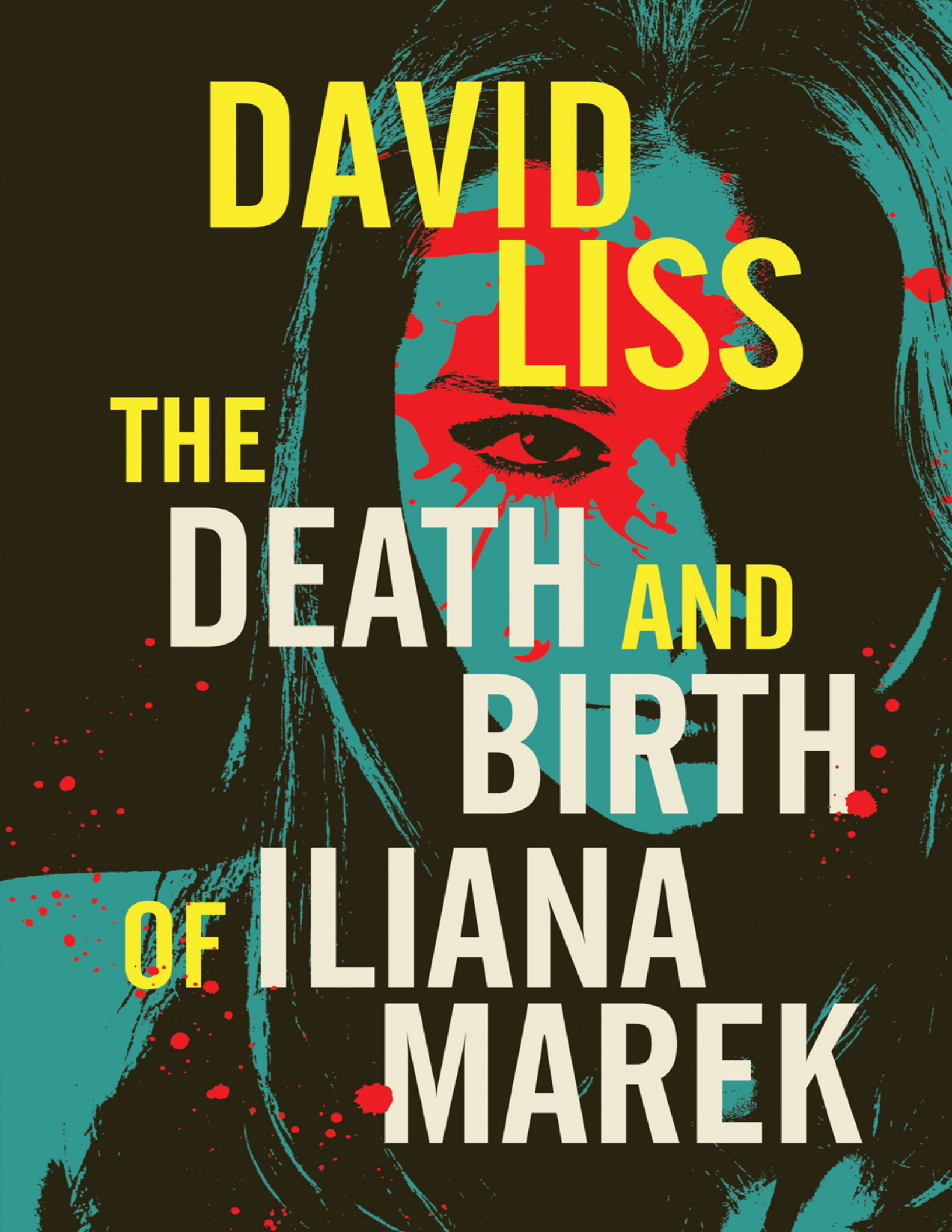

DAVID LISS
THE DEATH AND BIRTH OF ILIANA MAREK

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"In his new novel, David Liss not only plays enchantingly with the best of the crime-noir conventions, but he delves smartly into the enduring theme of serious literature—the universal quest for self, for identity. *The Death and Birth of Iliana Marek* is both narratively compelling and richly thought-provoking."
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For Claudia, who has more than a little Iliana in her.

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Prologue

There was that familiar confusion. She had no idea what to do. Very little frightened her, but she disliked not knowing how to act. Social cues and niceties did not come easily to her, and it was her experience that men could find defensive behavior provoking.

Someone was walking behind her, his pace slightly faster than her own. Without turning, she knew he was male, perhaps in his twenties. Based on his gait, his respiration, and the tinge of ammonia in the air, she suspected he was a heavy meth user. That did not necessarily make him dangerous, but it was a sure sign he'd made bad choices.

He was perhaps ten feet back and closing the distance. This stretch of road didn't appear to be getting much action mid-afternoon. A few minutes back she'd passed an auto mechanic, but now there were no homes or businesses, just grass and sandy soil and, a little farther beyond, a curtain of dogwood and pine. If the man tried something, she'd deal with him. Having no witnesses around made things less complicated.

She wished she knew the best way to avoid a confrontation. It was so confusing. Did she quicken her pace to stay ahead of him or slow down to let him pass? She wanted only to keep the situation neutral and trivial.

She'd chosen to make herself unattractive to minimize interaction with strangers, but that didn't always make a difference. If he assaulted her, she could break his wrist easily enough. If his behavior warranted, she could snap his neck. She did not think much of people who initiated violence without good reason. She did not know why she felt this way, but she always had.

The thing was, she couldn't be absolutely certain there would be no witnesses. If there were, that meant cops and attention, two things she wanted to avoid. She was finally here, on the outskirts of Tylor, and she did not want complications. She did not want to take the time to create a new disguise. She wanted to walk into town unknown and invisible and anonymous.

It would be easy to stay ahead of the man. If he started to run, she could outrun him. But she did not want to run all the way to town. Eventually, she would come to a populated area or a car would pass, and someone would see her, a young woman, fleeing from a man in pursuit. That would be worse than killing him quietly here, and so she slowed to let him pass.

She felt him close the gap, so she moved toward the side to give him room, a clear invitation to keep walking, to get out of her life. It was a gift,

if he was wise enough to accept it. He did not accept it. He stepped away from the road as well, positioning himself outside her peripheral vision.

A confrontation, then. She began to turn when she heard a pop and then a buzz, snapping like an insect zapper. She had never before encountered a taser. She'd never been attacked with one nor used one—not that she could recall—but she knew what it was instantly, just as she knew she had waited too long. Hoping for peace hadn't prevented violence. Perhaps there was a lesson there, but she would have to reflect on it later. The taser was already in contact with her back.

There was pain, but pain was meaningless. More significantly, she could not control her muscles. She could not breathe. It was a moment of utter helplessness, and it infuriated her, though she was not yet afraid. She fell hard, striking her head against the earth. He might have eased her to the ground, but he did not think to or did not have the strength or simply did not care.

It won't last long, she thought. I will regain control faster than he thinks. I am in an undesirable situation, but I am not in danger.

Unless there were witnesses. Unless there were cops. She could not risk the police getting involved.

She heard a vehicle speed toward them and then stop. A car door opened, and then two more doors. It was a van, and the driver was helping

her attacker, lifting her into the back. They handled her roughly and quickly, as though she were cargo. They zip-tied her hands together behind her back and let her drop to the filthy metal floor. The interior smelled of piss and puke. The doors closed. The van began to move.

So did she. The effects of the taser were already fading. Her muscles felt sluggish, but she could compensate for that. She could ignore the soreness and overcome the cramping. None of these things mattered. She only cared about getting away without attracting attention.

She could wait until they arrived wherever they intended to take her. That might offer her the best chance of escaping without leaving witnesses. She could not endure the thought of witnesses. There was that time in South Carolina, a couple of weeks earlier, when a pair of polite young men, wearing suits and ties and looking absolutely harmless, offered her a ride. Once she was in the car, they told her they needed to make a quick stop and drove her to a cabin. As soon as they turned off the main road, they let their polite and harmless demeanors fall away. They were predators and she was prey. They believed the results a foregone conclusion. Maybe she'd suspected what they were when she climbed into the back of their car. Maybe she wanted to see for herself.

All their plans, along with every plan they would ever make, ended in that dirt driveway, but after she'd cleaned up, she inspected the inside of the

cabin. There were cameras and costumes and a weird, oversized dollhouse aesthetic. They'd intended to record their crimes, possibly distribute recordings on the internet where anyone could see her. Could she be recognized? She'd already changed her appearance several times, but she did not know if that mattered. Maybe there were signs, for those who knew to look.

Now, she shifted silently against the sticky van floor. There could be cameras where she was going, and she could not risk exposure. She saw no advantage in postponing the confrontation until they reached their own turf.

She groaned to attract their attention, and when they glanced back, she rolled slightly but then fell motionless again. She did not want them to consider the sound of her moving alarming. Let them think she was still dazed and weak.

"She's waking up," one of them said. "Iliana told me she'd be out longer."

"Awake or asleep, it don't matter," the other answered. "Let's just get this done."

"I thought she was supposed to be pretty," the first one said. "She's kind of horse-faced, don't you think?"

"Maybe Iliana likes horse-faced," the driver said. "Who gives a fuck?"

She waited a moment until their attention was diverted, and then it was time. Raising her arms to their maximum extension, she then slammed them back toward her body, pulling the wrists apart as she did so. As she'd hoped, the momentum and torque snapped one of the cuffs at the locking mechanism, their weakest point. She had no idea how she'd known this would work, but her intuition in these matters had proved trustworthy.

She now had a full second to examine her abductors and properly assess the threat. They were young men, perhaps in their mid-to-late twenties. The one in the passenger seat, the man who had tased her, had very straight brown hair that fell most of the way down his back. The driver had a baseball cap pulled low over what appeared to be a buzz cut. Both were thin and wore T-shirts and jeans. Neither wore a mask, which meant they did not care if she saw their faces.

Did they know who they had taken? It seemed unlikely. How could they? Would someone who knew her secrets send two druggies to abduct her? That defied logic. It was a crime of opportunity, then, like all the violence she had already faced. A young woman alone at a rest stop, in a deserted parking lot, by the side of the road. To some, this was a target too tempting to resist.

No, that didn't quite make sense, because these two had planned their attack. They had a scheme requiring coordination and timing. Perhaps they

had passed her going the other way and decided to act. She shook off questions that did not matter right now. All that mattered was dealing with the two men and escaping. If she had the chance to question them, she would do so.

The long-haired meth addict in the passenger seat turned around again. His eyes went wide as he saw her kneeling upright, her hands free.

“Shit,” he said.

It was his last word. She lunged forward, took his head in both hands, and snapped it sharply to her left. She heard bones crack, and his body went limp.

She had hoped the driver would slam on the brakes. Depending on where they stopped, she could either question him and kill him, or simply kill him and escape. She had not counted on his irrational response upon seeing his partner killed. He yanked the wheel out of panic or confusion or stupidity. She knew instantly that the outcome would be bad and prepared herself to ignore more pain.

