing the slightest signs of a hangover, they will wish they had never seen a damn beer.”

Ava didn’t know how to respond. She hoped none of her team would get drunk. The only person she thought she would have to worry about was Metford. She didn’t know what he would do if he was with a group of like-minded peers. The others, she thought, were okay to hold their own and keep a level head. If any of them caused trouble in San Francisco, heads would roll, though. She wouldn’t have to do it, either. Sal would hang them all out to dry if they caused her any grief.

“Did I hear you say you wanted another burger?”

“Or chicken sandwich, or whatever. I’m good with something from a drive-thru even. I want to find out more about Ivana before I go to bed. Maybe if I get to know her a little better, something we’ve already got in evidence, or something we saw today that looked like nothing, will make sense and connect some dots.”

“Fast food? Really?”

“That’s what you focused on?”

“No, that’s just the most shocking thing I heard.”

“So, now I’m one up, right?”

“I guess so. Which fast food do you prefer? We have them all and we’ve made up a few, I think.”

“The first one you pass is fine.”

Just as she said that, the iconic golden arches of a McDonald’s came into view, and she laughed.

“I guess it’s McDonald’s for dinner,” Ellis said, flipping on the signal light.

“Is it bad that I have this horrible craving for their big crispy chicken sandwich, fries, and a sweet tea?” she asked sheepishly.

“No worse than my urge for a large coffee and apple pie.”

“I know two people who are going to have to hit the workouts a little harder in the morning.” Ava thought Metford’s bad eating habits were rubbing off on her. He would have ribbed her about the sandwich and fries.

“You work out every morning before work, too?”

“That’s the only way to start the day. For me, anyway.”

“Best time to exercise. Clears and focuses your mind.”

He gave their orders and they drove through the line. “Want to take it back to my apartment to eat and research Ivana? Two birds, one stone.”

“I don’t know if that’s a good idea.” A sudden knot of apprehension formed high in her stomach where her solar plexus lay, and the skin over her shoulders tightened.

“Completely professional, Agent James. I am not hitting on you, if that’s what you’re thinking, and I’m no serial killer who’s luring you into a dark alley. I just thought it would be helpful if we both were researching Ivana and learning the same things at the same time. Both of us would be up to speed when we start the investigation tomorrow. I understand if you would rather go back to the hotel, though. I might be put off if I were in your shoes, too.”

“It’s just that I don’t really know you, and I don’t usually go off alone with anyone I don’t know.”

He nodded. “That’s an ace policy to follow. Not a problem at all. We’ll just get together first thing in the morning and go over what we learn about Ivana tonight. Shouldn’t take too long to merge all our information.”

And then she relented. “No, it’s okay. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make it sound like you were some sort of creep. We’ll go to your apartment. That’s fine. It shouldn’t take too long to do the research, and you’re right. If we do it together, it will be better for the case.” As she agreed, the ball of tension in her solar plexus relaxed, but the pulses of unease didn’t go away as easily.

“Are you sure? Because I completely understand if you don’t want to. I could go to your hotel and we could do it there if that makes you feel more comfortable. I wasn’t thinking when I asked you to come to my place. I have just gotten... comfortable working with

you, and it's like I've known you for a long time. I simply wasn't thinking how it would sound to you."

"It's fine. Let's just go to your place. Besides, I'm kind of curious to see what the housing is like out here." She liked that he was talking more, but it seemed to be out of nervousness, or maybe discomfort. Had her show of distrust made him that uncomfortable? If she couldn't trust another agent, one with whom she was working closely, who could she trust?

"I hope your expectations aren't too high. It's just a small apartment. A kind of crappy one at that. Rent is ridiculous out here."

They drove until they reached a part of the city where the buildings looked older but not in a bad way. The architecture just had more character. It wasn't all flat concrete and steel and glass walls.

"This is my building. At one time, it was a doctor's office. That was back in the sixties. After that, it was a boarding school for a few years and then they turned it into apartments in the late eighties. Not much has changed on the inside since the eighties, either."

"The front looks like it used to be a huge house," she said, looking up at the roof.

"Not many houses are five stories. It's just a façade."

They got out and walked across the tiny patch of grass that served as a front yard. He stopped on the first floor at the bank of mailboxes, unlocked one, pulled out a handful of envelopes, and locked the box again.

She followed him to the stairs. "We're not taking the elevator?"

"I'm on the second floor. It's just as fast to take the stairs."

She eyed him and then glanced at the elevator.

"Trust me. If you want to take it, be my guest." He motioned toward the elevator.

She joined him on the stairs. "It's just to the second floor."

A large panel of floor-to-ceiling art deco rectangles separated the entryway from the living room and the living room from the kitchen. The panels were more like divider screens she'd seen in old motel rooms. Ava touched one of the rectangles and ran her finger down to the smaller one inside it.

"Is this original?"

“It was here when I moved in, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Not much for privacy, huh?”

He shrugged as he stepped around her and into the living room. “Not married, no kids, no roomies.” He went into the kitchen area and flipped on a light. “No need for it. Come on in. We can use the laptop in here while we eat.”

She walked into the living room. The walls were covered with dark wood paneling. Another throwback. The leather sofa and chair were only a slightly lighter shade of brown. The table lamps were tall with dark wooden bases and barrel shades. Turning the corner, she joined him in the more modern kitchen. It looked like any typical bachelor’s apartment kitchen.

He turned on the laptop, pulled paper plates from a drawer, and motioned for her to sit. “Ivana Baruch,” he said as he typed her name into the search bar. He hit the enter button and the page filled with what seemed to be endless search results.

“Let’s just start with the first one and work our way through,” Ava suggested.

“Don’t use the internet very often?”

“Yes, I do,” she said a little too defensively.

He clicked on the first result and they read the seemingly endless landing page about Ivana Baruch, the last princess of Croatia. From that page, they fell down the rabbit hole together and dug deeper and deeper into the life of the altruistic and amazingly talented woman who had been killed and discarded as if she were nothing but a piece of rubbish.

Ivana was an icon, an influencer, a model. She was an entrepreneur with her own lines of jewelry and partnered with several skincare and makeup brands. She had millions of followers across social media platforms. If there was one platform where she didn’t hold a presence, they couldn’t find it.

Wanting to do all the good in the world that she could, Ivana traveled to impoverished countries all over the world and showed women how to make the jewelry she sold online. It was the type of one-on-one training that Ava and Ellis had never seen from any other entrepreneur. Ivana’s approach wasn’t a handout to get more

channel or video views, it was a helping hand so the people could earn for themselves. She trained them and then employed them at wages far above the typical pennies other brands would pay. For some of the women, it was probably the best they had ever had it.

Ivana also had small teams that constantly traveled to do that part of her work, but from what Ava read online and the videos she watched, the princess genuinely enjoyed the hands-on aspect of it. The people she helped didn't mind that she filmed or live-streamed their meetings either, as they received a percentage of the revenue on those videos. Ava was skeptical at first, but the details of the contracts were publicly available, and the families had come forward of their own accord to verify the PR spin. It seemed really true that Ivana simply wanted to do something good in the world. She even made several posts and videos to encourage others to take up the idea and run with it, even if they weren't so-called influencers.

In the months before her murder, Ivana was in the process of setting up an organization that would help women who had survived trafficking and other types of violence in their lives. Her organization would link these women up with much-needed services such as employment services, housing, food, loans, physicians, mental health support, drug rehab, physical rehab, and so much more. Again, none of it was at any cost or debt to Ivana. Everything offered was in a fashion that allowed the person being helped to make decisions and take their life in the direction they truly wanted. If they wanted it bad enough, they would work to make the changes. It was Ivana's philosophy that those women would then proceed to help others in the same way and the world would be a better place for it.

"Ivana was an angel on earth, wasn't she?" Ava asked, staring at a picture of the woman on the screen. She was smiling, her long, dark hair blowing to the side in a stiff breeze as she hugged a woman and her little girl in South Sudan. In front of them stood a makeshift table of old corrugated tin balanced on large uneven rocks. In the valleys of the tin lay pieces of jewelry the mother and daughter had just finished making after Ivana's instructions and help with a few. In the accompanying video, Ivana had given the little girl her favorite bracelet from the set to keep as her own.

“Seems that she was definitely a force for good.”

“Just look at all she had done by the age of thirty-three. Look at all the enormous good she put into motion all around the globe, in places where it mattered the most. It’s just unbelievable that one woman could do so much in so little time. She not only helped all those women and families in impoverished countries, but then to start an organization to help victims of trafficking and violence?” Ava shook her head and pushed her hair away from her face. “It just blows my mind how much good she did and how much will continue because she started it. It’s unthinkable and completely infuriating that some lowlife asshole just snuffed her out like a candle flame when she probably never hurt anything or anyone in her whole life.”

“You don’t know this woman,” Ellis countered. “You only see the public face of what she allowed the world to see. What made her look good.”

“But still, come on,” she insisted. She turned the screen toward him. “Does that face look like the face of someone who could hurt another human?”

Ellis smiled and turned the screen straight again. “Looks can be deceiving. I worked a case where a twelve-year-old girl with the face of a cherub killed her entire family. Mother, brother, father. All killed one night while they slept all because her parents refused to allow her to start dating a boy who was eighteen and they threatened to press charges on him if he ever came around her again. So, don’t let looks decide anyone’s guilt or innocence.” He stood and stretched. “Besides, guilt and innocence aren’t our concern.”

“How can you say that? Of course it is.”

He shook his head. “No. The law says the people we hunt must be tried in court to decide whether they did something wrong or not. Everyone is presumed innocent until proven guilty. You know that.”

“And we both know that’s exactly how it always goes because that’s right.” Ava pushed the screen down on the computer and rubbed her eyes. “Whoever did this to Ivana should suffer the maximum under the law. Or, better yet, maybe they should suffer even more.”

“Your passion on the subject is endearing, I must admit. Why so passionate about it?”

Ava looked up at him, stunned. She had let her guard down and didn't know how to respond immediately. She shook her head and bobbed her shoulders. “I don't know. For one, it deserves to be noted how truly good Ivana was. For two, her good works should be publicized everywhere, shouted from the rooftops. I don't see any other influencers, or anyone for that matter, doing such good in the world. Especially like she did. I wish I had known her so I could have met her.” Ava's heart twisted a little. She would have loved to be involved with the organization Ivana was starting for victims of trafficking and violence.

“Seems like there might be a bit of a personal reason there, but I won't badger you about it. I'm just glad to see that someone has some passion left in them for something good. People are so desensitized to everything today. It's disheartening.”

“It is.”

There was no need to go into any amount of detail about why it hit so close to her heart. It wasn't like they would be seeing each other after the case was closed. And, if she talked about Molly and her mother, it would ultimately lead to the need to reveal the entire ordeal in Prague, because Ellis was no rookie, he was a damn good detective and would know when she wasn't telling him the whole story. Even if she didn't tell him the whole story, he wasn't dull, and he would surely put it together that she had been kidnapped in Prague. That was enough to deter her from talking about it with him.

After a few moments' thought, she realized that she had no desire to talk about any of it. Not Prague, her mother, or Molly with a stranger.

But was Ellis really a stranger?

No more than he was dangerous, that little voice whispered.

“You're awful deep in some thought there. You okay?” Ellis asked.

“Yeah, I guess. It's just I can't get it out of my head about Ivana and all she was doing. Do you think she knew people who had been trafficked and that was why she was starting that organization?”

Ellis shrugged and headed for the living room where he sat heavily on the sofa. He motioned to an oversized chair close to him. "I don't know. Maybe. Is that why it hit you so hard and won't leave you alone? You know some people who were victims of trafficking or something?"

Ava stretched as she walked the few steps to the living room chair. "As a matter of fact."

"Really?" He sat forward, seemingly more interested. "Family?"

"Something like that. Kidnapped in Prague while celebrating a birthday. Took seven long years for the rescue to finally take place." She shook her head and squeezed her eyes shut as flashes of Prague intruded her memories followed by flashes of Molly's rescue. Chaos, terror, strength, love, and hate all roiled together in those flashes.

"Traffickers will grab from anywhere. They don't give a damn about the occasion or the person or the person's family."

"No, they only care about their own sick desires and how much money they can make." Ava looked out a window. It was dark and streetlights glowed at even intervals along the roads. She looked at her watch and jumped. "Shit, it's three in the morning." She stood and ran her hand through her hair.

"I'll take you back to the hotel. I didn't realize so much time had passed."

"We'll feel it in the morning," she said. "I can call an Uber so you don't have to go back out."

"Nonsense. It's not like I'm asleep." He picked up his keys from the entry table. "Come on. It'll be safer riding with me anyway."

She grinned and headed for the door.

How long had it been since she had stayed up so long with anyone without realizing how much time had gone by?



CHAPTER NINE

Ava showered and lay on her bed trying to fall asleep but it didn't work. Knowing her alarm was going to blare at half-past five, her mind wouldn't let go of its anxiety that she would oversleep. A ninety-minute nap would have been better than nothing, and much better than forcing her restless self to lie there waiting for the alarm, but she had little choice. She wanted to be as rested and alert as possible when she arrived at the office.

At six-thirty, she emerged from her room with one thought on her mind: find the biggest, blackest cup of coffee in the city of San Francisco.

"Hey, what time did you finally get in last night?" Metford asked as he walked up behind her at the elevator.

"It was late. Found out a ton about our victim, though." She stepped into the elevator and stifled a yawn. Her eyes burned with the effort.

"You didn't find it out in your room." He grinned suggestively.

"No, Metford. I did not find out the information pertaining to our case in my hotel room." How did he know that? He hadn't called or

texted her, and he certainly didn't have a keycard to her room. She refused to ask. He was being juvenile, and she didn't have the wherewithal to deal with him until she had caffeine.

He cleared his throat and dropped the smile. "So, is he the stick in the mud I believe him to be?"

"Who?" She glared at him briefly before turning to face the opening doors. She knew exactly who he was talking about.

"Ellis. Or were you with someone else last night?" He grinned again as he stepped past her and out of the elevator.

Sighing, she followed him into the lobby where the others were waiting.

"Jeez, you look like you pulled an all-nighter," Santos commented.

"Nothing a good strong cup of caffeine won't cure," Ava said. She fidgeted with the keys and headed for the door. She didn't want to hear what anyone else had to say about her late night with Ellis. Her wits weren't sharp enough to banter about it.

"I didn't even hear her doing her workout this morning," Metford said as if it was a huge deal.

"That's real creepy, Mettie. What do you do, listen at her wall?" Santos asked as she dropped her sunglasses into place. "Damn this California sun. Is it never overcast out here?"

"I like it," Ashton said, smiling up at the sky.

"Because it doesn't feel like somebody's driving railroad spikes through your eyes every time you step outside," Santos said.

"How are those migraines?" Ava asked. She punched the button on the fob to unlock the doors and they got in.

"I'll survive, but these are not optimal conditions." Santos snickered and flopped back against the seat. "Not optimal optical conditions, either."

"She has a sense of humor," Metford said. "It's just buried under ten layers of *grrr* and coated in cold armor."

"You bring out the best in me, Mettie. What can I say?"

Ava started the car and drove. At least the others seemed to be fine and in top condition, which meant their night out hadn't left them impaired with hangovers. She just hoped Ellis' team was the same.

At the office, Ava immediately went on the hunt for strong coffee. She was preparing to dump double the portion of coffee grounds into the filter when Ellis walked in.

“You’re not really going to do that, are you?”

His eyes were clear and his shoulders straight. He looked as if he’d had a full night’s rest.

“You just watch and see.” She scooped coffee into the filter.

“Jasper is going by Starbucks on her way. She called. If you can hold out five more minutes, you’ll have coffee that will open your eyes and not hit your gut like a nuclear weapon.”

“Thank God,” Ava said. She dropped the scoop back into the canister. “I need it this morning but I didn’t know where any coffee shops were except the one down the street from the hotel.”

He shook his head. “I wouldn’t recommend going there. The signage is still there, and they do serve coffee, but it’s with a side of harassment and sometimes mugging from the homeless people on the sidewalk.”

Ava shoved the filter back in place and clamped her teeth together. What was it with everyone being so mean toward the homeless population in the city? She was sick of hearing it, but she didn’t feel like arguing and firing up a headache, so she changed the subject completely.

“I was thinking about where Ivana was found in the storage shed,” she said as she turned to face Ellis again.

“Yes.”

“We’re sure that’s where she was killed?”

“We found no traces of evidence suggesting she’d been killed elsewhere and moved there.”

Jasper announced her arrival from the doorway of the outer office. Elliot walked in with her, and each of them carried cardboard trays of coffee cups sporting the Starbucks logo.

“Morning wake-up call,” Jasper said loudly.

Ava thanked Jasper for the coffee and walked toward Ellis’ office without waiting for an invitation. He followed with his own coffee as Metford and the others teased Jasper and Elliot about the lack of donuts.

Ellis shut the office door and propped on his desk. “And?”

“I was just wondering what Ivana was doing at the storage shed.”

“We don’t know. Nobody does. At least, no one that I’ve spoken with had any idea why she would have been there instead of at the party with everyone else.”

“That’s my hangup with this whole situation right now. We went over her entire online history. She was very smart. She had to have street smarts, too. It isn’t just any woman who can go into these countries all over the world and do the things she did without street smarts.”

“What do street smarts have to do with a millionaire’s party on his winery estate?”

“Ivana wouldn’t have been down at the shed so late at night by herself for no reason.” Ava drank deeply of the dark roast. The invigoration of its rich, thick aroma and the heavy caffeine content flipped a switch inside her. The effects were welcome after the long and sleepless night.

“Maybe she just needed to get away from the noise. You know how raucous those parties can get. Ivana was headed to a retreat for just that sort of thing, after all.”

“No. The retreat was for getting away from the internet and the electronics—not from people, per se. It was to be able to wake up and not feel like she had to check her phone, her tablet, her computer for texts, emails, news, sales updates, and track exactly how ridiculously busy her next few days were going to be with filming and traveling.” Ava drank more coffee. “I think being with real people is what she loved. She wouldn’t have just left the party without telling someone where she was going or at least telling them when she would be back. She was too responsible for that.”

“Well, what are you suggesting? I don’t follow unless you’re suggesting that someone lured her away from the group somehow.”

“That’s exactly what I’m suggesting. I believe that’s what happened. It would logically explain why an otherwise smart, responsible, and cautious woman would go walking alone that far from the main house in the dark. You have to remember it was pretty

late, which means that the people at the party were probably deep into the liquor and other party favors by then.”

“We’re not sure it was very late, though.”

“I’m saying it was after ten, and I might be wrong, but I’m willing to bet it was closer to midnight. If not, then the killer was someone she knew and trusted.”

“What makes you so sure of that?”

“Ivana didn’t live at the estate. She wouldn’t have known all the people at the party—they were Bianchi’s peers, not hers. She wouldn’t have been comfortable enough with the property and the workers there to go walking alone after dark away from the house. Even if she did, for her own safety, she would have taken her assistant or another person with her.”

“How would anyone have lured her away from the party? If she was there enjoying the celebration with Bianchi and the nearly one hundred other people in attendance, how would anyone lure her away without someone else noticing?”

Ava thought about it as she finished her coffee. The buzz of alertness rode through her body on the wave of caffeine, and she thought she might just love Starbucks.

“And who would have lured her? Did that person intend to kill her? Was it a murder of opportunity? A kind of wrong place, wrong time kind of thing?” he went on.

“We need to collect the cellphones of anyone who had access to Ivana’s number. Friends, coworkers, relatives, anyone who would have been able to even get ahold of her number from a random file. A simple text message or phone call could have been what lured her to the storage shed,” she postulated.

He contemplated it for a moment, his face that same mask of unreadable blankness that she loathed and admired simultaneously.

“If we can search the phones, we can see who was in contact with her, but if the messages or calls, whatever they used to contact her, have been erased, then we’ll need access to the phone records to find them.”

“I vote that we collect those phones and then ask for access to the phone records. That’s where we should start. That way if the

communications have been deleted, we won't have to go over everything twice. Just get the phones and then we'll start the search in the records. Can we swing that?"

He finished his coffee and tossed the cup into the trash bin. "I think we most certainly can. Come on, we'll make a list and start collecting phones. This might be an all-day job."

"As long as we get it done, I don't care if it takes two days," Ava said, smiling. Getting the gears turning on the case again made her happy, and although no one could see it on his face, she knew it made Ellis happy, too.

Ms. Hampton wasn't happy about handing over her cellphone, and neither were the other seventeen staff members in the house.

Bianchi handed over both of his cell phones without a fuss. "I hope this somehow helps find justice for my Ivana."

"We do, too, Mr. Bianchi," Ava said.

"Why do we need to be without our phones?" Ms. Hampton asked. "None of us had Miss Baruch's personal phone number. None of us were friends with her. Why are we being punished?" Her eyes flashed with barely-subdued anger and her cheeks burned red.

"You aren't being punished, Ms. Hampton," Bianchi said. "You will not be without phones. Alessandro is, even now, buying phones for all the staff. I will fund the phones until yours are safely back in your hands. This must be done to eliminate the possibility that anyone on the estate had anything to do with Ivana's death. I will have no more argument about it. We will all cooperate in any way with the agents to find her killer and bring him to justice."

Ellis glanced at Ava, and she knew what he was thinking. Bianchi kept an orderly house just like he kept an orderly business. He wouldn't allow anyone to go against him once he had made a decision. To Ellis, this kept him high on the suspect list. To Ava, it just showed how he had become successful. It didn't necessarily mean it was a trait that bled over into his relationship with Ivana. Even if it did bleed over, it in no way meant that he killed her for disagreeing with him over anything. He was a hard businessman, and perhaps a hard-nosed boss, but he also had a kind streak and tried to keep his

employees happy and safe. What other boss would have bought phones and paid for the usage for all his employees?

She shook her head at Ellis. He scoffed and hoisted the box of phones and the accompanying clipboard of information under his arm.

“We’ll show ourselves out,” he said as he turned away.

“When will we know anything?” Bianchi asked mildly.

“When we know something,” Ellis said.

“How long before we get our phones back?” one of the women asked.

“We’ll be processing maybe a hundred of them, so it might take a while,” Ava said. “We’ll make it as soon as possible to limit your inconvenience.”

“You’re not going to erase anything from them, are you?” another woman asked. “I have kids, and there are videos and pictures—”

“No, we’re not going to copy or delete anything from your phones. We’re only interested in who was in contact with the victim,” Ellis said hotly. “We’ll let you know as soon as we’re finished processing them. Goodbye.” He looked at Ava and jerked his head toward the door.

She turned to face the group. “Sorry. I’ll be sure to let you know soon. I promise.” She handed Bianchi her card and then handed one to Ms. Hampton. “If any of you have any questions, email or call me.”

Ellis jerked the door open and walked out leaving Ava to catch up. She refused to rush out the door after him.

“What the hell, Ellis? Would it kill you to be civil?” she asked as soon as they were at the car.

He tossed the box into the back seat. “All they were doing was delaying us with stupid questions and bitching about their precious phones. Don’t they care that a woman was murdered and stuffed in a damn barrel right here on the estate where they report to work every day? Don’t they care that their big-hearted boss who’s buying them all new phones might be the killer?” He yanked the driver’s door open and got in.

Ava got in the passenger seat. Hearing his point of view had cooled her temper quite a bit. “Still...” She let the sentence die in the

air between them, unwilling to argue and equally unwilling to completely let go of her own philosophy.

“Being nice is going to get you killed one day, you know that?” He drove down to the road and zoomed onto the pavement without looking for cars. “You can’t just be nice to everybody. For starters, they don’t really care. They just want to feel special. Well, screw ‘em. They’re not special. They’re not the ones who are dead, murdered. We didn’t have to fish them out of a barrel, did we? And if you keep misplacing your niceness, someone is going to be luring *you* to a storage shed in the middle of the night, so you need to get a handle on it. The world isn’t nice. People aren’t nice. We have a job to do, and I don’t always have time to worry about other people’s feelings.”

Ava let his words ring out in the silence of the car before responding in a measured, even tone. “Are you finished? Do you feel better?”

He shot a look at her that could have melted cast iron.

“Did you get that out of your system? I hope so, because I *know* the world isn’t nice. I know people aren’t nice. Why do you think I joined the Bureau? Do you think it was for the prestige?” She gave a bark of bitter laughter. “Boy, that’s a hoot. Do you think it’s because I thought it was going to get me noticed? Or, because it was such an easy thing to accomplish that I just thought I would pass up being a dolphin trainer, a doctor, a nurse, or a hundred other things I could have done instead?”

Ellis pressed his lips into a tight line and kept his eyes on the road ahead.

“Joining the Bureau has been one of the most difficult things I have ever been through. I’m not here to be a tourist, I’m not here for the kicks or the rush, and I’m damn sure not here to be talked down to by men who think they know more than I’ll ever know just because I’m a woman.”

“A dolphin trainer? You?”

“What?” she asked in confusion.

He bobbed his head once. “Actually, I could see that. You’d work well with animals. But you’d still have to learn your limits with how nice you could be. Dolphins are surprisingly pretty dangerous.”

“You think it’s funny to just get people riled up?” Her heart thudded in her head like war drums.

“No, but I always like to know my partner’s limits. I have to know that my partner will stand up for himself if necessary. Or herself. And, in your case, I had to know if you knew the limitations of being nice to people who clearly didn’t deserve it.”

“So, you were prodding me like I’m some kind of experiment. Using an electric prod on a cow.”

He chuckled shortly. “I’m sorry, okay?”

“No, it’s not okay. Not at all okay.”

“You’re right. That was a dick thing to do. If it makes you feel any better, I have done it to everybody on my team at least once.”

“It doesn’t make me feel even the least bit better.” She looked out her window unsure of her level of anger. Was she furious or just a little pissed? Would she even be able to continue working comfortably with Ellis? Had she so sorely misjudged him, after all?

He let her ride all the way back out of Napa Valley in silence, and by the time they were out, her deep anger had subsided once again. Maybe he was right to test his partners. Didn’t everyone test their partners to an extent? Even in romantic relationships?

They did as far as she could figure, but most didn’t do it as brutally and swiftly and without warning the way Ellis had done. He had completely pulled one over on her again. That’s what had riled her to remain angry with him for so long.

“Want to stop at Peggy Sue’s on the way in?” he asked, breaking the silence as if nothing had happened.

If he could let her rant go that easily, she could let his little tirade go, too. “You know, that sounds like a good idea. We can devise our next move while we eat.”

“Good thing the estate was our last stop on the phone collection tour,” he said, eyeing the two boxes of collected cellphones in the backseat. “You think Metford and Oliver had as much luck?”

Ava nodded. “I’m sure they did, and Metford probably was almost as nice to everyone about it as you were.”

Ellis laughed as he flung his jacket over the boxes.



CHAPTER TEN

Ava looked at her watch. It was already past seven in the evening and they had just left the diner. “You think we should wait until tomorrow to go talk to Filip? Isn’t it getting a little late?”

Ellis shook his head. “He’s Ivana’s father. I would think he’d be more than happy to talk to us no matter if it was three in the morning. Besides, we’ll be at his house before eight. Not like we’ll be interrupting his bedtime.”

“He probably isn’t sleeping much since Ivana’s murder. I know I wouldn’t be sleeping at all if my only child was murdered and her killer was still running loose.”

“We need to get his phone, too,” Ellis reminded her.

“I hate to think her own father had anything to do with her death, Ellis,” Ava said. “Putting him under the microscope is going to compound his grief.”

“If he’s innocent. And can we get on a first-name basis? If we’re going to be working together, I don’t see why we have to stick to last names. Hi, Ava, I’m Jason.” He let go of the steering wheel with one hand and stuck it out for her to shake.

She grinned and shook it quickly. “Hi, Jason, put your hand back where it belongs, please.”

He complied with a smirk. “Much better.”

“How far is it to Thomas Avenue?” she asked.

“Not that far. Kind of. We’ll be there before eight, don’t worry.”

Thomas Avenue wasn’t as far away as she had feared. They reached their destination in about twenty minutes with heavy traffic in some places.

Houses lined both sides of the street. The architectural styles were wildly different. One thing most of the houses had in common were the fences surrounding the tiny properties. Ellis parked on the corner at the curb in front of a three-story Victorian. It was beautiful—or rather, had been beautiful once, but now it was an eyesore on the prim and proper neighborhood. The peeling paint on the east side lent the place an air of creepiness that Ava didn’t appreciate. It seemed unkempt and cluttered even though the white picket fence with its spiked tops was in immaculate condition around the entire eight-foot side yard, and the one tiny tree and the single small bush within the fence were the only things present, it still felt unkempt because of the peeling paint above the first-floor window.

“Is it apartments?” she asked. Maybe that’s why the outside had been neglected.

“No. It’s listed as his residence, a house.” Ellis consulted the file again.

“One man lives in that monster all alone?”

“Unless he has boarders, yes.” He stepped out of the car. “I only see a couple of lights on the first floor. He might not be home.”

Ava got out and leaned to look down the side of the house. What she had first thought was a three-story house, was really a partial four-story. Atop the front section was a fourth level with windows set far back under the eaves. Perhaps it was only an attic space, but maybe an extra living area.

“No wonder these houses get chopped up into apartments all the time,” she muttered, unable to keep the awe out of her voice. It was unusual to see such a large house cramped into such a small space. The structure was thin and very long.

“In its prime, I bet it was a real beauty.” Ellis went up the steps.

“If someone had taken a few pains with the exterior, it still would be,” she said, stepping up beside him.

He knocked on the door and then rang the doorbell. She grinned.

“What?”

“Overkill much?”

“You never know if those things are even hooked up.” He pointed to the doorbell that looked as if it might have been original to the house.

Ten seconds later, he repeated the knock and doorbell ring. “Hello, Mr. Baruch. You home? It’s the FBI. We need to speak to you about your daughter, Ivana,” he said loud enough that Ava had to step away from him.

Somewhere inside the house, glass shattered and a man’s voice grumbled curse words.

“Mr. Baruch? Everything okay in there?” Ellis yelled with his hand on his gun.

Ava followed suit.

Again, the man’s deep, raspy voice spewed a mountain of curse words. His heavy footsteps thumped toward the door, and Ellis backed up two steps, his eyes narrowing.

The door jerked inward. A man stood there looking at them with red-rimmed eyes. It was immediately evident that the redness wasn’t just from grief. The smell of vodka wafted out and encircled them. The man’s eyes dropped to Ellis’ hand on his gun and then over to Ava and her similar stance. He ran a hand down over his stubbled face and back up through his buzz-cut gray hair.

“Mr. Baruch?” Ava asked.

The man nodded. “Yes, this is me.”

“Filip Baruch,” Ellis said.

“Yes, I said yes. What do you want? Who are you? You wish to shoot me?” He threw his arms wide. “Then do it. I have nothing to live for anyway.”

Ava snapped her gun back into the holster and stood straight. Ellis did the same but a little more slowly.

“Mr. Baruch, we’re with the FBI,” Ava said as she moved toward him slowly. She showed him her badge. “We’re just here to talk to you about your daughter, Ivana.”

“I know my daughter’s name, Agent. I only had the one. She was my only child.” He turned away and walked back into the house, leaving the door open.

“May we come in to speak with you, Mr. Baruch?” Ellis asked.

Ava cocked an eyebrow at him.

“What?” he asked in a low voice.

“That’s an improvement. You do have some social skills.”

He scoffed and turned back to the open door. “Mr. Baruch, we’re coming inside.”

“Do whatever you want. I don’t care anymore,” Baruch answered. His words slurred as he turned a corner and disappeared into a dimly lit room.

Ava closed the door behind her and followed Ellis down the entry hall.

“Mr. Baruch?” he called.

“I’m in here.”

They stepped into the spacious living room. Like the exterior, the furniture had been elegant once upon a time, but not any longer. It was worn and faded in places. The coffee table had distinct light spots where bottles had been placed over the years and their condensation allowed to run onto the wood and slowly deteriorate the finish. The carpet was dusty and hadn’t been vacuumed recently.

Filip picked up one of the several bottles of vodka on the table and turned it up. Nothing came out of the bottle. He looked displeased and tossed it to the cushion beside him. “Are you going to talk or do you want a drink? You might have to go to the corner package store and refresh my stocks.”

“No, sir, we don’t want to drink,” Ava said.

“I’m not in the mood to hold court, so if you could be on with your business.”

“Mr. Baruch, we need your cellphone,” Ellis said.

Filip ran his hand into his pocket and fished around and then did the same thing with his left side. Shrugging, he showed them his

empty hands. "I don't know where the damn thing is. If you can find it, you can have it. I have no use for it. Damn nuisance anyway."

"I'm not searching this whole house for a cellphone," Ellis said.

Ava took out her phone. "Mr. Baruch, what's your number?"

He told her and she keyed it into her phone. "Just listen for the ringing," she told Ellis.

A few seconds later, Mr. Baruch lifted one leg and stuck his hand between the couch cushions. "Found it." He tossed the phone toward Ellis while it was still ringing and reached for another bottle, this one with probably a sip's worth of brown liquid in it. He held it up as if to toast them half-heartedly. "*Živjeli*," he muttered as he tipped it back.

"If you could hold off on the booze just until we leave, it would really be appreciated," Ava said as she disconnected the call.

Filip sat back and eyed her for a moment. She was sure he was getting ready to unleash on her. Instead, he smiled. It was a big, loopy smile.

"You know, this is the house I raised my Ivana in. Lena saw this house one day when we were driving, and she said to me that she just *had* to have it. I didn't stop until I could give it to her. Her and Ivana. They loved this big house with its fancy furnishings and expensive linens. Lena was of royal blood, you know." His smile faded a bit, no doubt dragged down by his losses and his grief.

"It's a beautiful home, Mr. Baruch," Ava replied gently.

"No, no, no. It *was* a beautiful home. Then Lena died and now Ivana has died, and it is an ugly home. A stain. A tombstone. Full of nightmares and heartache. I hate it." He covered his face with both hands and made a sound that only a deeply grieving father could make.

Ava looked at Ellis. He shrugged and chucked a thumb toward the entry hall. She motioned for him to take the situation, and for a minute, she thought he was going to just sit there despite knowing she was horrible when people started cranking up the waterworks. Even when they were justified, tears forced her into one of two modes: shutdown or panic.

Ellis cleared his throat. "Mr. Baruch. We're really sorry for your losses, but we need to ask you some questions about your daughter.

Unless you're so inebriated you can't answer them."

"It would take more than a few drinks to incapacitate me, young man."

"It's Agent Ellis, if you please, Mr. Baruch. How was the relationship between Leonardo Bianchi and your daughter in the days and weeks before her murder?"

Ava shot him a look. He could have used the word death instead of murder. But it was his show since she had backed away from the crying Filip and all his rollercoaster emotions.

"It was good. They planned on marriage. Soon. Leonardo is a good man. I hope you are not eyeing him as a suspect because that is a preposterous waste of time and effort."

"No one is off the list just yet," Ellis assured him.

Filip mumbled something in Croatian that Ava was sure was more cursing.

"Did any of Leonardo's staff dislike your daughter for any reason?"

"No, no, no. They probably didn't even know her well. Only as Leo's guest and fiancée. She wasn't friends with any of them."

"Did she have many friends? I mean, real friends, not the online ones. Anyone she met up with to go out and eat, go to the mall, the movies, walk in the park?"

"Only Leonardo, really that I can think of at the moment. Her assistant. She was a good girl and kept to herself when she wasn't out changing the world. Just like her mother... always doing good wherever and however she could."

"Do you know anyone who would want to harm your daughter?"
Ava joined in.

"No. Who would wish to harm an angel?"

Ava nodded.

"Someone did, Mr. Baruch. Someone had something against her, and we really need to find out who if you ever want justice for your little girl," Ellis said.

Filip fidgeted and shook his head. "I know nothing about anyone who would want to hurt my Ivana. She was humble and kind like her mother. So much like her mother. Lena would help anyone. Would

take from herself to give to those less fortunate. Ivana was a little shrewder about helping, but she would have taken her last dollar and handed it to a child if she thought the child needed it.”

“Yes, she was very altruistic, and she did so much good in the world. That’s all the more reason we need to know if anyone in her circle, anyone at the party that night, anyone you can think of at all might have had even the slightest grudge against her,” Ava urged.

Filip cleared his throat and reached for another bottle—this time a beer. He lifted it, was instantly disappointed that it too was empty, and tossed it to the cushion beside him, where it clinked loudly against the one he’d tossed there earlier. “I don’t know. I know nothing about it. I just know my only child has been taken from me and I have nothing left in this world.” He sat forward and put his elbows on his knees. The strange, nostalgic smile returned. “You know, her mother gave up everything to be with me. Now, I can’t help but wonder if she ever felt lonely the way I do now. She couldn’t have, though. She had me and Ivana.”

Ava and Ellis looked at each other for a moment. Ava was ready to give up and come back when Filip was sober. He was stuck on Memory Lane and seemed intent on staying there.

“What do you mean she gave up everything to be with you, Mr. Baruch?” Ellis asked, surprising Ava.

The saddest smile she’d ever seen crossed his face. “She loved me. They kicked her out of the family for it. I was not of royal blood. A commoner. They didn’t approve, you see, so they turned their backs on her because she loved me and wanted to marry me. I was but a lowly businessman. But we were so in love that we didn’t care. The title was meaningless. We wanted to get married and move to America so I could chase my dreams.”

“Sounds like a love story for the ages,” Ellis said. A strange little smile played at his mouth for a fleeting moment.

“Oh, it hurts my heart to remember. So pure, so strong. We were bonded so deeply. I could have never made it so far in life without her by my side. If I had married any other woman, I would still be a struggling nobody back in Croatia. Not that I don’t love my home country, but America is my home. It is where my life was made. Lena

was pregnant only a year after we moved here. She lost everything to be with me and then she died just five years ago.” Tears rolled down his face again. He didn’t sniffle or try to hide them. “My Ivana was all I had left in this world. I was so proud of her. So was her mother. And now they’re both gone.”

“And you’re sure you can’t think of anyone who might have been upset with Ivana about anything?” Ava pressed. Even something that seemed trivial. Sometimes very minor things can get blown out of proportion when someone is angry.”

Filip’s gaze shifted to hers but he was quiet. His lips moved as if he was going to say more, but no words came out. After a few tense seconds, he blinked and shook his head as he let his gaze fall to the coffee table and he slid back against the sofa cushions. He had gone into shutdown mode. Ava recognized it immediately. There was no way they were getting anything more out of him that night.

“Thank you, Mr. Baruch.” Ava left her card on the coffee table, then stood and stepped toward the doorway. “We’ll be in contact. We’ll show ourselves out.”

He nodded but his expression was as vacant as his eyes.

“I’ll lock the door on the way out,” she added as they stepped into the hallway.

Filip didn’t acknowledge her again. He simply sat there with his wide, vacant stare. The epitome of a heartbroken man who truly thought he had nothing left to live for.

“You know Baruch and Bianchi must have gone to the same drama school,” Ellis said the moment Ava locked the door behind her. He unlocked the car and swung his door open.

“What do you mean?”

“That over-the-top reaction in there. Just like Bianchi’s.” He started the car.

“He wasn’t acting. Did you get a look at him as we left the room? That man is destroyed,” Ava replied.

“No, he was three sheets to the wind drunk and feeling sorry for himself and covering something up. I think it was his own ass, honestly.”

“Why? Just because you have a tough exterior that no emotion can show through for more than three seconds doesn’t mean everyone is hardwired that way. He lost his wife and his daughter and he’s in the country alone. No family or anything.”

“A man like Filip Baruch is never truly alone. He hasn’t lived here for thirty-five years and not made some close friends, I can tell you that much for sure. No man is an island, Ava.”

“Well, I’m not going to argue. I’m just saying, the man lost his wife and now his only child. He has a right to fall apart at the seams. Even if it’s just for a little while. We’ll question him another day.”

“Yeah, when he’s not hip-deep in the sauce, preferably. He knew more than he was saying. I saw that much before he shut down completely. Don’t tell me you didn’t see it. He was looking right at you. He came so close to telling us something.” He held his hand up with his thumb and forefinger millimeters apart. “So close.”

“I’m not denying that. I did see that, but it doesn’t mean he had anything to do with Ivana’s death. Personally, I don’t think he did. If he had done something to cause her death, guilt would have made him confess or kill himself by now. He couldn’t stand a secret like that. You saw him. Tell me he’s strong enough for something like that.”

Ellis was quiet for a long time and then he shook his head. “No. You’re right. He probably isn’t strong enough to hold something like that inside for very long. It would tear him apart. Literally. But if he turns up as a suicide in the next week or so, you’ll know I was right.”

She shook her head and sighed. What was it with Ellis thinking everyone was overreacting when they showed anything less than stiffly measured doses of emotion?



CHAPTER ELEVEN

The next day started better after a good night's sleep. Of course, five hours of broken sleep wasn't considered good by a lot of standards, but Ava would take that over no sleep any day.

"What's on the agenda for today?" she asked Ellis as soon as she walked into the office.

"I think I am going to do some research into Leonardo Bianchi's past. While I'm at it, I'll pull up good ol' Dad's files, too." He tipped his coffee to her from behind his desk. "What did you have in mind for today?"

"It would be a good idea if I spoke to the teams and found out what they've got from the interviews so far. My team has said they haven't been able to locate some of the interviewees, and Dane said she learned something last night that might help us."

Ellis nodded. "We'll get together later and compare notes, then."

Ava walked back to where the teams were gathered with their paperwork. Her team had not adjusted to not having the usual morning meetings as they usually did. Ellis did things differently, it

seemed, but his team was efficient and they seemed to clear cases just as well without the same structure.

“Has anyone cleared all the names on their list?” Ava asked the group. She was disheartened to see that no one raised their hand or spoke up.

“Okay, I take it that everyone has at least one or two people on the list that can’t be located.” She picked up a clipboard and pen. “Jasper, who can’t be located from your list?”

“Cillian Halliday and Jeffrey Bowman. Both are listed as California residents, and both seem to be out of the country. Cillian didn’t attend the party, but I haven’t been able to prove he was in Florida that night.”

“If he can’t be located, why do you think he was in Florida the night of the party?”

“Because that was the reason he gave Leonardo for not being able to attend. Said he was going to his little sister’s wedding in Miami.”

“Okay, that’s your first assignment for the day. Check that alibi and get him cleared from the list. If he was in Florida, he didn’t kill Ivana, and we don’t want to waste any more time or effort on him than necessary. I’ve put Jeffrey Bowman on my list. Quinn, you’re next.”

“Celeste Adair. Lives in France. Didn’t attend. Supposedly, she was attending an event in Paris. The CCTV footage of the event is on its way to me today. I called for it yesterday and will let you know as soon as I clear her.”

“Thank you,” Ava said, impressed. “Any others?”

“Only one, but I have a scheduled interview with him this morning at nine. Unless you want him.”

“No, that’s fine. Keep the appointment. Thank you. Oliver?”

“Stedman D’Angelo. He was at the party. He’s Italian but lives here. His father owns a big tech business and has his fingers in a lot of lucrative pies in that genre, but Stedman is a known playboy. From what I’ve learned, he’s probably in another country. Or, he could just be gambling somewhere here.”

“Run a search on him. Driver’s license, passport, whatever it takes. I want him located. If he was at the party, he might know something even if he doesn’t realize it.”

“On it,” Oliver affirmed.

“Tate? How many?”

“Just one. Remi Martinez. His parents were big celebrities in Mexico back in the early and mid-nineties. They just moved here two years ago as a family. Remi was at the party. He got too drunk and a friend had to drive him out. I found the friend. He took him to a hotel in Santa Rosa. He says he hasn’t seen Remi since. Family hasn’t seen him either. Maybe still at the hotel. I’ll check it out today.”

“Very good. Thank you. Santos?”

“Selma Dreyfus. Model from Spain who has her own line of shoes. Real globetrotter, that one, and she was not at the party.”

“Okay, I have Stedman D’Angelo on my list and Selma Dreyfus and Jeffrey Bowman. I don’t want you to stop looking for them. Pull out all the stops. Do whatever it takes to track them down. Metford?”

“I’ve got mine under control. One man who was at the party and one who was not. I have a new address for the attendee and good information says the other man is with him. I’m on it today, but it might take all day.”

“Takes as long as it takes. Let me know what you find out.”

Metford nodded.

“Ashton?”

“I’ve got two Germans who are likely both in Germany. I have my searches running as we speak. Fritz Weiss, and even I’m not sure what he does for a living. I don’t think anyone knows but Fritz. His pockets are deep, and he and Leonardo Bianchi have been friendly for a couple of decades now. And then Alma Freiberg. German actress and a good friend of Leonardo Bianchi. They’ve known each other for a long time. I’ve seen pictures of him with her at movie premiers from twenty years ago. She wasn’t at the party because she was at the premiere of her newest film. And, yes, I’m checking that as well. I’ll update you as soon as I know something.”

“Should I add them to my list?”

“No. If they’re in Germany, I’ll have them located no later than tomorrow morning. If they’re here, it will be even sooner.”

Ava nodded and then turned to Dane. “I think you said you had something useful to the case.”

“Yeah, something you’ll be very interested in, I think.” Dane said. “It’s Sterling Abbott, good friend of Leonardo Bianchi. He was at the party. He’s a well-known playboy and bad boy. The last woman I interviewed last night, Angel Silva, was a journalist doing an article on Leonardo’s wine business. She told me that she saw Sterling and Ivana having a huge heated argument the night of the party.”

A jolt of excitement ran through Ava’s veins. Finally, something to go on. “What was this argument about?”

“She didn’t know. Said she was too far away to hear the particulars, but the body language said enough.”

“Didn’t anyone else see them arguing?”

“Maybe they did and just didn’t want to get involved,” Dane said. “You know how rich people are. None of them want to get involved with anything that might smudge their reputations.”

Ava nodded, thinking about how many people must have witnessed the scene. “Did he hit her?”

“Angel didn’t mention it, and I think she would have if she had seen Ivana being hit by a man.”

“I think we have our assignment for the day, Dane. Good work.” Ava pulled the tablet from the clipboard, tore the top page off, and stuck it in her pocket. “I trust you have an address for dear old Sterling.”

“I do.” Dane held up her phone, showing a page of notes on Sterling that Dane had no doubt compiled herself.

“Nice. Let’s get our GPS on and pay him a little visit.”

“What do you want to bet it’s a penthouse in the most expensive part of the city?” Dane asked.

“I don’t want to bet anything because I don’t want to lose anything. You know it’s going to be a penthouse. Where else would a rich playboy live in the city?”

Sure enough, when they arrived, they found that Sterling’s residence was a penthouse. In fact, it was four penthouses. He had

the entire floor of one building to himself and his many friends.

“Well, hello, ladies,” Sterling greeted Ava and Dane. He was dressed in a loose, white silk shirt with blue lotus flowers running over the shoulder panels. His tanned chest stood out in stark contrast under the bright white material. His blond hair was stylishly ruffled and obviously gelled into place.

Ava and Dane showed their badges at the same time.

Sterling’s eyes widened for a moment and then he relaxed against the frame of the door. “Nothing is sexier than a woman in uniform. Except maybe two women in uniform. Who sent you? Was it Bryce? Because this is definitely something he would do.” He stepped inside and motioned them in.

“We’re here on business, Mr. Abbott,” Ava said.

“Ooh, and she takes charge right off the bat. Alexa, remind me to send Bryce a thank-you gift for the strippers.”

An electronic female voice said, “When should I set the reminder for?”

“Tomorrow at noon,” Sterling replied, grinning at Ava and Dane as he rubbed his palms together.

“I’ll remind you tomorrow at noon,” the electronic voice said.

“We’re federal agents, Mr. Abbott. FBI agents to be exact. James and Dane,” Ava said, not smiling.

“Okay, okay, I can role play if that’s your thing.” He grabbed a large wooden bowl from a side table. “First, you want some pinky, spice, flakka, salts? I have any kind of booze you could want. Your call.”

Dane took the bowl from him and slammed it on the table. “We’re here about the party you went to at Leonardo Bianchi’s house last week. You remember that, or are you too drugged out?”

His expression mutated. He didn’t know whether to be upset, confused, or worried. “There are limits even in the world of the dominatrix. At least, there is in my house.”

“If you mention anything about us being strippers one more time, Mr. Abbott,” Ava said as she pulled back her jacket to reveal her gun. “I might shoot you in the knee.”

Shock registered on his face and wiped away all the playboy expressions. He pointed at the gun. "Is that real?"

"Yes, it is. We're real agents, Mr. Abbott. None of your friends hired us because we're not sex workers. We're federal agents here to question you about a murder that took place at that party you attended," Ava said tersely.

His mouth dropped open. "Murder? What? I don't know anything about a murder. I was there to help Leo and his guests have a good time. Everyone knows that if Sterling is in the house, there are going to be hot bitches and designer drugs galore. The whole party will rock all night. It'll be a night to remember."

"Sterling has a big crush on himself," Dane said to Ava.

"Sterling knows his worth," Sterling said, having regained his composure. "Now, I told you I don't know anything about a murder. I have things to do, so if you could leave the same way you came in, I'd appreciate it."

"Oh, but we've just arrived, Mr. Abbott," Dane said, tilting the bowl of drugs.

"Those are designer. They're not illegal." He moved to take the bowl but Ava blocked him.

"Really? Is that what you think?" Ava asked.

"Yeah." His voice lost two-thirds of its conviction, and he took three steps back. "I don't know anything. If somebody overdosed, it's not my fault. I tell them the safe doses to take. They were all adults with free will to take that advisement or not."

"Now you're a doctor, too. That's something nice to add to your already packed resumé, isn't it?" Ava asked.

"I'd suggest you take a seat and talk to us, Mr. Abbott," Dane said as she motioned toward the oversized living room with a view of the city below and the bay farther out.

Sterling turned on his heel and stalked to a chair that had been covered with a faux fur throw. He sat in it like a king on a cushy throne gripping the ends of the armrests. "Fine, let's get this over with quick."

"What were you doing at the party?" Ava asked, helping herself to a seat.

“I already told you. This is why women shouldn’t be in law enforcement. A man would have already stated his business and been on his way because a man understands that other men have business to take care of. Women, on the other hand, want to sit and gossip and chitchat and tiptoe around the subject all day.”

Ava’s blood pressure rose until it was tapping on the super-high luxurious, and overly-expensive, ceiling. “Alright. I can cut to the business. What’s your relationship with Ivana Baruch?”

“There’s not a relationship there anymore.”

Ava raised an eyebrow at that last word.

“Anymore? What was the relationship before?”

He rolled his eyes as if she had asked the stupidest question he had ever heard. “We used to date, okay? Is that plain enough for you to understand?”

Ava gritted her teeth, fighting to keep her cool.

“Why did Leonardo invite you to his party if you and his fiancée used to date?” Dane asked.

“Because Leonardo doesn’t know we used to date. That’s why we’re such good friends, too. That should answer your next question. I didn’t want him to know because he’s a great connection. Ivana didn’t want him to know because she didn’t want him to think less of her. As if that would happen. I don’t know how dating me could damage a girl’s rep. Leo’s got money and connections, but I have everything else.”

Ava took a deep breath. “Why were you and Ivana arguing at the party?”

“Because she wanted to get back with me, but I was done with her a long, long time ago. She lost her appeal, so she lost her place on my arm. I have a rep to keep up myself, you know.”

At least this time when Ava’s stomach roiled, it wasn’t because of a display of emotion. It was just because this man was a complete scumbag. “That wasn’t the only thing you argued about. It was a huge blowup. Really heated from all accounts. Lasted five minutes at least, eight at most. What else was going on?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. Guess it just didn’t seem that important to me because she wasn’t that important anymore. Why

are you so interested in our argument? You think I got pissed over our argument and went out and killed somebody?”

“Ivana Baruch was the victim, Mr. Abbott,” Ava said flatly.

He looked gut-punched, and she was glad.

“Ivana was—was murdered?”

Ava nodded. “That’s what I said. Are you stalling? Are you wasting time now? Is it you who is tiptoeing around the subject? I thought you were a busy man today. So, tell me, Mr. Abbott, what else was going on?”

“I swear, we were just hashing it out about our old relationship.” He couldn’t hold eye contact for several seconds, and his throat made little clicking noises when he tried to swallow.

“What do you do for work, Mr. Abbott?” Dane asked.

And just like that, he was back in the game. He slicked back his hair and winked at her. “I’m a professional hot mess looking for the right woman, or women to cool me down and straighten me up. You ladies interested?”

“Are you serious?” Ava asked incredulously.

He giggled and spread his arms wide, tipping his hands down to indicate himself. “I sure am.”

Ava could barely manage to keep her face straight as she told him not to leave town. Then she stood and walked to the door without looking back. If she could see her reflection, she thought she might see steam rolling off her face, she was so mad. How could one man be so disgusting, callous, and chauvinistic?

Sterling Abbott had pole-vaulted himself right to the top of Ava’s suspect list.



CHAPTER TWELVE

After adding Sterling's interview to the growing files, Ava sat at a table going over everything again. There was a thread she was missing, and she couldn't find it. To her, it seemed that Sterling was the only legitimate suspect at that point, but she didn't want her opinion tainted by the disagreements with Ellis over Bianchi and Ivana's father. She understood that to be good at her job she must keep an open mind. Until the investigation was over, she could not let herself become biased just so she could try to prove herself right or Ellis wrong. That's how cases got botched and killers walked free.

"Sterling is a real piece of work, isn't he?" Ellis asked as he walked over to her.

"He's a piece of something," she answered, barely looking up from the files. "Weren't there caterers at that party? Ms. Hampton said the chef didn't cook for it."

"Yes, I think there was. I have the name of the catering company in the files somewhere." He leaned over her arm and flipped through some of the pages and then pulled another file from further down in

the stack. "Here it is." He gave her a sheet of notepad paper with hastily scribbled names on it.

"Smokehouse Eats," she read aloud. "Noah Alexander, owner." She struggled to decipher the writing. She handed the paper back. "No wonder it's not printed out. Nobody could read it to enter the data into the computer."

He snatched the paper from her with a scowl. "Mason, Connor, Olivia, Keegan, Bree, and Roxy. That's not illegible by any standards."

"You just made those names up." She chuckled and took back the page.

"No, I wrote them." He snapped the file closed and dropped it on top of the others.

"Since you can read your own writing, I think we need to question them. They weren't on our other list. Nobody has spoken to any of them yet."

"How did they slip through the cracks?"

She turned the names toward him. "Maybe because nobody could read what was written there."

He scoffed and turned on his heel. "I'll give Noah a call and set up a meeting. See if we can't go talk to them today."

Ava stared at the names but could only make out a couple, and those only because she remembered what Ellis had said when he was reading it. She put it aside and continued looking at pictures of the crime scene and trying to put herself into the setting on the night of the party.

What would the estate have looked like with nearly a hundred people there to party and celebrate? Would people have been meandering outside? Perhaps enjoying the warm, clear night on the large open patio, or even the sloped and grassy yard? She thought the answer was a definite yes. That many people likely would not have all remained inside.

Where would the caterers have been set up? The kitchen? A dining room deep in the interior of the mansion? The patio?

The location of the main attractions of the celebration might give her some better ideas about how Ivana got away from everyone

without being noticed. And maybe she could finally understand how Ivana and Sterling had a big argument that had only been seen by one person—if that was actually the case. Dane might have been correct in assuming that others witnessed the outburst and just turned a blind eye, or didn't mention it under questioning to avoid being associated with anything that might tarnish their shiny reputations.

Ellis came back and tapped the end of the table with his fingers. "Mr. Alexander said he could have the entire staff at the kitchen in an hour."

"Everyone who worked the party at Bianchi's?" Ava stood and shoved the scribbled names into her pocket.

"All of them. He sounded nervous."

"Rightfully so. Finding out you catered a party and then someone was found murdered there would be upsetting, I would think."

"Or maybe he's worried that one of his employees did something. Catering companies don't have the strictest of guidelines when it comes to hiring employees. No kitchens do. I dare you to go into any kitchen in the city and find a clean crew working it. Kitchens are notorious for drugs and alcohol and ex-cons."

"No, kitchens aren't notorious. Sometimes the people working in them are, though."

"You are exasperating with the technicalities; you know that right?"

She raised one shoulder as she walked out the door. "I try."

"I thought as much." He followed and they walked to the elevator together.

"Caterers usually aren't killers." She punched the call button.

"'Usually' is the operative word in that sentence."

"It is. I'm hoping some of them saw something that will help us, though. Service workers are subject to seeing and hearing a lot more than peers in places like Bianchi's estate because they are largely overlooked."

"You mean the uber-rich ignore the peons of society because they think the peons are less intelligent and less important."

The elevator opened and Ellis stepped inside. He pushed the button, and Ava hurriedly joined him before the doors slid closed.

“That’s a bit harsh.”

“Doesn’t mean I’m wrong. The world’s harsh.” He squinted at her as if daring her to prove him wrong.

“Tact,” she said simply.

“Skill and grace in dealing with others,” he replied.

“Well, I was wrong. You do know the definition. I was sure you didn’t.”

“Why would you think I didn’t know what tact meant?” He flashed a grin that showed more than a tiny glimmer of teeth.

“Uh-huh. You know why.”

“I’m tactful when it’s necessary. When and where it’s deserved. Otherwise, I find that plain-spoken is easiest understood and less likely to be misconstrued. If I say something, there’s little room for misinterpretation by any of the involved parties. I’m not rude about anything. I’m just blunt. There’s a big difference.”

“Is there?”

“There is.” He nodded once as if to emphasize his point. “You want to drive?”

“Not a chance. You haven’t given me a stroke or wrecked us yet, so I’ll leave that to you.”

“Didn’t you drive to Sterling Abbott’s earlier?”

“I did, and I’ll probably be having flashbacks for the next twelve hours at least. Has anyone ever told you that the traffic out here is worse than in most other cities in the country?”

“Never heard that before. Are you sure you’ve driven in cities before?”

“I drive in DC all the time.”

“Do you have any viable suspects on your mental list yet?” he asked as they climbed into the car.

“Sterling Abbott,” she said without hesitation.

“As I thought. Still think Bianchi and Baruch are completely innocent?”

She started to say that she did, but she stopped short. “I don’t know who killed Ivana yet, but Sterling definitely has psychopathic

traits. They stand out like flashing neon signs on a dark night.”

“He didn’t shed a tear, did he?”

“Not even close.”

“If he had, would your opinion be any different?”

Was he ribbing her about her discomfort with crying people? Was he implying that she only thought Leonardo and Filip were innocent because they were crying about Ivana’s murder? Was that why she thought they were innocent?

She didn’t like thinking about that. Questioning herself and her reasons that seemed so solid made her feel vulnerable. It made her feel like she had a weak point that could be taken advantage of.

But was it true? If Sterling had bawled his eyes out even for a few seconds, would she have left that penthouse with a different opinion of him?

“No. He’s your stereotypical playboy with more money than common sense. He is in love with his own reflection, the sound of his own voice, and his bank account. All he cares about is his designer drugs, being seen and recognized by all the right people, and having sexy women on his arm and in his bed. And he would step on his best friend’s neck to win. He’s a legit sociopath with psychopathic tendencies, and it doesn’t take a doctorate to recognize it.”

“Okay. Fair enough. But you didn’t take notice of the psychopathic traits displayed by Leonardo Bianchi or Filip Baruch.” He held out a hand to halt her hasty response. “Granted, they had a much better handle on theirs, but the signs are there just the same. Don’t say anything right away. Just replay our meetings with both men and subtract all the waterworks. Food for thought. Might give you a different perspective.”

“Might not.”

He tilted his head and lifted one shoulder. “Maybe, but give it a try anyway. You don’t even have to tell me what you come up with. It’s just a little exercise. One that helped me tremendously when I was young and first starting out with this agent life.”

“Oh, because you’re so ancient now?”

“Thirty-three is the new fifty in the Bureau. I thought you knew that.”

She laughed. “Then I’m middle-aged already. Does that mean you have a seniors’ discount card for coffee shops and restaurants?”

“And the gym, and BART. Yeah. All kinds of perks to getting old.”

So, he had a sense of humor after all. It was a little dark and a little quirky, and she supposed not everyone would get it, but at least it was there. Not everyone got her sense of humor, either. Metford did. Usually.

While he expertly and smoothly maneuvered through the traffic, Ava replayed their meetings with Bianchi. She nixed the tears and emotional outbursts, or at least, she tagged them as having no importance.

His presence was imposing from the way he dressed—perfectly tailored, obviously more expensive than either she or Ellis would ever be able to afford—to the way he carried himself. He walked like a king at the head of an entourage even though he was alone in his office. It was obvious that he was king of his castle and his word was law. The furnishings, the architecture, and the layout of the mansion sent a statement, too. He was a proud man who had accomplished great things, and he was not to be questioned or toyed with. His eyes were shrewd and sharp and missed nothing. Bianchi was a man who made it his business to know what was going on around him at all times. He knew exactly where his employees were, what duties they were performing, and how long it would take for them to execute anything he asked for. Like a good sovereign, he did what he could to keep their loyalty. He furnished them with lavish gifts and attention, but she would bet her retirement that if being nice didn’t keep them in line, he could be harsh.

Because the world is harsh, she thought wryly.

Smokehouse Eats was a brick building that would have been painfully plain if not for the unique artwork that covered it from top to bottom and side to side. Even the windows had been painted with scenes symbolizing what surely went on inside the walls of Smokehouse Eats.

The sign wasn’t on in the window, and the interior was dim.

“I thought he was going to be here with his crew,” Ava said.

“It’s not a regular shift for them. That’s why he wanted to have the meeting now.”

The door was unlocked. Inside, an older man sat at a counter facing them. He raised a hand.

“You must be Agents Ellis and James.” He stood and walked toward them. “I’m Noah Alexander. Owner of Smokehouse Eats.”

“Are your employees here?” Ellis asked.

“They’re in the back prepping for the shift ahead. Come on with me. We can talk back there, if that’s okay.”

“Works for me.”

The kitchen was a standard industrial kitchen where the smell of cooking grease was heavy and the aroma of warm yeasty bread was heady. Two men and four women stopped what they were doing and turned to look at them.

Noah walked to the center of the room. “Everybody, these are the agents I told you about. They’re here to ask all of us some questions about the party at Mr. Bianchi’s estate that we catered. Answer all their questions. Help them in any way you can. Mr. Bianchi’s fiancée was found murdered on that estate after that party, and we need to do our part to be sure her killer is brought to justice.”

An audible gasp ran through the kitchen.

“You didn’t tell them what the meeting was about?” Ava asked.

Noah shook his head. “Didn’t know if I should or not. Not until you were here anyway.”

“Do you have employment records for everyone?” Ellis asked.

“On the desk in my office.” Noah pointed toward the back of the kitchen to a door that was closed.

“Where on Mr. Bianchi’s property were you set up for the event?” Ava asked.

“We were on the open patio to the left of the main entrance. Our vans were off to the side so the catering tents kept them hidden.”

“Thank you,” Ava said, making a note.

“If we could go into your office, I’ll talk to you first and have a look at the records while Agent James talks to the ladies one at a time out here. The others can continue their work until we need them,” Ellis said.

Ava nodded approvingly. It seemed Ellis had a bit of tact when it came to disrupting the workflow of smaller companies. Or perhaps he just connected with them better than he did with the mega-rich and elite.

“Everybody get back to work. Agent James will call you ladies one at a time to speak with her, and everybody can keep on working until you’re needed.” Noah turned and motioned Ellis to follow him.

Ava talked to Olivia first. She was the newest employee. She’d only been with Smokehouse a few weeks. She also seemed to be the youngest at eighteen. Unfortunately, she’d been on dish duty for most of the event and so hadn’t even emerged from the back.

Keegan and Bree hadn’t even seen Ivana up close at the party. They had seen her and Leonardo standing in front of the group and making some sort of small speech thanking the guests, but then the women had gone back behind the tents to their duties.

“I’m Roxy Underwood,” the last woman said as she used a towel to wipe her hands. She shoved her hand toward Ava and smiled broadly.

“I’m Ava,” Ava said, taking her hand for a quick shake and not entirely sure she was comfortable doing so.

Roxy had her septum pierced, plus the side of her nose, her bottom lip, and her ears were lined with hoops and spikes and rods that Ava didn’t even understand. Her hair was black with fiery red tips. The best way she could describe the hairdo was a spike that had fallen but still looked as if it had been done on purpose. To complement all that, she wore heavy makeup with bright red lipstick and dark smoky eyeshadow with a bold purple liner. Ava had seen punk rock before, but this was something even crazier. Roxy Underwood was a unique individual, and she would never disappear in a crowd.

“Ivana really got offed?”

“She was murdered, yes.”

“You know, she was super talented. Sweet woman, too.”

Ava noted the heavy tattooing down Roxy’s arms all the way to her wrists. Her hands were creamy pale and unmarked by ink,

although they sported a good share of scars from her chosen profession.

Roxy looked down and ran a hand from her elbow to her wrist. “Oh, these? Like ‘em? I’ve got a damn fortune in ink on me. Sometimes, I think I’m crazy that way, but I’m addicted to them. It’s a thing. For real. You get one, and you think you’re all cool and shit and you’ll maybe get one more later on, but they’re expensive, so no more than just a couple. Next thing you know, you wake up one morning and you’re covered in ‘em.” She laughed and held out both arms.

“That’s a lot of tattoos.” Ava thought back to seeing the tattoos peeking out from under the cuffs of Bianchi’s cuffs. Did his arms look like Roxy’s? Was he a tattoo addict as well? That would give him something in common with a caterer who worked his event. She noted it on the paper. In a city like San Francisco, filled to the brim with mustached and tattooed hipsters, it might not amount to much, but it was something.

“Oh, I cover them with these sleeves. They’re like compression sleeves, only they’re especially for ink junkies like me. Them’s the rules, you know. Noah don’t let you go to events with all your crazy shit showing. He runs a tight ship, and I go by the rules because I love my job.” She leaned forward and cupped her hand to the side of her mouth. “And I know tats insult some people and just send the wrong message to others,” she whispered as if divulging a great and important secret.

Ava couldn’t help but chuckle. Roxy was funny. “So, you don’t show your tattoos at any events?”

“No. If I did, Noah would send me home and dock my pay for a month. Unless we were catering a church event when I showed them. Then he’d probably just send me packing.” She laughed again. “What happened to Ivana? I mean, how’d she get killed? Somebody shoot her, or something?”

“What is your title at Smokehouse Eats?”

She gave an expression somewhere between a smirk and a frown. “My title?”

“Yes. What’s your job here?”

“I’m usually serving at events, but I cook my ass off here in the kitchen same as everybody else.”

Ava grinned and wrote it down. “And how long have you been working here?”

“Four years.” Her smile was big and genuine, reaching all the way to her eyes. It was refreshing that someone, at least, smiled with their whole face.

“So, I take it you like your job and your boss.”

“God, I love them both. Noah is a great guy. Good heart, hardworking, and the job—I couldn’t imagine doing anything else, just to be honest.”

“How old are you, Miss Underwood?”

“Twenty-nine. You know, Noah let me work the whole time I was pregnant, too. Even held my spot until I was able to come back to work after Rosie was born. She’s three now. Well, she will be next week.”

It was not typical to do an interview under such circumstances and get so much personal information on a person, but Ava noted most of it mentally and a lot on paper. “Congratulations. Now, back to the party at Mr. Bianchi’s estate. Did you see Ivana there?”

“Yeah, we spoke. It was brief, but she spoke with me. Like I said, she’s super nice. I follow her online. That’s how I knew who she was. I was a little bit fangirl when she got close, but I got over it the second she spoke to me. She’s just a regular person. You know, a lot of these celebrities put on a good face for the camera, but not Ivana. She was the real deal.”

“Roxy,” Ava said, hoping to get the woman to pump the brakes on the energy.

“Yeah?” She visibly pulled back and settled.

“What did you and Ivana talk about?”

“The drinks that were at the bar. They were all kinds of weird mixed drinks that she didn’t like. We had that in common even though I couldn’t drink because I was working and I wasn’t a guest. I told her how much I liked and appreciated her online content and all her work. I told her I followed her online and then I noticed she was looking at her phone and she looked distracted or worried. I asked if

everything was okay because she'd been conversating with me and then just stopped. She shrugged and said, 'Yeah. You know how it is. Fathers, lying boyfriends, and mobsters. Just a typical day, right?' Then she got another text and said she had to go, thanked me for following her and reposting her stuff and supporting her cause, and she was gone."

Ava wrote as fast as she could. Her writing was still more legible than Ellis' had been. Maybe that was all due to perspective. She wouldn't even tease him about it because he had a way of twisting perspectives and making her see things differently. She'd had enough of that for one day.

Roxy held out her wrist and showed Ava three boho bracelets. They looked slightly familiar. She had seen them or similar ones somewhere recently.

"Where did you get those? They're nice," she said, unsure why Roxy was showing them to her.

"I bought them from Ivana's website. It's her old boho line—my favorite. I just bought them a couple weeks ago. Of course, I didn't have them on at the party because of regulations and all, but yeah, I really like Ivana." She dropped her arm to her lap. "I guess I should say I liked her."

"Did she say who was texting her or where she was going when she left?"

"No. Why, do you think it's important?"

"What time was it when you spoke with her?"

Roxy considered it for a few moments. "Probably close to midnight."

Ava blinked. "You're sure of that?"

Roxy nodded. "Pretty sure because we were getting ready to break everything down. We were only serving until midnight. I remember we closed up the tents not long after she left. Maybe fifteen to twenty-five minutes after she left."

"You never break down early?"

"No way. That's a perfect way to ruin your chances of being hired again."

Ava noted the time. The last time anyone saw Ivana was between eleven-thirty and midnight.

“Wait a minute,” Roxy said.

“Did you remember something else?”

“No, if you’re asking me where she went and who was texting her... Does that mean I might have been the last one to see her alive? Was I the last person who talked to her before some maniac killed her?” Her face paled and her eyes widened.

“We don’t know. Thank you for all the information, though. It’s really helpful. We’ll be in touch if we need anything else.” Ava handed her a card. “If you think of anything else, get hold of me. Goes for anyone else here, too.”

Roxy nodded but still looked nauseated.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“I got the alibis for all Noah’s employees. Even the ones who weren’t at the party,” Ellis said in the car.

“Okay. Do any of them sound suspicious to you?” Ava asked.

He shrugged. “Don’t know. I’m going to have somebody check all their alibis, though. I’m not leaving anything to chance.”

She told him about Roxy Underwood.

“I saw her. I don’t know how that girl gets away with working public events with all those piercings, wild hair, and tattoos. People like her usually end up bartending in some sketchy strip joint for the rest of their lives.”

“Judgy much? Dang. It’s 2023. Besides, she’s a twenty-nine-year-old single mom. Her little girl is getting ready to turn three.” Ava smiled.

“And that’s sweet, I suppose.”

“Yes, it is. What’s wrong with it?”

“Nothing. I just hope the kid doesn’t already look like a Hell’s Angel reject.” He glared out the windshield.

“Oh, I get it. This is another one of those test things you’re doing to see if I’ll get all defensive. It won’t work this time. Roxy needs no defense from me. Trust me, she’s got it handled all on her own.”

Ellis broke character and chuckled. “We need to go speak to Luka Kardum. He’s Bianchi’s distribution overseer, and he was at the party, but he was not at the estate when we interviewed the other staff.”

“Kardum? Isn’t that Croatian?”

“Gold star to you. Why does it matter?”

“Just odd because most of the management at Bianchi’s estate and business are Italian or American.”

“Well, his fiancée was Croatian, and so was his soon-to-be father-in-law,” Ellis pointed out. “He has friends from every other country in the world. Maybe he made a few in Croatia, too.”

They found Luka at his house. The deep lines on his face made him seem much older than his thirty-seven years. His hair was thick and dark brown with no signs of graying. When he smiled, it didn’t touch his eyes. They remained cold and hard.

“Luka Kardum?” Ellis asked when the man opened the door.

“Yes. Who is asking?”

“Agents Ellis and James. FBI. We need to ask you some questions about Ivana Baruch.”

“Ivana Baruch? Leonardo Bianchi’s fiancée?”

“Yes.”

He opened the door wider. “Please. Do come inside, but I don’t know what I can tell you about her. I don’t know her well.”

They went to his dining room and sat at the table. “How may I help you?”

“Did you attend the party last week at Bianchi’s estate in Napa Valley?” Ava asked.

“Yes, I did.”

“Was it in the capacity of a guest, or were you on the grounds as an employee?”

“No, Leonardo invited me to the party. I work for him, but he sometimes invites me to such functions as I oversee his distributions overseas. It is good for me to meet some of the clients in a less

formal setting so they don't feel as if they are dealing with a stranger."

"If you just met someone once at a party, aren't you still a stranger to them?" Ava asked.

"Perhaps, but who wants to screw over the man who held you while you puked on your shoes? Who wants to deceive the man who made sure you got home safely because you were too drunk or doped to drive yourself? Who wants to make angry the man who kept you from looking like a complete idiot at the party? See my point?"