She was aware of everything, but time did not seem to slow. Rather, everything happened quickly, in a swirling rush of images and sensations. She was propelled against the side of the van, striking her head. An instant later, she was on her back as the van went airborne. The impact, she knew, would be extremely unpleasant.

They landed with a terrible screaming of metal. Hot air rushed inside. She smelled oil and shit and blood. Another roll propelled her toward the side of the cargo area, which was torn and mutilated, partially ripped away from the main body of the vehicle. A sheet of metal was bent to face her, undulating like a terrible sea. She twisted violently in midair to protect herself above the shoulders. She could survive a great deal of injury, but there was no coming back from a beheading. She yanked and stretched herself, to keep anything vital from the deadly protrusion, but she couldn't avoid it entirely. It caught her left arm, severing it just above the elbow. Her head slammed against the side of the van, and she spat three teeth into her remaining hand.

She couldn't risk another duel with the sharp metal. Using her legs and shoulders, she wedged herself between the two sides at points where the frame remained intact. *If this had occurred to me sooner*, she thought, *I'd still have two arms and all my teeth.* Somewhere there was pain and weakness, but she would not let these things distract her. She was aware of her blood, of her exposed bone, but she opted not to care. That was for later. Now was about survival.

They rolled and rolled again, and a third time, this one more tentative and sluggish. The van was upside down, and rocked slightly, but it had stopped. She smelled gasoline, and she knew she only had moments.

The driver was dead, his forehead caved in. There would be no interrogation. With her remaining hand, she quickly patted him down and then the passenger, who was still in his seat. The meth-heads, much to her surprise, wore their seatbelts.

Neither appeared to carry any kind of identification. No wallets, no licenses. Maybe if she had time to search more thoroughly, she would find something, but she had to go. She quickly checked the glove compartment for insurance or registration information, but it was empty.

It would be good to know who had abducted her, but she was unlikely to find answers here. There would be fewer still when the police arrived, which they absolutely would, and soon.

She opened the rear door and saw luck or fate had favored her. The van had rolled away from the road and toward the trees. The rear door faced the woods, and was almost certainly obscured from the road. The accident seemed to have happened on a more traveled stretch than where she'd been taken, and she could hear cars stopping, doors slamming; in the distance someone shouted that they'd called 911. It was time to go.

She looked around and saw her arm. She could not leave it behind.

Grabbing it by the wrist, she leapt out of the van and ran into the thick growth of trees. She'd finally reached Tylor, but this was not how she'd wanted to make her entrance. Sometimes, she reflected as she hurried into

the overgrowth with her severed arm in tow, plans went awry. The important thing was to know how to adapt.

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***Marta Uresti**: You've spent more than two decades as one of Silicon Valley's most influential entrepreneurs. You created an extremely popular dating app, an office-space-sharing app, a financial system that has revolutionized how people spend money on the internet, and that's only scratching the surface. But now you're retired. I can't imagine you need to keep working, but are you really done innovating?*

***Gregory Meeks**: I never said I was retiring. I said I've retired from public life.*

***Uresti**: To Tylor, Florida. I suspect most of our viewers have never heard of Tylor, It's a bit isolated, isn't it? It's an hour from Tampa, the nearest major city. Your story of growing up in a working-class home in Boston is well known, so how did you choose Tylor?*

***Meeks**: Tylor has everything I need, but it's also quiet. It's a place where I can develop my next project without distractions.*

***Uresti**: What can you tell us about that next project?*

***Meeks**: For now, nothing. Except that it will change everything.*

—*Interview on* Marta Uresti's TechWeek, *nine years earlier*

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Chapter 1

DAN

Over at the Gas-M-Up, things were spiraling out of control.

I arrived an hour and a half before my scheduled shift, working without punching in to avoid arguments with my boss about overtime. Pierre was a no-show again, and Diego, who needed to take his grandmother to the doctor, couldn't wait it out. It was Friday, only a few hours before the rush. The limitless promise of the weekend loomed, and the people of Tylor, Florida prepared to surrender themselves to the purchasing of gas, beer, cigarettes, and lottery tickets. Even with two live registers, we could depend on long lines and impatient customers. Having only one register would be a disaster.

I waved off Diego, who was mid-customer, finished the transaction, and then called the missing employee. Imagine a guy named Pierre, and you might conjure up berets and accordion music. You'd be wrong. Instead, picture a community college kid whose face tattoos did little to conceal his acne. Pierre believed a work schedule to be a vague suggestion. When he did show up, he found himself overmatched by the complexities of operating the register, a frustration he vented by slipping out through the

back door mid-shift to vape weed. Working with Pierre was not ideal, but it was still marginally better than managing the Friday rush alone.

“Oh shit, Dan,” he mumbled when he picked up on the fifth ring. I’d clearly woken him. “Fuck, I forgot to tell Igor I quit. Let him know, okay?”

“Are you serious?” I kept my voice calm since Pierre dealt with conflict by vaping more weed.

“Yeah, sorry, man. I’m, I don’t know, not feeling the job.”

How was the routine of working the register and cleaning bathrooms not exactly what he had supposed? I’m not saying it was fulfilling, but beyond some unpleasant things I’ve found while unclogging the toilets, there were zero surprises. I hated the job, and I’d been doing it for seven years.

I struggled to come up with incentives and bribes, anything to change Pierre’s mind, but he’d already hung up. My next call was to the gas station’s owner.

Imagine a guy named Aleksei Egorov—nicknamed Igor behind his back—a Russian immigrant who owns multiple businesses in Central Florida. Whatever you’re thinking is probably spot-on.

Late-middle-aged with a bulging gut and a fringe of hair around the base of his otherwise bald skull? Check. Frustratingly thick accent? You bet. Short-tempered and vaguely menacing? Oh, yeah. I’d been working for

Igor since I left high school. He trusted me as much as he trusted anyone, which was not at all.

“Dan, what you do?” he shouted into the phone. “I make you assistant manager to have less problem. How do you not know when employee quits?”

“If he keeps it to himself, it remains a mystery until he takes me into his confidence.” I’d learned that if you push the boundaries of Igor’s English, he became self-conscious and backed off. Or he might fly into a rage. Over the phone, I was willing to roll the dice.

“So, what is it?” He sounded more subdued. My gamble had paid off. “You ask for help?”

“It’s the Friday after-work rush hour,” I reminded him. “We could be looking at a lot of lost revenue if lines are too long.”

I took the string of Russian cursing followed by the line going dead as a promise I would see him soon.

Igor showed up half an hour later, wearing a Gas-M-Up polo tucked into his jeans, a style that emphasized his huge gut, which he liked to swing around as though it were evidence of his prosperity. I guess he was doing something right. He’d arrived in this country twenty years before with five hundred dollars and permission to sleep in his cousin’s guest room for no

more than two months. Now he owned a half-dozen businesses around Tylor, including some that once belonged to my family.

For the next several hours, I would work in the fug of his cologne and under his dubious gaze, which suggested he expected to catch me pocketing money from the register or furtively slipping baggies of drugs to customers. That said, he knew his way around a register and would help me cycle through customers at a steady clip.

Igor began with a walkthrough of the store, making sure everything was in order. After a minute, he offered a half-nod of approval. It was as effusive as he got. Igor might unload on me when he needed a punching bag, but he knew I would be hard to replace. He also knew I didn't have any other options, so he felt no need to express his appreciation in the traditional form of increased pay.

Around 4:30, as lines began to form, I popped one of my new antianxiety pills. My therapist wanted to get me off alprazolam, which I leaned on pretty hard. I was game for experimenting, so with the new meds coursing through my system, I tried to lose myself in the routine of ringing up after-work tallboys and potato chips and hot dogs. The occasional soda spill required me to pop away from the semi-circular counter, but otherwise I was glued to my spot with hardly the opportunity to think about the passage of time. These were the moments when I was happiest.

The buzzing of my phone snapped me out of my flow. I had the ringer off, but I could feel the vibration of a quick barrage of texts. My social life was non-existent, and my parents weren't likely to text me unless it was an emergency, so between customers, I slipped my phone out of my pocket to have a look.

There were multiple messages from Benito, who knew better than to text during the Friday rush.

I need you to come to the observation tower urgent as soon as you get off work

Then, a minute later:

Seriously its important or I wouldn't ask

Then:

I need you here asap

It didn't sound like Benito, who was weirdly fastidious about punctuating his texts. I couldn't imagine what he'd be doing at the Observation Tower or why he'd want me there, today of all days.

"What is important more than job?" Igor gave me the side-eye as he provided change for a customer with a six-pack of Dr Pepper.

"I don't know." I was too distracted to deflect the sarcasm. "Something's going on."

He grunted but let it go. Igor couldn't let me use my phone during a rush without a snide comment, but after all these years he knew I wouldn't be engaging with anything personal if it weren't important.

Why? I texted.

Seconds later, I got: *not on the phone you need to get here trust me tell me you'll come*

I hadn't been to the Observation Tower in years. I'd hoped never to see it again, and I couldn't imagine why Benito needed me there *today*. Why would he want to put me through that? But he was my best friend—my only friend, really—and if he said it was urgent, if he said he needed me to do something, I would do it.

OK soon as I'm off work, I sent back.

I put my phone away and tried to get back into the zone, but the zone would not let me in. A couple more of the new pills did nothing despite putting me at double the max dosage.

There were plenty of places in Tylor I avoided, places where people would whisper and turn away in disgust or stare in fascination. Most places, really, but I had to make the occasional trip to the grocery store and the bank and the post office. The Observation Tower, a decrepit early twentieth-century landmark in the Kitchikuti Wildlife Management Area, was not one of them. The city had put up a fence long before I was born, but it had

fallen into disrepair, and no one much cared. There was no way to keep out kids looking to fool around or light up a blunt or dare each other to climb up to the tower's crumbling second level.

Back before everything fell apart, I'd slipped through holes in the fence plenty of times. I'd ventured through the main door, but I'd never had the nerve to test the rickety ladder.

The Observation Tower was a good half-mile hike from the nearest trailhead, and I'd heard that there were no longer any official trails, which meant getting there would be an exercise in stumbling through the brush and avoiding snakes while mosquitoes bled me dry.

Around 5:30, when the after-work rush was peaking, came another twist of the knife as Mike Kristic entered the store. The new meds were not up to facing the man who blamed me for his daughter's death.

Mr. Kristic wandered in every few weeks to buy a half gallon of milk or a bag of pretzel sticks—the most depressing of pretzel shapes. There was a Publix and another gas station closer to his house, but it wasn't the food that brought him to the Gas-M-Up.

I told myself it didn't matter. Even when I was the only person working, Mr. Kristic never caused trouble. Maybe he did it to punish

himself. Torturing me was a bonus.

Mr. Kristic shuffled into my line clutching a bottle of apple juice to his chest. I worked through the customers ahead of him, mumbling through my greetings, mis-keying the register, and presenting receipts with a shaking hand. I reached into my pocket and reassured myself with the presence of the bottle of useless meds.

It pained me how much Mr. Kristic had changed over the past seven years. His hair, previously full and dark, was now gray and receding in an unflattering pattern. Once meticulous about his appearance, he would wear casual slacks and expensive shirts meant to flatter an athletic build. Now he wore old jeans with a stained Rays T-shirt too big for his gaunt frame. He had the scruff of a man who hadn't shaved in four days, and his eyes were red behind his cloudy glasses.

I didn't intend to say anything, but retail is a Pavlovian business. I spoke out of pure instinct.

"Will that be all for you today?" I winced as the words came out.

"Will that be all for me?" he repeated. "*Today*." He gestured menacingly with the apple juice, but he made no move to let me scan the bottle.

A trickle of sweat dribbled down my side. Two more people had joined my line. Igor glanced over to try to figure out how I was fucking up

something so unfuckupable. I cycled through the coping mechanisms Trish had taught me. It's only a line at the Gas-M-Up. Ten minutes from now, this won't matter. Control what you can, and get through the rest.

The big biker-looking dude with an unkempt beard behind Mr. Kristic sensed something was up. He hoisted his suitcase of Coors like it was evidence of all the indignities he'd endured during the work week. "Let's move, asshole!"

"Sir, will there be anything else?" I asked Mr. Kristic, hoping to hurry him along.

"'Sir,'" he repeated. "Like you don't know me. Like everyone in this town doesn't know. They don't want to look me in the eye. But you stand there with your 'sir.' She chose you, and now you want to pretend she was nothing."

How could I tell him how much it hurt to speak to him? I'd apologized to him, in public, in court, in front of the news cameras, but that wasn't enough. It never could be. I knew that. He'd sued my family, and my parents lost almost everything. My future was destroyed. I had nothing left for him to take, but the books still remained unbalanced. They always would be.

The big guy with the Coors moved closer to the counter. "Jesus Christ, hurry your ass up!"

Igor looked over again. “What is problem?”

“Please, Mr. Kristic,” I said, my voice hardly above a whisper. I didn’t know what I was asking for.

“Today!” Mr. Kristic announced so every customer would hear. “Seven years since she died.” He pulled back the arm holding the apple juice and threw it into the cigarette case behind me. The juice bottle and the case were both plastic, so while there was a thunderous rattle and some furious bouncing, nothing broke. The bottle landed between the rows of customers, spun briefly, and then offered up a half-hearted and melancholy roll down the snack aisle.

“You!” Igor snapped at Mr. Kristic. “Go before I call cops.”

The last thing I wanted was for Mr. Kristic to be arrested. “Please, Mr. Egorov,” I began, but Igor’s cold stare shut me down.

It didn’t matter. Mr. Kristic had already turned to shuffle out. The big guy slammed his Coors suitcase onto the counter. I shrugged and half-smiled by way of apology, but he wasn’t having it.

“You fucking piece of shit,” he said to me. Then he pointed to the still-vibrating plastic case. “And get me a pack of Camel Lights.”

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[Blurred, stuttering image of the Observation Tower in fading light]

***Narrator**: The Observation Tower. Looming and gothic, fallen into ruin—it was once a picturesque attraction in Tylor's Kitchikuti Wildlife Management Area. A popular destination for picnickers and hikers. It also has a much darker history. According to authorities, dozens of people have climbed its crumbling stairs over the years for the sole purpose of contemplating suicide. At least nine followed through, hurling themselves into the abyss.*

Tormented beyond endurance by Dan Gibson, it must have proved an irresistible destination for a distraught teenager who believed she had no reason to live.

—From the online documentary *Social Media Murders*

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Chapter 2

“No more trouble from man while working,” Igor cautioned me.

It was seven o’clock, and I was on my way out the door. I’d broken my promise to myself not to pop any more of the new meds, but they weren’t doing anything, and the act of swallowing pills provided some comfort. Maybe the pills were placebos. That might be for the best since I was now at triple the max dose. There was about an hour of daylight left, and I intended to get to the Observation Tower and see what Benito needed before sunset.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Egorov,” I said. “I can’t control how other people behave.”

“You are lucky to have job,” he said. “I see good worker, and so I don’t care about past. But sometimes past grabs you and is not letting go.” He made a doublehanded grabbing motion, like he was strangling the air. “Is why I leave Russia, so I am with sympathy. But if people make trouble, is bad for business.”

Igor was never going to find anyone who would work as hard as I would for what he was willing to pay me. I, on the other hand, was never going to find someone else to give me a job. In seven years, I’d saved

nothing. I couldn't afford to move somewhere I wasn't notorious, even if such a place existed, which it did not. We were stuck with each other. Or so I thought.

"There is nephew who wants to learn business," Igor continued. "No experience, and English is not good, but he will work for less."

Since I was making minimum wage, working for less would be illegal.

"We have more trouble," Igor said, "I think of nephew."

He couldn't expect me to control Mr. Kristic. I wondered if Igor was merely laying the groundwork to make a move that would take away what little I'd been able to hold on to.

It should only have been a ten-minute drive to get to the Kitchikuti Wildlife Management Area, but there was an accident down the road from the highway—a bad one with firetrucks and EMS and the husk of a burned van that had flipped over, possibly several times, It rested upside down, with its charred nose pointing toward the road, its rear obscured by the cluster of trees behind it. The cops had set up a detour around Hibiscus Avenue. I texted Benito that I was held up in traffic.

After a minute I looked down at my phone to see if he'd responded when a honk blasted out. The driver behind me must have felt that the fraction of a second he'd allotted me to move had been squandered. He leaned on the horn as a cop waved me forward. It was Kyle Hilliard, who regarded me with a disgusted glare.

Why was the police chief's son directing traffic? Tylor had around nine thousand citizens and more than fifty police officers, which gave it one of the highest cop-to-citizen ratios in the country. I'd looked it up. That meant there were always plenty of low-level grunts to do the work.

It took me another fifteen minutes to get through the detour and pull into the parking lot. The signs said the Kitchikuti was open until an hour and a half after dark. I looked at the sky, which had turned a garish orange, and the sun winked near the horizon. I hoped that whatever Benito wanted from me wouldn't take long. I was beginning to feel a little light-headed. Maybe I was nervous, or maybe the meds were finally doing something. Too late, in my opinion, and whatever they were up to, it wasn't easing my anxiety.

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Shocking news out of Florida this evening. Billionaire Gregory Meeks has been reported killed in a boating accident. Police tell us he flew in his private helicopter from his home in Tylor, Florida to a remote location 20 miles north of Tampa, where he boarded a speedboat. It is being reported that his plan was to slip quietly onto his yacht, Maiden's Glory, *which was anchored somewhere off the coast, but the speedboat appears to have been traveling at unsafe speeds when it struck something in the waters. Divers continue to search for Meeks' body.*

—CBS News Broadcast

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Chapter 3

Sandburrs barnacled to my pant legs as I pushed my way along the vague suggestion of a path, trying to avoid anything sharp, unpleasant, or venomous. I hopped over fire ant mounds while scanning the undergrowth for copperheads. Looking down meant not looking forward, which led to getting a face full of spider web. I had to stop a couple of times to make sure I didn't have something crawling through my hair. Banana spiders aren't dangerous, but their bites hurt.

Tylor began as a barebones settlement near Fort Dillon, which had been established to facilitate the murder and removal of Central Florida's indigenous people. By the 1920s, much of the state had become a weird soup of grifters and dreamers, whose failures had made it expedient to flee the country's more habitable climes. Florida somehow facilitated an eternal cycle of booms and busts. Most people ended on bust, but a small number managed to build lasting wealth, often in real estate ventures, and more often in real estate scams.

A successful bootlegger named Frederick Huber built his mansion in Tylor, and others with money soon followed. The rich had to go somewhere, and Tylor became that place. It's not near the ocean—certainly

not by 1920s standards—and it's no prettier or uglier than anywhere else in Central Florida. The rich remain there still, though mostly not the same families. Now it's Wall Street types and tech people who've bought and renovated and modernized the array of massive pre-war estates. Famously—infamously—this is where billionaire Gregory Meeks reclusively cyberstalked underage girls. He likely would still be at it if a group of reporters hadn't connected the dots and brought his pervert paradise crashing down.

Back in the 1920s, Frederick Huber considered the entire town his domain, not unreasonable since he was both mayor and he owned most of the surrounding land—including the vast expanse that later became the Kitchikuti Wildlife Management Area. Because he enjoyed climbing an impossible number of stairs and looking out upon all he possessed, and because, I guess, he liked medieval-looking things, he built the Observation Tower. It's a stone structure rising 130 feet with the occasional window and crenelated walls at the top to help archers defend the tower in the event the peasants rebelled and decided to storm a mostly empty vanity project.

No one had the heart to tear down the tower, and no one had the courage to suggest spending tax dollars to repair it, so it endured in a state of limbo. Generations of restless and horny teenagers have used it as a

hangout. Isolated, forbidden, and freaky is an irresistible draw for the young.

It’s also where at least nine people have committed suicide over the years.

Benito didn’t fuck around with stuff like this. If he said he needed me, then he did, and I assumed that when he explained himself, it would all make sense.

The top of the tower was visible from the parking lot, but I was hot, sweaty, disgusted, and covered with mosquito bites by the time the base came into view. The woods opened into a clearing of sandy soil and scrub, and there, a couple hundred feet away from me stood the tower, surrounded by a chain fence and a sprinkling of warning signs.

I called Benito’s name. He didn’t shout back. I didn’t see any sign that anyone had been here recently. Now that I thought about it, I hadn’t seen Benito’s car—or any cars—in the parking lot.

I took out my phone and texted him, but there were no little dots telling me he was writing back.

Then I felt something press against the back of my head. It was hard and cold and made painful contact with my skull.

“Don’t turn around. Just move.”

I recognized the voice, and I wished I didn't. I had no doubt the thing that knocked against my head was the barrel of a gun.

"Keep going," she told me. "To the left, between those two trees."

We'd been walking for about ten minutes, my terror growing as the light faded. I didn't dare wipe the sweat off my face or chase the bugs away, and the mosquitoes were getting brazen.

I asked once what was going on and got the flat of a shoe against my ass for my trouble. I considered it a win that I hadn't tumbled face-first into the dirt, and I did not ask again.

Then I heard something that sounded very much like a shovel biting into the soil. That could not be good.

Another minute of walking brought me to a much smaller clearing, where a guy was working a shovel from calf-deep in a troublingly grave-shaped hole. I didn't know his name, but I recognized him from around town. He was a cop, a white guy, maybe thirty years old, with a military buzzcut and a weightlifter's build. He was not in uniform but wore jeans and a long-sleeved T-shirt, not ideal for the heat, but good protection from insects.

The woman pointing the gun at me stepped around so I could see her face. I knew it well.

“Take over for Quin.” She tilted her head toward the man with the shovel.

I tried to understand what was happening. I hadn’t yet registered what lay on a tarp next to the hole. In the dusk, I first thought they were logs. Then I noticed the black shoe stuck to one end. The scrap of singed clothing. The smell of charred meat.

I was standing near corpses. Burned corpses.

“Where’s Benito?” I asked.

“He’s not coming. I stole his phone.” She pulled it out of her pocket and waggled it at me.