"So you are a schmoozer for Mr. Bianchi," Ellis said.

He shrugged. "Call it what you will. It helps pave the way for many business partnerships. I thought this was about Miss Baruch."

"It is. Did you know she was murdered at the estate sometime during that party?"

"Yes, I knew she had been murdered, but I wasn't aware of the timeframe."

"How well did you know her?"

"Not very well, I think. She was a beautiful woman with a sad story. Just like so many nowadays, no?"

"What sad story?" Ava asked.

"Her mother died just about five years ago. They called her the last princess of Croatia, but she had no power of a princess at all. She only visited the family property in Croatia maybe two times in all her life. That is really sad. I don't understand it, but it saddens my heart. I am not of royal lineage, but I could never stay away from my motherland for so long."

"You go back there often?" Ellis asked.

"As often as possible. Travel is not cheap, but I find a way once or twice a year usually."

"Did you know Ivana's family, Mr. Kardum?" Ava asked.

"Sort of."

"Could you expand on that, please?" Ava asked.

"I have only been in the US for ten years. A little less, actually, but I have been working for Mr. Bianchi for the last two. I have gotten to know many people very well, and many people well enough, I

suppose. Just like you with your coworkers. How well do you know their families after two years working together in the same building?”

Ava nodded. He had a point. “Do you have Ivana or Filip Baruch’s phone numbers?”

“I have Filip’s number, yes.”

“Why would you have his number unless you know him well? Unless you’re on friendly terms?” Ellis asked.

“Because sometimes Leonardo asks me to deliver a message to Filip, or something like that. It is not because I call him to go fishing or drinking or whatever it is you think.” His eyes darkened another degree as he stared unblinkingly at Ellis.

“You’re a hard man, aren’t you, Kardum?” Ellis asked.

“I’m a regular man, Mr. Ellis. A regular man with a strong work ethic and strong traditions. Just like you.” He smiled ever so slightly. “Nothing special at all.”

Ellis’ cheeks reddened. Neither man blinked for several seconds. Ava wondered if she was witnessing the calm before the storm. Would one of them break bad and go for the other’s throat? No. That stuff only happened in movies. But the air was electrified with the tension between the unflinching men.

“Okay, then.” Ava sat forward, making a big show of drawing their attention to her. “Mr. Kardum, is there any way we could check your phone? Your cellphone, that is.” She smiled at Kardum even though she didn’t like what she saw in his expression. Especially deep in his eyes.

Kardum took the phone from his shirt pocket and thumped it onto the table. He slid it to Ava and removed his large hand. She noted that it was the hand of a man who was used to manual labor, and she wondered what he had done in Croatia and for the first eight years after coming to the US to make his hands so rough and scarred.

“Check as much as you like. I have nothing to hide,” he said.

Ellis held his hand out to Ava as she scrolled through the messages and call logs. She laid it in his hand. He scrolled, clicked, scrolled some more, and then copied something onto a piece of paper. “We need to take it with us to have it processed just like we

took everyone else's. We'll get it back to you as soon as possible." He smirked and dropped it into his pocket.

"Do I get a receipt or anything before you take it? How do I get it back?"

Ellis flipped the paper to him. "It's handwritten, but it's legal. Legal enough anyway. Don't worry, I won't keep the phone. I have one of my own. You'll get it back when we're done with it."

Kardum picked up the paper and pinched it between thumb and forefinger so hard that his finger and thumb turned white. "Are we finished here?"

"For the time, yes. We know where to find you if we need anything else." Ellis walked toward the door. "You have a good day, Mr. Kardum." He opened the door, and Ava stood to leave.

"Thank you for your help," she said.

Kardum nodded to her.

Outside, Ellis got in the car looking blank as water.

"You were really pushing him in there."

"I was, but did you see how he reacted?" Ellis asked.

"He didn't."

"Exactly. We have both ends of the spectrum so far. Overreacting and underreacting. Which is worse? Which one screams guilt?"

"Neither one. Follow the evidence. That's the only way to find the guilty person," Ava said.

"We have a winner." He looked straight at her. "Always remember that, but also never forget to listen to your gut. Many an officer and agent has been saved because he listened to his gut."

Ava tried to never dismiss her gut instincts. When she did, it typically led to something bad. "I think maybe his underreaction might be the result of being from a different country and culture. He was being careful so he wouldn't be persecuted because he isn't sure how things work here."

"Bullshit. He's been here ten years."

"And I could live in Croatia for ten years and still be unsure of how their law works for sure or what rights I really have," Ava countered.

"I'll give you that one. I guess it could be true."

“You’re still determined Bianchi did it, aren’t you?”

“You don’t have time to argue with me on that today, do you?” he asked.

“I do, but I don’t think I have the mental fortitude right now. I’m trying to actually work the clues in the case and not manipulate clues to point toward Bianchi.”

“Me neither. That’s absolutely not what I’m doing. I’m working it just like you. All I’m saying is that when we find the clues, they will most likely point to him.”

Ava shook her head. “I give up. Have it your way.”

“Thank you.” He drove quietly for a few miles. “Even though I know you don’t really mean it.”

“Mean what?”

“That you give up. You’re not the type to give up on anything. I have seen that about you in the short time you’ve been here. I like that about you, Ava.”

A little shiver ran over the nape of her neck. She smiled and suddenly felt self-conscious. How long had it been since she’d felt that sensation? “I wasn’t raised to give up.”

“Your parents must be something else,” he said. An almost-smile lit on his face briefly.

“They are pretty phenomenal, if I do say so myself.”

The silence grew thick between them, hanging there pregnant with possibilities that she didn’t care to contemplate. They were partners, and nothing more.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“**W**e need to check Luka Kardum’s background,” Ava said to break the silence and burst the tension.

“Definitely. I didn’t see anything in his phone that threw up any red flags about this case, though, did you?”

“No.”

She didn’t see anything at all about him that threw up any red flags about the case.

“And his answers weren’t too concerning.”

“Except that they were too broad and generalized for my liking. His blasé attitude irked me, too. It was like the attitude was to mask something else.”

“Oh, no,” Ellis said.

“What is it?” Ava asked, turning to him.

“You’ve converted. You’re becoming like... *me*.” The grin was a real thing that time. “After you’ve had a few minutes to digest the meeting and replay it, you’re seeing that maybe, just maybe, he was hiding something. Maybe he wasn’t just unsure of our legal system’s workings.” Ellis laughed. “That’s dandy. After all the high-strung

emotions put on by Filip and Bianchi—that shit was Academy Award-worthy, by the way—and you’re going to say this guy who barely showed any emotion is the one hiding something?”

“It’s better to cover all the bases. You never know about these things. Serious lack of emotion is just as much an indicator of covering something up for some people as the overreaction in others,” she said. “There’s some psych 101 for you.”

“I’m glad to see you’re expanding your perceptions,” he said.

She wasn’t sure if he was teasing, but she thought he was.

“Lunch?”

“Have I ever turned it down?” she asked.

“I know a little place on the outskirts near Chinatown. It’s sort of quiet and not a lot of people go there. You want Chinese food?”

“I’m game,” she said.

They stopped at a red light, and Ava saw a concrete park with a bunch of kids running and flipping over and off of all shapes and sizes of obstacles. “Is that parkour?”

“It is, and the people practicing parkour are called traceurs. Pretty cool, isn’t it?”

“Looks a little dangerous to me, but cool.”

“You’ve never tried it?” He sounded shocked.

“No. I prefer to keep my feet on the ground. Something about not having the ground under my feet just seems wrong. Have you ever tried it?”

“I was a traceur back in the day. I was in competitions throughout the city.”

“You were not,” she laughed. But he was serious

“I was. I won medals and even have a trophy for it. Why is that so shocking to you?”

“I don’t know. You really just don’t seem... *edgy* enough to run up walls and turn flips as you jump from rooftop to rooftop, so sue me.” She laughed. “I just can’t see it.”

“Oh, so you think I’m just some kind of stiff, huh?”

“Maybe. Just a little. It’s hard to think of you doing something that’s all about fun energy.”

“Should I pull in and show you a move or two at the park? We have time before lunch, and it helps build up an appetite.”

“There are more fun and less dangerous ways to build up an appetite,” Ava said. Realizing how that could have been taken, she turned her head before her cheeks could flush red as they inevitably would.

“I can’t argue that, but seeing as we are on duty...” he let his voice trail suggestively.

Ava turned to face him with her cheeks burning. “I didn’t mean it like that.” What was it about him that made her unable to bite back with something witty and sarcastic the way she could with anyone else?

Deep down, she knew the reason. Shoving that feeling deeper, she motioned toward the light, which had turned green.

“So, do you need some salt, maybe some water?”

“Uhm, no. Why would I?” She eyed him curiously.

“To go with that shoe leather.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You stuck your foot in your mouth back there and I just wondered if you wanted something to season it with, or to wash it down with.” He was serious for a moment and then laughed.

After lunch, Ellis drove them back toward the office.

“Are you sure you don’t want to learn some basic parkour moves? I could teach you the kiddie-level moves. It’s a good workout.”

“I have my workouts. I graduated past kiddie-level workouts a long time ago, but thanks,” she replied.

“Don’t you ever get bored doing the same routines over and over?”

“I mix it with martial arts to keep it fresh. I don’t get bored.” But sometimes she did get bored. She had tried her hand at some other types of activities but they never stuck. She even tried yoga a couple of times, but that was something she wouldn’t do again. It did nothing except frustrate her.

“I do martial arts, too. Parkour incorporates that. Just saying. If you change your mind, let me know.”

“Deal,” she said, smiling. Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad to have a new workout. And parkour would be an activity that would get her out of the house and into different landscapes than her normal jogging routines. No matter how many routes and trails she took, she could still only run in so many locations.

Ellis’ phone rang. He pulled it from his coat pocket and fumbled it to the passenger side trying to answer it. Ava caught it and held it out to him.

“It’s Quinn. Just answer and put me on speaker,” he said.

Ava hesitated.

“That was a request. I was having tact with the situation.”

She hit the buttons and held the phone over the center console.

“Ellis,” he said.

“It’s Quinn. You told me to call you when your background checks came through on Bianchi. We practically have a book on him now. Want me to leave it on your desk or pass it through the group?”

“Just put it on my desk. I’ll sift through and pull pertinent information to put in the case files.”

“You got it. Need me to do anything else?”

“No.” He nodded for her to cut the line.

“Thank you,” Ava said into the phone.

“Excuse me?” Quinn asked.

“Thank you. For letting us know about the reports. We’re heading there now. Shouldn’t be too long.”

“Oh. Uhm. Okay. You’re welcome?”

“Bye,” she said, grinning at Quinn’s confusion. She disconnected the call. “Do you ever thank them? Any of them?”

“For what? For doing their jobs?”

“Yes.” She dropped the phone into the cupholder.

“Yes. I thank them, but I don’t thank them every time they do something. It’s part of the job.”

“A thank-you goes a very long way.”

“So does doing your job because it’s your job and not because you’re expecting a pat on the head. My team knows I appreciate everything they do. I don’t have to tell them all the time. Besides, it keeps them on their toes. Keeps them sharp.”

“Quinn didn’t even know how to respond to a simple thank-you. It confused her. I saw the same looks on the others’ faces this morning when I thanked them. It’s not patting them on the head as if they’re pets or little kids. It’s just a way of letting them know they’ve done something right. A way of showing a shred of support for their efforts, which are more often than not, without direction from you or me or anyone else. Just let them know they’re going in the right direction. It builds confidence.”

He glanced in her direction. “What is that? Did you learn that in some class, or something?”

She bit her lip and turned her head.

“You did, didn’t you? What kind of class did you have to submit to and why? I know there’s a story there.”

She shook her head. “Doesn’t matter where I learned it. If it works, it works.”

“And my methods have been working for me for years. No problems, no complaints. You work with the psyche, and I work with human nature. It might be the baser side of things, but it still yields the same results. Our teams do their jobs and do them well while respecting us.”

Was it wrong to want to strangle him? It was infuriating when he made a valid point that she couldn’t logically argue with. Especially when she knew her strategy was the better one.

He zoomed into the parking spot and shut off the engine. “Don’t be sore at me because I have valid points. You do, too. You and I just do things differently. It doesn’t mean one or the other of us is doing it right or wrong. It’s just different methodology.”

“I’m not sore over anything. I was just thinking about the case,” she lied. For the first time in her career, she was thinking about something completely different than the case she was working.

And it scared her.

She didn’t like it.

But that was a lie, too.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Ellis walked straight to his office without a word or nod of acknowledgment to any of his team. Ava shook her head and stopped to see if Ashton was doing okay with his online searches of the Germans. He was her only team member in the office.

“They are both, as I suspected, in Germany. I haven’t been able to pinpoint them in real time, but I have collected several active addresses for them along with phone numbers to try.”

“That’s progress, at least. Have you been able to confirm that Ms. Freiberg was in Germany at the premiere at the time of the party?”

“No. I’ve only just put in the request for the footage again. It mysteriously went missing earlier. The wonders of the internet, huh?”

“It’s wonderful and more helpful than we can imagine.” She patted his shoulder. “Until it’s not.”

He smirked. “That’s it.”

Ava spoke briefly with Tate and Quinn before heading into Ellis’ office. As much as she hated to admit it, he had been right. His team wasn’t suffering in any way because he did things differently than

she did. They worked and they were just as content as her team. That didn't mean she would be changing her methods any time soon, though. She enjoyed showing her gratitude.

"Anything useful?" she asked as she pulled up a seat.

He pushed a file to her. "Have a read. Interesting."

Ava looked over the thick file. Leonardo Bianchi's grandparents had been farmers back in Italy. Aldo and Giada were poor people with only the regular census reports and paper trails that would be expected from that time period. They never caused any trouble. They kept to themselves, and they farmed. They had eight boys and two girls. Of their children, only Leonardo's father and two other siblings survived into adulthood.

Leonardo's father Patrizio Bianchi had not carried on the family tradition of farming. From the reports, it was clear that he had helped his parents only until he was old enough to strike out on his own.

Patrizio moved away from his family and started making wine. At first, the operation was minuscule, only supplying a few houses in the village. But it grew until he supplied the whole village. By the time he had Leonardo, he was very rich.

By all the recorded accounts, Patrizio always encouraged Leonardo to spread his wings and fly, and never be tied down to someone else's wishes for him—even if it meant people would turn their backs on him.

Leonardo was apparently adventurous by nature when he was growing up. He tried his hand at rock climbing, went on safaris in Africa, hiked into the Italian Alps in search of lost treasures all before the age of twenty-one. Sometime during his early adulthood, Leonardo decided he wanted to make wine like his father, and his daring side led him to start his business in the US.

Having his business tied to his father's back in Italy was lucrative for both of them. They collaborated and worked together to bring some of the most expensive wines in the world to the US, and it made them even richer than before. As their wealth grew, so too did their power and influence.

Ava finished the file that read like a rough draft of a book and laid it aside. "You know what I didn't find in all that?"

“Probably the same thing I didn’t find,” Ellis said, tossing a paper to the desk.

“I didn’t find any criminal records for Leonardo Bianchi. I mean, he had some moving violations, and I think I saw a bit of trouble he got into for a bar fight fifteen years ago, but that was it.”

“A man like Bianchi doesn’t move here, start a business, and become a millionaire without acquiring a record of some sort,” Ellis grumbled, shifting the papers on his desk.

Ava chuckled. “Seriously? That’s your takeaway? The man’s squeaky clean and you still think he’s hiding something?”

He huffed out a long sigh. “Don’t get me started. Leonardo isn’t as clean as he appears. There is just no way.”

“It’s cute the way you are so disappointed about Leonardo. You were so set on him being the culprit that you’re pouting because he seemingly isn’t.” She poked his arm with the back of her pen. “Shouldn’t you be glad he didn’t kill his girlfriend?”

Jason pulled his arm toward himself and sat straighter.

“I’m glad it seems as if he didn’t do it. But just because he doesn’t have a rap sheet doesn’t mean this wasn’t a one-off. It could have been an argument that got out of hand,” he said, pulling the list of people who still needed to be interviewed from under the files.

“What’s that?”

“We still need to find Ivana’s personal assistant. She’s been missing in action since the day after the party. She won’t answer her phone or her door for any of the agents.”

“What’s her name?” Ava pulled out the list she’d gotten from the agents earlier.

“Ana Juric.”

“That name’s not on my list. I asked everyone for names of people they couldn’t locate, and no one said that name.”

“Because she wasn’t on that list. I saw her name on Ivana’s website while we were browsing it the other night, and I sent it to Quinn to check out. Since then, Tate and Jasper have gone to her place, too. No luck at all. They tried tracing her bank cards, but they haven’t been used.”

“You want to go to her place and give it a try?” Ava asked.

“I think I do. That would be a nice change of pace, wouldn’t it?”
He stood and rounded the desk without tidying the papers.

“What about these papers?”

“Later,” he said and kept walking.

She wanted to sweep the papers into one big stack, but it was his office. She wasn’t his housekeeper. She was helping him on a case. As much as it bugged her, Ava walked out of his office and followed him back to the parking area.

As she walked, she wondered if other people felt the same way when they were trying to keep up with her. Did she seem to others the way he seemed to her? Manic and always in high gear; set in her ways and stubborn. The thoughts almost stopped her in her tracks.

“Ana is the woman who was with her in almost all the video shoots, right?” Ava asked.

“Yes. She was Ivana’s personal assistant, and her friend. Or, at least it looked like they were friends to me. Did you get that vibe from the videos?”

“Yes, I did. Filip said Ivana only hung around with her assistant and a couple of friends, too.”

“That’s right. So, why did Miss Juric pull a Houdini after the party?”

“Maybe she’s in trouble, too?” Ava got into the car.

“Or maybe she knows what happened to Ivana. Maybe she and Ivana got into an argument and things went south.”

“Ana isn’t big enough to stuff another person into a barrel and then place that barrel on the stack again. You know that.”

“But there are lifts there. They aren’t even motorized. Hand-jacks, hand-mules. They do all the heavy lifting for you. Even Ana could use one of them.”

“What kind of argument could have led to murder between those two peaceful women who were working together to promote love and peace and who helped victims of violence? It doesn’t make sense to go at it from that angle.”

“Ana is a looker. She is every bit as beautiful as Ivana. Maybe our hotheaded playboy took a liking to Ana and Ivana didn’t like it. Maybe they were arguing over that. Maybe that’s what Sterling and

Ivana were really fighting over at the party. Jealousy is a strong emotion and it never leads to a good outcome.”

Again, he had a valid point that Ava couldn't quite argue with. She had seen it too many times. Usually, it was in the form of one lover being jealous of the other. The situation would devolve into domestic violence, which in turn devolved into accidental murder.

But something about Ana and Ivana fighting to the death just didn't sit right with Ava. Not even over a man. Ivana was to be married to Leonardo, and she wouldn't have agreed to a marriage of convenience or status. She would have only accepted his proposal from a place of love. Why would she have cared if Ana and Sterling hooked up? Unless she was trying to protect Ana from Sterling.

Which led her right back to where she started with him. He might have been so angry with her for trying to keep Ana away from him that they got into a physical altercation. Sterling was plenty strong enough to kill Ivana, put her in a barrel, and lift it onto a stack all by himself. No equipment needed.

“In the pictures I've seen, Ana looks taller than Ivana, who, we know from the post-mortem reports, was five-nine,” Ava said, trying to work the logic.

“Yes, and she weighed in at a grand total of one-thirty?” Jason shook his head. “Not exactly a heavyweight. If Ana is taller, she logically weighs more, and probably has more muscle. She could have done this.” He glanced at her and flashed a quick expression that was probably a grin. “But I still think Leonardo probably did it. I don't like him. He's hiding something.”

“I am thinking more along the lines of Sterling. A drug-fueled rage egged on when Ivana tried to protect Ana from him,” Ava said. “He definitely has the physique for it.”

“And the temperament?”

“Definitely,” she said, recalling his behavior during her interview at his penthouse.

They would just have to hold different opinions for the time.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Ana Juric's neighborhood wasn't ritzy or slummy. It looked just like a million other neighborhoods in a thousand other cities across the nation. Well-maintained medium-sized houses with manicured small yards—some with fences, some without—and a mid-size vehicle or two in their driveways. Nothing stood out. Nothing was special about the street. It was mundane and stereotypically average.

"Her house is right there," Ava said, pointing to a light blue split-level three-quarters of the way up the street.

Jason pulled alongside the curb across the street and idled past a driveway. He parked where two yards met and they could see Ana's house from his window.

"Why did you park here?"

"Don't want to spook her if she's watching the road. We'll sit here a minute and see if there's any movement. If not, we'll go knock on the door."

"I just watched a curtain move beside the door there," Ava said. She pointed to the window to the left of the front door. It moved again.

“I think that might be a fan blowing the curtain. It isn’t moving much,” he said.

“Nope. It was definitely a person the first time.” She unbuckled her seatbelt. “I saw the hand on the fabric.”

It moved again. A barely perceptible movement.

“I don’t see a hand.”

Ava opened her door.

“Where are you going?”

“I’m going to walk up to this house and knock on the door,” she said without looking back. “If she thinks we’re salesmen or visitors, you know, that we *belong* here, she might relax or come outside.”

“Or she’s not home, or she’s hiding because she doesn’t want to be arrested for murdering her boss,” he said.

Ava closed the door and walked to the closest house, knocked on the door, and waited. No one came to the door. She knocked again. Nothing. Turning around, she caught sight of the curtain pulled back again.

Jason got out of the car as Ava walked back toward it.

“She’s there. Let’s go,” he said, heading across the street.

“Oh, it wasn’t just a fan after all?”

He shook his head in annoyance but didn’t respond as he walked. Ava caught up to him on Ana’s porch. He knocked on the door. Three loud raps.

“Ana Juric? FBI. We need to speak with you,” he said.

After ten seconds, Ava knocked. “Ana, you need to open the door and talk to us before we assume something bad has happened to you. You’ve been ignoring agents and officers for days now.”

Ten seconds more passed with no response from inside the house.

“We have no problem kicking down the door to do a welfare check on you, Ana,” Jason announced. “We don’t have all day. About ten seconds more is all we’re going to wait, so if you’re in there, and we know you are because we saw you looking out the window, you should open up.”

The deadbolt clicked and then the lock on the doorknob followed. The door opened a crack. The chain lock was still engaged as Ana

peered out.

“I don’t want you here. Go away. It’s dangerous for me.” She looked at each of them with wide eyes and then scanned the street beyond and the houses on the other side of the street.

“We just need to ask you a few questions about Ivana,” Ava said.

She shut the door in their faces. The sound of the chain being slid from the locking mechanism was loud, as if she had shoved it through the metal casing and yanked it free. The door flew open again.

“Come in before the whole world sees you standing on my porch.” She motioned them inside with jerky, irritated gestures.

After exchanging a brief glance, Ava and Jason stepped inside.

“Glad to see you changed your mind,” Jason muttered as Ana closed the door and locked it.

“I still don’t want you here, and I don’t want to talk to you, but I don’t want certain people seeing me talk to you either. What is it you wish to speak with me about?” She crossed her arms, uncrossed them, shifted her weight from one foot to the other, and her gaze flitted from one window to another ceaselessly.

Ava followed as best she could, but all the windows were blocked with heavy drapes and blinds. Whoever Ana was afraid of, it was serious.

“It’s about Ivana Baruch. What happened the night of the party at Leonardo Bianchi’s estate?” Ava asked.

Ana squeezed her eyes shut briefly and pressed the tips of her fingers to the center of her forehead before whipping past them and into the living room. They followed her. She sat on a chair and laced her fingers tightly as she leaned her elbows on her knees.

“Ivana was going to break up with Leonardo the night of the party. You should check him out thoroughly because he isn’t all he seems to be, if you understand what I mean.”

Jason nodded and shot Ava a smug glance. “I know exactly what you mean, but could you elaborate a little? We need all the details you can give us.”

“Listen, if Ivana was going to break up with him that means he wasn’t a good person,” Ana said.

A car backfired outside. Ana yelled and covered her head as she leaned forward far enough to slide off the edge of the chair.

Ava and Jason looked at each other, shocked by her behavior.

She quickly realized it was only a car and composed herself. "I'm sorry. It sounded like gunfire. My mistake."

"Ana, if Leonardo wasn't a good person, why was Ivana with him to begin with?" Ava asked.

"She was with him for a long time. Three years. She loved him more than she loved herself. I have never seen her like that with anyone before. So happy. They were to be married, and she acted as if she couldn't be happier. I was helping with some of her plans, and she talked to me a lot about after the wedding. About her career, how her role would remain the same but the scope of her travels might shrink—understandably so—and about the possibility of starting a family although she thought it might be a little late in life for that. She said it was fun to sometimes fantasize about the pitter-patter of little feet filling Leo's mansion." She stood and walked to the far corner. "But all of a sudden, a week before the party, that all changed. She stopped talking about the marriage and kids and Leo. She seemed nervous and angry. She didn't eat well at all, and she couldn't concentrate on work. She had to keep reshooting segments of videos before getting them right and then she would get frustrated and just throw up her hands. Walk out and quit for the day. Totally out of character for her."

"Did she say what was wrong? Did she mention an argument with Leonardo or anyone else?" Ava asked.

Ana shook her head. "No, but she did make plans to go to a silent retreat in Mexico. That's when I became worried enough to start asking questions directly. She wouldn't tell me anything and got upset that I kept asking. I wouldn't give up, though, and I just kept on. I told her she could just be mad at me, but I wasn't leaving her alone until she told me what was wrong. The next day, she told me that she was planning on breaking up with Leo, but she refused to tell me why. She said it was enough for me to know what she was planning and when it would happen. She was going to break up with him at the party and head to the retreat in Mexico the next morning."

“Was there a specific reason she was going to the retreat right after the party?” Jason asked.

“I assumed it was to get as far away from Leo as possible after the breakup,” Ana said. She stood with her back in the corner and her arms crossed tightly. Her fingers dug into her arms.

“What had Leo done that was so bad? Did he hit her, cheat on her? What would make her change her mind so dramatically and go from loving him more than herself to breaking it off in the middle of a party and running away to Mexico?” Jason asked.

“I told you, I don’t know. He was always good to her. He never hit her, never hurt her, never cheated on her that she ever knew about. She would have told me. But something happened and Ivana found out about it. That’s the only explanation. And it had to be way worse than having a one-night stand. You have to believe me on this. Ivana wouldn’t just act the way she did for no reason. She wasn’t flighty and she wasn’t petty. She found out something really bad about him or that he did. Check him out. Check out everything about him.” Her voice and chin quivered as she spoke.

“Do you know Sterling Abbott?” Ava asked.

Ana gave a disgusted look. “Everyone knows Sterling. He’s a real prick—in every sense of the word, if you ask me.”

Ava couldn’t have agreed more. “Was he at that party? Did you see him?”

“He was there, alright. After he showed up to the party, he and Leo were really yukking it up like they were old friends. Come to find out, they were. That upset Ivana pretty bad. Well, it kind of infuriated her.”

“Why would that make any difference to her one way or the other?” Jason asked.

He and Ava knew the answer. They knew the answers to a lot of their questions, but they needed Ana’s answers; they needed to get her take on the situation, and they needed to know if she was being completely truthful with them.

“Because he was Ivana’s ex-boyfriend and he had been trying to hook up again with her for months. When she denied him, he trolled her across all her social media channels and even smeared her

philanthropic endeavors at every turn. He was still doing it right up until the night of the party, as far as I could tell.”

“What about after?” Ava asked.

“I don’t think so. Just to be honest, I haven’t really been online much since that night.”

Ava nodded sympathetically. “Do you think Sterling might have killed Ivana?”

Ana shook her head.

“Why?” Ava couldn’t understand. Had no one seen the bad side of him the way she and Dane had seen it?

Ana’s fingers dug deeper into the flesh of her arms and sweat popped out on her forehead. Her gaze jumped from Ava to the windows behind the sofa. She shook her head again. “Just because.”

Ana curled her bottom lip in and clamped it between her teeth as if she were forcing herself to remain quiet and not say anything more. Ava had seen the look before—Ana wanted to say more, but she was too fearful to do so. It would do no good to push her or try to bully her into it either. All the tactics used on criminals to get them to talk would only cause her to shut down completely. Ava had witnessed it multiple times, and every single time those tactics were put into play, the woman would shut down, and it would take twice as long to convince her to talk again.

Ava nodded. “Alright, thanks, Ana. I think we’re done for now.”

“We are?” Jason asked, eyes flashing with challenge.

“Yes, we are,” Ava said in a tone that she hoped would impart the need for them to leave Ana alone for a while. She pulled the front door open. “Thank you for talking with us, Ana. Please call us if you need anything at all.”

Ana merely gave them a tight-lipped smile as they stepped out of the house and closed the door behind them.

“I told you Leo was dirty somehow, and I’m going to prove it,” Jason said as soon as they stepped off the porch. “He must have killed Ivana. If she tried to break up with him, he killed her in a fit of rage perhaps.”

Ava flopped into the passenger seat. “Well, I can’t argue that logic. That could very well be the case. Especially if he found out about Sterling and Ivana having a past relationship and that Sterling was trying to hook up with her recently.”

“Who knows? Sterling might have even lied and said that he and Ivana *had* hooked up recently just to piss off Leo and cause trouble between him and Ivana.”

“Without realizing it would escalate to murder,” Ava added. “And after seeing Ana in person, do you still think she was capable of the murder?”

“She could have murdered Ivana, but I daresay she would have had a fair amount of trouble getting her into that barrel and getting it back on that stack without machinery. Besides, I didn’t see any marks on her hands that would indicate she had recently been in a fight, did you?”

Ava shook her head. At least Ana seemed to be a suspect they could move off the main list without worry.



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The Bianchi estate never lost its appeal, it seemed. The drive up never lost its gut-tossing abilities, either, but Ava was glad to have the opportunity anyway. She always tried to see the silver lining.

“You don’t look as green around the gills this time,” Jason quipped as he put the car in park.

“Not because you tried to make the ride any less puke-inducing,” she countered. “Seriously, though, I think I’m getting used to it. It’s not nearly as bad this time.” It was a lie.

He chuckled. “Told you it gets better with repetition. Lots of stuff does, as a matter of fact.”

Like smiling or laughing, you should try it, she thought but didn’t say.

Jason rang the doorbell and banged loudly on it for good measure. The self-satisfied smile on his face was small but prominent and kind of out of place. His was a face that wasn’t accustomed to hosting many smiles whether caused by genuine pleasure or something a smidge darker.

Ava braced herself, fully expecting to be thoroughly browbeaten by Ms. Hampton, but this time, Leonardo himself opened the door. "Hello, Agents," he said, flashing a smile that never reached his eyes.

"Mr. Bianchi, we need to speak with you again, if that's alright," Ava said with a genuine smile.

"I don't suppose that was really a question, now, was it, Agent James?" He stepped back and motioned for them to enter. "I mean, if you really intended to request an interview with me, you would have called me from back in the city instead of driving for two hours to knock on my door and then ask."

She chortled. "Okay, you got me." She really wanted to keep the mood light.

"We need to speak with you whether it's here or at the station; whether it's alright or not; whether it's a good time or not," Jason said in a flat tone with a flatter expression.

Leonardo snapped his fingers and pointed to Jason. "Now that's the kind of brutal honesty that I wish everyone had. That's something a person can work with. I like that kind of integrity, Agent Ellis." He led them into a small office and shut the door. "And by the way, the timing is fine, speaking with me is fine, here or at the station doesn't matter to me. Just for the record. All I want is to find who killed my Ivana, and I'll do exactly anything to find that person."

"What would you do if you found said person, Leo?" Jason asked, leaning forward in his seat.

Ava's mouth nearly dropped open before she could stop it.

Leonardo's mouth curled up on one side in a grin and the temperature of the expression in his eyes dropped about sixty degrees. "Well, now, Agent Ellis, I would do exactly what was right."

"I bet you would, Mr. Bianchi. I bet you would." Jason sat back, and the two men assessed each other for several seconds.

Ava wouldn't have been too surprised if one of them had said some cheesy line from an old western like: 'This here town ain't big enough for the both of us.' The testosterone was thickening by the millisecond, and the tension was building. It was the calm before an inevitable storm.

“Mr. Bianchi,” she said, drawing his attention.

He blinked twice deliberately, and his expression cleared back to normal. “Yes?”

“I need to ask you about Sterling Abbott.”

“I know Sterling quite well. Have for some time. He’s... how do I put this?” He looked out a window as if to ponder the question.

“We know what he is, but I’m not sure you know all that he is,” she offered.

Leonardo’s eyes snapped back to hers. “What do you mean?” That keen laser-focus was back. He already sensed something was up.

“Did you know Ivana and Sterling dated before you were even in her life?” Jason blurted.

Bianchi shot him a withering glare. He looked back to Ava as if for confirmation.

“They dated before you and Ivana got together,” she said.

“No. That’s not true. I would have known if they had.” His brow furrowed deeply and his eyebrows crept toward the bridge of his nose.

“Well, they did, and now you do know,” Jason said. “When did you find out about their little affair?”

“Affair? Ivana never cheated on me with him. She would never do such a thing. We were in love,” he said, his voice growing in volume.

“No, but they were definitely together for a while. And you’re trying to tell us that you had no idea?” Jason shook his head.

“I didn’t know. I don’t believe you.” Bianchi sat forward and put his forearms on the desk balling his hands into fists. “She would have said something. *He* would have said something.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Bianchi, but it’s true. He had been trying to get back together with Ivana for months before her death but she kept denying him. He smeared her name online and tried to run down all her good works as payback for her loyalty to you,” Ava said.

“Because she loved me,” Leonardo said.

Ava nodded. “Yes.”

“That bastard!” He pounded the desk with his fist. His jaw muscles clenched and relaxed several times. His chin quivered, but he kept his emotions in check. “I don’t know what hurts worse; that I had to learn this from you two, or that Ivana never told me herself.” A tear slid down his cheek and he angrily thumbed it away before shoving back from the desk.

“Maybe Ivana didn’t know you and Sterling were friends before he showed up at the party,” Ava said.

Leonardo stood and put his hands on his hips to glare out the window. “I think she did, but I can’t be sure.” He shook his head. “She might never have been here when he was around. She was always so busy with her own work, you know. We truly lived separate lives in that respect.”

“And that didn’t sit well with you after you decided to marry her, did it?” Jason asked.

“Didn’t sit well with me? What do you mean?” Leonardo dropped his arms to his sides.

The sleeves of his shabby-chic denim shirt pulled up past his wrists, revealing more of his tattoos. Were his arms covered in them? Ava looked from the ink to his face and then around the room. The ink just didn’t seem to fit with what she knew of businessmen like him. Especially ones who had such squeaky-clean backgrounds. She peered at what she could see peeking out from under the denim and tried to make out what she could. The FBI had a vast database of tattoos linking people to organized crime rings all over the world as well as localized gangs. It would have been surprising to find out that Leonardo Bianchi was a gangbanger, but she would do her due diligence and check the tats against the files if she could get a clear look at even one of them.

“You wanted her to settle down when she married you, right? It’s understandable. Any husband would want that.”

Ava shot Jason a look. She couldn’t tell if he was rattling Leonardo’s cage, or if he meant what he said.

Leonardo chuckled and shook his head. “I wanted to marry her, yes. Tie her down and take her from her passion? Absolutely not. I

planned on helping her do all the great things she had planned for the future. It's 2023, Agent Ellis, not 1923."

"Sterling and Ivana got into a heated argument at your party," Ava said.

"That's news to me. Again, neither of them informed me. No one said anything about anyone getting into an argument that night, and I certainly didn't know about it. What was it about?"

"We're not sure," she admitted. "Do you think Sterling could have killed her?"

"No, I don't think so, but anything is possible, I guess. It seems I didn't know Sterling quite as well as I thought I did." He thumped back into his seat, looking defeated. The sleeves gave a teaser view of the ink again, and he caught Ava peering hard. He unbuttoned the cuff and yanked the sleeve up. "All you had to do was ask, Agent," he said with irritation.

There were no nefarious gang symbols and nothing that screamed he was part of any criminal ring, but that didn't mean it wasn't so. "Any of those gang-related?"

He flicked the sleeve back into place and laughed. It was the sound of broken glass scraping concrete. His eyes were icy again. "I would have thought you did my complete background workup by now, Agent James. Am I wrong about the FBI? Are the FBI as incompetent as the Keystone cops around here? Should I hire a private investigative team to solve this case?"

"She asked a straight question. Give a straight answer," Jason said. His eyes were neutral as ever, but his tone held a warning.