I’d been terrified of Iliana Marek since middle school. The toughest kids always fell in line with her. She was fearless, reckless, and a cop’s foster child. Now that cop was chief of police. Rumor said that whatever was too dicey for Tylor’s cops fell to Iliana, and Tylor cops were up for almost anything. She was no more than five-four, slightly built, with shoulder-length auburn hair pulled back in a wavy ponytail. Her nose was a little sharp, her lips a little thin, her mouth wide. I supposed she would have been attractive if she hadn’t been terrifying. I’d spent most of my life avoiding interactions with her, but back in school, I’d seen what happened

to kids who crossed her path. Now, according to town whispers, people who crossed her path vanished.

I was about to become one of those people.

I was relieved that Benito wasn't involved with all this, whatever all this was, but I had no idea why Iliana Marek would go to such lengths to lure me here.

"Unlock your phone and give it to me," she said.

I did what she asked, though with my hands shaking, it took a frustratingly long time.

She tapped the screen a few times and then powered down the phone before slipping it into her back pocket.

"Just be cool, bro," the cop said as he shook the dirt off his shovel. "Everything's going to be fine. You do what Iliana tells you, and you go home without a scratch. It's as easy as that."

It was not as easy as that. My brain was firing wildly, still trying to make sense of everything around me—the grave, the pair of burnt bodies, the gun—but I was disoriented and overmedicated, not stupid. Two people associated with the police department, one of whom was an actual cop, did not steal my friend's phone and trick me into coming to a remote location to bury bodies so that they could later send me on my way. The best-case scenario was that they were setting me up to take the blame for something.

The most likely scenario was that I would end up in that grave alongside the corpses.

But why? Today was the seven-year anniversary of Faye Kristic's death, but how did that connect with the two cooked bodies? Did they come from the burning wreck on Hibiscus Avenue? With the way the van was positioned, I supposed Iliana and the cop could have dragged the bodies out here without anyone seeing, but why would they? And what did any of this have to do with me?

I still hadn't moved. I was trying to speak, but the words weren't coming. I had been in deep shit before. I'd been arrested, ruined my parents' lives, become—however briefly—a nationally despised figure. I couldn't connect the dots, but all of these things had to be related.

"What is all this?" I managed. "Why am I here?"

"Shut the fuck up and start digging." Iliana gestured toward me with the pistol. She wasn't exactly poised to shoot, but I got the message.

Quin, the cop, held out his shovel and smiled convincingly. "You can help us. You know more than you think. You do a little work, you answer a few simple questions, and then you can get out of here."

Iliana raised the gun a little higher. "You want to dig that hole with or without a bullet in your foot?"

I stepped forward and took the shovel in a trembling hand.

Despite my criminal history, I was not tough or violent or cunning. My brain went blank. I became a passive receptacle for images and sensations. No thoughts. No expectations.

I took the shovel, stepped into the hole, and began to dig. I couldn't think about what was going to happen when I was done. I didn't dare to look at the charred bodies lying on the tarp only a few feet away from me. I ignored their weird, sweet, plastic-and-meat odor, like a steak grilled in a garbage bag. Somewhere in the back of my mind, a voice was telling me I was going to have to do something, but I couldn't think of what that something might be. I wanted time. Time to think, I suppose, but I wasn't doing any thinking. It wasn't as though I was carefully noting my captors' weaknesses and blind spots. Each shovel full of soil brought me closer to my death.

I was not suicidal. I absolutely did not want to die, and never, even at the lowest points in the last seven years, when the entire town—the entire country—hated me, had I considered ending my own life. I had fantasies about running away, changing my name, somehow scraping together enough money to decamp to the Bahamas and spend the rest of my life as a beach bum—and I hate the beach. Now I passively obeyed Iliana's commands not because I embraced the end but because I was tired. I didn't have any fight left in me.

Digging a grave is hard work, especially in sandy Florida soil. After ten minutes, my Gas-M-Up polo shirt was soaked through, and I was panting, but I couldn't see that I'd made much progress. I paused to examine my pathetic results.

"Keep working," Iliana said, "or I'll shoot you in your fucking balls."

"Let him catch his breath." Quin turned to me. "Just keep at it. You'll get there." His voice was kind, and the stupid part of my brain wanted to show him how much I appreciated his support. The smart part of my brain knew I wasn't getting out of there alive.

Full dark had settled in. Trees and heavy clouds obscured any theoretical moonlight. Cicadas buzzed, and frogs sang. A night bird cried out nearby. Quin illuminated the area as best he could with his cell phone flashlight. Iliana kept her gun on me. I dug and tossed dirt to the side and waited for my mind to break free of its torpor.

They'd arranged for me to be here. It had something to do with Faye Kristic. Why else bring me out here, and on this day? Even so, it didn't add up. Iliana, who had been cruel to Faye for years, wouldn't care about what I'd done. Even if there was some bizarro world in which Iliana wanted justice for Faye Kristic, why would she have waited seven years to act? And how did these two corpses fit in?

Alive or dead, I would probably never know. I needed to concentrate on the plan that I quickly cobbled together.

I would slow down, just enough to annoy Iliana. If she wanted to credibly threaten me, she might have to take a few steps closer. That was all I needed. A few steps so that I could toss a shovel full of sand to momentarily blind her. The hole was still shallow enough that I could hop out and run toward the trees.

I was no expert on guns, never having fired one or been near anyone firing one, but I knew that it was harder to hit a target in real life than in the movies. Adding movement and darkness further strengthened my odds of survival. Once I reached the trees, Iliana could only hit me by pure luck. From there, I would need to orient myself toward the main road.

I wasn't stupid enough to believe that reaching a populated area would make me safe. Iliana had no official connection to the police department, but Quin could detain me, and then it would be a short trip from the side of the road to my jailhouse suicide. If I got away, I had to vanish and never show my face in Tylor again. One way or another, everything was going to change tonight.

"You're slow as shit," Iliana said.

“This is as fast as I can dig,” I said while, in fact, digging as slowly as I could plausibly get away with.

A minute later: “Are you fucking with me? Do you think someone’s going to save you? Only doped-up kids come out here, and never this early and not this far from the tower.”

I could hear the tension in her voice. She was right that it would be hours before anyone wandered close enough to make firing the gun risky, but she wanted the grave dug fast. I had to make that work for me, so I slowed down another fraction, hoping she didn’t decide to cut her losses and shoot.

Iliana took two long strides closer. I felt every muscle in my body constrict. My heartrate skyrocketed. A vein in my neck pulsed spasmodically.

Was she close enough? I couldn’t be sure, but I didn’t dare wait any longer. My vision narrowed to a filmy aperture, but I continued to dig.

Then, without realizing I’d made a decision, I shifted the angle of the shovel and tossed a load of soil into Iliana’s face. I heard her grunt as I pulled myself out of the hole and stumble-ran toward the trees.

Turning to look when you are running for your life makes absolutely no sense. I understand that. If I hadn’t—if I’d run like any sane person—everything would have been different. But I did stop because an instant

after I darted from the hole, as I braced myself for the impact of a bullet into my back, I heard a crack, and it was not gunfire.

I would have kept running even still, but then I heard Iliana's voice. "Oh, God."

Her words were a cold blast. She sounded surprised and confused and absolutely terrified. There was no rational reason to stop to examine whatever it was that had frightened Iliana Marek, but out of instinct, I put my back to a tree and turned, trying to make sense of what I saw. Quin lay on the ground, his face glowing from the light of his phone. He was on his side, his back turned toward me, his head bent all the way around. His empty eyes stared at nothing.

Iliana had forgotten me. She pointed her gun toward the trees, peering into the darkness, turning one way and then another. Her features strobed in the phone light, tense and taut, her teeth bared in a lunatic grin.

Iliana's problem was not my problem. The three or four rapid heartbeats I'd paused to see Quin's body and Iliana's terror was time poorly invested. This mayhem was a gift, and I shouldn't squander it by staring, or putting myself in the way of whatever did that to Quin. I needed to get out of there.

Then I heard something whiz through the air. It landed with a wet slap. Iliana raised her hand to her neck, from which a four-inch handle

reflected the dim light. She wavered for a moment. Was she confused or surprised or terrified? I couldn't see her face, only a silhouette and a flash of her eyes. She gently tapped the knife handle, a weird, staccato pattern. Then she collapsed, the transition from living to dead sudden and jarring and horrific.

A figure unfolded from the darkness, barely over five feet, female, her face obscured in the gloom. She appeared to be missing an arm, but Quin's phone light hinted at something silvery protruding from the stump below her right shoulder. A slow trickle of blood dripped where her arm had been torn off, leaving a metallic bone exposed. The figure strode confidently toward Iliana, her strides sure and steady, as though having an arm ripped from her body was an everyday occurrence. She pulled the knife from Iliana's neck. I watched, unable even to think about moving, while the stranger searched through Iliana's pockets and pulled something out before standing up. She turned to me.

"You should go." The voice was not unkind. English wasn't her native language, but I couldn't place the accent. Maybe something Asian. "This is yours." She tossed an object toward me. On my best day, I wasn't going to make that catch in the dark, and being over-medicated, abducted, and a witness to murder hadn't sharpened my hand-eye coordination. Something hit me hard in the chest.

“Sorry,” the stranger said.

I reached down and picked up my phone.

Meanwhile, the stranger grabbed Iliana by the ankle and began dragging her body into the woods.

This, I decided, was the time to run and not look back.

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***Julia**: So, he ruined this girl's life, right? Just destroyed her.*

***Emory**: Completely destroyed her. You can find it all online, and you can read it if you want to, but I don't recommend. It's really brutal.*

***Julia**: Just the meanest stuff I've ever seen.*

***Emory**: But then he claims to have no memory of writing it.*

***Julia**: Post-traumatic amnesia is the official diagnosis. A therapist backed him up. And apparently this is a thing that can happen. You remember who you are and your family and whatever, but you just forget doing this one thing. Usually it's a bad thing—an accident, or being a victim.*

***Emory**: But sometimes it's being the victimizer. Sometimes you can forget that you're the bad guy.*

—*From the podcast* Terrible People We Love

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Chapter 4

After I got home from my—I don't know, let's call it an *incident*—I tried to order my memories into something resembling coherence. I thought a shower might help, but that turned out to be a mistake. Under the water, I shook uncontrollably, barely able to hold the soap. When I abandoned that project, I struggled to dress myself after a halfhearted effort to towel dry. My window-unit AC rattled in a valiant effort to cool my tiny apartment, but I was shivering.

Everything was coming apart. Again. My life wasn't great, but I'd built what little I had after destroying everything I wanted and cared about. I had a job. I was self-sufficient. I wasn't institutionalized.

I needed to understand what had happened, to establish a foundation of reality and work from there. I started with some facts. Actually, they were non-facts since at some point on the drive home—my hands gripping the wheel so tight that my knuckles hurt—I reached a conclusion: nothing I'd experienced could have been real. Seven years before, my memories had betrayed me. Clearly, that was happening again.

The only certainties were negatives: I had not been forced to dig a grave for a cop and the police chief's psycho foster daughter; I had not seen

those two killed near a pair of charred corpses; I had not encountered a one-armed assassin with metal bones.

If I could cross these things off the list, then I had to figure out what really did happen. Where had I gone, or not gone? I tried to find the moment when reality split from delirium. Everything felt normal up until Iliana Marek appeared with a gun. Had she been there at all? Had I even gone into the Kitchikuti?

Did it matter? The point wasn't what I'd imagined, but rather that I'd imagined at all. I'd had a full-blown delusional episode. But my previous mental health incident had involved forgetting things I'd done, not experiencing the impossible.

Then I thought of something. I gritted my teeth as I searched through my recycling trashcan for the paperwork. There it was, amid flyers and credit card offers and political direct-mailers. Holding my breath until my lungs ached, I scanned through the tiny print listing side effects of my new anti-anxiety meds.

Along with classics, such as headache, nausea, and dry mouth, were some more concerning possibilities: convulsions, loss of bladder control, and, yes, the pearl for which I'd been diving: hallucinations.

Well, fuck. My bladder control remained solid, but I'd gone way over the dose of a med that can cause hallucinations, and then witnessed

something impossible.

I slumped onto my bed, almost giddy with relief. My mind hadn't gone from disordered to insane. It was just the drugs I'd been abusing. Yes, I should not have more than tripled the dose. I bore some responsibility, but I'd been used to going way over the max dose for alprazolam. A mistake. That's all it was. Even I could forgive myself for that one.

I dropped the new meds in the trash and dug out my emergency supply of alprazolam. Was it a bad idea to combine the two? Was I following one stupid pharmaceutical decision with another? Possibly, but I was desperate to calm down and get some sleep. I chewed on the pills and let the bitter taste comfort me as I waited for a wall of time to arise and form an impenetrable barrier between reality and my lunatic recollections.

In the morning, I eased my sluggishness with several cups of instant coffee and then headed over for my shift at the Gas-M-Up, where I surrendered to the comforting mindlessness of work. I sold gas and dip and overpriced energy drinks. I took comfort in the accomplishment of easy tasks and even found myself taking genuine delight in the solidity of my life. I didn't have much, but I wasn't on the cusp of clinical insanity.

The one thing that concerned me was the text exchange with Benito. That had begun before I'd overindulged in the meds. At least that's how I remembered it.

On my phone, the entire chat history with Benito was gone. When I imagined Iliana messing with my phone, had I really been deleting my own messages in a plot against my future self? I'd never done anything exactly like that, but I did have an established history of erasing unwanted memories.

I sent out a few texts to Benito that morning and then decided not to worry about his silence. He could go for hours without checking his phone, especially when he was caught up in his work. Benito was prone to all-night marathons, tinkering with his game code until sunrise. If that were the case, he'd still be sleeping.

Benito came by the gas station to visit at about two that afternoon, always a slow time. He knew the rhythms of my job, and he never visited when I was likely to be busy. Given his secondary role in last night's hallucinations, I was happy to see him healthy and unharmed, but the lone customer in the store, an oily-haired teenage girl trying to choose her Mountain Dew variant, eyed him suspiciously.

People don't know how to deal with Benito because he's a bunch of things all at once. Any one of those things would be enough to make him

stand out, but all together, they resulted in sensory overload.

First of all, Benito was a big dude, easily six-four, wide as well as tall. He was an avid weightlifter, but he never sought a gym rat's physique. He looked like one of those Olympic lifters—muscle and fat piled on top of each other.

He was a Mexican Jew, and he telegraphed both. The Mexican part was from his facial features and coloring. The Jewish part was made most obvious by his yarmulke. Benito's family wasn't particularly religious. His father and brothers didn't cover their heads, and none of them went to their synagogue in Tampa very often, but Benito liked to make sure everyone knew he was Jewish. His flashy gold bling featured chais and chamsa and Stars of David. It was a challenge. He was daring you to say something.

On top of that were all the old-school hip-hop gestures and the circa 1990s East LA gang inflections. These had only manifested a few years ago. He was a couple of grades ahead of me in high school, and I hadn't really known him then, but I remembered him as a quiet kid—an enormous, quiet kid—who wanted to do math, read science fiction novels, lift weights, and play video games. The football coach had been desperate to recruit him, but Benito had zero interest in anything athletic except weightlifting, which he could do while listening to space opera audiobooks.

So, you've got this big, hulking, kippa-wearing, bling-flashing, Mexican Jew in long, baggy shorts and a checkered button-down. People loved to put things in categories, but Benito was an entire catalogue.

"Yo, homes. What up?"

Then there was the way he spoke. After graduating high school, Benito had somehow—and inexplicably—become a Juggalo, a follower of the next-level absurd band, Insane Clown Posse. If you've never heard of ICP, you're both extremely lucky and a tiny bit unfortunate. I've spent enough time with Benito, listening to the albums, to realize ICP is not unbearably awful, merely painfully mediocre and unironically stupid. I've also come to realize that people don't necessarily gravitate to ICP for the music but instead for the unlikely fellowship of its fans.

I assumed that fellowship was largely virtual, since Tylor didn't come across as a hotbed of Juggalo activity, but Benito was active on message boards and social media. Every year he headed out to Ohio for the Gathering of the Juggalos, a weekend of concerts, drinking, drugs, and diving into a surging tide of knuckleheads in clown makeup. He always tried to talk me into going with him, and I always declined. I couldn't trust myself in that environment.

It wasn't like I expected to Jekyll-and-Hyde at any given moment, but I couldn't be sure. That was the thing. Trish said I should take more

chances, but she also said I should avoid situations where I felt out of my depth. Tens of thousands of drugged-up, rowdy clowns would be out of my depth.

“I made some dope progress last night,” Benito was telling me. “Your UI suggestions really clean things up. And I’ve uploaded a bunch of new tooltips.”

Benito had been messing around with videogame coding since middle school, developing mods and minigames that drew him a decent following online. Three years ago, he’d started developing a space strategy game called *Dangerous Realms*, which had been picked up by a publisher the previous summer. They funded the project and allowed Benito to bring on a small, freelance staff. His dev team was scattered, with artists in Latin America and coders in Poland, but Benito was the boss, operating the company and living his dream, all from the bedroom in which he’d grown up.

“I sent you a bunch of texts this morning,” I told him. “I guess you’ve been working.”

“Naw, man. I lost my phone yesterday. I think it was stolen. I couldn’t track it even though I know it was charged.”

A slow accretion of terror massed in my core. The comfortable edifice I’d constructed now wobbled unsteadily. Benito’s missing phone lined up

with what I'd imagined Iliana had said to me. What if I'd been comforting myself with stories of med-induced hallucination? Not that all of it could be real, but what if *something* had happened? What if the hallucinations had been my mind's way of coping with real horrors I'd seen—or done? What if I had, in fact, been involved in multiple murders, including that of a cop and the police chief's foster daughter?

"You okay?" Benito asked. "You kind of look like shit."

I shook my head. Trish talked about my habit of catastrophizing. I always went for the worst-case scenario, imagined the most devastating outcomes. I'd spent years in therapy with her trying to coax me away from assuming everything would turn out badly, even though it usually did.

The worst-case scenario here would be murder on top of murder. It would be impossibly convoluted plots and secret burials and a freakish metal-boned assassin. It seemed safe to rule that out. The missing phone had to be a coincidence.

I made the decision that I was fine. It was just too many weird meds. Nothing more. "I didn't get a lot of sleep last night."

Benito slapped a meaty hand on my shoulder. "I'm getting together with a few of my homies at that Korean place tonight. A few beers, some good food. I'll spot you. Pick you up at eight?"

Benito ordered us takeout from Tylor's only Korean restaurant a few times when we'd been at his house. I loved the food, and I knew his heart was in the right place, but he didn't get it. Any attempt I made at a normal life out would end up being a reminder that I was always going to be an outcast.

"I'm really tired," I told him as I rang up the teenager, who'd settled on Mountain Dew Voltage. "But I appreciate it."

"I need to bounce and get a new phone," he said. "Once it's set up, I'll text you with the deets. You can let me know later."

"I'm letting you know now."

"But," he said, pausing dramatically and flashing a toothy grin that he believed opened all doors, "you'll let me know later."

Benito had turned away when the doors chimed, and Kyle Hilliard came into the store, shouldering past the exiting teenager as though there hadn't been an actual human person in his path. Kyle's uniform was weighed down with a squawking police utility belt, and he swaggered like an Old West sheriff stepping into a saloon teeming with outlaws.

"Yo, what up, Officer?" Benito leaned against the counter, announcing himself as a witness to whatever was coming. Kyle Hilliard had been an asshole when we were kids, and he remained an asshole as an adult. Being a cop gave him power. Being the police chief's son made him

untouchable. Bryce Hilliard might dump on his son by making him do traffic duty, but I had no doubt he'd unleash hell on anyone who dared to try to keep his son in check.

Kyle paused, giving us a chance to fully register his presence. His brown hair was heavily styled and gelled in a way that would have made more sense if he were in a boy band rather than a police officer. He had inherited his father's handsome features, but his face hadn't made the best use of them. His eyes were round, with pronounced bags, and his slack mouth made him look dumber than he was—though maybe not by much.

He gazed around the store as though surveying his domain. Chips? A cellophaned ham sandwich? An on-duty six pack? It was all his for the taking. Other cops paid. Not Kyle. He thought of the Gas-M-Up as his personal pantry. Igor made it clear I was to keep my mouth shut. A few dollars here and there, he said, were easier to absorb than a war with the police department.

I'd done one unambiguously bad thing in my life. It was terrible, but I'd never stopped paying for it. Kyle Hilliard had maybe done even worse things than me. I mean, who knew? If the stories about what went on in Tylor were even one-tenth true, then Kyle had to be neck deep in bad shit. He was Iliana Marek's boyfriend, and it wasn't out of the question that he

helped cover her tracks—and vice versa. As long as Bryce Hilliard was police chief, Kyle was above the law.

“Give me a pack of Luckys,” he said as he stepped up to the counter.

“I didn’t know you smoked.” Shutting the fuck up would have been the smart thing, but that wasn’t how I played it.

“Those things’ll kill you, homes,” Benito said.

Kyle didn’t seem to hear Benito. His focus was entirely on me. “You don’t talk unless I ask you a question,” he said, snatching the cigarettes from my hand as though I’d been holding them out of reach.

He moved toward the door, but then turned back. It was a performance of being casual, pretending something just happened to occur to him, but his movements were artificial and rehearsed. This wasn’t an afterthought. It was the reason he was here. “You went to the Kitchikuti yesterday. Why?”

I froze, trying to decide how to answer the question. So, that part hadn’t been hallucination.

I couldn’t tell him about the texts I’d invented for myself in which Kyle’s girlfriend had been impersonating Benito. I sure as hell couldn’t recount what I’d imagined came later.

“To clear my head,” I said after a few seconds too many. “I walk there all the time.”

“You walk there at dusk? You’re a big fan of mosquitoes?”