Leonardo regarded a moment. "No, none of my tattoos are gang-related. They are all of my own design, and they are drawn from my own life. They are very personal to me and me alone. Only I hold the story of my life, and it is represented in the artwork on my body. Last time I checked, that is no crime in the United States of America."

"You are absolutely correct, Mr. Bianchi. It isn't a crime at all, but if we are to do our jobs thoroughly, that means checking every lead equally thoroughly—even the ones that might point to you," she informed him.

Chagrined, he looked down and nodded. "My apologies. You are correct. I am only anxious to have justice for my Ivana, and this news about Sterling has upset me terribly. I had no idea he had been bothering her, or stalking, or trolling her online, let alone in the real world for months. If I had known, I could have put a stop to it. I just do not understand why she didn't tell me about his behavior. I could have made sure the backstabbing little dirtbag never did anything like that again." He bared his teeth and balled his fists in the air. "And I thought he was a friend. I invited him into my home, into my *life*." He vocalized a low sound of rage and then lowered his hands.

"And you're sure you didn't see them arguing the night of the party?" Jason asked.

Ava stood to leave.

"No. I swear it. I would have tossed him out, and I might not have opened the door first, if you catch my meaning." His cheeks burned deep crimson.

"And you are absolutely sure you didn't lose that big ol' temper of yours and do something stupid that night?"

Ava snapped her gaze back to Leonardo expecting a hot retort. The man dropped his gaze to the desktop and sighed as if completely defeated.

"No, Agent Ellis. I didn't. I was focused on entertaining my rich and elite friends. I wanted to impress them with a good time and garner some lucrative business relationships. I was too busy being happy and drunk on my own damn wine to even know something was wrong."

"Thank you, Mr. Bianchi. We'll see ourselves out," Ava said. She walked past Jason and out the door. He followed, and she closed the door behind them before continuing out of the house.

"I think we should go talk to Sterling again," she said.

"I think you might be right. Why wouldn't he mention to his good buddy that he had bedded his girl in the past? What kind of friend would keep something like that a secret?"

"And then go after her again knowing she was with his friend," she added.

“Then troll her and smear her name and stalk her because she wouldn’t cheat on his friend.” Jason shook his head. “Just another reason to be a loner. If you don’t have friends, you don’t have to worry about that kind of drama. Ever. Period.”

“Wow, that’s a dark take on life.” Ava buckled in.

“Practical, though. Works for me, anyway.”

Ava wanted to pin Sterling to a board like an insect specimen, but she wouldn’t say that aloud to Jason. He would just find a way to shoot her down for it and logic away her reasoning for being so gung-ho that Sterling was the killer. That would be bad.

It would be worse if it turned out that he was right.



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The sun was warm and the sky was clear as Ava got out of the car and walked with Jason toward Sterling's apartment building. The ambient heat was dry and was only relieved by the frequent puffs of wind that blew past them.

"I could get used to this weather," she said offhandedly.

"Until it's a relentless and brutal one-ten and you're working where there's no shade, no air movement, and no hope of cooling down for the foreseeable future. Kind of sucks then."

"You're just a regular little bucket of sunshine all the time, aren't you?" She opined, refusing to let him rain on her happy thoughts. They were few and far between when working, and she took them when she could. The weather was one of the nicest things about the city that she could experience quickly, and she was determined to do so.

"I try my best." He opened the lobby door and they walked inside.

Just as they pulled out their badges to show to the security desk, Sterling rounded the corner from the elevators. He stopped in his tracks and looked side to side.

“Mr. Abbott,” Ava called over. “We need to speak to you.” She put her badge away and moved toward him.

Before she had taken four steps, Sterling bolted out a side door close to him.

“Dammit,” Jason grunted as he took off after him.

Ava and Jason chased him around the side of the apartment building and into a parking garage. The sudden change from bright sunshine to darkness gave her pause. She could barely see where she was going for the first couple seconds. Jason pulled ahead of her, seemingly having no trouble at all. As she ran, Ava stepped on a pair of discarded sunglasses. Sterling had tossed them as soon as he’d gotten inside.

Jason ran like a marathoner. His jacket’s tails flipped out behind him in perfect steady rhythm as he pulled away from her and gained on Sterling, who jumped over the barrier at the other end of the parking garage like a gazelle. Jason hurdled the wide concrete wall with ease and kept his pace. Ava made it over the wall, but not as easily as the men had.

Sterling had the stride of a giraffe as he ran the length of a greenbelt between the busy street to their left and a row of office buildings to their right. He pulled ahead again just before reaching the end of the greenbelt and taking a sharp left into the traffic.

Ava kept running but braced to hear the distinct sound of a crash. There was none. Jason followed Sterling’s path. She pushed herself to run harder and faster. She couldn’t lose them. As Sterling took a right, she continued straight. From her vantage point, she could see that there was an old construction zone two streets beyond, and she deduced that was probably the direction Sterling was heading. It would be a good place to lose the agents on his trail.

As she rounded the corner to head them off, she was shocked to see Sterling going through a crowded plaza outside a shopping mall. Jason was having more trouble as he brought up the back. Sterling shoved people to the side without care while Jason tried to dodge them. She caught up with Jason as he entered the shopping mall.

“Which way did he go?” she asked.

Jason pointed to the right. His breathing was heavy but very tightly controlled. Ava was impressed.

The sea of people made it nearly impossible to pick out Sterling. There seemed to be hundreds of men milling around that fit his general description, which was a little nugget she knew would irritate the hell out of him. If there was anything that would upset Sterling Abbott, it would be that he looked anything like so many other John Does. He liked to stand out and be noticed. He wasn't good at blending in.

"There," she said.

Jason turned to look where she was pointing. "The exit's over there." He was off again.

Ava was right with him, and she didn't intend on letting them get away from her again.

Sterling looked over his shoulder when they were only five yards away. He panicked and shoved down three women in front of him, tripped over them, and stumbled out the door. He was running as soon as his feet hit the concrete. Jason sailed across the women, and Ava slammed into the door as she slid past them. There was no time to do more than assess that no one was seriously injured.

"Stop running, Mr. Abbott," Jason ordered.

Sterling shot him a bird and banked to the right and into traffic again. He jumped onto the hood of a car that was in the process of stopping at a red light. Jason followed, and Ava ran around it. They chased him toward another parking garage. Jason vaulted over the low wall to the side, barely slipping sideways through the bars as Sterling went past the gate.

Ava made it into the garage in time to see Jason run onto the hood of a car, across the top, leap and grab the railing of the ramp behind it. He flipped over the railing in a cartwheel move that stunned Ava. He scissored his legs and kicked wide as Sterling trotted by. The kick caught him in the hip and sent him skidding sideways.

Jason managed to land on his feet, and put his shoulder into Sterling, knocking him to the floor.

“I told you to stop running!” Jason yelled as he yanked Sterling’s hands behind his back and slapped cuffs on him.

Sterling huffed and groaned without responding.

“I think, for once, he doesn’t have a smart comeback,” Ava said.

Jason dropped onto his butt on the floor and arched sweat from his face. “Good thing. I would have been tempted to shoot him.”

Ava grinned. Jason didn’t. It was a moment in which she wondered if he was joking. Of course, he was joking. He was a federal agent. A damn good one from what she had seen. He was just upset because of the wild and dangerous foot chase they’d just been led on.

Jason got to his feet with enough ease that Ava was again impressed. It was as if he had not just chased the bad guy for several blocks and through traffic only to physically tackle him and cuff him.

Sterling was down for the count. He was too exhausted to even protest more than once, and that was only a half-hearted snark.

Jason dragged a large baggie from Sterling’s pants pocket and held it up to Ava. She took it. There were several smaller bags in it filled with various drugs, which she assumed were a mixture of designer and street drugs from the looks of them.

“Sterling, Sterling,” Jason tsked, rolling the man to his side. “You’ve been a bad, bad boy, Sterling. What else you carrying?”

Sterling grimaced as Jason checked the remainder of his pockets.

Ava helped get Sterling to his feet and direct his face to a concrete wall while Jason finished checking his clothing.

“What’s under this fancy shirt collar?” Jason asked as he ran his finger cautiously under the fabric and undid the small button. He flipped up the collar and chuckled as he looked over his shoulder at Ava. “See this?”

She moved for a better view. “I think that’s a first for me,” she admitted as Jason pulled what looked like a plastic-wrapped cord from an opening in the fabric. “Cocaine? MDMA?”

Sterling struggled against Jason, and for once he looked scared instead of defiant.

“I would say something far worse. He wasn’t bothering to hide all the other stuff. I bet we have ourselves some fentanyl, or at the very least some angel dust.” He shoved his forearm into Sterling’s back hard. “Right, Mr. Abbott?”

Sterling didn’t say anything as they cuffed him and hauled him downtown.

After being put in an interview room at the station, Sterling was still quiet. He refused to respond to any questions—even the simplest questions were met with a blank stare.

“Looks like he’s back in action,” Jason said.

“Oh, no. That’s not how he normally acts. He’s loud, proud, rude, obnoxious, and the list goes on. That,” she said as she pointed through the two-way mirror at him, “is reminiscent of a sulking teenager.”

“Let’s go give him something to really sulk about, shall we?” Jason asked as he headed for the door.

Ava followed. “You know he’ll get off those drug charges within a few days, right?”

“I’m going to complicate that for him. He put our lives in danger, and he endangered civilian lives everywhere we chased him. He’s staying for a while even if we can’t get him on murder charges.”

“Good enough for me.”

Sterling immediately rolled his eyes when they walked in.

“So, why did you do it?” Jason asked as he leaned on the table with his fists.

Sterling said nothing.

“We know about all of it,” Ava said. “How you trolled Ivana online, smeared her name.” She opened a file and pulled out a paper. “Would you like me to read some of your posts out loud?” She tossed the paper in front of him. “Here’s one of the relatively tame ones. *Nobody really knows the truth about precious Princess Ivana. She’s a fraud and a bitch and she...* my God, Sterling, does your mother know you use this kind of language? I don’t even want to read it out loud.”

“You can’t prove that’s me,” Sterling finally said. Ava pressed on.

“I have probably fifty like that. All of them from different sites at different times.”

“So, why did you do it? Was it just because she turned you down? Just because she wouldn’t cheat on her fiancé with you?” Jason asked.

Sterling laughed and shook his head as if it was the stupidest thing he had ever heard.

“You think it’s funny?” Ava asked, tossing down another paper and then another and another in rapid succession. “Nobody is laughing about this except you. Nobody. No one thought it was funny when you were doing this online, either. Coordinated harassment campaigns? Anonymous death threats? Swarms of bots spreading all this hate everywhere you could? There were so many people trying to shut you down from the beginning, yet you persisted, didn’t you?”

He glared at her.

“And then it spilled over. Somewhere along the way, you let it get out of hand, and you started trolling her in real life. Harassing her as she went about her business, not hurting anyone. You followed her, stalked her. Made her so paranoid that she wasn’t even comfortable going to the coffee shop with her best friend anymore,” Jason said.

“And then you confronted her at that party,” Ava added, finally pulling out a chair and sitting. She preferred being eye level with him. “That was pretty ballsy, in my opinion. So many people around. Nearly a hundred sets of eyes that could have seen you.”

“Probably more with the workers there that night. And how many ears could have heard the things you were saying to her?” Jason asked.

Sterling looked from him to Ava suspiciously. “Ivana was a bitch. Believe what you want about her, but she was a bitch, and she wanted to get back with me just like I said. She started the argument when I turned her down.”

A fat bead of sweat trickled from his left temple to his jaw line. Ava smiled and shook her head.

“You did it, didn’t you?” she asked.

“Did what?”

“Don’t act like you don’t know why you’re really here,” Jason pressed. “Don’t act like you took off running like a gazelle because you had a few drugs in your pocket. You knew why we were at your apartment. That’s why you ran, and that’s why you’re here with those shiny new accessories around your wrists.”

“Just because she wouldn’t hook up with you again behind your good friend Leonardo’s back,” Ava said. “That makes you about the lousiest friend in the world, doesn’t it? Going after your friend’s girl like that is despicable, but what you did later?”

“Unforgivable,” Jason said. “Nothing she could have done was bad enough that she deserved any of what you did to her.”

“And especially not ending up in that barrel,” Ava finished.

“You think I killed Ivana?” He sounded genuinely shocked.

“We don’t think, Sterling. We know,” Ava said.

He shook his head. “No. No way. You’re crazy. I didn’t kill her. Yes, I was an ass. Hell, I *am* an ass—that’s kind of my thing, who I am. I was a bad boyfriend to her, and a horrible friend to Leonardo, but in my defense, I never told Leo about me and Ivana. I’d never do that to him. I’m not that low, after all. And I didn’t kill her. I didn’t. I don’t know who did, either.”

Ava stared a hole through him. Was he telling the truth? She wanted to believe he was lying. She wanted to charge him with murder. But her gut had other ideas. He looked like a man telling the truth. As bad as it pained her, Sterling Abbott’s words *felt* true.

“We have enough circumstantial evidence to pin this on you, Sterling. We can pin it and make it stick. You need to start being honest with us, or this is going to get a whole lot worse for you,” Ava said. She desperately wanted to break him and hear a confession from him.

“Maybe you two argued at the party and you wanted to talk to her away from it for a while? You know, to settle things once and for all. Maybe you even wanted to apologize for being such a dick, but you were on some of those fancy little pills and powders, and things just went sideways when you got her alone.”

Sterling shook his head. “It wasn’t like that at all. I do have a drug habit. I’ll be the first to admit that, and anyone who knows me knows

I have a habit. And, yes, I sometimes sell drugs on the side.” He looked at Ava with wide, pleading eyes and held out both hands. “But I told you I was a professional hot mess, didn’t I? You and that other woman agent who came to my place. I told you that from the beginning. You saw all that shit in those bowls and on the tables. You knew I was telling the truth about it. Why would I take up lying now?”

“I don’t know, maybe for the same reason you keep lying about Ivana wanting to hook up with you instead of the other way around. To preserve that reputation you’re so worried about,” Ava spat.

“Okay, fine. I was the one who wanted to hook up again. It was me. But, Jesus, did you see her? You’ve seen pictures of her, videos of her online, right?” He looked at each of them for confirmation, but neither gave it. “I know you have. She was the most gorgeous woman I’d ever been with. And no, I didn’t tell Leo I was trying to hook up with his fiancée. I’m not that low.”

Ava couldn’t hide her look of disgust as she shoved the chair under the table and turned to walk out. Jason followed shortly after to find her pacing in the viewing room.

“Agent James is not impressed, I take it,” he said.

“No, I am not impressed. He’s a bottom-feeder of the worst kind.”

“He’s definitely not a good guy, but at least we can charge him with the drugs. I don’t think he killed her.”

“You didn’t think it to start with, though,” Ava reminded him.

“Nope, but I had enough doubt that I considered the possibility. Seemed like he was telling the truth in there.”

She nodded once. “Yeah.”

She was glad to know he was being booked and would spend some time in a cell where he belonged, though she would have been happier with a different outcome. She reminded herself that she couldn’t pin a murder on a man if he was innocent, no matter how much of an ass he was.



CHAPTER NINETEEN

“I want to go by Ana’s house and let her know about Sterling,” Ava said as she and Jason walked out of the station.

“Why? That’s not our job.”

“No, but it would ease her mind maybe. And she might tell us whatever else she knows. I might be able to persuade her even if Sterling wasn’t the person she was worried about.”

“She doesn’t know anything else. If she did, she would have told us while we were there.”

“Yes, she does know more than she told us,” Ava said, pulling the car door open hard and getting in without waiting for a reply.

Jason slid under the wheel and started the engine.

“Let’s go to Ana’s, please.” Ava was trying a new tack. She recalled all the women’s faces she had seen over the last couple of years. All the eyes filled with fear, the cheeks hollowed by worry and anxiety, the nervous tics and constant need for movement caused by the fear and the need to tell someone what was going on mixed with the inability to do so.

“Like it or not, Sterling just might be completely clean as far as the murder goes.”

“That’s not what this is about.” It was part of it, but she wouldn’t say that out loud. It made her sound too much the way Jason had sounded when he’d wanted Leonardo to be guilty. He still wanted that, but he had backed off a little. At least enough to entertain the idea that Sterling might be the culprit.

“Really?”

“Yes, really. If Sterling’s guilty, the evidence will lead to him eventually. Until then, he’ll be in jail where he belongs.”

“Then why go back to Ana’s? She might not care one way or the other about him being in jail.”

“Yes, she will. He was harassing her friend, making Ivana’s life hell. Trust me, she’ll care. She will want to know.”

They drove for a few minutes in silence. Ava’s mind turned to her mother and Molly and the dinner they would have when the current case was over. She worried about her mother because she seemed to be better too quickly. She recovered far faster than expected from her yearlong tracking expedition that put her almost at the heart of the darkness that had swallowed Molly and so many other people. She had seen and done so much that there should have been some sort of residual effects, and there were very few. To Ava, that meant her mother was bottling it all up inside and not dealing with it. It was like putting a radioactive rock in a box and hiding it in the sock drawer—eventually, the poison would leak out and taint everything.

Molly, on the other hand, had outward and very noticeable residual effects that might never go away. Some of her physical scars would never disappear, and Ava was sure there were even more internal ones that would remain forever. But Molly was dealing with them through therapy. She was trying, not denying.

“Why does all this seem so personal to you?” Jason asked, intruding on Ava’s personal thoughts.

“I know when a woman is holding back because she is scared. I’ve dealt with it too many times not to see it when it’s right in my face, and I can’t believe you didn’t pick up on it.”

“Well, it wasn’t right in my face. She was nervous, but I suspect that’s because her friend, who was also her boss, was murdered. That’s enough to make any young woman nervous, I would think.”

Ava shook her head. “No, it’s more than that.”

“How do you know that? What makes you so sure?”

She glanced at him. “Previous cases.”

Ava sat straighter and took a deep breath as they turned down Ana’s street.

“Wait in the car for me, please,” she said.

“So, what? I’m just your chauffeur now?”

“Of course not, but I...” She turned to him. “I just think it would be easier if I spoke to her woman-to-woman. She might be more comfortable.”

“As if I’m a threatening presence.” He nodded once, curtly. “I’m a federal agent. If she doesn’t feel safe around me, she won’t around you, either.”

“You’re a man,” Ava said.

“Captain Obvious, thank you for re-confirming that. I just don’t understand why I can’t be in the house while you’re talking to her.”

“And I don’t understand why it’s such a big deal. You didn’t even want to come tell her about Sterling. I won’t be long.”

She walked to the door, unsure if Jason would stubbornly follow her or not. Thankfully, he didn’t budge from his seat. Ana opened the door and let her in.

“You’re back. Did something happen?” She peeked out and saw the car in the drive. “Great, right in the driveway. You two are going to cause me a lot of grief by coming here.”

“I’m sorry, Ana. I came by to tell you that we arrested Sterling. He’s in jail on drug charges. I just thought you’d like to know he’s not on the streets.”

Ana looked confused. “I’m glad he got into trouble, but too little, too late. He was out and about when he shouldn’t have been, and you’re wanting a pat on the back because he’s in jail now?”

“No. I thought if you were worried he’d come after you—”

“Come after me for what? It was Ivana he was terrorizing. You should’ve put him away back then. Maybe you should drag up some

of the old complaints she filed and add those to the drug charges. He might stay in longer than a week.” She pulled her sweater tighter and stormed to the kitchen.

“So, Sterling isn’t why you’re so scared?” Ava followed her.

“Scared?” Ana turned to her, wide-eyed. “I’m not scared.”

“Yes, you are. And it’s okay. You can talk to me, Ana. I’m here to help. That’s why Agent Ellis is in the car and I’m talking to you alone. I saw how scared you were when we were here before, and I know you wanted to tell me something more last time. What was keeping you from it? What are you scared of? I can help you if you let me.”

Ana shook her head and pulled the sweater tighter again. She turned toward the sink and nibbled at her thumbnail. “Thanks for letting me know about Sterling. See yourself out, please.”

“Ana, why was Ivana going to break up with Leonardo the night of the party? What happened to change her mind, her *heart* about him so suddenly?”

Ana’s breath hitched and she covered her mouth with her hand, but she didn’t turn around. “The week before she was killed, she overheard her father talking with someone about some illegal activity going on at Leonardo’s business,” she whispered. She finally turned her head and her eyes were brimming with tears. “She thought Filip and Leo and this other person were in on it together, and that maybe it had to do with drugs, and possibly... human trafficking. She argued with Filip. It was bad. Like, really bad. The kind of bad that breaks family ties if it isn’t resolved.” She sat in a chair at the table and wiped her tears with the sleeve of her sweater.

“Are you sure her information was correct? Did she do any sort of research to check out the validity of the information or its source?”

Ana shrugged. Her chin quivered. “She was so out of touch, and when she did talk to me, it was in a rush, like she was trying to fit a world of information into a ten-minute conversation. She was scared and hurt and furious. All I know is that she was certain enough about it that she was cutting ties with her own father and with Leo after the party. She was done and wanted me to leave with her.” She broke down into tears.

Ava let her sob for a moment, knowing she must have been feeling a fair amount of survivor's guilt and a lot of fear.

"She asked you to leave with her?"

Ana nodded. "I told her I would. We were going away to start fresh. She said maybe in another state, maybe in another country. We were going to figure it out at the silent retreat in Mexico. Now, she's dead, and whoever killed her might come after me if they suspect I know any of what she found out."

"And Sterling?" She already knew the answer.

"Sterling didn't kill her. He's a top-tier jerk, but he's not a murderer. He didn't do this. It was someone else."

"Who do you think could have done it?"

"Leo. If he really is doing something illegal through his business, he might have killed her if she threatened to turn him in—and Ivana might have threatened that. She was righteous, and she believed in doing the right thing no matter what."

"What about Filip?"

Ana looked up as if she had been slapped. "I never even really stopped to think that far. I know him, but not very well. I don't think he would be able to kill his daughter. Would he?" She looked as if she had opened a portal to another dimension. "Surely, he couldn't have. But I can't say for sure." After a moment, she tapped the table with her finger. "Money and means. I'm saying it was probably Leo. She threatened his operation, and now she's dead."

"Do you know for sure that she threatened him, or that they argued that night?"

"No, but..." Ana closed her eyes. "No."

"Thank you, Ana. If I find out anything else I think you would like to know, I'll be back."

Ana nodded. This time, when Ava left, it was with a heavy weight on her shoulders.



CHAPTER TWENTY

“**S**o, what new and interesting thing did she reveal to you that she didn’t say the first time around?” Jason asked smugly as Ava got into the car.

“We need to go speak with Filip immediately.” Ava buckled in.

“Okay, care to share with the class?”

“The week before she died, Ivana overheard her father, Leonardo, and another person arguing over something. She thought it had something to do with drug and human trafficking.”

“Well, that’s a development. Did she say where this trafficking was going on?” He glanced over with a smirk. “Or do I get three guesses?”

“No, you don’t.”

“I knew Bianchi was dirty. Maybe we should swing by the estate and have a chat with him. Want to go to the trophy store and pick up an Oscar for him first?”

“We don’t know that the accusations are true. Ana can’t even say for sure that Ivana confronted Leonardo about it, or that they even argued the night of the party.”

“But she’s sure he’s the one we should look at for Ivana’s murder.”

“Only because she doesn’t know who else to blame,” Ava clarified. “Ivana was acting strange the week before her death, and she wasn’t getting into many details of what she had overheard. Whatever it was, it was bad enough that Ivana had decided to cut ties with her father, and she wanted Ana to go away with her.”

“To the retreat?”

“Yes, and then they were going to move to another state, maybe even another country. The plan hadn’t been set. They were going to figure it out at the retreat after Ivana had broken it off with Leonardo.”

Jason considered this for a moment and hummed thoughtfully. “Whatever she overheard made her do a one-eighty about being in love and getting married. It also made her decide it was better to cut ties with the only parent she had left, which was the only family she had left in the country. Don’t forget that. And she was going to leave the state, too? Sounds to me like what she overheard convinced her that her boyfriend was a completely unsalvageable piece of garbage and so was her father. Filip might have had something to do with her death for all anyone knows. He sure turned on the waterworks for us.”

“I still have trouble believing a father would do that. Especially this one,” Ava said.

“What about Ana? Did she have trouble believing it, or did you ask?”

“Yes, I asked. She wasn’t sure. She doesn’t know him that well, and she still thinks we should check out Leonardo and his business more thoroughly.”

“I agree with Ana,” Jason said.

Once again, daylight turned to dusk, and the streetlights threw their cones of insufficient illumination onto the concrete and asphalt below. Pedestrians passed through light and dark spots seemingly without consideration. Did fear prickle across the napes of any of their necks as strangers walked too close behind? Did anxiety heighten anyone’s awareness as they passed into long stretches of darkness between streetlights?

Life in a crowded city had a way of numbing some people's senses and awareness. The constant droning noise blanketed even the menacing shuffle of feet running up behind a person, and their fight or flight reaction wouldn't kick in until it was too late. Other people were hyper-aware and would startle at the least provocation—the wind rattling through the leaves on a nearby tree, the sudden whoosh of bicycle tires rounding a corner, or a car backfiring.

The first type of person was more likely to fight for their life if they found themselves in a dangerous situation. The second type was more likely to be paralyzed by fear and panic.

Neither characteristic made a person more or less likely to become a victim as far as Ava could tell. If a criminal decided they were going to rob, rape, maim, or kill, they usually succeeded no matter what the intended victim did to protect themselves.

Such is the nature of the criminal element in the real world.

Ava closed her eyes and tried not to think about the hundreds of potential victims and possible criminals walking on the sidewalks, gathering at the bus stops, and peering from darkened alleys. What good would it do? There was a case to focus on.

"Here we are again," Jason said.

Ava opened her eyes and blinked slowly as she breathed deeply. Would they go into the house and confront a father who had killed his only daughter? Was he innocent? Being framed? Was he in on the trafficking? Was the trafficking even a for-sure thing?

She groaned and grabbed the door handle.

"You sound as enthused as I feel," Jason commented.

Ava slammed her door behind her. "This case just twists my insides. I want justice for Ivana, but I hope her father didn't have anything to do with her death. That's just..." She took a deep breath and shook her head.

"Yeah, I know."

Jason knocked on the door and announced their presence much the way he had before. After the third time, he threatened to kick the door in to do a welfare check, but there was still no answer.

"Maybe he really isn't home," Ava suggested.

“Maybe.” Jason trotted down the steps and started peering in windows. “He’s home,” he said fifteen seconds later.

Ava knocked on the door immediately. “Mr. Baruch, you need to open the door immediately. FBI!” she shouted.

Jason jogged easily back up the steps, shaking his head. “That won’t do any good. He’s dead on the couch.” He turned the doorknob.

About two tons of lead dropped in Ava’s stomach. “What? Are you sure he’s—?”

“Oh, yeah.” He kicked the door beside the knob and it flew open. “Come on.” He called the situation in as they made their way inside.

Filip sat on the couch slumped to his left slightly. A pistol lay near his right hand near the edge of the cushion as if it were about to topple to the floor. The bullet had entered his right temple and exited about a half-inch below the left temple, taking out part of his jaw joint on that side. Blood and gray matter had splattered the sofa back and soaked the arm. There was a good amount on the floor to the side of the couch and some on the wall a few feet away.

Ava and Jason stopped just inside the living room doorway and assessed the scene, each of them taking in every detail they could see. Jason looked up at the ceiling and at the windows behind the couch.

“No blood spatter on the ceiling,” he noted.

She pointed to the couch and floor on Filip’s left side. “It all seems to be concentrated there. Look at the angle of the entry and exit wounds.”

Jason stepped forward carefully and leaned with his hands on his thighs. “It’s a slightly downward angle from the looks. Poor bastard took out part of his jawbone.” He grimaced and stood straight, looking around at the wine and liquor and beer bottles. “Looks like he was probably going at the booze pretty heavy since we were here last, too.”

Many of the bottles were broken. Some of the contents of others had spilled onto the couch, table, or floor. Filip’s shirt was torn above the left pocket and the left arm seam was ripped. The gun was small. Maybe six inches long, maybe less. The knuckles of Filip’s right

hand were bloody, and it wasn't from the gunshot to his temple. The blood came from the busted skin on his knuckles. He had hit something hard and repeatedly. She quickly looked at his face. His left cheek was darkened with a bruise from the cheekbone down, and a broken tooth peeked morbidly from under his split top lip on the left side.

"What kind of gun is that?" she asked Jason.

He turned from the blood spatter on the wall and stepped back toward the couch. "Looks like a Springfield Armory Hellcat Single Action Only semi-automatic pistol. Croatian originally but marketed here by Springfield Armory under the Hellcat branding." He turned to her. "Why would he have one of those?" His eyebrows went up, and he smirked. "Makes me wonder about what he was up to."

"He was in a fight before he died."

"With what, the liquor?"

She pointed out the broken tooth, busted lip, and bloody knuckles. "And his shirt is torn right where someone might grab him if they were in an altercation and they were throwing a punch at his face."

Jason ran a hand over his cheek. "Maybe he got into a fight and that put him over the edge. After he got back home, he offed himself."

Ava shook her head. "I'm not sure about that. The angle of the wound, the broken bottles, the defensive wounds. Looks a little suspicious to me."

"It was a suicide," he said as he turned back to the scene.

But was it that simple? Jason's explanation might have been right, but maybe it was wrong.



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The scene at Filip's house wrapped up an hour before sunrise. Ava walked out with Jason. The commotion at the house had drawn the usual looky-loos, and the sidewalks were crowded with neighbors, reporters, journalists, and internet glory-hounds shooting videos and snapping photos. The local PD had their hands full keeping people behind the yellow tape.

"Peggy Sue's is open," Jason said in the car.

"I didn't think it was a twenty-four-hour joint," Ava said.

"It's not. Want to get breakfast?"

"Is there anything closer?"

"Lots, but nothing quite as good." He maneuvered the SUV through the slow-moving clump of people in the street. "It won't take long to get there. Traffic isn't bad this early."

"I'm game. I could use a monumental caffeine infusion right about now. And a super stack of pancakes isn't out of the question, either."

"Sugar and caffeine." His expression was as unreadable as his tone.

“And maybe a couple of side orders. I was thinking donuts and aspirin.” She fought a grin.

He tried to stifle a chuckle and failed.

She laughed. “Was that a little laugh I just heard? From you?” She ran a finger down the window. “I mark one point for me, in that case.”

“Oh, now it’s a competition?”

“Have to get my jollies somehow, I suppose.”

At Peggy Sue’s, Ava ordered the All-American breakfast platter with city ham, two scrambled eggs, a biscuit with gravy, a waffle with blueberry syrup, and a large black coffee.

“Again, you surprise me, Agent James,” Jason said as he eyed her plates of food.

“I wasn’t trying, but the element of surprise is sometimes beneficial, I hear.”

“You have a healthy appetite.” His grin was wide and very amused.

“I’m hungry, so sue me. That omelet and toast you’re having just didn’t look like it would do the job for me.” She gave the omelet the side-eye and then doused the waffle with blueberry syrup.

“No insult intended. Just noting facts. That’s kind of what I do.”

She nodded. “Me, too. Must be a hazard of the job, eh?”

After breakfast, they stepped into a new morning. The sun was bright, and of course, warm. The breeze, though light, was just right.

“Are you going to call your team and let them know you’re going back to the hotel for some shut-eye?” Jason asked.

Ava shaded her eyes and looked toward the east and then took down her hand and looked north. “Are you tired?”

He shook his head. “I’m accustomed to running only on naps for days at a time.”

“I’ll have to try it.”

They got into the car, but Ava’s brain was already churning with possibility. “I think we should go to Napa Valley.”

Jason looked at her in shock. “Really?”

She nodded. “Talk to Leonardo while all the information is still white-hot and fresh in our minds, and before he gets wind of what’s

happened. Unless he had something to do with it, that is.”

“Are you admitting that he might not be Mr. Squeaky Clean?” Jason headed the car toward Napa Valley.

She shrugged. “Just covering all the bases. Better safe than sorry, don’t you think?”

They arrived at Leonardo’s estate a little after eight. He opened the door promptly and invited them inside. He didn’t seem irritated, but he wasn’t exactly doing Snoopy dances to see them, either. It appeared that some of his intense grief over Ivana had dulled, but all his angst about the lack of progress on the case had doubled.

“You are back, so I am hopeful that you have news of some progress on the case?” he asked as he led them to a sitting room.

Ava hadn’t been in the room before, but it looked to be some sort of parlor or sitting room with a fireplace, several chairs, a loveseat, a small table with four chairs, and a baby grand piano in the corner.

“We do have news, and there is some progress,” Ava told him.

“Good, tell me.” His face was set and stoic.

“It’s your friend Filip,” Jason said. “He’s dead. Looks like suicide.”

Ava bit her lip. Jason was completely tactless at times. She wasn’t sure if it was purposeful or not, but in the case of Leonardo, she suspected it was.

“No, Filip wouldn’t do that,” Leonardo said, his face paling. He looked frantically from Ava to Jason.

“Well, I’m afraid he did. Used a little single-action Hellcat to get the job done. Know anything about that Hellcat, Mr. Bianchi?” Jason asked.

“What is a Hellcat, Agent?”

“You know, a gun. A semi-automatic pistol. About this big.” He held his thumb and middle finger about six inches apart. “Not very big, but it packs one hell of a punch. Why would Filip do that to himself, Mr. Bianchi?”

“Stop it. You are being cruel. First, my Ivana, and now her father.” He covered his eyes with one hand. A tear slipped down his cheek, and he wiped it away forcefully before looking desperately at Ava. “Tell me he is only being cruel. Filip is still alive. He isn’t dead.”

“I’m afraid he is telling the truth. We found him last night when we went back to speak with him about his daughter. He was already deceased when we arrived. We’ve just come from the scene.”

Leonardo took a moment to grieve. He allowed tears to flow for several seconds unchecked as he thumped his chest over his heart with his closed hand. “Filip was my friend. He was a good man with many troubles.” He looked up and made the sign of the cross. “May you find your peace, Filip.”

“I don’t think suicides—”

“Mr. Bianchi,” Ava said loudly, shooting Jason a disbelieving look.

“I know what is supposed to happen to suicides, you fool. I still say Filip did not kill himself. He wasn’t that type of man.” He brought his simmering gaze to Ava.

Before she could ask him anything, Jason set in again. “You seem awfully sure of that. Is that because you know he wouldn’t, or because you *know he didn’t*? I just have to ask.”

“He wouldn’t,” Leonardo said through gritted teeth.

“What kind of business were you and good ol’ Filip running here, Mr. Bianchi?” Jason asked, getting comfortable in his seat.

“The wine business, Agent Ellis. And we weren’t running it together. It’s my wine business. Filip was just a friend. A very good and dear friend, but he wasn’t part of the business in that capacity.”

The men stared at each other in silence. It was a tactic to get the suspect riled and then go silent. Often, the suspect would continue to feel the need to talk, and he would reveal pertinent, and often damning, evidence in a case.

That didn’t happen with Leonardo Bianchi. He simply stared back, refusing to break eye contact or the silence that hung between them. He was as icy as Jason.

Ava sat forward and adjusted to the edge of her seat. “Mr. Bianchi, it has come to our attention that you are possibly filtering drugs into the country through your wine business. Is that true? In any capacity?”

His eyes went wide and his jaw slack for a moment. His attention jerked to her. “What? No. I do not do business that way. I have never

and will never conduct business in that manner. Every facet of my business is legitimate and legal.”

“Well, a little birdie told us a very different story,” Jason said.

“Then your little birdie is lying,” he spat. “You can check anything you want. I have absolutely nothing to hide on the premises or in the running of my company. You have my permission to go through it all.”

“We might just take you up on that,” Jason said, getting to his feet. He glanced at Ava.

“Good. You do whatever is necessary.” He stood with his shoulders squared and his chin high. The look of defiance in his eyes never wavered.

“By the way, just out of curiosity, where were you last evening?” Jason asked.

“Here. All day. All evening. All night. You can check the security cameras and systems any time you like.”

“Thank you, Mr. Bianchi,” Ava said.

He looked solidly at her as if he didn’t fully trust her anymore. He watched them leave the room but made no move to show them out.



CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

As they walked to the car, Ava looked out over the rolling landscape from the porch. It was stunningly beautiful and peaceful. It was hard to imagine that a brutal murder had taken place there only days before. It amazed her that such horrible acts didn't leave more of a mark on the immediate environment. Every time she went to a place where a murder or other hideous crime had taken place, she always expected something more than what was there.