I shrugged. “They don’t really bother me.” I wanted to ask him if Iliana had said something about seeing me. Maybe she had. Maybe we’d spoken, and that was the seed of my hallucination. Hearing another person’s account of last night would go a long way toward sorting things out, but I held my tongue.

“What?” Kyle took a step closer and leaned in toward me. “You were going to say something. Let’s hear it.”

I shook my head. “Nothing. I didn’t see—I don’t know what you mean.”

“You didn’t see who?” Kyle asked. “If you know something, say it, you fucking psycho.”

Benito, who had grabbed a candy bar and had been pretending to read the ingredients, looked up. “Chill, Officer. Maybe it’s time to get back to serving and protecting.”

Kyle appeared startled. He seemed to forget what he’d been saying and doing. I was grateful for the intervention even while I had the terrible feeling that I’d said too much.

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***Alice Sullivan**: We are talking about a troubled young woman with a history of idiosyncratic behavior. According to everything we've read, she experienced social difficulties her entire life. Blaming her death on Dan Gibson may be convenient, but it is neither fair nor responsible.*

***Mariah Acharya-Green**: A young woman is dead, Alice.*

***Sullivan**: And does ruining a young man's life balance the scales, or does it merely satisfy our thirst for blood?*

—Excerpt from the Florida International University Political Union debate series

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Chapter 5

I lived on my parents' property but not with them. The back yard had a free-standing one-room apartment with a decaying roof and a flaking paint job, what realtors called a mother-in-law house. Inside there was a kitchenette in one corner, a desk with a computer in the other. I had a tiny bathroom with a hissing toilet. Cracks in the wall exhaled a bottomless supply of palmetto bugs. It was a small space, and it always smelled of mildew and whatever I'd recently cooked.

I paid rent, which I considered fair. Before Faye Kristic died, my dad had been planning on moving us to a new place in Tylor's swanky Deer Pines neighborhood. My legal fees put an end to that dream. My dad also lost most of his many businesses during the fallout. Then came the lawsuit, which he settled out of court. I have no idea how much that was for—he would never tell me—but it gobbled up most of what remained. Somehow, he'd managed to keep this house in a working-class neighborhood and a single business, a sports bar off Tylor Avenue.

I could go days without seeing my parents, which suited all involved. My dad still regarded me with an icy mixture of disappointment, bitterness, and disgust. My mom, on the other hand, took her cues from my dad. I

sensed that she didn’t resent losing her easy life and the dream of a beautiful house and rich friends. She resented my dad’s resentment. She would have been happy with him anywhere he was happy. My dad couldn’t forgive me for ruining his life. My mom couldn’t forgive me for ruining my dad’s life.

He must have been keeping an eye out for me because as I walked toward my apartment, his back door slammed open, striking the back of the house with a starter-pistol crack. My dad wore jeans and an old T-shirt that hung off his gaunt frame. Back when he had been poised to emerge as the king of the Tylor bar, restaurant, and laundromat scene, my father had been a large man. In the years since Faye Kristic’s death, he had gradually shed his expansive, room-filling presence. He’d lost an entire human’s worth of body weight. His face was now thin and hollow, his eyes sunken. His hair had turned gray and thin, unflatteringly long so that it splayed out around his collar. He looked much older than his fifty-seven years—another person I’d aged prematurely.

“Where were you?” he asked, as though I were a teenager slipping in before dawn.

I glanced down to make sure I was still wearing my brown Gas-M-Up shirt. “I’m coming from work.”

“You’re happy to work that shit job the rest of your life, I guess.” Occasionally, he would look to manufacture conflict. We all have our own ways of blowing off steam. “You should tell that immigrant asshole you want a raise.”

“Okay, Dad. I’ll talk to him.”

“A man who doesn’t stand up for himself has to take whatever gets dished out.”

“That’s good advice,” I assured him.

“Talk to me like I’m the crazy one if that makes you happy, but I’m raising your rent. Another three hundred a month. I did some research, and that’s what the place is worth on the open market. I can’t afford to cut you a break forever.”

I swallowed hard, trying to beat back the surge of rage and helplessness. Seven years of therapy had taught me that feelings don’t have to translate into behavior, but I didn’t have the emotional bandwidth. Not today. I already gave my dad most of what I took home. After rent, I had maybe a hundred and fifty left for food and gas. If something went wrong with my nearly twenty-year-old Subaru, I would have no way to get to work.

“I literally don’t have another three hundred dollars a month,” I told him.

“What did I say? Ask the Russian for more money.”

“There’s no raise he’s going to give me that’s going to add up to another three hundred a month.”

“Then figure something out.” He threw up his arms in exasperation. “Get a second job. Work out of your bedroom. It’s good enough for that Mexican freak you pal around with. The new rent is due in three weeks. If you can’t pay it, you’ll have to move out. That’s how rent works.”

“You can’t raise my rent with only three weeks’ warning,” I said. “I’m pretty sure *that’*s how rent works.”

He shook his head. “You’ve got a computer in there. You’ve got a phone. Maybe cut back on the luxuries, princess. You can either come up with the money or find another place. It shouldn’t be too complicated—not even for you.”

“I don’t know if I can continue seeing you.”

It was not a great way to begin a therapy session, but it was all I’d thought about during the hour-long drive to Tampa. Mandatory weekly therapy had been part of the agreement that kept me from doing any jail time. The court selected Trish, who specialized in troubled teens, but she saw adults as well, so I’d stuck with her even after I’d aged out of my legal

obligation. Maybe I continued to see her because she was a rare source of positive affirmation. Still, not having to pay a therapist would free up some money that I was likely going to need if I wanted to avoid homelessness.

Trish was a white woman in her early fifties, thin and nicely put together, with scarves that matched her blouse and elegant slacks. Her hair, cut in a jaunty bob, was probably too fiery red to be a natural color. She operated out of her house in a Tampa suburb, but there was nothing outside to indicate this was any kind of professional office.

“Ending therapy is a big step,” she said.

“Sleeping under an overpass would also be a big step,” I told her.

She smiled. “Do you really think you couldn’t find another apartment? Tylor is more expensive than most of the surrounding communities. You could spend a little more on gas to save a great deal in rent.”

“The laziest of background checks is going to scare any landlord away,” I said. “I’m a walking red flag.”

“Your incident was seven years ago,” she said, “and it’s not as though you committed a violent crime.”

“I’ll be sure to note that on the rental application.”

“Humor is a great way to deflect unwanted feelings,” Trish said, “but I wonder if you’re so afraid of facing the past that you’re avoiding your

future. The world is out there, Dan, and people may be thinking less about you than you suppose."

"Look, these sessions help me," I said, "but I can't afford them anymore."

"I work on a sliding scale," she said. "We can suspend your payments until you get your housing situation sorted out."

"I couldn't ask that of you."

"If you were stabbed, and the doctor offered to treat you for free because you couldn't pay her, would you say that you'd rather bleed?"

"That's a fair point, but this isn't an emergency."

"Your wellbeing is important," she said. "If you neglect it, something small can develop into something far more serious."

I felt a flood of relief, because I was, in fact, working through an emergency, even if I wasn't talking about it.

"Tell me more about these demands from your father," she said, the matter clearly resolved to her satisfaction. "That must have been upsetting."

There was plenty to talk about there, and I dove in with all the candor I could muster. I had no doubt that I was talking about one thing so I would not have to raise a different subject.

As we wound down, Trish checked her notes. "I wanted to ask how the new medication was working for you."

I was prepared for this and managed to answer as though casually recalling my experiences. “It didn’t seem to help, and there were side effects.”

“What sort of side effects?”

“Headache,” I told her. “And nausea. Really bad.”

In all the years I’d been seeing Trish, I’d never directly lied to her before. I’d withheld some details and talked around issues, but explicitly deceiving her was something new. I began our sessions years ago determined to make certain I would not hurt anyone else the way I’d hurt Faye Kristic.

I knew what I’d seen out in the woods could not have been real, but maybe I had seen *something*. There might be people who wanted to keep that something concealed. What if there really had been a pair of corpses? Trish was kind and empathetic, but she could also be naïve. She would be inclined to brush aside my concerns about the integrity of local law enforcement, and I couldn’t risk her concluding that her duty required her to contact the Tylor P.D. If necessary, I’d get a lawyer—I’d have to hope Benito’s mother would help me out—and come forward, but not until I had more information.

“That’s too bad,” she said, “but there are a few other options we can try.”

“I’d feel better if we stuck with alprazolam. It helps, and I promise not to abuse it.”

She thought about this for a moment. “For now. But let’s keep an open mind about other possibilities. I’ll do some research and see if we can’t find you something we can be more comfortable with on a long-term basis.”

Problem resolved. I celebrated on the walk to my car by chewing on a half milligram pill.

On the way home, I wondered if I made the wrong choice. Not about the meds—that was absolutely the right call. About telling Trish the truth. I was living in two worlds, accepting both that I hadn’t seen anything in the Kitchikuti and that maybe I had seen more than my brain could accept. I wanted to remain in that liminal space. I hadn’t expected to be expelled into the world of certainty quite so abruptly.

The CD player in my car had long since stopped working, and forget about connecting to Bluetooth in something that old, so I had the radio on. That was how I heard that the Tylor Police Department was seeking the help of local citizens in locating Officer Quinton Silvestri, who had vanished on Friday night without a trace.

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Chapter 6

I did not own a television, but I was able to catch up on the story by going to a Tampa news station's website. The posted clip included an artlessly manipulative montage of Quinton Silvestri photos—in his dress uniform at the police academy graduation, socializing with his friends at a barbeque, doing charity work at the hospital, holding hands with his wife on the beach. An attractive woman reporter, dressed for Coachella, gravely explained that the officer was last seen Friday afternoon, when he told his wife he had to run an errand with a friend. We next got a clip of Police Chief Bryce Hilliard looking deeply concerned and authoritative. He stood in front of the entrance to the Tylor P.D. building, while cops busily rushed in and out behind him.

"Officer Silvestri was not on duty or conducting police business at the time of his last known contact with his wife," Hilliard explained while a tip number appeared on the screen. He was about my dad's age but looked a good fifteen years younger. Fit and confident, with piercing blue eyes, his slightly graying hair suggested not depletion but manly experience. "However, this does not mean his disappearance is unrelated to his duties. Police officers inevitably make enemies while keeping the public safe.

While we pursue all possibilities, we urge anyone with any information about Officer Silvestri's whereabouts to contact us immediately."

They next cut to a woman in her early thirties. She was openly distraught, crying on camera, her blond hair loose and disorderly. She looked to be about five months pregnant, if I was any judge of these things, which I was not. Let's say she was pregnant enough for me to notice but still a long way from giving birth. The name Darcy Silvestri appeared on the screen. Quin's wife.

His widow, maybe.

"Please," she said. "If anyone has any information about my husband, help us. Help him." She wiped a tear off her face and placed a hand on her distended belly. "We want him home."

I paced in front of my computer monitor. The explanations with which I'd comforted myself—that I'd seen nothing out in the Kitchikuti, that maybe I hadn't even left my car—now seemed laughable. Embarrassing. There was no longer any denying that some part of what I'd seen must have been real—something distorted, but not invented, by hallucination. Had Iliana Marek lured me out there so she could murder me and bury me with a couple of corpses? That defied logic, but I hadn't known Quin Silvestri's name before Friday night. Now this figment of my imagination was missing.