Blood stains and a few broken items were never enough, in her opinion, to mark a place where someone's life had been violently snatched from them. Exactly what she expected to see at such places remained a mystery to her, but it should have been more than what she could see from Bianchi's front porch, which was absolutely nothing out of the ordinary.

"You feeling okay?" Jason asked when they were in the car again.

"We need to speak with Luka Kardum again. Could we go now, or do you need to be somewhere else?" She didn't look at him.

“We can go now. I was going to suggest it myself.” He drove them toward the main road.

“Why?”

“Why what?” He turned out of the driveway and onto the road.

“Why were you going to suggest we speak with Luka again?”

“Because he’s Bianchi’s distribution overseer. If anyone knows anything about drugs being filtered into the country through the wine business, it would have to be him. And I don’t think there would be any human trafficking going on that he could very well miss if he’s actually doing his job.”

Ava nodded. “I don’t think we should mention the drugs or the trafficking, though. Just tell him about Filip and get his alibi.”

“If we don’t, Bianchi will undoubtedly get to him and feed him lines to tell us for when we finally do get in touch with him about the smuggling.”

“If Bianchi was going to do that, don’t you think he would have already? If he killed Filip, or if he had him killed, the alibi stories are already in place. Bianchi isn’t stupid, and he’s not going to make a stupid mistake.”

Jason looked over at her with a slightly shocked look that lasted all of two seconds. “So we throw them off by not even mentioning the drugs to Luka?”

Ava nodded again. “Ana never mentioned Luka. Only Leonardo and Filip and a third man. That man may well be Luka, but he may not have any part in this, and we don’t need him talking to anyone about it. If he doesn’t know anything, let’s leave it that way.”

After several miles, Jason finally spoke. “We’ll play this one your way and see how it turns out.”

Ava didn’t say anything, but she did give him a doubtful look. Jason wasn’t the kind of man who played well by other people’s rules.

Jason knocked on the door. “Mr. Kardum, Jason Ellis, FBI. We need to speak to you again.” He knocked again for good measure.

Luka opened the door a few seconds later with something approximating a polite smile. “How may I help you, Agents?”

“May we come in? We have some bad news to give you,” Ava said.

Luka’s gaze slid from her to Jason and then he stepped back, holding tightly to the door. “Sure. Come inside.”

“Thank you,” she said.

Luka led them into the living room with a noticeable limp.

“You’re limping, Mr. Kardum. Did you hurt yourself?” Ava asked.

He made a flippant gesture and continued to a chair. “I twisted my ankle and knee when I got out of the shower. Hurts like a *pun kurac*, but I’ll be fine.” He sat and curled his hands into his lap. The knuckles of his right hand were an angry red, and the pinky knuckle sported a pretty good little cut.

“Have you seen a doctor? It looks really painful, and you don’t have it wrapped or anything. You can really do some damage by trying to tough it out like that,” she warned.

Jason looked at her as if she had lost her mind. She ignored him.

“Who needs a doctor poking and prodding and charging a scandalous amount of money to tell me what I already know. I need to ice it, wrap it, elevate it, rest it. There, now I pay me a scandalous amount of money.” He chuckled.

The laughter never reached his eyes. He was annoyed, and it was plain for anyone to see. Just like the last time they had been there, his eyes remained hard and cold like those of a viper assessing them.

“What happened to your hand?” Jason asked, raising his fist and patting his own knuckles in a demonstration.

Luka turned to him slowly, his irritation peeking through the thinning veneer of civility as he did so. Without looking at his own hand, Luka commented, “Maybe I hit it on the wall when I slipped. I don’t really know.”

Ava and Jason exchanged a look. Jason didn’t believe him any more than Ava did. It was the most unconvincing tone she had heard yet from anyone they had spoken to about the case—and it wasn’t even concerning the case. But what could they do? There was no law against a man having a limp and slapped-up knuckles. There

was no law that said he had to tell them the truth about how he got them, either. It was his private business.

Unless he had broken the law in procuring those injuries.

“Mr. Kardum, where were you last night into this morning?” she asked.

He shrugged. “I was alone. I am alone a lot, though. It’s not unusual.”

“That’s not what she asked. She asked where you were last night into this morning.” Jason stared hard at him without blinking.

Luka returned the look. It was chilling to watch as they stared coldly and unblinking at each other for several seconds. After what seemed an hour, Luka smiled, showing his teeth a fraction too much.

“As I said, I was alone, Agent Ellis. I was working from home for a while and then I went to grab some food across town. I drove around for a while to relax and then I came back home. I slept for a while, got up, took a shower—that’s when I slipped and hurt myself—and then I worked for a while again. Then I went for food across town again, drove around for a while again, and then came home again. Now you are here, and we are talking.”

“And no one was with you?” Ava asked.

“No, I told you already I was alone. I have been alone for days. When I work from home, there is nobody with me. Is that a problem? Have I broken some law by being alone?”

“No, of course not. I just had to make sure. Did anyone see you when you went for food or for your drive? Either time?”

He shrugged again. “I’m sure a ton of people saw me. I was in public, but did I know any of them? Probably not. It was not my intention to have company, Agent James.”

He had no real alibi. It was only his word. Ava scribbled notes.

“You said you had bad news for me?” he asked.

“It’s Filip Baruch. He is dead. We found him last night,” Jason said.

“Filip is dead?” The reaction wasn’t shock. It was neutral and bland.

“Yes. That’s what I just said,” Jason blurted harshly.

Ava cringed internally, but she understood the reason behind the delivery method.

Luka shook his head. "Poor Filip. He lost his wife and now his daughter. He was so sad. So much grief. He got me my job with Leo two years ago. I thought then that he was pitiful but nice. He went downhill so fast after Lana died." He shook his head and blew out a deep sigh. "Ivana's death must have pushed him over the edge."

Ava squinted at him. Was he genuine? The filtered response sounded well-rehearsed, but she couldn't be sure. It just sounded off to her.

Jason's phone rang and he left the room to answer it.

"Mr. Kardum, were you and Mr. Baruch good friends?"

"We were friends, I would guess. He was from Croatia, and I am from Croatia. We have much in common. It was good to meet someone from the homeland, you know?"

"I'm sure it was. Did you see Mr. Baruch over the last few days at all?"

"No, I didn't. I've been so busy with work. Now, it makes me wonder if he might still be here if I had taken the time to visit, or at least to call him."

"Was there any tension between him and Ivana the week before she died?"

He shook his head.

Jason stepped to the doorway. "We have to go now."

Ava stood. "Thank you, Mr. Kardum."

She rushed out of the house with Jason.



CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“What’s going on?” Ava asked as they hurried to the car.

“They found deleted messages on Bianchi’s phone. Said we needed to see them.”

Jason remained withdrawn and silent for the entirety of the drive, and he was no more talkative once they were back in the office building. Not that Ava had much to say. The messages would hold all the answers she needed. For the team to have called Jason back to the office to read the messages instead of sending them or telling him what was in them meant they were bad. Bad for Bianchi.

Jason blew into the office and straight toward Quinn. “Where are the messages?”

“Garcia has them in his office,” she said.

Without slowing his pace, Jason turned and went straight to the office. He barely slowed down long enough to knock, which was enough time for Ava to catch up with him. He was pushing the door open before Garcia told him to enter. Unsure about the brutish office etiquette, Ava stood in the doorway as Jason made a bee-line to the desk and thrust out his hand to Garcia, who was on the phone.

“Where are the messages?” Jason asked.

Garcia held up a finger and then pointed at the phone as he answered a question from the caller on the other end. He motioned for Ava to come in and shut the door and then continued his call as Jason eyed several folders on his desk. The call lasted another minute, and Jason seemed to be about to crawl out of his own skin by the time Garcia hung up.

“Where are they?” he asked again in a tense tone.

“How about taking a seat, Ellis. It wouldn’t kill you to have some consideration here. I was on the phone with *my* boss,” Garcia said as he pulled the folders to him and looked at the labels.

Jason stood there, and Ava took a seat hoping the situation didn’t devolve. Things were definitely different in the San Francisco office.

Garcia found the folder and looked up at Jason in obvious irritation. “Take a seat, Ellis. We need to discuss this before you go running off half-cocked.”

“I stopped in the middle of an interview and came back here to see these messages. I’d like to see them.” His jaw muscles bunched. “Please,” he added as if it pained him.

Garcia shook his head and handed the file to Jason but didn’t let go of it. “Read them right there.” He pointed to the chair beside Ava. “And let her read them, too.”

He sat and opened the file, Ava leaning to see them. They were between Leonardo Bianchi and Ivana Baruch.

Leonardo: *Where are you?*

Ivana: *At the drinks outside.*

Leonardo: *Can we talk?*

Ivana: *I think that’s a good idea. I have something I need to talk to you about.*

Leonardo: *Can you meet me at the first storage shed?*

Ivana: *It’s dark down there.*

Leonardo: *Which makes it perfect and private.*

Ivana: *Why not in the house somewhere?*

Leonardo: *Too many people everywhere. Just meet me at the storage shed. We might take a midnight stroll in the moonlight.*

Ivana: Meet there what time?

Leonardo: Fifteen minutes?

Ivana: Meet you there at 12.10 I'm bringing Ana

Leonardo: No. Come alone. OMW now

Ivana: Trail is pitch dark

Leonardo: Use your phone light. I'll be there. Don't be scared and don't leave me waiting all night plz. Can't wait to see you

Jason let Ava have the folder and looked at Garcia. "This is good. This is great. We can go arrest him."

Garcia held up a hand and shook his head. "No, we can't, and you know that."

Ava closed the folder after reading the messages again. "But this proves that Bianchi lured Ivana to that shed."

"And the timestamps prove that she would have gotten there a little after midnight," Jason added. "Just like the caterer said."

Ava nodded. "Roxy Underwood. We suspect she was the last person to see Ivana alive. She said Ivana looked worried and anxious and that she kept looking at her phone."

"When she asked Ivana if everything was okay, Ivana said what?" Jason looked at Ava.

"She said something like, 'Fathers, lying boyfriends, and mobsters. Just a typical day.' Roxy didn't know what to make of it at the time, but I think this pretty much sums it up." Ava lifted the folder containing the messages.

"Don't we all wish it was that simple? It's circumstantial at best," Garcia said.

"What?" Jason asked loudly. "You have got to be—"

Garcia held up a hand. "If you say 'kidding me' so help me God, you will be riding a desk so hard you'll be saddle sore for the next six months." He composed himself but the anger lingered in his eyes. Garcia didn't like being challenged or interrupted, and it seemed that Jason was old hat at both. "Do you have any physical evidence tying Mr. Bianchi to Miss Baruch's murder other than the fact that she was murdered on his property?"

Jason clamped his mouth shut and finally shook his head.

"That's what I thought. You get some hard evidence—"

“Boss, this isn’t hard enough? This puts him at the shed at the time of her murder.” Jason grabbed the folder and brandished it like a weapon.

“All that proves is that he *intended* to meet her there. They were *lovers*. They were *fiancés*. So they were going to have a little private time in the shed, or under the moon, or whatever the hell they wanted to do. It’s his private estate, Ellis, it’s not against the law. There was no threat in those messages. There’s no evidence that they were even arguing leading up to her death. The only thing anyone has said about them is how in love they were and how happy they were loping toward their future together.”

“Everyone except Ana,” Ava said.

Garcia pierced her with a hot look which quickly softened. “That’s right. Except Ana Juric. She’s the only person who has said anything bad about Bianchi. Maybe you should be checking her out a little better. Last I checked, Bianchi has been nothing but open, honest, and helpful. Can you say the same about Miss Juric? Funny how she withheld information like that, isn’t it? And when did she tell you that Ivana asked her to run away with her? That’s right, it was very recently, wasn’t it? And didn’t she hide from the officers and agents for over a week who were just trying to check her off the list when you started the initial interviews?” He stood and leaned with his hands on the desk. “That’s right, the answer is yes again. So, let’s think about this clearly now.”

Ava nodded. He knew how to put a person in their place and make them feel stupid. Being angry at him wasn’t an option because he was right. Ava had not thought it through with his broader perspective as she should have. It was a teachable moment, and she had been schooled. Lesson learned. One she would not need repeated in the future.

“Agent Ellis, if you run up there to arrest Bianchi, it won’t stick. He’ll be out of custody before you get your dinner this evening. If he happens to be guilty, what do you think he will do then?”

Jason took a deep breath. The lightbulb moment arrived. “He’d do exactly what anyone else would do in his situation, but—”

“Ah, there it is.” Garcia smiled and sat back down. “I knew the gears would get grinding again with a little help. But what?”

“But he would be able to go anywhere in the world with his money and connections, and we’d probably never make him again.”

“Right. He could remain hidden indefinitely. So, let’s not spook Mr. Bianchi unnecessarily, okay?”

“Yes, sir,” Jason said.

Garcia looked at Ava and considered her for a moment. “Agent James?”

“Yes, sir. I understand.”

“Good. Now, go solve this case without running off any of our top suspects.” Garcia turned his attention to his computer successfully dismissing them.

Ava followed Jason out of the office and into his. He tossed the file onto the desk with the others for the case.

“I think we should go tell Ana about Filip,” she suggested.

“I think you might be right. You know, this news probably won’t help her nerves any,” he warned.

“I know, but she was sort of a friend of the family. She would want to know, I think.”

“She said she didn’t know Filip like that and couldn’t even be sure he didn’t hurt Ivana,” Jason countered doubtfully.

“She didn’t really believe he hurt his own daughter. She really loved Ivana, and I think, by extension, Filip. She’s been through a lot, and she’s confused and scared. Even if he and Ivana were on the outs, Ana would want to know that he killed himself.”

Jason thought about it for a moment and then nodded.

Twenty minutes later, they were back knocking on Ana’s door once again. Jason hung back and let Ava take the lead once again.

“Ana, it’s Agents James and Ellis again. We have some news you should know.”

The locks clicked, and she opened the door. The dark circles under her eyes were worse. Her hair was in need of attention, and her clothes were badly rumped. “You are determined to cause me trouble, aren’t you? Ever heard of a freaking phone?”

They stepped in and she slammed the door, locking it behind them.

“Ever heard of answering one?” Jason asked unkindly.

Ava shot him a look and turned to her. “You don’t exactly have a good track record, like he said. At least, you will answer the door when we show up. I’m sorry.”

“Forget it. Get to the point and leave. Please.”

“It’s Filip. He committed suicide,” Ava said.

Ana covered her mouth and shook her head. She turned and walked to the nearest window to peek out from the side of the closed blind.

“Ana, you’re okay,” Ava said.

She turned to them. “You think it was suicide?”

“Yes,” Jason said. “It was. He shot himself, and from the looks of it, he was drunk when he did it.”

Ana shook her head again and turned to Ava. “It wasn’t suicide. Filip wouldn’t do that. I knew him that well. He would never kill himself. I told you what was going on, and you didn’t listen, didn’t believe me. They killed him to keep him from saying anything incriminating.” She jabbed her finger at the air. “That means he didn’t have anything to do with Ivana’s death. I didn’t want to believe he would do that, and now I know he didn’t.” Her eyes shimmered with tears.

“You didn’t tell me specifics, Ana. I need details to go on. If you know something more, you need to tell me so we can do something about it,” Ava said.

“We need something we can check out. Something we can prove. Hard evidence,” Jason added.

“Filip owed money to all the wrong people back in Croatia. He was funneling drugs into the United States through Leonardo’s business. They were making money and Filip was repaying that debt to keep himself alive. If those people found out that Ivana was threatening to go to the cops, they killed her, and now her father, too. Do you understand?” Ana rushed to the window again. Her breathing was erratic and her eyes wide. “If they think I know any of this and that I’ve been talking to you, I’m next. You have to put me in witness

protection or something, please.” She moved to Ava with her hands out in supplication. “Please, you have to do this or they’ll kill me.”

“Ana, calm down,” Ava said, leading her to the sofa.

“Calm down? How? I have told you what I know, and that has put a target on my back. I was fine hiding out here before you insisted on beating my door down and screaming on my porch for the world to see. God, they probably have seen you here all these times already. They’re going down the list getting rid of people who could turn them in.”

Jason came into the room. “Ana, just calm down. One of my team will be stationed here to keep an eye on your place day and night until the investigation is over so you will be safe. No one will get past them. You’ll be safe.”

“Easy for you to say. It’s not your life on the line,” Ana countered.

“Only every day,” he said flatly. “I’ll send an agent out in a couple of hours—no longer, you have my word. Just keep the doors and windows locked tight until then. Don’t go out for any reason. My agent will be in a black SUV with tinted windows. The unit will be parked at the curb in front of your house. You can call me to confirm by giving me the tag number.” He handed her a card with his information.

She sighed. Her breathing calmed, and her eyes seemed a little less like those of a prey animal trapped by a hungry predator. “What if I can’t see the tag?”

“Call me anyway. I’ll have the car pull forward. If it does, you’ll know it’s my agent, but you can still give me the tag number as a double assurance. Sound good?”

“Absolutely not, but what choice do I have? Why not put me in witness protection?”

“We don’t have a case built against anyone yet,” Ava said. “There’s no official reason.”

“So, politics and paperwork are going to get me killed. That’s great. Can I at least have something for protection?”

“Like what?” Ava asked, shocked.

“Like a gun or something. I don’t know. At this point, anything. I have nothing.”

“I’m sorry. We can’t give you a gun. You can use anything in your house as protection if someone breaks in, though. Fire poker, knives, table leg, baseball bat, literally anything you can get your hands on, use it to defend your life,” Ava told her.

“But you won’t have to worry about that,” Jason interjected. “My agent will be here to eliminate the possibility of anyone getting to you.”

Ana locked the door behind them. The terror on her face wrenched at Ava’s heart as she left with Jason.

“She’ll be fine,” he said.

For once, Ava hoped she was wrong and Jason was right.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

In the car, Jason and Ava scanned the neighborhood for a moment. It seemed quiet and normal. A mother getting her toddler out of the back of a minivan across the street struggled with the child and the three bags on her shoulder simultaneously. An elderly couple walked a terrier in painfully slow motion as the woman clung to the man's arm and the dog kept running ahead only to jerk to a stop at the end of the lead. A couple in their mid-twenties were attempting to repair a broken window themselves, but seemed more intent on arguing than working together on the project.

"Seems okay for now," Ava said. "Don't know how long that will hold true if what she said was true, though."

Jason pulled out his phone. "I'm putting Oliver here to watch her house. He will be free soon enough to get here within the two hours I promised her."

"Then what are we going to do in the interim? Just wait for someone to show up to try and kill her?"

He hung up and blew out a breath. "No, of course not. Bianchi's our top suspect at this point. Do we agree on that much?"

“Since we saw the texts with our own eyes, I am inclined to say he is.”

“I sense a ‘but’ coming.”

She shook her head. “But we’ve got to worry about Luka, too, considering what Ana just told us. There’s no way he’s not our mystery third man. He could be silencing people to keep himself out of trouble.”

“Yeah, and I’m sure Bianchi is the one giving the orders for that. You heard her. Filip and Luka were smuggling drugs through Bianchi’s business. Do you really think he didn’t know?”

“Not likely,” she admitted. “But that means we need to be keeping an eye on more people than just Ana. We need to be looking for who did this, not just waiting for a killer to show up.”

Jason nodded and tapped the phone against the steering wheel. “Okay. Bianchi has two personal assistants who would be in the know if anything was going on at the estate.”

“That Alessandro Moretti who brought us the list of people at the party,” Ava said.

“Yes, and the other one who was on the other list. I think his name was Callum something-or-other.”

“And there were three high-ranking managers who were at that party, too. I can get their names from the list. They would have to know what was going on because they run practically everything concerning the business.”

“Okay, so that’s five people. Counting Ana, six. We need someone on Luka’s tail. Anyone else?”

“What about the head groundskeeper?” Ava offered. “He’d see the comings and goings. Might be privy to a lot of illicit activity. Can’t count him out.”

“I wouldn’t have thought of him. That was a good catch. You’re right. They might have even overlooked him. He could be in the same boat as Ana.”

“Or, he could be in on it with them.” Ava shrugged. “After seeing those texts and having to wonder about Bianchi, I don’t put anything past anyone. And who better to help cover their tracks on the estate than the humble groundskeeper?”

“I’ll get Oliver over here to watch Ana’s house. I’ll put Elliot and Jasper on the assistants, and send Quinn and Byrne to find the managers.”

“I’ll have Ashton find and tail Luka. Dane can follow the groundskeeper, and Santos can follow the third manager. Metford can sleep and then take the overnight shift watching Ana’s house.”

“That’s a damn lot of moving parts to oversee, but I think it just might work. What are we going to do?”

“What else? We are going to follow Bianchi,” Ava said with a half-grin.

“Eyes on the prize, eh?”

“Always,” she replied.

“Garcia would appreciate you about as much as he appreciates me.”

Ava laughed. “And I bet he would enjoy chewing me out just as much as he enjoys chewing you out.”

They called their respective team members to dole out assignments and confirm names from the list.

Jason drove them down the long, winding road once again. “This is getting to be a boring road. You want to drive?”

“I’m fine, thanks,” Ava said. Her mind was on the interview they did with Luka. Something about it bothered her, but she could not pinpoint just what.

“Something’s on your mind. I can hear the gears grinding from here. What is it?”

“That interview we did with Luka. You saw his limp.”

“Couldn’t miss it.”

“And his cut knuckle. Didn’t that seem odd to you?”

Jason bobbed a shoulder. “Maybe, maybe not. He could have done that by having a slip-and-fall accident. That was the story he gave.”

“I know it was, but it just seems strange to me. Especially since I believe that Filip was in a fight right before he died.”

“Right before he killed himself. I’m still leaning toward suicide on that one. It was too obvious.”

“Which is another reason why I’m inclined to doubt it. It was too obvious.”

Jason smirked. “Well, in my experience, when someone pulls that trigger, they don’t get up and change the scene so it looks a little *less* like a suicide so it doesn’t raise Agent James’s suspicions that it might *not* be a suicide.”

A silver Audi passed them.

“Wasn’t that Bianchi’s car?” Ava asked.

“I believe it was.” Jason took the next curve and executed a U-turn that left Ava’s stomach in her throat. He sped after the Audi, slowing when it was just in sight a few curves ahead.

“A little warning would have been nice.”

“Hold on. I’m going to make a U-turn and follow our suspect just like we talked about,” Jason said.

“Not how warnings work, but it’s progress, I suppose,” she said with a little grin.

“Sorry. I’ll try to remember I have a passenger who sports a more delicately tempered nature in the future.”

“Jerk,” she said playfully.

“I try, but only with people I like.”

“Oh, and he breaks out the charm. I’m at a disadvantage.”

“No, you’re not. You’re a triple-threat kind of woman. Brains, beauty, and charm.”

Ava’s heart skipped and she looked at him. He glanced at her. Their eyes locked for the briefest moment and then he looked back to the road. She had to pump the brakes on the moment. It had just veered off-course and entered dangerous territory. Her mind flailed frantically for a non-awkward solution as she faced forward again.

Finally, she had it. “And here I was hoping you’d say something positive like brains, bravery, and bullheaded.” She gave a nervous chuckle.

“Yeah, well, I couldn’t let the insult about me breaking out the charm go unanswered.”

He flashed a tiny tight grin twice. It was like watching a baby having gas pains, and Ava thought it was about the most awkward

moment she had endured to date. She had no desire to repeat it any time soon.

The conversation with Luka looped through her mind as they followed Bianchi, who seemed to be simply driving aimlessly after hitting the city. Was there a destination at all? If there was, she couldn't discern it.

"Where the hell is he even going?" Jason asked after an hour of endless random turns.

"I don't think he's going anywhere."

And they were committed to following him even if that was true.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Jason's phone rang. He answered. "Oliver, hold on. I'm going to have James put you on speaker." He handed the phone to Ava, who pressed the button and held it up between them.

"What's going on?" Jason asked.

"Nothing. That's why I'm calling. I've been here for three hours, and I haven't even seen a curtain move. Are you sure Miss Juric is even here?"

Ava's stomach knotted. They had been discussing Luka and tailing Bianchi, and she had almost completely forgotten about Ana.

"You best go check on her, Oliver. Just to be honest, we've been so busy tailing Bianchi and going over the case that I forgot she was supposed to call and check your tag number once you arrived."

"Want me to keep you on the line?"

"Yes. If you can do so safely."

Ava gave him a worried look. He kept his eyes on the road, but his unreadable expression faltered momentarily and the worry peeked through his tough exterior.

“Miss Juric, Agent Tate Oliver, FBI. I’ve been assigned to watch your house. Just doing a wellness check. Are you alright in there?”

Ava held her breath as she strained to hear a response.

Oliver delivered the message again, louder, and banged on the door harder.

“She’s not answering, and I hear no movement inside. I’m going in,” Oliver said to Jason.

“Head on a swivel,” Jason ordered.

“Always,” Oliver answered.

The sound of him kicking the door open was loud. He yelled, “Ana Juric. FBI. Are you in here?” A moment of silence passed. “Federal Agent Tate Oliver in your house, Miss Juric.” More silence followed.

Ava tightened her grip on the phone. Something terrible had happened, or Ana had fled in fear. If they needed her in the future as a witness, she was in the wind. Her testimony might have been the deciding factor in a case against Luka or Bianchi.

And then came the confirmation of all her worst fears.

“She’s dead,” Oliver reported with a frustrated sigh.

“What? Are you sure?” Jason asked.

Ava’s heart dropped. Ana had been right after all.

“I’m sure.”

“Another suicide?” Jason asked, white-knuckling the wheel.

“No. Iron poker to the head.” Oliver’s tone was flat as if he were dissociating from the scene.

“We’re on our way,” Jason said. “Hang tight.”

Ava disconnected the call. “She was right. She was telling the truth about all of it.”

“Don’t jump to conclusions just yet. We don’t know the whole situation. Oh, and by the way, you might want to hold on.” He took a sharp right, accelerated, and flipped on the lights and siren once there was no way Bianchi might see the car.

Oliver stood on the front porch waiting for Jason and Ava to arrive. He was pale but held it together very well.

“There’s a lot of blood. The side door was kicked in. I didn’t even see it until I had already kicked this one open and gone inside. That

must have been how they got in, but I never saw anyone on the property.”

“You had eyes on it the whole time? You weren’t texting or watching damn videos on your phone or anything like that?” Jason blew past him and into the house.

Oliver looked upset. “No, sir. I take my job very seriously, and I think you know that. The only people I saw were the neighbors across the street playing ball with their kids in their yard, and the old couple walking their dog. They walked right by me. Other than that, the only movement has been from vehicles. It’s been quiet.”

Ava and Jason went to the body. Ana lay sprawled on her side in the living room just past the fireplace. Blood pooled out and around her head. One eye stared up blankly at the ceiling. The other eye had been obliterated by the massive blow that had also crushed in a huge portion of her skull.

Ava and Jason took a quick inventory of the house. “Doesn’t look like a robbery gone wrong,” Jason said.

“No, her laptop, phone, cash, credit cards, and all are still right out in the open on the kitchen table like she was planning on leaving soon.”

“And she’s still fully clothed. The blood isn’t smeared, and the furniture isn’t pushed around and broken as if she was in an altercation.”

“She probably wasn’t raped, so that wasn’t the motive, either,” Ava said. “And it looks like the door was only kicked once. Whoever it was, he was strong.”

Jason pointed to Ana’s head. “It looks like only one blow to the head did all that damage, too. There’s only one spray of blood there and no cast-off spatters on the mantel or ceiling as if there were multiple blows.”

“We know it couldn’t have been Bianchi because we had eyes on him the whole time,” Ava said.

“Couldn’t have been his personal assistants or managers, either.”

“Not Luka or the groundskeeper, either.”

“And Filip is dead.” Jason ran a hand over his face and took in the room again. “Any other suggestions?”

Ava shook her head. “Maybe we should call the teams and confirm how long they’ve had eyes on their targets.”



CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Jason called Elliot first with the phone on speaker so Ava could hear the conversation.

“Elliot, how long did it take you to find your mark today?”

“I found Moretti at the same time Jasper located Esposito, so we are together, actually.”

“How long did it take from the time I called you?” Jason asked.

“About thirty minutes. Moretti and Esposito were together leaving Moretti’s house.”

“Do you have eyes on them right now?”

“Not exactly right at this moment, but we do know where they are,” Jasper said.

“What the hell do you mean you don’t have eyes on them? When did you stop having eyes on them?” Jason snapped.

“Only fifteen minutes ago,” Elliot assured him.

“Why? You better have a damn good reason.”

“We followed them to a bar out in the shady side of the city, and they met with two sketchy guys. They left in a van with the two men, and we followed them to an abandoned house. They are in that

house right now, and there is a party going on in there, but not your normal kind of party,” Elliot reported.

“Not at all. It’s about the sleaziest party I’ve ever seen. Kinky as hell even for San Fran, and I have seen some kinky stuff,” Jasper added.

“Sleazy? Kinky? What are you talking about? I don’t care about that. What I care about is that you let them out of your sight, and I want to know why.”

“Well, because we were seeing way too much of them,” Elliot said. “Literally. There was consensual abuse going on and lots of leather coming off. Those two assistants were on the receiving end, and they were enjoying it.”

“Like really enjoying it,” Jasper said, stifling a giggle.

“Jesus,” Jason muttered. “Are you certain they’re still in the party?”

“Yes, I’m dead sure,” Elliot said.

“And they never left?”

“Absolutely not, if the sound’s anything to go by,” Jasper assured him.

“Thanks for the update.” Jason hung up. “The assistants are masochists. It’s likely they aren’t the killers, but just a couple of odd dudes who get off on enduring pain.”

Ava nodded. “Right. Might be a different story if they were sadists, though.”

“But they aren’t, so…”

“Right. I’m going to call Ashton. I can’t wait any longer. Luka is high on our list, too.” The phone rang three times before Ashton answered.

“I have eyes on him right now. He’s sitting at an outdoor café still having dinner. He’s been here for the last hour, maybe a little more, I’m not... *sure*.”

“What do you mean that you’re not sure, Ashton?” Ava asked.

“I was following him, but I sort of lost him in the city center for a while—”

“Ashton,” she said angrily. “You didn’t think to call and let me know that you had lost him?”

“It was only for about an hour. I was furiously driving through this crap traffic and trying to find him. I didn’t really have time to pull over and call you. That would have let him get even farther away. I found him here at Sunset Café just sitting outside having his dinner and coffee by himself. I’ve had eyes on him ever since. It’s all good. This is probably where he was headed when I lost him.”

“How did he seem when you found him there? Did he seem nervous, agitated, paranoid?”

“No, not at all. He was relaxed and calm, why?”

“Because Ana Juric is dead. Someone killed her a short time ago. It had to be within the last three hours, and we’re trying to figure out who could have done it. Keep your eyes on him this time.”

“I will.”

She hung up. “Luka might have had time to come here and kill Ana and then make it back to the café in time for Ashton to find him.”

Jason thought about it. “Did he say which café?”

“Sunset Café. It’s only about fifteen or twenty minutes from here. We passed it every time we came to Ana’s house.”

“He might have had time. He would have had to move fast, though.”

“He is definitely strong enough to kick in that door, too,” Ava said.

“Even with that limp? And just an hour... I don’t know, that would be pushing it for someone who could move with normal agility, but he was limping. If he kicked in that door and Ana fought back at all, it’s safe to assume the leg might have been hurting worse when he left.”

“Which would have slowed him down even more,” she finished for him.

“Exactly. Pushing it.”

“Still, we need to question him. Quick. There will be blood spatter on whoever did that to Ana. He didn’t have time to go home and clean up and change clothes before going to the café. We need to catch up to him before he gets back home.”

Jason nodded. “Call Ashton and confirm where Luka is now. Let’s get moving.”

The adrenaline pumped and her senses heightened. That feeling was every bit as addicting as any drug, and Ava was a junkie for it.

Without any doubt, so was Jason. That's what drove them on when others would give up and go home. That's what kept them coming back to the job day after day.



CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Jason got behind Luka two streets before he made it to his house. They followed him into the parking area in front and got out as he stepped from his car.

He turned and smiled at them. “Agents,” he said in greeting.

“Mr. Kardum,” Ava said. “Where were you this evening?”

He shrugged and chuckled. “I went out driving and then went to Sunset Café and had a nice relaxing dinner at an outdoor table. I was there for a little over an hour. It’s just a café, I know, but don’t let that fool you. Their grilled fajitas are the best in the city. Did you know they serve baklava, too? One of my absolute favorite desserts.”

“Mr. Kardum, were you at Ana Juric’s house this evening?” Jason asked.

“Who?”

“Don’t act like you don’t know her,” Jason snarled. He reached for the side of Luka’s shirt, but he moved back. “Hold up your arm so I can see your side, Mr. Kardum.”

“I don’t think I will, Agent Ellis. I’ve done nothing wrong, and you are harassing me.”

“And I have reason to believe that you are carrying an illegal weapon on your person.” Jason grabbed Luka by the wrist, and in one swift motion had him turned to face his own car with one arm jacked up behind his back.

Luka grimaced and grunted loudly. “What is going on? I have done nothing wrong.”

“Ana Juric is dead, and we believe you had something to do with it,” Ava said.

Jason let him stand straight. “No weapons.”

“Of course not. I do not carry weapons. And I do not kill women or anyone else. If you think I had something to do with this woman’s death, feel free to check my hands and clothes for blood. You’ll see that I am not guilty of anything.”

“Yeah, then why did you go to such trouble to lose the tail we put on you?” Ava asked.

“I did not know someone was following me. Was he from your team?”

“Yes, he was. How did you know my team was any different from his?” She pointed to Jason.

“Because your accent is pure East Coast, and your posture is straight from Washington DC.”

Shocked, Ava looked at Jason, who simply shrugged. “That doesn’t answer my question, Mr. Kardum. If you are guilty of nothing, why did you try so hard to lose my agent in the city for a whole hour?”

“Well, if I had known I was being tailed, I would have driven slower so the East Coast agent could keep up sufficiently to give me an alibi that I had no idea I would need.” He tossed up his hands. “You see how ridiculous it sounds?”

“May we look inside the car?” Ava asked, exasperated with the man.

“Sure, sure. Knock yourself out, just don’t hurt the leather, please. It is the most expensive thing I own—and I am still paying for it, you know.” Again, he laughed.

“You’re finding all this real funny, aren’t you?” Jason asked. “Real chuckler this evening. You weren’t nearly as jolly last time we spoke.”

“Maybe I am in a better mood now.”

“Maybe I’m not.”

The interior of the car was clean. Everything checked out. There were no visible blood spatters, splatters, smears, or smudges anywhere. Nothing suggested that Luka had done anything other than what he said.

Jason pointed to the trunk. “Let us look in there.”

Luka’s smile ratcheted down several notches. “No. You have checked everything and found nothing.”

“If you have nothing to hide, just lift the lid and let us have a quick peek. We’ll be out of your hair in no time,” Ava said.

“You have no right and no business in the trunk, and my answer is no.”

“Not even a peek?” Jason asked just to annoy the man.

“You have no reason to look in there. I have cooperated enough with you on this nonsense, now leave me to the rest of my evening; what precious little is left of it.”

Jason thumped the trunk hard several times and leaned his ear close. “Well, there’s no one in there screaming for help, and it doesn’t seem to be packed with bodies. Sounds practically empty. What’s in there? Bloody clothes?”

“You found no blood on me, and besides, I would not have had time to do much in the time you stated. What was it, an hour?” He scoffed, shook his head, and flapped a hand at them. “No, I tell you.”

Ava nodded to Jason. “Tell you what. I’ll stay here with him while you go do whatever it is you need to get us a search warrant. We have enough on him for that, don’t we?”

Jason looked him up and down and nodded. “Yeah, I think so. I think Judge Aller would sign a warrant for me. He owes me a favor anyway. But when I tell him about the limp and the cut knuckle that coincide with Mr. Baruch’s death, and now how you purposefully lost the tail we put on you...” Jason shook his head. “I could convince the judge in no time that you had just enough time to go to Ana’s house, break in, kill her, change your clothes, and stash the bloody ones in

your trunk before heading to that café for the agent to find you. And of course, you were sitting outside having dinner—a little over-the-top conspicuous there, wasn't it?"

Luka didn't flinch. He stared at Jason with his lips pressed into a thin line and his eyes brooding and dark.

"You could save everybody the trouble, though, and just let us have a look," Ava said. "No? That's still your position?"

"No." Luka crossed his arms.

"Alright, but that warrant is going to give us full access to your entire house, your storage space in the basement, your office, all your electronics at both places, and your car. Just so you know."

"And any other place I can think of that might be pertinent before I talk to the judge. And trust me, when you force my hand on this, I will make sure that your life is turned inside-out one piece at a time, slowly and methodically," Jason said.

"And we will have many agents helping us," Ava added.

"Plus, a forensic team at the first *hint* of evidence," Jason said.

"Oh, and we can't guarantee that things like the leather in your car won't get a little messed up, either." Ava gave him a look as if to say she was really sorry. She liked the way she and Jason could seamlessly play off each other and rattle cages at will and under pressure without having to even think about it. Though Luka's cage was well-rattled, the man was not budging. They were not getting in the trunk of his car.

"You do exactly what you must, and I will do the same. The answer is still no," Luka said.

"Don't leave town, Mr. Kardum," Jason said.

"Wouldn't dream of it, Agent Ellis. This is my home, and no one will run me out of it so easily."

With their bluff successfully called, Ava and Jason had no alternative but to leave.



CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Ava replayed the whole conversation in her mind, over and over, as they left his house. Something was still not right with it. It interfered with her ability to focus on what Jason was saying.

“James, are you with me?”

“I’m sorry. Yes, I’m with you,” she said, forcing her attention to him.

“What’s got you going? You’re out there somewhere. We need to figure out what our next move is.”

“It’s Luka. Something’s not right with this.”

“You think?” he asked sarcastically.

“I know,” she retorted hotly. “And if you’d give me a damn minute, I might figure it out. Something about our interview with him earlier is still bothering me. Not this time, but before. Something was wrong then and I can’t put my finger on it.”

“So, talk it out. When did you first get that feeling? Was it at the beginning when you asked him about his leg?”

“Not really.” She thought about it, put herself back in that memory and walked through it. “No.”

“Was it when we sat down and saw his cut knuckle?”

She pushed the memory forward to that time. “It bothered me, but that wasn’t *the* feeling I’m talking about. It was later. It was after you told him that Filip was dead.” She gasped and opened her eyes. “He said that Ivana’s death had probably pushed Filip over the edge and caused him to commit suicide, Jason,” she exclaimed.

“Yeah. And it probably did. What’s the big deal?”

“Neither of us said it was suicide. Neither of us even said that it *looked* like a suicide. You just blurted out that he was dead, remember? And then Luka went into that filtered response as if—”

“It had been rehearsed?”

“Exactly. Your phone rang and then things got chaotic. I didn’t catch it at the time. We have to get back there before he hightails it out of the state. He’ll hit the road so hard it won’t even be funny.”

He hit the lights and siren. “Hold on.”

They sped straight back to the parking area in front of the house. As they neared it, Jason turned off the lights and siren. As they pulled in, Luka had just taken something out of the trunk of his car.

Ava leaped from the car. “Luka, drop it!” she yelled as she ran toward him.

Jason was on her heels. “Kardum, put it down!” he yelled.

Luka stopped. Putting the object back in the trunk was out of the question. It was closed. Running was no good because he had a gimp leg.

“Drop it, Luka, it’s over,” she repeated firmly.

Luka pulled a gun. It was so quick, she didn’t have time to register what he had done.

Suddenly, there was an arm around her waist and she was off her feet, flying sideways. She crashed to the ground as a shot rang out and the bullet passed where her head had been only a split-second before.

The arm was gone from her waist, and Jason was on his feet, calling for backup as he gave chase. Even with an injured leg, Luka pulled away from the much fitter Jason, but not by much. Ava ran to catch up, gun drawn, heart pounding like the hooves of a panicked buffalo.

Luka had entered into darkness. Jason paused only briefly before throwing the door wide and easing inside. The acrid smell of something burning caused him to cough and throw an arm over his face as he moved deeper inside.

Ava hit the light switches as they secured each room downstairs. Luka was nowhere on the first floor.

“I’ll clear the second floor. Get that out of the fire,” Jason said.

Using the poker, she pulled the remains of a charred shirt and pants from the hearth and put out the flames with her shoe. The gloves disintegrated into piles of ash when she tried to remove them.

“He’s not here. He got out somehow,” Jason said as he walked back into the living room.

“Guess we know what he was hiding in the trunk now,” she said, pointing to the burned clothing.

“Bastard,” Jason said through gritted teeth. “I’ll call it in and request the search team and a BOLO immediately. I do not want him slipping through our fingers.”

But as Ava looked around the room, she couldn’t shake the sinking feeling that maybe he already had.



CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Ava stood on the porch and looked at the property on each side. There were houses across the street and on either side, but none of them were very close. In the darkness, Luka could have slipped past them. It was doubtful that he had gone back out the front, though.

Stepping off the porch, she looked up to the second-floor windows. None of them were open. He hadn't gone out that way, either.

"I'm going to look around outside," she told Oliver.

"Want help?"

"If you want to help, thanks."

"Looking for anything in particular?"

"Any sign of how he got out of the house. He went somewhere. Open window, door, anything that stands out, but note anything of interest."

"Got it. I'll go around this side. Meet you in back." Oliver immediately turned and disappeared around the left side of the house.

She went around the right side searching for any sign that Luka had jumped out a window. He was a big man, heavily built, and would have made impressions in the ground if he had jumped from any height.

At the back, she scanned the windows and the door. "Think I found it," she announced as she mounted the porch steps. The storm door stood open but the entry door was shut. "He must have thrown the clothes in the fire and then ran out the back door."

"Almost a straight line," Oliver said.

She turned to look beyond the yard at the overgrown alleyway that butted up against an abandoned property. "What was that?" She pointed to the property.

"I'm not sure. I'm not super-familiar with this part of the city. I can have someone look it up."

"Not necessary, I don't think. We just need to have the search teams made aware that the place is abandoned when they get here so they can do a thorough search," she said.

"You don't think he's holed up that close to us, do you?" Oliver looked nervously over at the squat crumbling building.

"He's probably long gone by now, but you never know about people, right?"

"No, you don't. I've learned that in spades on this job. But nothing much shocks me anymore. I guess that's the upside to it." He went to the porch to look at the storm door. "Looks like the door is in good condition. The entry door is in good shape, too, which means the storm door has been doing its job."

"Until this evening, anyway," Ava replied.

"Yeah." He joined her in the grass again, still looking at the house. "It's got a basement," he said with a tone of amazement.

"Yeah, I saw that." She nodded toward the windows at ground-level.

He guffawed. "I forgot. You're from back east where basements are a normal thing."

She tilted her head. "And they're not here?"

"Not at all. If you build a house with a basement around here, it's likely going to be the most expensive room of the house. Anywhere

from five- to nine-hundred dollars a square foot.”

“That’s crazy,” Ava exclaimed. “To store vegetables and toss old furniture into? No thanks.”

“It’s environmental out here. Most basements would technically be below sea level and then there’s the earthquakes to think about. You have to build it to special, strict codes, and most people just don’t have the money for that. That’s why there are so many basements that aren’t underground out here, if you’re lucky enough to have one at all. I am not one of the lucky ones. I live in an apartment.”

“Guess you learn something new every day. And I never took you for a basement kind of guy, Oliver.” She grinned and motioned that she was going back around front. “Let’s get searching the inside of this house.”

“Find anything useful?” Jason asked from the porch as they rounded the corner.

“He went out the back door,” Ava said. “Bet you a dollar to a dozen donuts he tossed the clothes into the fireplace, struck a match, and legged it right on out before we even made the front door.”

“Practically a straight shot through the house,” Oliver said. “And he has a basement.”

Jason blinked at him. “Okay. That mean something?”

Oliver’s face fell. “Just that he had money to spare for a house that has an underground basement.”

Jason nodded. “Seems that he had money and the refined tastes to go with it, but he didn’t make any sort of show of it.” He stepped into the house. “Let’s split up and get this done. Teams are on their way, but I can’t just wait around.”

“I’ll search the basement,” Oliver said, heading for the door just inside the kitchen.

Jason headed up the stairs. Ava turned and looked at the burned remains of the clothes on the hearthstones. “Guess that means I’m searching the first floor.”

Passing through the living room, she stepped into the kitchen. She hadn’t paid much attention to the room when they were there

any time before. It was a kitchen, and warranted no special attention. As she stood there with the knowledge that Luka was probably a murderer, she took in details that hadn't stood out before.

The layout looked to be one of the standards from the late nineties. The appliances, though dated to about the same decade, showed no real signs of wear and tear. They were in pristine, shining condition. The room was showroom perfect. No dirt, no smudges, no grime. Even the hood over the stove was clean to the touch—and that was nearly impossible to accomplish for even the most OCD person.

Maybe he ate out a lot. Single guy, no kids, no girlfriend, no kids, no family. He had money, so it was very likely. Every time she and Jason had spoken to him, he had talked about going out to get food somewhere. If you don't use a kitchen, it's kind of hard to dirty it up.

The towel hung by the sink on its rod as if it had been pressed, measured, and never used. As if it were only for aesthetic purposes. Decoration only. The soap dispenser was squeaky clean. No drips or runs; no water ring at the bottom—as if it, too, had never been used. Not a single water spot marred the shiny basins of the sink or the faucet. How was that even possible?

Ava shook her head. Sometimes, she thought her own sink collected water spots from her neighbors' sinks just for fun. It was a forever-battle, just like keeping the sticky grease cleaned off the stove hood.

The cabinets were pin-neat with perfectly stacked and matching plates, bowls, serving dishes, and delicate glasses—all in sets of four. Looking in the cabinets caused goosebumps to break out on her arms. There were four dinner plates stacked. One inch beside them, there were four salad plates. Behind them, four dessert plates and cup saucers. The pattern held through the entire bottom shelf of the eight-foot length of cabinets over the counter. The top shelf held cups, glasses, and serving dishes. Everything was placed as if with a measuring tape for a guide.

There had to be a messy spot hiding in the cabinetry somewhere, though. No kitchen was exempt. She threw open doors willy-nilly under the counter and was shocked to see the same

painfully measured neatness and minimalist style of storage even with the cookware and kitchen accessories.

There was no clutter or anything messy in the kitchen. There was no newspaper open on the dining table. No glass or plate sitting in the sink. The chairs were pushed all the way under the table without a single leg out of line.

Cans of food all pointed label-forward in the pantry, arranged in a perfectly even row. The fridge was the same, and it held only the basics: eggs, milk, mayo, mustard, a block of cheese, and a bottle of hot sauce. The freezer compartment was empty except for a box of open baking soda.

Ava left the kitchen. The study sat on the other side of the living room. It showed more signs of being used. A few more signs, anyway.

The letters on the home keys of the computer keyboard had slightly faded, which signaled lots of regular, possibly prolonged use. The last three local Sunday newspapers lay neatly stacked to one side of the computer, and on the other side stood a three-quarters empty bottle of Maker's Mark and a whiskey glass.

The books on the shelves behind the desk ranged from first-edition Dickens to Carl Jung, to astrophysics to New Age philosophical texts by authors with unpronounceable names. There were even a couple of Edgar Allen Poe collections in there, and some medical textbooks from the nineteenth century. Calling the collection eclectic would have been an understatement.

The more she looked through the house, the more Ava wondered about the man who lived there. The house and its contents didn't fit with the type of icy, detached, bold man he presented as.

The overabundance of neatness fit with some psychopathy reports, yes. But the super-tidy plates and bowls in the kitchen were hand-painted with flowering vine patterns and rimmed with gold. Though some of the books were coveted collector items, many others held highly passionate or deeply soulful content—not in standing with what would be expected at all.

Was he not as alone as they had first believed? Was there a significant other somewhere? A present domestic partner, or one in

his recent past? Maybe even a family member had been there with him—either legally or illegally in the country—and that was why he was so secretive.

But where were their *things*? Their clothes, hats, shoes, overcoats, bags, any highly personal items that people leave lying around in their house. The cup of random pens, the half-used-up notepad, the dusty junk drawer full of paperclips and rubber bands and other crap that seemed to accumulate out of nowhere. The stacks of unopened mail, the trash at the bottom of a trash can waiting to be taken out. There were none of those things.

She walked across the living room again. This time, she looked for anything that looked as if it might have belonged to a woman. There was nothing. Stepping to the utility room doorway, she noted that there were no dirty clothes in the baskets, not a single stray shirt or sock on the washer or the rack above. It was a pristine room, just like the others.

“Ava,” Jason called from the living room.

She turned. “Yeah?”

“Come upstairs. You need to see this,” he said before heading back up the stairs.

He never waited for a reply, it seemed. Ava gave the utility room another glance and then went to the stairs and followed Jason’s lead. At the top, she turned right. He stood outside an open door like a sentinel. How did he manage to always look so completely unreadable?

“In here.” He stepped into the room.

“What is it?” She moved so she could see inside.

“Just come in and see.” Impatience lit on his features. Or, it could have only been the shadows from the tilt of his head as he looked from her to the room again.

She stepped inside and nodded. “Okay?”

He pointed to the fireplace. “Notice anything odd?”

She scoffed and grinned. “Like the entire house? What’s not odd at this point?”

He pointed again. “Over there. Notice anything odd?”

She looked at the fireplace. “Highly-polished oak mantel, cleaned-out fireplace, expensive fire screen, scrubbed hearthstones, fireplace toolset.” She shrugged. “What am I looking at? It’s just a fireplace that hasn’t been used in a while.”

“Look at the tools.”

Taking a deep breath, she did. She immediately saw what he was getting at. After he practically rubbed her nose in it. “The poker is gone.”

“Exactly. The only set of fireplace tools in the whole house with a missing poker.”

“I wonder if it’s the one that killed Ana?”

He snapped his fingers. “That’s exactly what I was wondering. My gut is screaming that it is, but I don’t know.”

“I would love to find that baby,” Ava said.

“You and me both. The teams are pulling up now. We need to make sure we get all the electronics. I want a rush put on analyzing them. How many downstairs?”

“I saw one laptop and one desktop in the study.”

“I found a couple of tablets up here.” He walked out.

Ava followed him back downstairs to meet with the others. Everyone had explicit orders to be on the lookout for the poker because there was a good chance it was a murder weapon.

Being wrong about Luka spurred Ava to work harder and longer on the case. As she went nose-to-the-grindstone, she was secretly thrilled that Jason was right there with her at every turn.



CHAPTER THIRTY

“You like Chinese takeout?” Jason asked in the elevator.

“It’s an All-American staple of law enforcement, isn’t it?” Ava joked.

“You’re not wrong. Mei’s is the best around here, if you planned on still working after work.”

“I certainly do plan on working. Just because the office shuts its doors doesn’t mean I quit. I can’t believe I was that wrong about Luka, and I can’t figure how he ties in with all this. It’s making me crazy.”

“It’s only been a day since we collected everything at his house. The reports will be rolling in within a day or two, and we’ll have our answers then.”

“Maybe, but I can’t wait that long, and you don’t strike me as Mr. Patience, so don’t even try to sell that. I’m not buying. You’re just as anxious as I am to put this puzzle together.”

He grinned. It was only a flash, but it was there.

“I saw that,” she said as the doors opened.

“What?” he asked innocently.

“That grin. You weren’t just humoring me when you helped me rearrange the case boards and run through everything again last night.”

They walked to the cars. “No, I wasn’t humoring you. I’m not good at that sort of thing, actually.”

“I would have never guessed.”

“Chinese takeout and work at my apartment again?” he asked, pulling his gaze from the surroundings to her.

Was it a good idea? He asked in a professional capacity. They were going to work on the case together.

Alone.

In his apartment.

Again.

Swallowing her apprehension, she nodded. “Sounds good.”

“Leave your car. We’ll take mine.”

She hesitated and then opened her door. “I’ll take mine. I remember how to get to your place. It isn’t that hard to find, and the traffic shouldn’t be heavy right now. All my stuff is in it. And when I get ready to leave, you won’t have to come back out.”

“Call if you get lost. I won’t be fifteen minutes behind.” He pointed leftish. “Mei’s is just around the block, and service is fast there.”

“See you at your place.” She got into the car, fished a twenty out of her bag, and stepped back out quickly. It was too late. He had already pulled out and was driving away.

Proud that she had been correct and she could find Jason’s place by memory, Ava parked in the lot out front and turned off the engine. The streetlights came on farther away, down the hill, but not where she sat. It was an odd sensation to be between worlds like that, looking down into the darkened part of the city from her still-lit place higher up. The mystical moment wouldn’t last long. They never did.

Within minutes, the world darkened around her, and the nearby streetlights flashed on. There was nothing magical left, nothing philosophical to ponder about sitting between light and dark. There was only the darkness that brought out the criminal element in force.

When the sun went down and the streetlights went on, the crazy cranked up. And it was evident nowhere as much as in cities.

Just as she had the urge to press the lock button on the doors, headlights washed over the back of her car, and Jason pulled into the spot beside her. She breathed a sigh of relief even though she might never admit it out loud to anyone. It had been almost an hour since she had parked.

She got out and took the box of files from her front seat with her.

“Kudos on not getting lost,” he said.

“Thanks. I thought I was going to have to come find you, though. Fifteen minutes, huh?” she teased as he opened the door for her to go inside.

“Mei’s was busier than usual. Sorry.”

They started working as soon as they sat at the kitchen table. Ava noted it but said nothing. He thought no more of bringing his work home and letting it override dinner than she did. Was that an augury of what she could look forward to as she grew older in the Bureau? Would her current habits and tendencies follow her? Get worse? Get better? How much of an impact would that have on her physically, mentally, and emotionally over the years? No wonder so many agents were single and never married, or single because they were divorced. Some of them divorced multiple times. Law enforcement was not conducive to marriage and having a cute little family with a white picket fence and a golden retriever apparently.

“Let’s look at it in reverse,” Jason said in reference to the case.

“Okay, that’s an unusual approach, but I’m game.”

“Luka shot at us because we caught him taking something—most likely the bloody clothes—from the trunk of his car. He torched the clothes and is now on the run. We found Ana had been murdered, and as we suspected, it was with an instrument that matches with a fire poker, but it wasn’t the one in her house because it’s still there.” He made a rolling gesture with his hand, signaling for her to take over while he popped a crab rangoon in his mouth.

“Agent Oliver was going to watch her house while we followed Bianchi and members of our teams followed his employees.”

“But?”

“But Ashton lost sight of Luka for about an hour, give or take, and that’s when we went to his house and SHTF.”

He nodded. “During that three-hour window, we know for sure that Bianchi was nowhere near Ana’s house because we never lost sight of him once we picked him up coming down from Napa Valley. He never ran, never stopped, just drove moderately as if he had no destination, and as if he never made us.”

Ava thought on this for a second as she chewed her lo mein. “You think that was on purpose? That he did make us, but he wanted us to follow him?”

“Maybe. Do we have the reports from everyone else on the teams?”

Ava patted a folder. “Right here.”

“Okay, Elliot and Jasper ended up working together because Bianchi’s two personal assistants were together doing some BDSM party thing. We know that much.”

“Yes.” She pulled their reports from the folder and placed them facedown on the table.

“What about Bianchi’s managers? Quinn, Byrne, and Santos?”

“Yes, but—”

“There was a but?” He dropped his eggroll to the plate.

“Two of the managers were together, too. Byrne got a call that Marco was at a fancy restaurant, and when he went there, Francesco was with Marco. They were drinking heavily and having dinner with two unknown women, the report states. Dane was supposed to be tailing Francesco, so Agent Byrne called her and told her he had them both, that she should go help Santos find Fabian Poggioli, the groundskeeper. That’s what she did.”

“What about Quinn’s guy? What was he doing that night?”

Ava chuckled and shook her head slightly. “Says here that he was sitting at home watching Tom and Jerry cartoons from the time she went there until after midnight when we called her off duty.”

“Tom and Jerry? And he’s how old?”

“Apparently not too old to enjoy the classics.” She scanned through the files, located Garrett’s information, and grinned again. “Forty-four.”

“To each his own, I suppose. What about the groundskeeper? How long did it take Dane and Santos to locate him?”

“Almost two hours,” Ava said.

“Really? That long?”

“He wasn’t at home, and it took them a while to track him down to the Center for Contemporary Art in Vallejo, but then they stayed with him until we called them off duty, too.”

“But that window of time before they found him gave him enough time to reasonably kill Ana, clean up, and get to the museum in Vallejo.”

“Why would he kill Ana, though?”

“I don’t know. Why would any of them kill her?”

Ava blew air out and put the paper on the table with her hand on top of it. “If Bianchi lured Ivana to the shed and killed her, maybe he had Luka kill Ana when he figured out she had spoken with us. He didn’t want her to tell us anything that would connect the murder back to him. That would explain the missing fire poker and the bloody clothes.”

“Or, they are all in on it together, and they closed ranks as soon as they realized we were getting too close. Bianchi had Fabian kill Ana, and he had Luka get rid of the evidence. Bianchi knew we would be eyeing him as the top suspect, and that’s why he led us on that merry goose chase through the city. He was just keeping us busy so his guys could get the job done. See? That scenario works as well. And we didn’t have eyes on Luka or Fabian during the critical window of opportunity.”

“We should have stayed at her house until Oliver arrived,” Ava said glumly. “We should have just sat there a while.”

“You know we didn’t have that option. We had to get eyes on Bianchi. He’s the one who sent texts to lure Ivana to that shed where she was murdered. That’s the heart of this case. We can’t let that slip from our sights or lose focus now.”

“You’re right. Whoever murdered her is the one behind Ana’s death, and Filip’s.”

“Higher management at Bianchi’s estate are all Italian except for Luka Kardum, right?”

“That’s what I’ve gathered from the files.”

“Are they loyal enough to cover for their boss if he committed murder to cover up smuggling drugs through his business?”

“One person, maybe even four or five. But all of them? That’s a longshot, in my opinion. You know how difficult it is to get even three people to band together and agree on something simple. This is drug smuggling and murder to cover it up we’re talking about. That’s not something simple.”

He ran a hand down his face and the other over his hair. “Bianchi’s dirty. Kardum is dirty. Fabian might be dirty. And the only thing we can rule good ol’ playboy Sterling out of is Ana’s death.”

“Jesus, I’d almost forgotten about him,” Ava said. “You’re right again. Bianchi could have texted for Ivana to meet him at the shed, and who knows, they might have had an argument and he left her there. Sterling could have seen all this and taken the opportunity to make a move on her. He was drunk and doped up on his designer drugs, no doubt. She rejected him, and he got mad—something Sterling does with the greatest of ease.”

“We have texts from Bianchi to Ivana that got her to go to the shed where she was murdered. We have a crazy ex-boyfriend at the party with them. We have Ivana’s personal assistant and good friend, Ana, who knew too much for her own good about Sterling and Bianchi and Filip’s personal lives. We have Kardum with burned bloody clothing and a missing fireplace poker, and one shady groundskeeper who was MIA during the time Ana was killed.”

“In one way, that’s a lot,” she said.

“In another...”

She scoffed. “I know. It’s practically nothing.”

He nodded and pulled the papers to him, straightened them, and put them in the folder. “We are missing something. We’re overlooking something, or we don’t yet have a vital piece that will make it all fit. What is it?”

“I wish I knew. Where do we even look for it?”

He stood and started clearing the food from the table. Ava helped, her mind gnawing at the evidence like a dog coveting a

bone. She glimpsed her watch as she tossed a carryout box in the trash, and she gasped. Had that much time really passed?

“What is it?” he asked, turning to face her.

“It’s half-past one already,” she said.

“Time flies, right?”

“Doesn’t seem possible.” She put the folders back in the box. “I better get going. It’ll be after two before I get back. At best.”

“Call if you get lost,” he said, flashing a one-sided grin.

“I won’t get lost.”

“The city looks different at night. Just saying, call if you get lost.” He held the door for her and stood there until she was safely in her car with the doors locked.

Without waving, smiling, or anything, he stepped back and closed the door.

Ava only took one wrong turn on the way back to the hotel. She realized her mistake, circled the block, and was back on track in five minutes. It still made her palms sweat and her heart race a little as it took her closer to the Tenderloin District than she liked. Her hotel was closer than she would have liked, but she didn’t have much say in that.

For once, she didn’t have much trouble falling asleep, but as per usual, that sleep was troubled with bad dreams full of memories she wished she didn’t have.



CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

The next day, Ava and Jason were in his office going over Ivana's autopsy report and photos again.

"I'm going to put all the crime scene photos from the shed with her report and autopsy photos," Ava said as she began pulling from one file and adding to another on the computer screen.

"Okay, but how is that going to help?" Jason asked.

"I don't know yet. I'm just following my gut, and my gut is saying that I need all the photos of her—after death—in one file with the crime scene photos." She shrank the pictures and made a collage that spanned three pages.

"And here I thought you were more of a hands-on, old-school girl."

She hit the print command. "And you weren't wrong." She walked out into the hallway to retrieve the printouts from the shared printer, and her phone rang. "Ashton, what do you have?"

"I'm in the lab. I found something on one of the computers from Luka Kardum's house, and I believe you are certainly going to want to hear it for yourself. Bring Agent Ellis, too, if he's available."

“We’ll be there in five.” She hung up, grabbed the papers from the tray without looking at them, and rushed back into Jason’s office. “Ready for a field trip?”

He tossed down his pen and stood. “Absolutely. Where to?”

“The electronics lab. Ashton found something he wants us to hear on one of Luka’s computers.”

He was around her and out the door before she could put the printouts into her folder. “Are you coming, or what?” he called behind him.

“Well, I’m not staying here.”

They hurried downstairs to the computer lab and Ashton stood up at the far end of the room. “Over here,” he said, motioning.

“What do you have, Ashton?” Ava asked, amused by the excited expression on his face.

He clacked at the keyboard of a company computer furiously. “It took some work because it was hidden, and Kardum had tried to delete the original file, but as you know, nothing is ever really deleted.”

“Not when you’re at the helm, anyway,” Ava said.

He pulled a laptop out of a drawer, plugged a cable into the side of it, and plugged the other end into the company computer before going at the keyboard again. His fingers flew across the keys. The laptop’s screen lit up and windows began to flash on it as if files were being opened and extracted at the speed of light.

“I couldn’t believe it when I realized what I was listening to. Unbelievable what people will record, but it’s even more unbelievable what they will then download onto their personal electronics as if it will never be discovered.”

“How do you do that?” Jason asked him.

“Do what?” Ashton asked, continuing to navigate the system via the keyboard commands.

“Talk while you’re typing. Do you even know what keys you’re hitting?”

Ashton laughed self-consciously and looked at the screen. “Yes, sir. I do. I’ve been doing this a while.”

Ava grinned. “It’s kind of his thing. He doesn’t just do it for work.”

“Oh, you’re geek squad in real life, too,” Jason said. “I’ve got one on my team, too. He’s a real Star Wars fan when he’s off-duty, too.”

Ashton stopped typing and plugged in a speaker. “Sorry, I would prefer Bluetooth, but you know how regulations are.”

“It’s fine,” Ava said.

He hit the spacebar and the recording played.

“I won’t stand by and say nothing anymore. You know I can’t, and you know why,” a woman said.

“But you don’t understand. It is only to repay my debt, and then it’s done,” a man replied.

“No. I cannot be okay with this. I have to go to the police. I cannot marry Leo now, either. Drugs, Papa? Drugs? How could you? Even more importantly, how could you not tell me that Leo was allowing you to do this through his company? You know what I stand for. You know the work I do, and what I have dedicated my life to. So does he. I am sickened.”

“I told you already that Leo knows nothing, Ivana. Nothing about any of this. It is only me and Luka who are doing this. My debt to the Croatian Mob will be repaid in under two years, and I swear on my life that it will be over then. No more drugs. No more anything. Can you give me that long at least?”

“I don’t believe you, Papa. You get drunk, you gamble until you have no money and then you borrow from who? The Croatian Mob. You work and instead of repaying that debt, you continue to drink and gamble until you cannot repay, and now look what’s happened. My fiancé, my love, my future, my family, all gone because of this. I cannot be associated with you any longer. Just as I can no longer be associated with Leo. And what about women? Huh? How many are you trafficking with the drugs?”

“I swear, Ivana, there are no women. Neither of us would do such a horrible thing for any amount of money. And Leo has no idea what Luka and I are doing with the drugs. Don’t throw him away because of my misdeeds. You’re happy with him, and he with you. Marry him. Have your own family. Be happy the way your mother and I were happy.”

There was a long stretch of silence.

“What is Luka getting from this?” Ivana asked.

“He is making money from the deal. He worked the deal between me and the mob back home. He makes sure they get their money and they pay him well enough. There are no women being trafficked, and Leo is not involved. On your mother’s grave, he is not involved in any way, Ivana.”

“I cannot abide any of this. You kept me in the dark, lied to me about things when I asked, and still you ask me to just blindly trust you as if I am a child. I’m not a child. I don’t believe you. I do believe that Leo is in on this. It’s his business. He would know this sort of thing. I do believe that there are women being hurt because the Croatian Mob is well known for trafficking women at every opportunity. You have one week, Papa.” Ivana sobbed heavily.

“One week for what?”

“To break ties with Leo and Luka. To get out and away from what they are doing. Even though I despise what you are doing, you are my father, and I still love you. I’m sorry, but after this, I can no longer have anything to do with you.”

“What do you mean?”

“We can never see each other again. I don’t want you to write me, call me, message me, nothing. I am making a clean break. You have one week and then I am going to the police, Papa. Do with that what you will.”

The call ended.

Ashton was all smiles as he watched for Ava’s reaction. “Well?”

“Why are you smiling like that?” Jason asked.

“Because that was the find of the century, right?” Ashton turned to the computer and shut down the program.

“It was damn good, but I wouldn’t say find of the century. It raises a hell of a lot of questions and gives damn near no answers.”

“You do realize that this file was on Luka Kardum’s laptop, which means that he had bugged either Filip’s or Ivana’s phone to be able to record that conversation, right?” Ashton asked matter-of-factly.

“But it was her father she was threatening directly,” Jason said. “That’s motive for killing her. Maybe the old man did kill her after all.”

“It was also motive for Luka to kill Ivana,” Ava said. “He heard the whole conversation, and who knows how many before this one? That also gave him motive for killing Ivana.”

“If Luka killed Ivana, who lured her to the storage building?” Jason asked.

“The texts say it was Bianchi. You know that.” She paused and thought for a moment. “But if Filip was being truthful with Ivana in that phone call, why would Bianchi have lured her there in the first place to kill her?” She groaned in frustration. “It’s a vicious circle that never ends, and we keep ending back right where we started it seems.”

“Maybe Bianchi did kill her. Maybe Luka let Leo listen to the recording. If he was involved with Luka and Filip’s scheme, there you have it. He and Luka worked together to kill Ivana and Ana to save their own asses from getting into trouble over the trafficking.”

Was Bianchi involved? Or was he just that convincing of a liar?

No matter how damaging, the recording did not prove that anyone was killed or that anyone was a killer. It only proved that Luka and Filip knew about Ivana’s plan to tell the police about the drug smuggling at Bianchi’s estate via his wine business.



CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

“Luka’s in the wind. Ivana, Filip, and Ana are dead, so I think we should go talk to our only accessible source of information again,” Jason said. He nodded toward the computer. “With the recording.”

“Leonardo Bianchi.”

Jason nodded.

“Ashton, can you get me a copy of that? Send the file to my phone?” she asked.

“Sure. When do you need it?”

“Yesterday,” she said as she headed for the door.

“Twenty minutes?”

“Awesome, thank you,” she said as she went through the door behind Jason.

“You want to drive this time?” Jason asked her.

“I absolutely can,” she said, calling his bluff.

He shoved his hands into his pockets and waited for the elevator to reach their floor. They stepped in and the doors closed.

“Taking my loaner?” she asked.

He said nothing.

Ava barely contained her grin. Jason was used to being in control of situations. It was unlikely he would let her drive them up to Bianchi's estate.

The elevator opened and they headed toward the cars. He took out his keys and swung them around his finger a few times.

"Should we take both cars in case we need to split up?" he asked.

She laughed. "You can drive. I am perfectly capable, but I sense that you have some deep-seated apprehension about riding shotgun. I don't, so you can drive. If you want me to drive, toss the keys. If not..." She lifted one shoulder as they continued toward the vehicles.

Without further discussion, Jason took the driver's seat, and Ava silently patted herself on the back for being right about him again. Although he seemed unreadable, she was doing pretty good so far.

Bianchi sat at a table on the patio drinking wine under the fat shade of a tilted ten-foot umbrella. The cheesy, cartoonish birds-and-jungle print of the Sunbrella fabric seemed out of place.

"Mr. Bianchi," Jason called as they used the ornate stepping stones to cross the rock-and-miniature shrub garden that led from the parking area to the patio.

Bianchi wore dark sunglasses, a silky white button-down, and black slacks. Even casually drunk before lunch, he managed to look rather dapper and professional. He lifted his glass to them.

"Care to have a glass of wine with me, Agents?"

"No, Mr. Bianchi. We're—"

"Oh," he said, waving the glass back and forth with a scowl before continuing, "on duty, right? Such sticklers." He chuckled but it came out more like a mix between a huff and a scoff. "Sticklers. Sticks in the mud." He tipped his glass in a mock toast and then drained it.

"Little early for that, isn't it?" Jason asked, helping himself to a seat.

"Not breaking any laws, is it? My property, my wine, my business." He poured another glass. "Unless I'm wrong. Am I wrong, Agent?"

“Mr. Bianchi,” Ava said with a tight smile. “We need to ask you about the wine business, actually.”

He smiled. “Anything you want to know. I am a veritable encyclopedia of information.” He sipped. “Both useful and useless information. What do you need to know?”

“It’s about the distribution part of it. How hard would it be to smuggle drugs into the country through your business?” she asked.

His eyes turned cold, and he lowered the glass he had been sipping from again. He sat straighter in his chair and looked from Jason to Ava, seemingly sobering by the second. “What exactly is it you’re asking me? We have been through this before, and I have given you permission to check everything. I have nothing to hide.”

“And I appreciate that, but you know that checking everything is going to take us a long time, right?” Ava asked.

He shrugged. “I don’t know what else I can offer.”

“Just admit that you were smuggling drugs into the country through your business.”

“But I am not. I have never, and I will never,” he snapped, his voice rising with heat. His eyes flared and his brows drew down over the bridge of his nose.

“Leo, Leo, Leo,” Jason said, shaking his head. “What if I tell you that we have something that makes us, and a lot of other people, believe that you were smuggling and might still be?”

“I would say that you are drunker than I am.”

Ava pulled out her phone and moved to the table. She pulled up the file and laid the phone on the table between the two men and hit the play button.

At the sound of Ivana’s voice, Bianchi sucked in a hitching breath and covered his mouth as he lowered his head and closed his eyes.

Was it guilt or shock or just grief renewed? It was hard to trust her own judgment after being possibly wrong about him and Luka in the first place.

Bianchi’s breakdown was much more controlled than the ones on their previous visits. He was a grieving man coming to terms with his loss. Or a man growing tired of the act. It was impossible to know which.

The recording ended, and Ava returned her phone to her pocket. “You heard her. That was Ivana Baruch and her father Filip Baruch, right?”

He nodded. “Yes, it was. I don’t understand. I had nothing to do with any of that. I don’t believe that Filip and Luka—two of my most trusted people—would execute such a scheme right under my nose. It’s not possible.” He stood and walked to the backside of the patio facing the distant mountains.

“Mr. Bianchi, Ivana seemed convinced that you were involved. She was planning on breaking up with you on the night of the party,” Ava said.

Without turning, he dropped his head. “But I was not involved. Filip was my friend. Luka is my distributions overseer. I trusted them both. Was that why Ivana was distant before the party?” He turned to them.

Ava shrugged. “It’s my guess that it was. She also thought women were being trafficked using your business. The Croatian Mob is a nasty set to have dealings with. They aren’t the type of people to accept any excuse for even the smallest failure, but you know that, right?”

“You know the things they do to people who fail to keep their end of the deal, don’t you?” Jason asked. “That’s why Ivana is dead. That’s why Ana is dead.”

“I don’t understand any of this. I am not smuggling anything. If Luka and Filip were doing so, that was them, and I did not have a hand in it.”

“It’s compelling that Ivana was recorded arguing with her father and telling him that she intended on going to the police about the smuggling just days before she was killed,” Ava said.

“On your property. On the night of your party. After you lured her to the shed,” Jason added.

Bianchi looked confused again. “Lured her to the shed? I did no such thing. I was at the party all night. I never left it once.”

“Oh, but we have evidence to the contrary of that, too, Leo,” Jason said. “Do you remember handing over your phone to us?”

“Of course.”

“You remember all those messages you deleted?”

He shook his head and sat again. “My phone is set to do an automatic and complete cleanup every month or so, but I don’t take special note of any messages before they’re deleted.”