I sat down again in front of my aging computer. The aging was at least graceful because Benito would occasionally pop open the case, inserting more RAM or a friend's discarded GPU. He said he was doing it so I could help him out by playing test builds of his game, and I was happy to accept that excuse for his generosity.

I searched for every permutation I could think of to see if there were two missing persons—anyone not Quin Silvestri—in the Tampa area. Nothing came up. Not even Iliana Marek. Was she not missing? If she were alive and accounted for, then maybe Quin Silvestri's disappearance *was* just a coincidence. Or maybe I had seen something in the Kitchikuti so terrible that my mind had created fantasies around it—much like I'd blotted out what I'd done to Faye Kristic. I felt my head for signs of injury that might explain memory problems, but I found nothing.

Then there was the van. I searched for any traffic accidents in Tylor over the past week. I got one hit on the website for the *Tylor Independent*, a free weekly that specialized in profiles of wealthy families who owned local businesses, favoring those that advertised in the *Tylor Independent*. According to a very brief post, the van had been discovered abandoned, the fire likely caused by the exhaust system. The police were still tracking down the owner. No one, the article said, had been hurt.

The van I saw had flipped over, which the article didn't mention. It was possible that the crack reporters at the *Independent* had overlooked that detail, but it was also possible that the Tylor Police Department was lying. Maybe Hilliard had staged an accident, and then Iliana Marek and Quin Silvestri had—

I broke off, because my thoughts were going nowhere logical, and I took a moment to delete my browsing history—just to be safe—while I tried to form my observations into something that made at least a little sense. Why would Iliana have needed my help to bury corpses? I couldn't put the pieces together because I couldn't trust my memories. All I knew for sure was that Iliana Marek was involved, a cop was missing, and Iliana's boyfriend had seen me heading toward the Kitchikuti that night.

How do you live with impending doom weighing on you? I did have prior experience of having to carry out my day-to-day tasks while a shitstorm rattled my windows. In the aftermath of Faye Kristic's death, I had to get out of bed every day and deal with the chaos. It seems impossible, unendurable, and then you do it, and it becomes life.

The alprazolam helped make things manageable. It allowed me to tell myself that Quin Silvestri would show up at any minute and announce he'd

had amnesia or a drug habit or a second family. There was no possibility that was more preposterous than what I thought I'd seen, so any alternative explanation, no matter how unlikely, was possible.

I went easy on the meds when I was at the Gas-M-Up. I couldn't afford to make mistakes and give Igor a reason to fire me. Ringing up customers and cleaning bathrooms and filling out order forms kept the anxiety at bay. I twisted open the bottle in my pocket as soon as I punched out, letting a pill melt against my tongue before I even started my car.

Two days after the story about Quin Silvestri broke, I'd just gotten home from work when my dad sent me a text. It would have taken him approximately twenty-five seconds to walk out the back and knock on my front door, but he wouldn't do that. And while he hadn't established it as a rule, I wasn't supposed to show up at the main house without an invitation or, in the event of an emergency, a warning.

Come here, the text said. I'd been looking forward to cooking up a box of macaroni and cheese and streaming something on my computer—using Benito's borrowed login. I wanted to lose myself in meaningless stories and empty calories. I had the bottle of alprazolam in hand, and if my dad was actively looking to talk to me, I needed some pharmaceutical armor. I opted for a full milligram before heading over.

Dad stood at the back door, one hand on the jamb, prepared to block me if made a run at entering the house. My mother lurked in the background. She waved and offered a sad smile to let me know she thought it would be so nice if I could come inside, but that wasn't the world we lived in.

"I need you to work the bar tonight," he said.

Before everything with Faye Kristic happened, my dad had owned two restaurants, three bars, and a handful of laundromats. The only place he managed to salvage was Gibson's, the sports bar that had belonged to his own father. The regulars knew better than to talk sports with me when I tended bar, and they regarded me as a vibe killer. I'd tried to follow football for a season once, so my dad and I would have something to discuss, but it turned out that the problem with our relationship wasn't the available topics of conversation.

Dad usually covered the night shift. I had the feeling he didn't want to be home at night. My mom adored him, but they'd never had much to talk about. If something came up, and he couldn't work, he'd ask one of his daytime bartenders to fill in, and then one of his former bartenders, and then a friend. Once he'd gotten a leathery-skinned regular whose career selling drugs was ruined by a habit of using drugs. His distinguishing physical

features were yellow eyes, broken capillaries along his nose, and hands that shook uncontrollably. That guy was preferable to me.

I was a last resort because my presence hurt business. Customers kept the drinks coming with their palsied companion working the tap. When they came in and clocked me behind the bar, they were as likely as not to do a U-turn. Enough stuck around to make it worth keeping the lights on, but not enough that my father could justify paying me for my time.

Explaining that I was tired, or that my shift at the gas station the next morning started at five am—about three hours after I could expect to get home from closing the Gibson's—would not have changed anything. "Sure, I'll cover you."

I knew the drill. I had to be at the bar by five, so I was going to have to rush if I wanted to eat something before the shift started. I now regretted taking the alprazolam, which I would attempt to counteract with coffee. There was no choice but to power through it, to survive tonight, and then my shift tomorrow, and then the day after that. It was how I'd been living for years. Getting through each day, hoping the next one might be better. Sometimes it was.

My dad was still standing there, protecting the doorway, staring at me, like he wanted something more.

"Okay, Dad," I said.

“Okay, what?” He folded his arms.

I thought maybe he hadn’t heard me when I’d agree to work the shift. “Okay, I’ll do it.”

“What, am I supposed to thank you?” he asked. “This is what? A *boon* you deign to bestow upon me?”

“That’s not what I’m saying. I’m clarifying that I will take care of it.”

“What a fucking hero.”

In the background, my mother shifted as she calculated her move, ready to calm my father down so he wouldn’t have a stroke or a heart attack. She needed to protect him, even if the most dangerous thing he faced was himself.

Then the doorbell rang. My dad turned away from me, breaking the tractor beam of his gaze. I moved away from the doorway and toward my apartment, but Dad told me not to fucking go anywhere.

I heard voices from the front of the house and then the unmistakable squawk of a police radio. Somewhere, my mother was weeping. Bryce Hilliard, the chief of police, walked into the kitchen, my father in tow. In person, Hilliard looked taller and broader in the shoulders, even more cop-like. His uniform was always crisp. The sunglasses projected menacing law enforcement authority. I’d gotten to know him all too well when he’d arrested me seven years before.

“Dan Gibson.” He spoke my name like a butler announcing guests in a period drama. “You need to come down to the station to answer some questions.”

My father grimaced and then looked at the front of the house, as though trying to manage a series of complicated calculations without the benefit of pen and paper. Finally, he sighed and slumped his shoulders, defeated, and directed his words to me. “I suppose you can come in.”

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***Gabriela**: Watham goes on the run.*

***Will**: Right.*

***Gabriela**: And then Meeks tries to go on the run, but gets killed in a boat accident.*

***Will**: Right again.*

***Gabriela**: And then Dan Gibson is arrested for driving Faye Kristic to kill herself.*

***Will**: Yes.*

***Gabriela**: And how is it all related?*

***Will**: It's not. Bryce Hilliard used a lot of manipulative language to suggest that by arresting Dan Gibson, he was tying up all the loose ends. He never says that exactly, but that's the implication.*

***Gabriela**: He's the new sheriff in town, or police chief, or whatever, and so he wants to make people think all the crazy shit that was happening before will not be happening now.*

***Will**: He wanted to create the illusion of order.*

***Gabriela**: Which is funny, because Tylor is not considered an orderly place.*

***Will**: There are still rumors to be sure, but no one's been able to prove anything. On paper, Bryce Hilliard did seem to clean up Tylor.*

***Gabriela**: But behind the scenes, there's something much darker at work, and today's guest is going to tell us all about it.*

—Freaky Florida, *episode 67*

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Chapter 7

I wasn't handcuffed, so there was that. Bryce Hilliard put me in the back of his police cruiser without saying a word. He pulled out of my parents' driveway, still silent. It all felt unreal—and yet familiar, almost a relief, as though I'd always known I'd end up back in police custody.

The car smelled of sweat and rancid grease and the cloying sweetness of pine air freshener. The radio squawked, and Hilliard responded with a string of codes.

"Why are you bringing me in?" I kept the trembling in my voice to a minimum.

"We'll talk about that at the station."

I wanted to ask more, but I knew it wouldn't get me anything. Last time around, I learned the hard way that giving the cops anything was a mistake. It took all of my willpower, but I rode the rest of the way in silence.

It had been a long time since I'd been inside the Tylor police station, and years had been good to it. Our tax dollars had funded some quality

renovations. Large desks and back-supporting chairs. The computers had those big, curving monitors that I'd only seen before in Benito's room.

The room buzzed with a frenetic energy: phones ringing, fingers clattering on keyboards, cops and support staff moving here and there. How much crime could there be in Tylor? If nothing else, the police were putting on a good show.

The inner workings of the Tylor elite were beyond my ability to understand. The police department, the mayor's office, the city council, Tylor's most prosperous families—they all looked out for each other. I'd known that my whole life. It was the way of things in a small town, even more so when the town had money. It wasn't the glamorous international money of Miami. Tylor was too far north and inland to attract wealthy and beautiful tourists.

The dozen or so cops at their desks studied me as Hilliard led me through to the back. Seven years ago, my story had made the national news, temporarily downgrading the other, higher-profile Tylor criminal. They grabbed that opportunity with both hands, prompting both parties in the Florida legislature to come together for once and pass bipartisan legislation. This new law did not apply to me, but malicious bullying that ends with a minor's death was still a prosecutable crime, and I faced the real possibility of jail time.

I'd been a convenient target, taking attention away from how the cops had coddled Gregory Meeks' perverted ways. That was how a local tragedy ended up being a national news story. Even so, everyone in the Tylor P.D. still regarded me as contemptible. There was no way for me to walk through the cop shop without getting eye fucked, but I hadn't expected violence.

Almost-violence would be more accurate. Kyle Hilliard came at me fast, but his dad got in the way, pushing his son back. "Don't be stupid," the police chief said with obvious weariness. "I'm handling it."

"Where is she, you piece of shit?" Kyle's face was twisted into a hateful and slightly droopy mask of fury.

I did my best to look stupefied. My confusion was mostly genuine because his actions implied that along with Quin Silvestri, Iliana was missing. If she'd vanished, she might be dead. If she were dead, who was to say it wasn't from a knife in the neck, thrown by a mysterious one-armed woman?

I struggled against the confusion and fear, which caused my blood pressure to drop. My vision darkened at the periphery. I felt vaguely nauseated and worried I might pass out.

This was the beginning of a panic attack. I knew the signs, and I remembered what Trish had taught me. I practiced my breathing. I focused

on my immediate surroundings. I was in a bad situation, yes, but I was okay. For now, I was okay.