“Why? Aren’t any of them very important to you?” Ava asked.

He shook his head. “No. I don’t cling to such things. I prefer to live my life out loud. I loved Ivana, so I told her in person every chance I got; I showed her every chance I got. I need something from someone, I call them and we speak, or I arrange an in-person meeting.”

Jason hummed, feigning agreement. “But you texted Ivana the night of the party and lured her to the storage shed where she was murdered. Now, see, this is a problem for us. We—”

“Stop!” Bianchi yelled. “Right there. I did not lure her anywhere with messages or by any other means. My phone wasn’t even on my person that night.”

“That’s mighty convenient, Leo,” Jason said condescendingly.

“It’s the damn truth whether it’s convenient or not.”

“Where was your phone?” Ava asked.

“It was in my jacket pocket where I always keep it. I had no reason to have it out. All the people I wanted to associate with that night were here. I had no need of the phone.”

“Then, where was your jacket if you weren’t wearing it?” Ava asked.

“Hanging over the back of a chair, where I left it after my first glass of wine,” he said.

“And when did you put that jacket back on?” Jason asked.

“I didn’t. I was drinking. It was a party. It was hot. The jacket hung there until the party was over, and I carried it back to my room, took the phone out, and put it on the charger on the bedside table just like always.”

“So, now you expect us to believe that you didn’t even have your phone with you at the party?” Jason asked.

“I’m not asking you to believe anything. I’m only telling you the way it was. My phone was in my jacket all night. I don’t know why you think I messaged Ivana from it, but I didn’t.”

“Someone did, Mr. Bianchi,” Ava assured him. “Our techs recovered the deleted files of those messages, and I’m sure when they get to it, those same messages will be on her phone, too.”

“How can that be, if I never sent them in the first place? Someone placed them there from somewhere else.”

Jason chuckled dryly and looked at Ava. “He’s creative under pressure. I never heard that one before.” He turned back to Bianchi. “What happened, Leo? You get her down there to try and talk her out of going to the police and she put up an argument? You two get into it pretty bad? You know, that was the night she planned on cutting ties with all of you. She tell you that while you were arguing? That she was going to cut ties with you bunch of dirtbags, talk to the cops, and start over somewhere far away?”

“Preposterous, Agent. Lies. Covering for your own inability to do real investigative work and solve her murder. Don’t push your own inadequacies onto me,” Bianchi said loudly. It wasn’t a yell, but it was close. His face reddened, and a vein stood out on his forehead.

“Made you angry, didn’t it? Scared you, too, I bet. Croatian Mob coming for you if she blabbed to the cops about your little side endeavor. That’s enough to send any man into survival mode. And she just wouldn’t shut up, would she?” Jason stood.

“Shut up, Agent Ellis. I’m warning you.” Bianchi’s voice deepened and dropped sharply in volume.

“Or what? You’ll shut me up, too?” Jason stepped dangerously close to the irate man. “I’m not a hundred-and-thirty-pound woman, Leo. At this point, give me a reason. It doesn’t even have to be a good one.”

The muscles on the sides of Bianchi’s neck stood out like ropes under the skin. He lifted his hand and pointed toward the car. “Get the hell off my property. Now.”

Ava rounded the table and tapped Jason’s shoulder with the back of her hand. “Let’s go. We’re done here.”

“Damn straight, you are,” Bianchi said without breaking eye contact with Jason.

Ava stopped a few feet away and turned to him. “For now, Mr. Bianchi. We’re done for now.”

He scoffed but kept his eyes locked on Jason.

Ava's phone rang. She was reluctant to take her eyes off the men. They were both on hair triggers, and she only wanted to get Jason out of the situation. If there was an altercation, it could ruin the case later. He had to know that already, but she couldn't judge whether he was just rattling Bianchi's cage, or if he was genuinely upset enough to take a swing. Her phone stopped ringing, and Jason suddenly took a breath and stood straighter as if snapping out of it.

"We'll be seeing you, Leo," he said. He strode off the patio and through the tidy, manicured shrubs without consideration for the path. He rolled large stones and stepped on shrubs as he tromped past Ava and to the parking area.

Using the stepping stones, she caught up with him and got into the passenger side. "What was that?"

He started the car and sped down the driveway to the road ignoring her question.

"Jason, what was that back there? If you had caused an altercation, you know that could have jeopardized the entire case later on. Why did you do that?"

Gripping tightly on the steering wheel, he drew a deep breath, held it for a moment, and then let it out slowly. Still, he offered no answer.

"Okay, so this is how it is. You're not even going to give me the consideration of an answer. You could have just blown any chances we had of taking down his smuggling operation—if indeed there is one—and bringing justice to Ivana, Ana, and Filip. That's just grand of you."

He gave her the courtesy of side-eye and nothing more.

Several minutes passed with Ava's righteous anger building. "I've busted my ass on this case, and I'll be damned if you just flush it away because your stupid macho ego gets a little bruised! You need to learn how not to take things so personally—at least while I'm on the case and my ass is on the line, too!" She only realized how angry and loud she was after she stopped yelling at him.

He glanced over and nodded. "And now you see."

“Now I see what exactly? Stop with the mysterious and wise riddle-me bullshit. Just tell me.” Closing her eyes, Ava reeled in her anger, pulled it back, and made a conscious effort to dial it down. Being angry would get her no closer to solving anything with Jason. It would only make the time left on the case more awkward, upsetting, and ulcer-conducive.

“Now you see how easy it is to lose your temper and become confrontational when you think you’re right.”

She stared at him in disbelief. “That’s how wars are started, you know. Both sides think they’re right. That’s why we’re supposed to rely on hard evidence, not opinions.”

“I just wanted to see how right he thought he was.”

Shaking her head, she focused on her breathing for a moment. “Seriously? It looked a lot like you lost your temper back there. It looked a lot like you wanted him to take a swing at you so you could pummel the crap out of him. Didn’t look anything like you were trying to gauge whether he believed what he was saying or not.”

“I’d love to pummel the crap out of him. Even if he’s not guilty of murder. I just don’t like the man.”

“Well?” she asked in irritation.

“Well what?”

“Did he believe the stuff he was saying to us or not?”

“I think he does believe it. Either that or he’s so hellbent on protecting his smuggling operation that he’s perfected the art of acting like he’s Honest Abe.”

“You’re telling me that you now believe Bianchi is innocent?”

“Not completely, but maybe he isn’t as guilty as I first thought.”

Ava’s phone rang again. She finally looked down at it and frowned.

What did Metford want?



CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

At the office, Ava waited to meet with Metford while Jason took a meeting with Garcia. It was probably a dressing-down about how he had acted at Bianchi's. He wasn't a man who would sit back and take being dickered with and not retaliate in some fashion.

Metford walked in grinning. It was good to see that familiar mischievous grin. Jason was a superb agent—in his own way. And he could easily keep pace with her. But Metford was her comfort zone. She knew him much better. If it had been Metford instead of Jason facing off with Bianchi earlier, she would have instantly known if it was serious, or if Metford was just poking the tiger with a stick to get a reaction for the record.

He flapped papers against his hand. "Got the report from the local officer who responded. Want to read it before we go?" He handed it to her as she stood.

"Nah, just fill me in as we go."

"You driving, or you want me to?"

"Location?" she asked, scanning the paper as they walked.

"Not far from Ana Juric's house. A walking trail in the area."

“I’ll drive.” She took her keys from her pocket and smiled. “It’ll be good to get behind the wheel again, actually.”

“City-slicker agent getting under your skin?” Metford grinned ear to ear.

“Not really. He just works different than we do.”

“They all do. Although they all seem to be great at their jobs.”

“How’s everybody getting along?” Ava folded the report.

“There was a little tension between Santos and Jasper for the first few days. Not sure why unless it was because they both have that same pushy, bossy attitude.”

“And Santos would kick your ass if she heard you say that,” Ava said, laughing.

“Probably, but I’m sticking to my theory because they stopped grating against each other when they both got pissed at me at the bar one night.”

Ava turned to face him fully. “What did you do, Metford? I better not have to explain anything to anyone’s boss. Especially not Sal.”

“Just something I said. Anyway, it doesn’t matter. Nobody filed any complaints, and they found something to be buddies over.”

“Nothing unifies people like their shared annoyance at a fellow coworker or boss.”

He laughed again. “They got over it by the next night, so it was worth it, I guess. You really think that fire poker is the one from Kardum’s house?” He pointed to the folded report in her hand.

“Don’t know, but what is the likelihood that someone else’s fire poker was tossed on that walking trail and it had blood on it?”

He nodded. “Think it’s the one that killed Ana Juric?”

“Afraid to say right now, but it looks like it could be. Have to wait for the examiner to run the tests. Have you seen the poker? Did you already go out there?”

“No. The responding officers taped off the area. One went to the station to file the report and wait for me while the other stayed out there to make sure the scene wasn’t disturbed. Forensics is already on their way, too.”

“Good job, Metford.” She got in and started the car. “You know, I like California. I really do, but I think I’m going to be glad to get back

home.”

“Always, huh?”

“I think so.”

They arrived at the area where the walking trail was located. The residential street looked like any other in the area: upper-middle income, well-manicured lawns, quiet, clean, just regular people leading ordinary lives and trying to make it the best they could.

The trail lay about two-hundred feet behind the houses in a thin scrim of trees and greenery that was roughly a hundred feet wide. The greenbelt section of the walking trail only comprised a quarter of a mile of the total ten-mile length. The remainder of the trail on either side was open. In some places, there were raised and covered bridges that took it over roadways. In other places, it crossed parking lots or ran parallel to the two-lane road. There weren't many spots to do things in private—except in that little chunk of woods.

Metford and Ava walked toward the scene on the trail taking their time and noting the proximity to the houses and any obstructions to the views from different angles.

“If someone came up here to toss out a murder weapon, he would have to park his vehicle somewhere within sight,” Ava said.

“He could have parked over at that big paved area by the railroad tracks a mile back that direction, walked here, tossed the poker, and walked back out again. That would have reduced the likelihood of residents here noticing anything strange.”

She shook her head. “I don't think anyone would want to carry a bloody poker for a mile before chucking it into the woods. It's a public walking trail.” She turned to watch as forensics photographed the poker lying a few feet off the side of the trail and almost completely hidden in the weeds. “It wasn't wrapped in anything, and it wasn't thrown very far off the trail.”

Metford shrugged. “I don't know that I would have even noticed it if I had been out for my jog. It kind of blends in. Mrs. Sharpton only noticed it because Daisy went to it and alerted her.”

“The dog?”

He nodded. “Blue Heeler. Five years old.” He pointed to a gray house with black shutters in the distance. “She lives in that house, I

think.”

They headed down the slightly sloped hill toward the neighborhood again. In the street, Ava turned to eye the layout again. “Maybe it was a quick toss-out job. Maybe whoever tossed it was in a hurry. Parked somewhere, ran up that hill, but not all the way to the trail, and gave it a sling toward the woods.”

“That would explain why it wasn’t far from the trail,” Metford reasoned.

“Did the officers canvass the area, ask if anyone saw any unusual cars or activity in the last couple of days?”

“No. Nothing yet. They more or less got the call, responded, knew we were looking for a poker because Garcia made sure to alert them at the same time the BOLO on Kardum went out, and they tossed the ball to us immediately.”

“What’s Mrs. Sharpton’s house number?”

Metford looked at the report. “Five-oh-one.”

The gray house was nothing special. One-story, mid-size with a good-size backyard, and a fence all around to keep Daisy safe. There was a large wooden doghouse in the backyard and a scattering of chew toys, but no sign of the dog.

As Ava stepped onto the porch and reached out to ring the doorbell, she saw that it was a Ring doorbell. “It’s got video,” she said to Metford.

He leaned over and squinted at it. “It does. Probably a lot of people have those out here. They’re good for preventing break-ins.”

“Exactly. I bet there are others.” She turned and shaded her eyes to look at other houses. “We need to check. If there is footage, I want to collect it. If someone tossed that poker in the last couple of days, maybe they were recorded and didn’t even know it.”

“Smile for the camera,” he said.

She rang the doorbell.

Mrs. Sharpton answered with a wavering smile and fidgety movements. “Come in. The officer told me you would be coming around to talk to me. FBI, right?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Ava said. She and Metford showed their badges.

“Yes, yes. Come on in and make yourselves comfortable.” She showed them into the living room.

The dog raised her head from the floor by the sofa and gave a low growl as Ava and Metford entered. They stopped and watched the dog warily.

“Daisy, you be a good girl. These are our guests.” Mrs. Sharpton walked over and sat on the sofa, patting Daisy’s head. “She’s all bark, no bite. Harmless, really.”

“Doesn’t look harmless,” Ava said, easing to a seat.

“Looks full of teeth and attitude,” Metford said. “Like some of my exes.”

Mrs. Sharpton laughed and then covered her mouth. “I’m sorry. That just reminded me of something my late husband Henry would have said. Always joking. I miss him so much.” She ruffed the dog’s head and ears. “Daisy here tries to alleviate the loneliness, don’t you, girl?”

“Sorry for your loss,” Ava said, shifting in her seat.

“Oh, it’s been years now. You know, he once told me that I wasn’t his first anything but I’d be his last everything. I thought that was sweet.”

It was morbid and scary. Love was scary. It was alien. Not for the faint of heart. “Mrs. Sharpton, about that poker you found...”

“Oh, it was Daisy who found it. I would have walked right by it if not for her. I think it was the smell of blood that drew her to it.” She cringed. “That’s horrible, I know, but it’s true. She licked it before I could pull her away from it. And I did. Just as soon as I realized what was on the thing.”

Metford looked at Ava and back to the dog. “You licked the poker, Daisy?”

The dog’s lip quivered and her teeth showed.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” he said.

“I hope that doesn’t mess up any tests that might catch whoever threw it out there, or whoever’s blood is on it,” Mrs. Sharpton said.

“About that. Does your doorbell record video?” Ava asked.

The woman blinked a couple of times as if caught off guard by the question and then she nodded with a furrowed brow. “Well, yes.

It does. A few of us in the neighborhood have them.” She gasped and snapped her fingers. Daisy sat to attention, eyes on Metford. “No, Daisy. Down.” The dog dropped to the carpet again, eyes flitting between her master and the strange man she didn’t like. “You think whoever chucked that poker might have been recorded on one of the doorbell cameras, don’t you?”

Ava smiled. “Well, yes, we are hoping for that, anyway.”

Mrs. Sharpton picked up her phone, excitement lighting up her face. “I can call the others and ask them to get the footage ready for you if you like. They’d be more than happy to do that, and so would I. How far back do you want it?”

“The last forty-eight hours,” Ava answered in disbelief. “But we need to speak with them to make sure they know we are collecting it for a case.”

Mrs. Sharpton flapped a hand and scoffed. “Of course, of course. You can spout all that legalese when you’re collecting the footage. Trust me, they want to do whatever it takes to keep the neighborhood safe just like I do. We all moved here because it’s relatively safe, and we try to keep an eye on each other. This was a huge kick in the face for all of us.”

“So, they all already know about the poker?” Metford asked.

“Of course. I already told them. Soon as Daisy and I were back home. I had to let them know something was going on so they could take the appropriate measures to make sure their families and homes were safe. That’s what we do here. Isn’t that what neighbors are supposed to do?”

Metford pulled in a breath, held it, looked at Ava, and simply smiled.

Mrs. Sharpton only made one call. It was a short two-minute call, and then she hung up. “There. All set in motion. Janice will start the calls to the others while Terrence downloads the footage. I called them because they are just straight across the street. You can talk to them, and Janice will tell you who has the footage ready for you next, and so on and so forth.”

They thanked her and left.

“And so on and so forth?” Metford asked as they walked across the street.

“Behave. She was being helpful at least.”

“That’s what neighbors are for? So on and so forth,” he said in an imitation creepy voice. “All kind of Stepford-ish, if you ask me.”

“I think it’s nice to have that kind of community. Especially for someone like her. She’s obviously alone with just dear Metford-hating Daisy to keep her company. You know they say dogs are a good judge of character.”

“Not funny. Not funny at all. I have good character. Great, in fact.”

“Just saying.”

They collected the footage from four neighbors and took it back to the electronics lab.

“Hey, Ashton,” Metford said. He strolled into the room as if he owned the building.

If nothing else, he definitely had confidence. Maybe an overabundance of it at times, but he had confidence.

“Look what the cat dragged in.” Ashton smiled and stretched as he pushed away from the computer.

Ava chuckled. “Dog, actually.”

“What?”

“Never mind,” Metford cut in.

Ava handed him the thumb drives. “We need someone to look through these to see if anyone gets out of a car and gets rid of a possible murder weapon in the little spit of woods in the background.”

Ashton looked confused. “Is it video?”

Metford clapped him on the shoulder. “I’m sorry, my man, but all four are chock-full of video footage.”

“From doorbell cameras,” Ava added.

“Forty-eight hours each,” Metford said. He stepped back and twiddled his fingers at Ashton. “Hate to do it to you, buddy, but I gotta get back to work now and leave you to your super-techy-nerd stuff. Good luck, though.” He spun on his heel and started past Ava.

It was a pleasure to snag his sleeve and stop him in his tracks. “Not so fast.”

Metford's face fell slack and his eyes filled with dread and pleading. "Aw, come on, boss. You can't be serious."

She nodded and pointed to the chair beside Ashton. "As a heart attack."

Ashton patted the empty seat and smiled broadly. "Dang, I hate to do it to you, man, but here." He dropped two of the thumb drives onto the desk. "Many hands make light work. Working together, we'll be done in half the time."

Giving him a sour look, Metford snatched the chair away from the desk. "A little less talk, a lot more work, Ash. That's what will get us done."

With a smirk on her face and a laugh locked in her throat, Ava left the lab and headed back to Jason's office to update him on the situation.



CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

“**H**ow long before they get through all that footage?” Jason asked.

“Probably a few hours at least. If I know Metford, he’ll wrangle at least one more person into helping them. He hates that kind of work. He’d rather be chasing down the bad guys and tackling them in the middle of a shootout than sit at a computer for five minutes.”

“Every agent needs a healthy mix of field and office work. He’ll manage. He’s a good agent. He just has some issues.”

That raised her hackles instantly. “Some issues?”

“Don’t get all bristly. You know it just as well as I do. He’s hotheaded and tends to speak when he should hush, that’s all I’m saying.”

“Don’t throw stones if you live in a glass house,” she said, daring him to say any more about Metford, or anyone on her team.

Jason held up his hands defensively. “I’m not saying anything bad about Metford. He’s a good agent. I was merely suggesting that having him help Ashton was a good call on your part. It seems that you instinctively know what your team needs, and you deliver.”

Was that a passive-aggressive way of giving her a pat on the back? Was he putting a gold star by her name? What was the deal? Understanding him was like trying to read Greek most of the time— intriguing and frustrating.

Jason's phone rang. He answered, listened for a bit, and started writing. "Half Moon Bay? You're sure it was him?" He listened more, nodded, and then hung up. "Well, looks like Metford might be issued a get-out-of-jail-free card. You said he likes chasing down the bad guys better than anything?"

"Yes. What's going on?"

"Kardum was spotted at Half Moon Bay twenty minutes ago. I'm sending Elliot and Jasper. Want Metford to ride in with them?"

"Definitely."

"Tell him to meet Elliot and Jasper at the car in five. I need to speak with Garcia before we leave." He rushed out of the office.

Ava called Metford. The squeak of his shoes on the floor let her know that he was running out the door before she finished telling him what was up. Ashton was undoubtedly staring at the empty, spinning chair beside him wondering if teleportation had somehow become reality.

Less than ten minutes later, Jason trotted by the open door. "Come on!" he yelled without stopping.

Ava hurried to catch him at the elevator. When it took too long, Jason grunted in frustration and hit the stairs. She was on his heels. It felt good to get the muscles going and blood pounding. The bad guy was out there, and they were on their way to take him down. Justice was just around the corner.

"Fair warning," Jason said as they jumped into the car. "Hold on."

"Noted," she said as she buckled in. "How far is Half Moon Bay?"

"About twenty-five miles south of the city."

"He'll be gone before we get there if he realizes he's been made."

"Not if I can help it. The others have a ten-minute jump on us, too. They'll get there first. Maybe put Metford's combat skills to the test."

"He'll have no problem with that."

He wasn't kidding when he told her to hold on. He took zipping through traffic to levels she had never experienced, and navigated the SUV through openings in traffic that didn't seem possible. The g-force pressed her firmly against the seat most of the time. A fiery crash loomed large every second in her perception, and it kept her adrenaline pumping at a steady rate through her veins.

What should have been at least a twenty-five-minute ride was over much sooner. Jason parked in the first wide area they came to.

"Next time you ask if I want to drive, I'm not giving you options," she said. Her legs wobbled as she stepped out of the car. It was like getting her land legs back after being on a boat. That couldn't be a good sign.

"Eyes peeled. He could be anywhere, but I bet he's trying to make a boat."

"He stands out in a crowd. Won't be too hard to spot," she reminded him.

A sharp whistle drew her attention left. It was Metford. He motioned and walked toward them. Elliot and Jasper kept their course.

"We made him almost as soon as we got here," Metford reported. "He's walked through a bunch of the different areas here, but he seems to be heading for the water. One of the beaches is what Jasper said."

"Which direction?" Ava asked.

Metford pointed him out far ahead and to their left. The crowd had him nearly obscured. If Luka had been three inches shorter, they might not have seen him at all. His dark shock of hair stood out against the collar of his white shirt, making it easier to follow him at a distance. The number of fair-haired people was shocking. Maybe the constant exposure to the sun lightened the pigment.

"Whale-watching tours," Jason said. He nodded at the three-tiered boats near the docks. "They go in and out here all day and part of the night. All kinds of personal yachts and sailboats, too."

"Why would he be here, though?" Ava asked.

"Just to try sneaking out of San Francisco. Trying to sneak past the BOLO."

“Where would he go from here? He has to know all kinds of travel will be shut down for him.”

“If he can weasel his way down the coast, he could slip into Tijuana.”

“That’s five hundred miles from here,” she said.

“And there are a lot of boats he could hop that would take him right down to Chula Vista—a little more than ten miles away from Tijuana.” He raised both eyebrows.

They caught up to Elliot and Jasper but walked a few feet away from them. The closer Luka got to the water, the more often he surveyed the thinning crowd behind him. It was harder to camouflage with fewer people around. Ava and Jason moved to the side where there were more people. Luka knew what they looked like, but not Elliot, Jasper, or Metford.

It wasn’t long before he spotted Ava and Jason. As soon as he made them, he turned toward the water and bolted. He pulled a gun and waved it in the air. People scattered in all directions, screaming, and shielding their kids while simultaneously avoiding being trampled.

Pushing her way through the panicked crowd, Ava was sure she knew what hell felt like. Being shoulder- and hip-checked at least a dozen times, she still managed to leap over two people who fell directly in front of her.

Luka ran to the end of a dock and onto a three-tiered whale-watching boat. He put the gun to the captain’s head, and the boat slowly moved toward open water.

Ava, Metford, and Jason ran full speed, feet pounding the boards, fists pumping in the air, eyes fixed on the slowly moving boat. All three of them leaped at the same time. Metford and Jason landed on the deck. Metford skidded on his knee, Jason hit on his feet and then rolled gracefully and bounded back to his feet, and Ava struggled as she hit half on and half off the deck. Metford stood and grabbed her by the vest and hauled her up to her feet, grinning as ever.

Elliot and Jasper stopped running at the end of the dock.

“Coast Guard!” Metford yelled back to them.

Jasper gave him a thumbs-up and pulled out her phone.

Passengers pushed toward Ava and Metford. Some of them went overboard, preferring to swim back to shore rather than face a lunatic with a gun.

Jason made it to the bridge and headed for Luka. "Drop the gun, Kardum! You got nowhere left to go! It's over!"

Kardum pointed the gun at him and pulled the trigger. Jason dodged to the side, dropped to one knee and slid forward, shot back to his feet, and football-tackled Luka. The gun flew wide from Luka's hand, skittering across the bridge.

Metford jumped in the fight and landed an elbow to the side of Luka's head, driving it down toward the floor. Jason put his knee in Luka's side and wrested an arm up and toward the man's neck while Metford tried to cuff him.

Amazingly, Luka screamed and pushed off the floor with one arm. He bucked Metford off to the side and rolled in the opposite direction, throwing Jason off the other side. All of a sudden, Luka was on his feet, and both agents were down. There was no time for thought or hesitation or doubt. Ava jumped on Luka's back.

He fell from the force of her unexpected weight, but it didn't slow him down much. She tried for a chokehold on him, but he tensed against it and crawled forward, scrambling for the gun with her on his back. Grabbing a handful of his hair, she used her other hand to unholster her own gun. The boat hit a rough patch, and the world went topsy-turvy, tumbling people around like balls in a bingo cage.

Ava caught onto the railing, narrowly avoiding going over onto the deck below. People screamed, and she could see some of them bleeding from head and facial wounds as she righted herself. No time to look after them. Luka was still on the move. He'd been flat on the floor when everyone went flying, and he hadn't been tossed.

He ascended a ladder to the top tier. She followed. He ran to the back of the deck and stopped, looking down onto the decks below as she stood up and pointed her gun at him. He turned and snarled, licking blood from his split lip. Someone had landed a solid punch. His nose leaked blood, and his left eye was swelling fast. Good enough for the bastard.

He had to have been the one who killed Ivana and Ana. Probably Filip, too. All to keep his own ass out of prison. All so he could keep smuggling drugs into the US and making money hand over fist.

“Luka Kardum, get on your knees with your hands on your head,” she said with all the force of her anger and all the authority of her federal status.

He laughed. “I kneel to no one. Especially not a woman who doesn’t know her place.” He spread his arms as if daring her to try to make him kneel.

Would it be so bad to just pull the trigger and be done with him? To be done with the whole mess. Who would care, really? There was only the one pesky little detail that kept her from doing it—she needed to prove he actually did the things she already knew he had done. Yet her finger still tickled at the trigger, and her mind still toyed with the idea of what if. Luka had shot at her and Jason both already. He was resisting capture, resisting arrest, assaulting federal agents like it was his right to do so. Her left eye twitched and her trigger finger pulled back ever so slightly on the mechanism.

No one was up there with them.

Jason and Metford were on their way, but for a moment, just a cursed moment, she faced Luka alone, and she wanted to shoot him, wanted to punish him for all the things he had done. And maybe for all the things every man like him had ever done to their victims before him.

But she couldn’t shoot him in cold blood. He was unarmed and making no move against her. That’s what separated her from the truly bad people, the criminals, the psychopaths in the world.

She took a deep breath and relaxed as Metford and Jason walked up behind her. “Luka Kardum, you are under arrest—”

The boat hit another rough patch. It threw Ava sideways and into Jason. They slid to the railing, caught, and held on as Ava’s gun fell to the deck below. Metford rushed Luka. The men collided like angry giants. It was no-holds-barred for the next two minutes as fists flew and feet kicked. Finally, Metford drew his gun as Jason ran to join the fight. Seeing the gun, Luka lowered his head, hit Metford in his

center of mass, and lifted him off his feet. He tossed Metford over the railing, barely managing to not go over himself.

“No!” Ava screamed, leaning far over to see Metford hit the deck.

Passengers moved toward him, a slow-moving mass that would block him from view bit by bit. A man knelt by Metford as Ava yelled down again.

“He’s alive, just knocked out, I think,” the man called up.

“Don’t move him,” she ordered.

The man shook his head.

Ava turned to Luka with a new level of white-hot hatred boiling inside her. Jason landed blow after blow, but Luka gave as good as he got. The boat rocked violently twice more, and Luka backed against the railing. Jason stumbled to the side. It was his undoing as Luka grabbed the side of Jason’s head, pivoted sideways, and sent it crashing into the railing with enough force that blood sprayed to the boards. Luka stood at the side railing, heaving for breath with his back to her as he swiped blood from his face.

Ava stopped. “No, Jason,” she tried to yell, but her voice was very low. Barely audible. Someone had stolen all the air from her lungs. Or maybe it was that burning hatred eating up all the oxygen left in her.

Jason’s blood poured fast and ran toward her in two wide runnels. Luka’s back was still to her. She ran toward him; fury pushed her faster and drove her harder across the short distance.

And the impact was one of the most satisfying feelings she had experienced in over a year.

The freefall and all the questions immediately afterward were not satisfying.

Was there going to be a deck rushing up to meet her? How far to the water if there was no deck? Were there sharks in the water?

Luka hit the water and then she hit a split-second after, swimming immediately out of his reach. He turned toward land and began kicking in that direction, but they were too far out and he was too fatigued to get very far. The Coast Guard was in sight, too. Was it horrible to wish that Luka would try to keep swimming and drown?

Would that be too easy an out for him after what he had done? After what he had caused?

She continued to tread water until a woman threw her a life preserver on a rope and pulled her aboard the Coast Guard boat. At least Luka was headed to prison. He had earned himself a cell there. It was Ava's job to make sure he never got out. With two badly injured agents, she would have to work even harder, but that would be no problem.

She would do it gladly if it meant making sure Luka Kardum paid to the fullest extent of the law. He had snuffed out one of the brightest, purest lights in the world, and that infuriated her to the depths of her soul.



CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Metford and Jason were taken to the Coastside Clinic Hospital near Half Moon Bay for treatment and stabilization. Metford was lucky enough to get out of the situation with a broken arm, fractured ankle, and a concussion, but he was conscious by the time he was loaded into the ambulance. Jason had a severe concussion and didn't regain consciousness that day.

Ava remained by his side, as did Quinn. Garcia met them at San Francisco General after he was transported there later in the evening.

"What are the doctors saying?" Metford asked Ava when he called that night.

"They're playing it by ear right now. The swelling on his brain is pretty bad, though. They hope to avoid surgery, but they're not making any promises or predictions. He's not been awake at all. I should have done it," she said. "When I had the chance before you two got up there. I should have just..." She glanced over her shoulder to make sure no one was in the public restroom with her. "I should have just done it."

“No, you shouldn’t have. This isn’t your fault, Ava.”

“Easy for you to say.”

“Actually, it’s not. Hurts like hell. My jaw was almost dislocated, you know.” He chuckled lightly.

“You’re an idiot,” she said, laughing lightly. It was just like him to be making jokes at the worst time.

“I’m glad you didn’t do it. I saw it on your face when I got up there. All I can say is that I’m glad you didn’t go through with it. Eventually, it would have eaten you up from the inside out. You can never go back from something like that.”

“It almost cost your life and it might cost Jason his future, if not his life.”

“That man was dysfunctional before the blow to the head. If anything, he’ll wake up and be a new person. Maybe new and improved. Might be the best thing that ever happened to him, you don’t know.”

“Metford, don’t say crap like that.”

“Yeah, that was out of line, wasn’t it? He’s cool, really. But being out of commission for a while might be the only thing that saves one or both of our lives. Who knows, it might keep us from stepping in front of a speeding car, or a stray bullet. You just don’t know about these things, Ava. Stop beating yourself up about it. That’s my job.”

“Since when did you get all Zen Buddhist and philosophical?”

“I’ve always been. It’s just usually stuffed way down deep. I don’t show it often, so consider yourself lucky. You need anything?”

“The results on that damn poker for starters.”

“I’ll light a fire under their feet at the office about it. Call if there’s any change or if you need something.”

“I will, Mr. Gimp.”

“Hey, don’t make me roll up in that joint with my blinged-out wheelchair and pop a crutch upside your head for being sassy,” he said, laughing.

“Go to bed. Your meds have kicked in.” She hung up and despite the sickening guilt from earlier, she was smiling when she went back to Jason’s room.

“You need to go get some sleep,” Garcia said as soon as she walked in.

She startled. She didn’t know he was there. “I’m fine. I want to stay.”

“You have other business to take care of right now. I’ll stay until three and then Quinn is coming back.” He made a one-finger shooing gesture toward the door. “Now, go get some sleep. You look like hell and probably smell worse. They said you hadn’t left his side.”

“I haven’t. That’s what partners do. They stick with each other.”

“I’m here now, and I said go on and get out of here. Take care of yourself. We’re down two agents already. I don’t need it to be three because you have a heart attack from exhaustion.”

“I won’t. I promise. I just want to make sure he’s okay. This is my fault. I had Luka, but I didn’t take the shot. If I had, this wouldn’t have happened.” She pointed to Jason. “If I had pulled that trigger, he wouldn’t be lying there, and we wouldn’t be having this discussion.”

Garcia shook his head. “That’s not how I heard it. Luka wasn’t armed and he never made a move toward you when you had him cornered on that weather deck. If you had pulled that trigger, you’d be facing a hell of an OPR investigation right now, and you know it.”

She shook her head. “But—”

“Stop with the guilt-riddled bullshit. You’re just putting yourself through the wringer. This crap happens. Nobody likes it, but the good guys—that’s us in case you have any doubts—have to play by the rules. If we don’t, then nobody does, and all bets are off. It’s total anarchy out there. I know you feel bad, but don’t. If he’d been in your position, he would not have pulled that trigger, either. Neither would I, or any of the others.” He stopped and looked up briefly, held up a finger, and grinned. “I hope they wouldn’t, anyway. But you understand what I’m saying. And if the roles were switched, would you blame him for your misfortune?”

“No.”

“That was a very quick answer. I find that most of the time, a very quick and short answer like that is the truth, so you understand what I’m telling you. Jason is a strong man. He has a team of good

doctors looking after him, and he won't be alone. You..." he made that same shooing gesture. "That's an order, Agent."

It was hard to leave Jason lying there unconscious and not knowing if he would live or not, but one last look at Garcia told her that she'd better do as he had ordered. He wasn't a man who enjoyed arguing his point or repeating his orders to his agents.



CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

On her way back to the hotel, Ava called Metford to let him know she was not staying overnight at the hospital, and that she would be next door if he needed anything.

“Actually, Elliot invited himself over. He said he’d stay here until I was sure I could get around and do for myself okay.”

“You are letting another man spend the night at your place? I am shocked. I thought you would have asked Santos or Jasper, just to be honest, or maybe one of the nurses at the hospital.”

He laughed. “Santos told me no way. That I could call if I needed something and she was just down the hall. Besides, Elliot is bringing his Xbox.”

“You boys and your toys. That’s a sure sign that you’re going to be fine. No more brain damaged than you were before the fall.”

“I didn’t fall, I was tossed like a kid tossing a Lincoln Log, but yeah, I’ll be fine. But you, you should get some rest. Stop trying to take care of everybody but you. Think about yourself for a change.”

“I don’t do that,” she defended herself.

“Right. Okay, bye. Drive safe.”

“I’m already here. The hospital is like three miles away.”

“Get some rest. Talk tomorrow.”

“*You* get some—”

He hung up before she could even finish her sentence.

Ava parked and stared at the phone, unsure whether to be amused or upset. It was okay to be both when dealing with Metford. God knew she had been that way a lot in the past when dealing with him.

After a hot shower, all the aches and pains came to the fore, as usual. They were nowhere near as intense as some in the very recent past, but they were bad enough that she downed some aspirin with a cup of black coffee brewed from the packets by the small coffeemaker in the room.

Sleep would be good, but it wouldn’t come. It was nearly eight-thirty at night, which meant it was nearly eleven-thirty at night back home.

Her mother would still be up. At least until the nightly news went off. That had been a ritual for as long as she could remember. She pulled up the number for her parents’ house and hit the call button only to immediately hit the disconnect and drop the phone on the bed beside her.

What was she going to tell them? That she had just tackled a huge chunk of man off the third deck of a boat and gone overboard with him? Was she going to spill her guts about how badly she had wanted to shoot him, and how she had wished she were a bad person for just a moment or two so she could shoot him without caring?

“Sure, that’d make a good conversation starter,” she muttered, flopping back onto the bed and immediately regretting it as her bruised ribs flared with pain. “Hi, Mom, how was dinner? That’s great. Me? Oh, I wished with all my soul to be a true blood-lusting villain for two minutes so I could shoot a guy in cold blood today. Instead, I ran and tackled him off the side of a big old boat right into the water. Must mean it’s Tuesday again, right? Ha-ha-ha.” She groaned and laid her arm over her eyes. “I’m so stupid.”

How were her parents doing? How was Molly? She hadn't had time to speak with them since she had been in San Francisco. With the time difference, every time she got back to the hotel at night, it was far too late to call them. No matter how much they loved her, they wouldn't appreciate being startled from a dead sleep at three in the morning for a mundane little check-in chinwag.

"Wonder what time Molly hits the hay nowadays?" she wondered aloud.

She pushed to a sitting position and checked the time. Eight-thirty. Do or die time. The news would be going off back home, and her mother would stand up any minute now and announce that it was bedtime as she drifted toward the doorway carrying her wine glass.

She pulled up their number again and let it ring through. Why did it jangle her nerves? There wasn't always a need for a scripted conversation. It was okay to just call and say hello. Wasn't it?

"Hello, James residence," her mother answered.

"Mom?" Her heart double-clutched at the sound of her mom's voice and a lump formed in her throat. What was up with that?

"Aviva? Oh, I've been so worried about you. Are you alright? Hank, grab the other phone, honey, it's Aviva."

Ava smiled and sighed. Some things never changed.

"Hiya, kiddo," her father said, sounding chipper and happy.

"Hi, Dad. I hope I didn't call too late. This time difference is brutal to keep up with."

"No, no, honey. It's never too late," Elizabeth said.

"No, you call whenever you take a notion to call, kiddo. We'll answer and be glad to hear from you," Hank said.

"How is sunny California?" Elizabeth asked.

Ava laughed. "Sunny. They got the nickname right for sure. It's always sunny out here. You'd love it."

"How are you liking San Francisco?" Elizabeth asked cautiously.

"It's... *nice*. I guess. Crowded and parts of it are crazy, but nice."

"She's not a city girl, Elizabeth, you know that. Are you, Aviva?"

"No, Dad, I guess I'm not. I manage, but I think I've come to prefer small towns over big cities any day of the week."

"So, how's the case going?" Hank asked.

“Coming along. It’s been bumpy, but it’s coming to a close pretty soon. We’ve got one of our guys, and we’re trying to sew up another. I just have to make sure he’s involved first. You know how it is. How are you guys?”

“Good,” Elizabeth said.

Hank was suspiciously quiet.

“Good, I’m glad to hear it. What have you been doing since I’ve been gone?”

“Gardening. I talked your father into making me a little victory garden in the backyard. It’s cute as a button. Can’t wait for the veggies to start growing and blooming.”

That was actually unbelievable, and Ava didn’t care if it showed in her voice. “You’re gardening, like an actual garden?”

“I’ve got a green thumb, little missy. I grew up with gardens. I happen to miss all that. I just haven’t had time to do it. Until now.” She cleared her throat.

“What about you, Dad?”

“Oh, you know. Same old, same old. Just working like always.”

“But you’re good, right? Nothing’s wrong?”

“Why would anything be wrong?”

“Because you just answered my question with a question. What’s going on?”

“Nothing, honey,” he said. “I’m just really tired. Had one too many nightcaps tonight. I have to be up early, too.”

“Mom?”

“Nothing is wrong, Ava. If it was, I would tell you. I promise.”

She was silent for a bit. What choice did she have but to believe them? Being clear across the country meant there was nothing she could do about it for the time anyway.

“Have you heard from Molly lately?”

“Yes, I talked to her yesterday, and her mother called just today. Molly is responding to physical therapy very well, but...”

“But what?” There was something wrong.

“She’s not doing so well with the mental therapy, Ava. She’s really struggling, and it’s taking a toll on Shelly. I do what I can, and she has nurses, volunteers who help her, too.”

“But it’s not enough, is it?”

“I don’t know. I don’t want you worrying about all this while you’re working out there. God knows, you need to keep your mind sharp and focused on your job so you can stay safe. I’m here, and you can rest assured that I am doing all I can for both of them. Even if I need to hire someone to be there with them around the clock, I will. Okay?”

“Thank you, Mom. Should I call her when I get a chance? I don’t know when that will be. We’ve been daylight until after midnight almost every day since I arrived. Some days are even longer. But I can find fifteen minutes maybe during the middle of the day to reach out.”

“I don’t know. She is very fragile right now, and the abruptness of a quick call like that might send her into an episode or agitate her. Maybe wait until you have at least half an hour or more. She gets... *clingy* sometimes, and doesn’t want to say goodbye.”

Ava’s heart contracted. “Okay. I’ll wait. Are you sure you two are okay?”

“We’re fine,” they chimed in unison. It reminded her of what Metford said about Mrs. Sharpton—Stepford-ish.

“It’s midnight out there, so I’m going to let you go. I’ve still got some work to do tonight.”

“Alright, kiddo. We love you,” they said together.

“I love you, too,” she answered.

So much for the call home alleviating some of her worry and anxiety. If anything, it justified it. She had every right to be worried about her mother and Molly. Maybe even Hank, too. He had been suspiciously quiet for a time.



CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Two days later, Ava was back at the office meeting with Garcia. The dark circles under his eyes had darkened by two shades, and the crow's feet at their corners were more defined. She wouldn't say a word about it because she didn't exactly look like a pageant queen herself with the bruises starting to show and the bags under her own eyes.

"Jason's awake. Quinn just called," he said.

The breath she had been holding without knowing it escaped in a whoosh of relief. "Is he okay, I mean... Will they have to do surgery? Can he walk, talk, all that?"

Garcia held up a hand. "Slow down. Yeah, he's fine as far as anyone can tell. The doctors are going to keep him a couple more days just to make sure, but his mental faculties are intact enough for him to be bitchy about being bedridden."

She chuckled. "He's okay, then."

Garcia nodded. "That being said, I want you to take the lead on the case."

"What? What about Quinn or Elliot?"

He shook his head. "They haven't been attached at the hip to Jason throughout the way you have been. They've been playing supporting roles just like the rest of the team. This Bianchi smells dirty to Jason. Me too. We have the texts. Even though that's just circumstantial, it was enough to put him on edge. He's threatening to lawyer up if Jason goes anywhere near him again, and I can't really blame him, but he'll talk to you."

"Probably not, but I'll try. I've wracked my brain on a way to arrest him for murder, but I can't come up with hard evidence no matter how hard I try. Not against him, anyway."

"He said he'd talk to you again. Said you were civil to him in your own way." He held up a hand again. "I don't know what that meant, but you must have talked to him the right way at least to a degree. See what you can do, what you can come up with. Kardum is still over at the precinct. See if he'll roll on Bianchi. Close this case. Get them both if they both had a part in the killings. If Bianchi is smuggling drugs, shut him down."

She smirked. "No pressure, huh?"

"Nah. Pressure is for wimps, right?" Garcia's lips twitched, and he almost smiled. Almost but not quite.

"Something like that."

He turned to his computer. It was her cue to get out of the room and get to work. Doing exactly what, she wasn't sure, but she got out.

Kardum was the easiest place to start. He was already locked up and would be looking for a lighter sentence. If he had half a brain, he knew he was in hot water for the assaults on the agents, not including everything else. Of course, the jury was out entirely on how much of a brain the man had in the first place.

At the station, she looked over his file in the interview room. Being face-to-face with him again was not high on her list of things to accomplish in life, but it was a must.

Her phone buzzed with a text notification from Agent Jasper.

*BLOOD ON POKER WAS A MATCH TO ANA JURIC'S BLOOD.
TESTING NOW TO VERIFY IT WAS POKER FROM KARDUM'S*

SET. BLOOD AND DNA ON BURNED CLOTHING ALSO A MATCH FOR ANA JURIC.

The smile was a knee-jerk reaction. She shot back a thank-you, and gripped her phone, silently hoping the other test would yield positive results before her meeting with Luka ended.

The door opened and Kardum waddled in with chains and cuffs. Her ribs ached, her lungs burned, and the bruises on her face throbbed at the sight of him.

He winked at her as he sat across the table from her and the officer attached the cuffs to a bar. No grabby rough stuff from him. He was practically immobilized. The worst he could do would be to shove his chair back and stand in a hunched stance. He couldn't even move the table as it was bolted to the concrete floor.

"Fancy seeing you here," he said. "How are your boyfriends? I daresay the one has a nasty headache."

Biting the inside of her jaw, Ava forced her temper down. "Mr. Kardum, you know you have a laundry list of charges against you right now, don't you?" She laid the first page on the table between them.

He glanced at it and shrugged. "I'm not denying I took my swings at the agents, but I was just protecting myself. I'm a foreigner, and they were attacking me unprovoked, and I didn't know they were FBI. They never announced themselves as such."

"And that will not stand up in court. You shot at us. More than once."

He blew air between his lips as if he had heard something ridiculous.

"In two different locations, under two different circumstances. It doesn't look good for you, Mr. Kardum. Doesn't look good at all." She laid the second page on the table. "Oh, and you're charged with murder as well as all these other charges."

"Murder? How? I was never charged with that."

"Oh, that's right. How silly of me. The evidence just got confirmed not five minutes ago. That's the funny thing: when you're already in jail, and we find more evidence for more crimes, we can keep tacking them onto your sheet here."

“What evidence? You have none.”

“Remember when you shot at me and Agent Ellis back at your house? You had just taken something out of the trunk of your car. You ran into your house with it. Remember that?”

He glared at her. The color drained from his face.

“We went into your house and searched it top to bottom because after you shot at us, we didn’t need that warrant anymore, Mr. Kardum. We found the clothes in the fireplace in the living room. I pulled them out and stomped the fire out with my own feet. Got a nice little burn just above my ankle for my trouble, but you know what? It was worth it.”

“So I burn clothes. They were mine. That isn’t illegal even in this country.” He jutted out his chin defiantly.

“No, it isn’t, but those clothes didn’t burn completely because of the blood on them. There was a lot of blood, too. Right around this area.” She moved her hand in a circular motion indicating her right side from shoulder to hip and covering most of her belly. “Must have been close when you hit her. Closer than we are right now, right?”

His face contorted. He wanted to say something, to bite back and put her in her place. It was in his eyes, but he knew better. Underneath the anger in his eyes, she glimpsed fear. Raw, unadulterated terror. He already suspected what she would say next, and he had no choice but to wait for her to say it.

“The blood and the DNA from the skull fragments on the shirt came back a match to Ana Juric.”

He shook his head twice and clamped his lips tight.

She nodded. “But it did. And that poker? Just ran it, too. Guess what?”

“No.” It was a short burst of sound that barely formed a word.

“Yes. The blood on it matched Ana’s as well. And we are betting that poker is the one that’s missing from the set in one of your upstairs bedrooms, Mr. Kardum.” She flipped her phone over and lightened the screen. “The results should be in before I leave here.”

He shook his head. Sweat ran down the side of his massive neck and stained the collar of his jumpsuit darker orange.

“You’re in a lot of trouble, Luka. We know about the drug smuggling and the human trafficking. Right now, we have agents tearing the whole show to the ground. It’s only a matter of time before he pins it all on you, and you know he’ll do it. You’ll be left holding the bag all alone unless you talk.” She would have agents tearing it all apart, if only Luka would give her one iota of a hint that she was right, that Ivana had been right.

He furrowed his brow. “What? Who are you speaking of?”

Okay, the confusion was genuine. What had she missed? Maybe he was bluffing.

“Mr. Bianchi. Your partner in all this,” she ventured, hoping she was calling his bluff.

Luka shut down. It was like watching one of the old television sets from the 1950s being turned off. It wasn’t instantaneous. Instead, the picture drew rapidly toward the center of the screen, growing smaller, until all that was left was that one bright light in the middle, which would eventually pop out of existence. That’s how Luka’s face looked right after she’d mentioned Bianchi.

If Luka was in with the Croatian Mob, had killed Ana Juric, and probably also Filip Baruch, he was not a man who frightened easily. Why did he shut down at the mention of Bianchi’s name? Was Bianchi so much worse than the Croatian Mob?

“You are willing to take all the blame for the entire drug smuggling and human trafficking through Bianchi’s wine business?” She shook her head and gathered the papers. “You two must have some kind of really special bond. I’ve heard of honor among thieves, but this takes the cake. You’ll go away to maximum security for life without parole if you’re lucky. Are you really willing to do that for him?”

“We are finished, Agent James. You are still a woman who does not know her place.”

She narrowed her eyes coldly. “And where is a woman’s place, Mr. Kardum? Being paraded across a platform and sold to the highest bidder? Barefoot and pregnant at home? In the kitchen? In the bedroom? Trust me, I’ve heard them all, so don’t be shy.”

He shook his head and looked at her with disdain. "We are finished talking."

Out of the blue, a mental image flashed through her mind of Filip after his death. It was a closeup of his seriously messed-up face and that broken tooth peeking from under his top lip. Then it was gone and she was looking at Luka's right pinky knuckle. A faint cut was still apparent.

"Before I leave, I just want to let you know, I'm gunning for Filip's murder being added to this list next."

"But Filip committed suicide, no?"

"And we never told you that. We only told you that he was dead."

He shrugged. "So I guessed. He was a very sad drunk with nothing left to live for. It was only a matter of time before he did something stupid."

She pointed to his pinky. "And you did something stupid, too. Left your DNA on his broken tooth. I'm betting my retirement on it. I'm also betting your blood or your prints will be on him elsewhere, and on the gun or the bullets. How am I doing so far? You know, for a woman who doesn't know her place?"

"Go to hell."

She gave a bark of dry laughter, closed the file, and got to her feet. "You're right. We're finished here. You don't have anything useful to help save your own ass, and I'm bored with you."

With her shoulders back and her head high, Ava strode from the room. She would rather die than give Luka the satisfaction of seeing her leave defeated.



CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Bianchi agreed to the meeting with Ava at the police station. He walked in with a suit jacket draped over his arm.

“You didn’t bring a lawyer, Mr. Bianchi,” she said.

“I assure you that he is on speed dial should I need him. I’m not here to play games, Agent James. I’m here because I want justice for my Ivana, and I want to clear my name of these horrible lies being spread about me and my business.”

“Fair enough. You are aware that we have Luka Kardum in custody?”

He pointed at her face. “I take it he is the one responsible for those bruises?”

“And a lot more, I’m afraid.”

He nodded. “Then he is where he needs to be. Is he charged with the drug smuggling? Is my name cleared?”

“He’s not talking at all. The funniest thing happened, actually. I mentioned your name after I told him he was being charged with Ana Juric’s murder, and he just completely shut down. Wouldn’t say

another word. And he acted really shocked that I brought you up at all. Why is that, Mr. Bianchi?"

"Because he knows I have nothing to do with any of this. He is as shocked as I am that you think I do, perhaps."

She shook her head. "I don't know. We know he killed Ana, and I'm sure he killed Filip, but you? I'm just not sure what part you play in all this. See, I still don't know who killed Ivana or why. And I still don't know if there's truth to the smuggling and trafficking she was so intent on believing."

"I told you to go through everything, didn't I?"

"And there is a team working on that right now. We have agents checking out every angle of your distribution." Ashton was working his computer magic with Finley on that part of the case, but they had only been on it for a couple days. She wanted answers sooner.

He harrumphed. "Good. They will tell you I am clean."

"We are sure enough that the drugs were being funneled through your distribution channels that we got the clearance to do whatever we need to find out exactly how and for how long it's been going on. How could you not know something like that?"

He threw his hands up in exasperation. "Because Luka is my distributions overseer. He manages *all* of my distributions. Does the top boss of your FBI know what goes on in the mail room of this building every day?"

"Of course not."

"There. Exactly. The top boss doesn't know what goes on in most of his company most of the time. He hires people he trusts to manage departments for him, and those managers hire workers, and it continues down the line. If there is no problem, there is no reason to look into the department. And there have been no problems with my business."

"Your girlfriend was convinced that you knew about it and that you were involved. I can't dismiss those messages on your phone, Mr. Bianchi. No matter how much you deny your involvement, the fact remains that she went to that storage building because of the messages you sent her, and that's where she was murdered."

“Someone else sent them. What if someone took my phone and sent the messages to lure her there for the purpose of killing her?”

Something tickled at her brain. It was right in front of her. Why would someone go to that kind of trouble? Why would someone risk being caught red-handed taking and then replacing Bianchi’s phone in his jacket?

“I don’t know why, but I’m listening,” she said.

“You don’t see what’s right in front of you. You are in too deep with all the moving parts of the case. You listened to the recording?”

“Several times more than necessary, yes.”

“Who would have motive to kill Ivana? Filip?”

“Kardum,” she said. Surely, Bianchi got to see the lightbulb go on over her head in that moment. “But you were implicated on the recording, too. If he let you hear the recording, you just as easily could have killed Ivana and then had him kill Filip and Ana.”

“But I didn’t because I wasn’t involved, and I knew nothing about what Luka and Filip were doing. It was behind my back. I considered Filip a very close friend, God help me, I did. I was crushed when I learned of his passing. But that recording proved that he didn’t have the same feelings toward me. I trusted Luka with my business, with my top clients. He was a friend, I believed. But now I believe he might have killed my Ivana, and because of that I hope to never see him again, or I will spend the rest of my life in prison.”

“Please don’t make threats on anyone’s life while you are here,” Ava said. “We tend to take such things very seriously.”

“Test the inside of my jacket pocket for DNA. Test my phone for it, too. There should be no one else’s DNA on either of them but mine. But if I’m right, and someone did take it from my jacket pocket, it is possible that they left their DNA inside the pocket, on the phone around the ports or buttons, I don’t know. Just test it all.” He put the jacket on the table and slid it across to her. “And the barrel where my Ivana was found... Check it for DNA on the inside around the rim. There is a metal band that secures the lid in place. Check under it thoroughly. It is not uncommon for it to be rough and workers get scraped often by it. Maybe the killer also did when he closed it.”

Tears shone in his eyes, and his lower lip quivered. If the dam broke, it was going to be an ugly cry.

Ava nodded and stood. "Thank you, Mr. Bianchi. I'll let you know what we find out. Until then, I have to tell you not to get the urge to travel. Stay close, or you'll be on the naughty list so quick it'll make your head spin."

"I'll be at home should you require me."

Ava called for forensics and went back to the office to speak with the team. Running any sort of DNA test wasn't quick, but it was all they had to work with. After doling out assignments, she went to Garcia's office to give him an update for the day.

"No hard evidence still?"

"Just that the blood all came back to match Ana Juric. Kardum is the killer, so he's not going anywhere while we continue investigating."

"Good work on having Filip's tooth tested for Kardum's DNA."

"Thank you, sir."

"So," he said, raising his hands palm-up and then dropping them. "I guess we work with a hope and a prayer instead of hard evidence and a confession for now."

"I'll do my level best to change that, sir."

"I know you will, James. Sal told me a lot about you. Her word is good as gold with me. Now, go get us some evidence."

"Yes, sir."

With persistence, the DNA testing was finished and the results were returned in eight days. No one in the lab was a fan of Ava's, but the job was done.



CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Jason stood with Metford and Garcia. It was good to see Jason back in action. Metford was still using a crutch and would be for another week when he could transition to a cane.

“You sure you don’t want a shot at him?” Ava asked Jason.

“Nope. You earned it. Besides, I think it will sting worse coming from you somehow.”

Metford laughed. “You know it will.” He looked at Garcia. “She’s a woman who doesn’t know her place apparently.”

“Yeah, right. Go show him where your place is,” Garcia said.

Kardum sat at the table as before. He looked at her as if she were the most insignificant speck of dust in the universe and then averted his gaze to his knee. He bothered with a piece of lint there as if it were more important than anything she had to say.

“Mr. Kardum.”

He grunted in response but didn’t make eye contact.

“Do you remember me telling you about Filip’s broken tooth?”

He looked up sharply.

“Ah, thought that might get your attention.”

“So what? We had a disagreement and we were both drinking. He had a loud mouth, and I shut it for him. Men fight in our country. It’s what we do. We settle disagreements.”

“So you’re changing your story?”

“I am not. I didn’t kill him. Only had a fight with him.” One side of his mouth curved into a slimy self-satisfied grin.

“That’s not the only place we found your DNA, though.” She pushed the report toward him. “Says right there that it was behind the trigger, in the housing, and even on the bullets.” She pulled the paper back before he could finish looking at it. “There’s another murder charge added to your ever-growing list of charges. Why’d you do it?”

He thumped back in his chair and stared at her blankly.

“Cat got your tongue. It’s understandable. You’ve got a lot on your plate. I’m getting ready to add some more to it, too. The drug smuggling. Jeez, you were smart about that. Genius, really, but we have some guys who are even smarter, and they are still digging up trash to pile on you. Dirty, dirty, dirty. I daresay the Croatian Mob is going to do more than blackball you when they find out. You think they have connections in the US prison system?” She gave him a contemplative look.

“Are you done?”

“Oh, no, Mr. Kardum. Not just yet. There’s a little more here. Like your fingerprints being found on the inside of the metal band that held the lid on the barrel containing Princess Ivana Baruch’s body. Now, before you say that’s because you worked there, we already checked. You never worked a single day anywhere near those storage barrels. You worked with finished product only. It was already in the final packaging and ready to be shipped.”

“It was an accident. She was there, and I was walking through the darkness. I saw her phone light and asked if she was okay. She was tipsy, so I went in to see if I could help her back to the house.”

Ava pulled up the recording on her phone and pressed play while he was talking. At the sound of Ivana’s voice, he paled and shut up. When the recording ended, she put the phone back in her pocket.

“It wasn’t happenstance that you were there and she was there, Mr. Kardum.” She produced the printout of the text messages for him. “Those really smart guys I was telling you about? They found that recording on your laptop and these messages on Leonardo Bianchi’s phone. They had been deleted, of course, but our guys found them anyway. And you sent them, didn’t you? You knew the only way to get her to that storage building alone is if she thought you were her fiancé.”

“I just wanted to talk some sense into her,” he said. His voice dropped an octave. “All she had to do was keep her mouth shut a little while longer, and everything would have come to its natural conclusion. Her father’s debt would have been repaid. He would have been safe. All I wanted to do was explain the situation to her. Make her understand. It was still an accident.”

“I suppose Ana was an accident, too. And so was Filip. And the attempted murder of three federal agents. You are never getting out of prison.”

“I was used by the Croatian Mob. I was set up. Ivana was an accident. If you can help get me a reduced sentence, I will give you the entire story and many more people to arrest.”

She gathered the papers and put them back in the folder.

“Mr. Kardum, I wouldn’t give you a drink of water if your guts were on fire.”

His expression went from one of dramatic pleading to icy cold in two seconds flat. It reminded Ava of a snake readying to strike its prey. “It was no lie. It was an accident. I didn’t mean to kill her there.” He leaned forward and lowered his voice. “I meant to kidnap her, have a little fun with her first, and then dispose of her corpse out in the middle of nowhere. That is the truth.” He sat back in his chair. “Satisfied, bitch?”

Grinning broadly, Ava walked out of the room without another word. She was very satisfied.



CHAPTER FORTY

The next day, Ava met with her team in the lobby. The murder case was closed. Their part was over, and they had one day before heading back home. Home never sounded so good. There was a dinner party to plan for Molly and Elizabeth, and cookouts to look forward to.

Metford held out his phone. “Elliot says everybody is hanging at the beach for the day. We’re going to play volleyball and drink margaritas in the sand, apparently.”

“You are going to play volleyball?” Santos asked, laughing. “Over here ain’t going to be playing nothing but the radio,” she told Dane, who snorted in laughter.

“I have a crutch and I’m not afraid to use it, Santos. Those migraines will be the least of your worries today.”

“Oh, Mettie, you know I ain’t spending the day on a beach out in the blazing sun. I’ll have it made in the shade drinking pina coladas with some fine man.”

“She means she’ll be lucky to be sucking on coconut water with a beach bum,” Metford said.

Everyone laughed including Santos.

Spirits were high, and the day was fine.

Jason didn't play volleyball. He opted to sit on the sidelines with Metford and yell insults at everyone. Santos let them have their fun while she found a bar with a nice deep shaded area where she could sit and drink pina coladas without the worry of triggering a migraine.

The restaurant where they had lunch was so close to the beach that the floor was covered with sand and there was a designated area at the front for people to prop their surfboards.

As the sun dipped into the water and the moon rose, the group was still together. The company was great. It was the first time in forever that Ava had truly let her hair down.

They did a pub crawl, and by midnight, they were all too drunk to do more, although none of them wanted to admit it or show it.

"We have a seven o'clock flight in the morning," Ava told Jason. "We need to get back to the hotel. It's been a great day. Thank you."

He smiled. It was genuine. "Thank you. For everything. I've... enjoyed working with you."

"God, he *never* says that to any of us," Quinn said as she stumbled past them laughing.

"That's because you're all monumental pains in my ass on a regular basis."

"And there it is," Finley said. "He just implied that you were a monumental pain in his ass but not regularly." Finley patted her shoulder and followed Quinn to a bench to wait for an Uber.

"If you ever need us again, just call. Or, have Garcia call Sal," Ava giggled and immediately felt like an idiot.

"I'll have my people call your people," Jason said.

"That works."

"You suck at goodbyes almost as much as I do," he teased.

She laughed self-consciously. "Alright. Goodbye. It was great working with you, and thanks for everything."

"Same here," he said.

He really did suck at goodbyes.

She walked to the rideshare waiting for her. Dane and Santos were already in it. Metford and Ashton's ride pulled up as she closed

her door and told the driver she was ready.

The ride back to the hotel and getting ready for bed went by in just a blur. The next morning, the only thing that stood out was her throbbing head and her rolling stomach as the crew met at the loaner SUV.

Ava looked at each of them. They looked like a UFC cagefight losers club. “Guess I’m driving?”

The mumble of agreement swept through them. She forced herself to seem better than she actually was. They didn’t need to see just how hungover she was. She was supposed to be in charge, after all.

Once the plane took off, she wanted to close her eyes, but the world rolled and her stomach did nasty little lurches when she did. The team was the quietest she had ever heard. They were in worse shape than she was. If Sal saw them like that, she would tear them all new ones.

“Hey, listen up guys,” she said. “Yesterday was an exception, not a rule, okay? There was a little too much drinking going on, and we can’t be acting like that. What if a call had come in? What if there had been an emergency? Everyone was drunk off their rockers. Can’t do that again. Got it?”

They all nodded and groaned their agreement.

Leaving them like that felt hypocritical. She couldn’t do it.

“But it was pretty fun, too.”

Everyone laughed at that and the tension was defused. “We’re all guilty. Just don’t let Sal see you in this shape or there will be hell to pay.”

Metford chuckled. “And she’d have your head on a silver platter.”

She grinned. “At least it wouldn’t be hurting.”

As nice as California was, and as thankful as she was for the opportunity to work with the San Francisco team, Ava was even more thankful to get back home. Home, where her family was, where there were familiar faces and streets, and where she knew how to navigate the social circles.

It was sad to think Ivana would never get to experience that feeling of going home again. Ava wouldn’t forget her ever. Even

though Ava never knew the last Croatian princess, the woman had changed the world and made a huge impact on thousands of lives if not hundreds of thousands, including Ava's. She had been one of the truly good ones, a light of goodness in a world of so much darkness. She didn't deserve what had happened to her, how her life had been upended by the men she'd trusted and loved. And now she would live on as a smile and a memory in the hearts of her fans everywhere.

Ava pulled out her phone and stared at the woman's profile. She clicked 'Follow.'



EPILOGUE

After five and a half hours in the stuffy jetliner and cold airplane food doing nothing good for their hangovers, Ava and the team were completely worn out by the time they landed just past seven in the evening. They mumbled parting words to each other as they each headed to Ubers or taxis—none of them were up to driving a rental car.

While the entire California experience had been one Ava would keep at the forefront of her memories for a long time to come, it was also good to see familiar landmarks again. It didn't matter that it had recently been drizzling rain and the sky was heavy with dark clouds. It didn't matter that there were no grand vineyard estates with sweeping vistas to marvel at and be envious of.

Fairhaven was home, and that was where she wanted to be. Comfortable. Quiet. Still. A place where she could kick off her shoes and not worry about what might have been left in the fibers of the carpet by the last tenants as she did at the hotel. A place where she could crawl between the crisp, cool, and very clean sheets of her

bed and not worry if there might be ick on them from some couple's rendezvous the previous day.

Yes, California was warm and sunny and vibrant. As full of life and energy as it was, she still preferred the comfort and security of her own home. For better or worse.

Working with the San Francisco team had been the highlight of the experience for her, though she wasn't sure she liked what that said about her as a person. Workaholic? Perhaps. Worse? Probably.

The highlight for Metford, of course, had been the bars, the nightlife he didn't get to participate in near enough, and the beautiful women. He had smiled more in California than she had ever seen. He had also gone around singing bits and pieces of the Katy Perry song "California Girls." It didn't bother him that he couldn't carry a tune if it had handles on it.

Of the whole team, he had probably enjoyed the trip the most, with Ashton coming in second place. Ashton enjoyed things in a much tamer fashion, though, so it was harder to tell. He was fascinated by all the technology in the office, and Ava was certain he had a laundry list of suggestions to take to Sal and others at the Bureau on Monday.

Dane was just Dane. Did she have fun? Did she just do her job and wait to go home? It was hard to tell with her, too. She had already been to so many places during her tenure with the Bureau that she didn't get excited about much. That was good. It was good to have someone like her on the team. She helped balance out Metford's over-the-top excitement, and she was level-headed, well-grounded. It helped keep the team focused on their tasks while Ava had been away with Jason during the investigation.

Santos, on the other hand, had loathed the sunny state. It wreaked havoc on her migraine condition, and she'd spent ninety percent of her time there trying to prevent debilitating headaches. She had slipped from her normal give'em-hell attitude to being withdrawn and complaining unless she was on-task—and then, she was mostly silent.

After a shower, Ava looked out the kitchen window. It was dark. The clock said it was after nine, but it didn't feel that late. She was

tired from the plane, but sleep would be an issue for sure. Hopefully, Sunday would bring some relief from the jetlag and Monday would be at least partially normal for her and the team.

It was too late to run to the store, and for once, she didn't want to dump beef stew from a can into a pot for dinner. "Residue from Peggy Sue's?" she snickered to herself as she closed the cabinet.

She ordered a cheeseburger and fries from a diner in town that didn't close until eleven and offered delivery. She happily paid too much for the meal to keep from having to go out, and when it arrived, she took it to the kitchen as she thought about the excellent food at Peggy Sue's American Roadside Diner in San Francisco. And about Jason Ellis. Of course.

Unable to resist, she tuned Spotify to a 1950s station and sat to enjoy her food. One bite into the burger, her phone rang. Taking a deep breath to stave off the exasperation, she stood and walked to the counter where she'd left the phone. It continued to ring. She didn't want to turn it over and see who was calling. She wanted to eat and rest her mind for a while. Get lost in the memory of that cute little throwback diner on the other side of the country. Just for a few minutes. But the phone continued to ring, insisting that she pay attention to it.

When she finally did flip it over, her eyes went wide. It was as if thinking about Jason Ellis had conjured him out of thin air.

"Hey, Jason," she said a bit nervously. Well, confusedly would probably be more accurate. She couldn't complain that he was calling, though. She hid a grin and put it on speaker.

"Ava? Did you make it home okay?"

His tone was just as it had been in person—without much inflection at all. What little bit of nuanced inflection there was, she could hear easier over the phone without all the distractions.

"Yeah, just fine. Some prison-worthy food and a headache the size of Texas that lasted most of the day, but otherwise, I'm good. What's up?"

"Just getting back out to work. That's why I called. Did you put the interviews with the catering company employees in with the other interviews?"

Ava took a bite and thought about it. “Yes. I think so. I know the electronic files are where they should be, but the hardcopies might be in the box we lugged to your apartment and every place we went. I think I filed all that in the proper places, but I might have missed those.”

“I can’t access the computer files. The system went down this morning and the techs are installing something new. I haven’t looked through the box yet. Do you remember where we put it last by any chance?”

Ava laughed lightly. “What? You can’t find something? You misplaced something?”

“Technically, I didn’t misplace it. I believe *you* were the last one in possession of said box, hence the reason *I* can’t seem to locate it.”

“Are you insinuating that I am not organized, or that I am prone to misplacing and losing important things?” She feigned indignity. “I’m just playing. I hope nothing is wrong with the case.”

“No, nothing’s wrong with it. In fact, there was a whole set of cases opened because of this one. Luka Kardum’s network reached far and wide. He was raking in money from his and Filip’s endeavor, but while you and I were out celebrating closing the case, an over-achieving agent hoping for a spot on my team dug up more dirt on our man. Kardum had a network of distributors that took the drugs as far north as Washington state and as far south as Mexico. From the looks of it, he also had runners taking the crap through several states eastward all the way to the Mississippi River.”

A chill danced over Ava’s skin at the mention of the river. It conjured immediate flashbacks of all the horrible things she had seen, heard, and endured during her work to find her mother and save Molly. The burger didn’t look so good anymore.

“Is that why you need the interviews?” She couldn’t fit the pieces together and make the logic work, but figured it was due to her slight hangover and sudden, unwanted intrusion of traumatic thoughts.

“No. I need those because one of the waitresses at that catering company was murdered, and the case landed on my desk.”

“Why would a run-of-the-mill murder land on your desk? Not that it isn’t terrible; it is.” She sighed. “We just talked to them. Who was

it?" Did the world need to be so bloodthirsty all the time? Couldn't it just give it a rest for a while?

"Well, for starters, it wasn't just a run-of-the-mill murder. It was pretty brutal. She was strangled, stabbed repeatedly, and *after* the murder, it was like the killer posed her up like a... like some sort of 1950s housewife."

Ava frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Her hair had been dyed, curled, set or whatever, her makeup was done, and she was dressed in the clothes of the era. But that wasn't the outfit she was murdered in, and the stuff was applied over the dried blood on her face."

"Jesus," Ava whispered.

"Strangest thing. And you were the one who spoke to this particular waitress. I was talking to Noah, the owner, in the office at the time. That's why I need to see the interview you did with her."

"Who was it? I talked to a few of them," Ava said.

"Roxy Underwood."

"Oh," Ava muttered, her heart sinking.

"Do you remember her?"

"Yeah, I do. She was so cool. Really energetic and talkative. Had a daughter, too, if I'm not mistaken."

"Three years old. Sad as everything."

Ava's heart twisted at the thought of that little girl growing up without her mother. The world was tough, but without a mother it would be so much worse. "Um. That box should be in your office. Under the chair I used."

Roxy had been the exact opposite of a 1950s housewife. She had been vibrant, lively, outspoken, independent, and never would have demurred to a man for any reason. She was punk. She was rock. She was unique.

She was *free*.

So, apparently the world did need to be so damn bloodthirsty all the time, and it couldn't give it a rest for any amount of time.

"So, you do remember where you left it." He gave a short, dry chuckle.

“Just popped into my head where I set it on the last day. There are two chairs and three boxes, but you should be able to find it pretty easily. You are a detective kind of guy, right?” She grinned, but her heart wasn’t into the playful banter and no laugh came out to accompany the grin he couldn’t see.

“I’ll do my best. I have to go. Talk again soon?”

“Sure,” she said, not knowing how to answer.

They hung up, and Ava stared at her burger without an appetite. All she wanted was a peaceful night’s sleep.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Dear Reader,

I am thrilled to share with you the first installment of the second season of the Ava James FBI Mystery series, *Murder in the Moonlight!* You eagerly awaited joining Ava and the team on their new adventures and challenges, and I hope that it lived up to your expectations. In this book, I really looked forward to the intriguing setup of a whodunit mystery. It was a departure from my usual mystery style, but I truly enjoyed writing it and I hope you found it just as captivating!

I would also like to take a moment to ask for your help in keeping the Ava James' series alive. As an indie author, your reviews and support are vital in keeping the series going. If you could take a moment to leave a review for *Murder in the Moonlight*, I would be enormously grateful. Your feedback allows me to continue to grow and improve as an author, and it ensures that Ava and the team can keep solving mysteries and catching criminals.

While we await the next Ava James book, I invite you to experience the latest installment in the Emma Griffin® FBI Mystery Book, [*The Girl and the Deadly Secrets*](#). The book kicks off a new season in the series, offering an ideal entry point whether you have read the previous books or not. In this gripping season opener, Emma emerges from a lengthy coma, only to find herself in the midst of trouble once again. Xavier convinces Emma and the gang to join a charity organization he's involved with. Little do they know that their decision will unravel a sinister connection between a missing FBI agent, the charity organization, and the brutal murders of women within the group.

Thank you for your support and for joining me on this journey. Ava and the team are counting on you, and I can't wait to see where our adventures take us next.

Yours,

A.J. Rivers

P.S. If for some reason you didn't like this book or found typos or other errors, please let me know personally. I do my best to read and respond to every email at <mailto:aj@riversthillers.com>

P.P.S. If you would like to stay up-to-date with me and my latest releases I invite you to visit my Linktree page at www.linktr.ee/a.j.rivers to subscribe to my newsletter and receive a free copy of my book, Edge of the Woods. You can also follow me on my social media accounts for behind-the-scenes glimpses and sneak peeks of my upcoming projects, or even sign up for text notifications. I can't wait to connect with you!

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