I told myself I'd get through this. I'd done nothing wrong. I concentrated on these ideas and was only vaguely aware of the police chief leading me to an interrogation room and pushing me down into a seat. "I'll be back in a minute."

He would not be back in a minute. I knew the drill.

Three hours later when the door opened, it wasn't Hilliard who had come to talk to me.

Lenny Teuling's career had not gone the way he had hoped. He'd been the former police chief's right-hand man, his fixer, covert operator, and a debt collector for the then-chief's loan-sharking side hustle. Zack Watham had been a caricature of a Southern police chief, a big guy with a slow drawl who loved to throw his real and metaphorical weight around. He was missing the tip of his little finger of his right hand, and he loved to stick the knuckle-stump in the face of anyone he had in custody.

Teuling had been to Watham what Iliana was to Bryce Hilliard. The rumors said much of Teuling's work centered on catering to local billionaire Gregory Meeks' appetite for underage girls. Teuling was widely supposed

to possess excellent girl-silencing, reporter-discouraging, and witness-tampering skills. He was also remarkably slippery, and while his name was all over the newspaper reports about Meeks and Watham, and he figured prominently in the books and the documentaries, no one had ever been able to link him definitively to anything illegal. He remained a Tylor police officer, but in a diminished role.

Now he sat across the table, his movement deliberate, as if afraid to spook me.

Teuling was in his late fifties or early sixties, his iron-gray hair thinning but not aggressively receding. His mustache remained full and unfashionably bushy. He was fit for his age, maybe for any age. He looked to be slightly below average height for a cop, but he carried himself with an alpha-male swagger that would make gym rats with half a foot on him step aside to let him pass. He winked at me, and I was very, very frightened.

Seven years ago, when I'd been questioned about Faye Kristic's death, Teuling had begun his interrogation by promising he could beat the shit out of me without leaving a mark. He asked me a half-dozen times where I'd hidden some kind of unspecified evidence, and then he'd then kicked my chair over with me cuffed to it. I'd hit the back of my head on the floor, resulting in a mild concussion that wasn't diagnosed until weeks

later. It was ironic, since that head injury ended up messing with my memory, making it difficult for me to remember what I'd done.

Teuling seemed more than happy to deal out another skull-cracking. "How's it going, Dan?" He sounded like he was asking me something entirely different, as if he'd presented a coded question, and he wanted to hear the coded answer.

"Not great," I said.

"You're in serious trouble." He leaned close enough that I could pick out the dark hairs in his mustache. "You fucked with the wrong people, and that means you get fucked by the wrong people. You understand me?"

"I really don't," I said. "What are we talking about?"

He leaned back all casual and shook his head at the sadness of it all. "You never struck me as smart, but I thought you'd understand how few choices you have. No one else is going to give you a chance. I'm your best shot. I hope you're at least smart enough to see that."

Before Faye's death, my grades and SAT scores had been very good. Not Ivy League good, but I'd been in decent shape. Had I really given the impression of not being smart? This wasn't my most pressing issue, but I was now worried that I'd been giving off stupid vibes my entire life without knowing it.

"I don't even know why I'm here," I told him.

“I don’t give a shit why you’re here.” He kept his eyes on me as though I were a piece of art, and he was looking for some aspects he might have missed. “Think about what’s important.”

“If you make your accusations a little more specific, I can deny them properly,” I offered.

“You’re funny.” He wagged a finger at me. “You know what it reminds me of? At the beginning of a movie when the villain does something bad, something only a complete asshole would do. You hate that villain, but you’re glad he’s that asshole thing because when the villain gets what’s coming to him, it’s going to be satisfying. You’re going to get your money’s worth. It’s nice that you’re funny now because when you stop being funny, that’s going to be my payoff.”

This was not a particularly deep narrative theory, but still more than I’d been expecting from a police interrogation.

The door then clicked open, and Hilliard walked in, looking extremely pissed off. “What’s your business here, Teuling?”

“Me and this kid go way back.” He rose from his chair with a torpor meant to communicate indifference. “I thought I might shake something loose.”

“Yeah, thanks.” Hilliard jerked his head toward the door. “Much appreciated. Now fuck off.”

Teuling offered both me and Hilliard the same pleasant smile and left, gently closing the door behind him.

Hilliard said nothing for a moment. He seemed lost in thought. Then he shrugged and sat down, his face shifting into the harried expression of someone who needed to be in two other places and he was squeezing in my interrogation as a favor.

He slapped down a thick folder, which he opened so I could not see the contents and began to flip through a legal pad covered with handwritten notes. “Officer Kyle Hilliard affirms that while directing traffic on the night in question, he observed you driving in the direction of, and with evident intention to enter, the Kitchikuti Wildlife Management Area. He is prepared to testify that these events transpired at approximately 7:20 pm on Friday the 11th.”

The cop-speak was meant to convey the legal gravity of my situation, to suggest that the wheels of the justice system were already rolling. I recognized it as total bullshit while, simultaneously, respecting how effective it was at freaking me out. “I went to the Kitchikuti that night at around that time. After I got off work.”

Hilliard wrote down notes far out of proportion to anything I said. Finally, he looked up. “Are you prepared to state for the record the purpose of your visit?”

There was no way I was going to drag Benito's name into this. "I walk the trails all the time. It's peaceful. And it's open to visitors after sunset, so I don't see the problem."

Hilliard leaned back. "Then it is your assertion that your presence is a coincidence?"

"What kind of coincidence?" I asked. "What coincided?"

He sighed and shook his head. "I think you know, Dan. I think you're trying to see if you can get me to tell you what I can prove and what I can't. But I'm not interested in playing bullshit chess with you. Given your past, you need to make friends where you can."

If Hilliard could tie me to some crime, he likely would have revealed it here. I felt confident he was fishing while, at the same time, remaining appropriately frightened.

"I walked around for an hour or so and then I left," I told him. "That's all I know."

"Did you see Iliana Marek?"

And there it was. I shook my head in an effort to keep my expression from changing. "Is that what this is about? Is she missing too?"

Hilliard's eyes widened. "I never said that. It's interesting to me that you would say something about her whereabouts being unknown."

“Well, you’re asking if I saw her. Your son wanted to know where *she* is. And if you knew where Iliana was now, you could ask her yourself, so I drew the natural conclusion.”

“A jury will have to decide if it’s the natural conclusion.”

This was when I probably should have asked for a lawyer, but I decided I would keep my powder dry. For now.

“Tell me everything you did, everything you saw that night,” he said.

I shrugged. “Trees, lizards, birds. All I did was walk and look and listen and zone out.”

“If you think you have something to gain by keeping quiet, you’re fooling yourself. That will get you into the kind of trouble you can’t get out of again. I’ve seen it happen.” He shook his head, recalling with great sadness the many people who had gone to prison whose only mistake had been their failure to confess everything to the police.

“If I had any information, I’d tell you.” I almost started to believe it. I pushed away the central problem—that Iliana and Silvestri were missing. Hilliard wasn’t asking about Silvestri, though.

“Everyone thinks they can hold out,” Hilliard said, after we’d been going around in circles for over an hour. “But I’ve been doing this a long time,

and I know how the story ends."

In the movies, that's when the knock at the door would have come. In real life, it came twenty minutes later. Hilliard went outside, and I could hear a muffled argument. A few minutes after, Benito's mother came into the room, looking all business. There was no sign of the cheerful woman always ready to invite me to stay for dinner. She was in full lawyer mode.

Olga Marciano's face resembled a slender, older, and significantly more female version of Benito's, but that was where the resemblance ended. I had no idea where Benito's height came from, but it wasn't his parents, both of whom were on the short side. Olga Marciano was maybe five-one, but she brimmed with the coiled energy of a greyhound poised to sprint. Despite the hour, she wore a dark pants suit, and her hair was contained in a bun whose severity announced she was absolutely not fucking around.

"Dan, I'm now representing you, and in that capacity, I'm telling you to say nothing."

I nodded. I was happy to say nothing. I was happy to have a lawyer without having to ask for one. Hilliard had hit a dead end.

With Olga Marciano sitting in the room to ensure I said nothing, Hilliard was running out of reasons to hold me. He said that my presence in the

Kitchikuti that night made me a person of interest, but Ms. Marciano made short work of that.

“You’re going to have to explain why my client’s lawful presence in a public place constitutes a reason to hold him.”

Hilliard glowered at me, as though I’d been the one speaking. “You’re hiding something, aren’t you, Dan?”

I glanced over at Ms. Marciano for some guidance.

Hilliard slammed the table. “Don’t look at her! Why are you looking at her? Does she know what you’re hiding? I’m asking you, Dan.”

Ms. Marciano sighed and rubbed her eyes. “Bryce, I know you find the law confusing, so let’s review what a lawyer is and what she is supposed to do for a client.”

Hilliard got up and left the room. Ms. Marciano asked me a few questions, making sure I hadn’t been hurt, and then followed him. An hour later, I was cut loose.

“I really appreciate your helping me out, Ms. Marciano,” I told her as we got into her car.

“I’m glad I heard about this through my contacts. Who knows how long you’d have been there without a lawyer. Next time call me, or at least ask for a lawyer. You know better than to let them question you without representation.”

“I didn’t want to act guilty.”

“Jesus, Dan. He already thinks you’re guilty. It doesn’t matter how you act.”

“I don’t have a lot of money, but—”

“You’re Benny’s friend,” she said. “I wouldn’t take your money. But you need to be straight with me. Do you have any idea why they would want to question you? I’m not suggesting anything, but I need to understand what they’re after.”

Ms. Marciano had always been nice to me, as though she didn’t know or care about my past. Visiting the Marcianos was like stepping into an alternative universe in which I’d never hurt Faye Kristic or ruined my family’s finances.

As my lawyer, Ms. Marciano couldn’t relate to the police anything I told her. I knew she was a good person, but I also recognized that sparkle in her eye. She had a successful career, but she had normal human dreams of doing something more or different. Ms. Marciano was a true-crime podcast enthusiast, and I’d heard her talk about how one day she would turn her legal experience into her own podcast. She’d even casually, as if thinking out loud, pondered delving into my story—as if there weren’t enough Faye Kristic podcasts already.

As tempting as it was to confess everything, I decided I would keep it all locked away. Why stop now? I told her that, based on what the police had asked me, I suspected that Iliana Marek was missing, and that her last known whereabouts must have been the Kitchikuti. Why else would they care that I'd been there?

The headlights of an oncoming car spotlighted her worried expression. "I hadn't heard she's missing, but Friday night was the last time anyone saw that cop. They both disappeared at the same time, so an obvious explanation presents itself."

"That they ran off together?"

"Everyone knows Iliana Marek is impulsive. I've never met Silvestri, but a rookie cop toiling in the records room, with his first baby on the way? Men get jittery. I'm not saying that's what happened, but it's way too obvious an explanation to ignore."

"Then why are they ignoring it?" I asked. "Why bring me in?"

She tapped at the steering wheel for a minute, lost in thought. "Did Hilliard ask you anything about Gregory Meeks?"

This got my attention. "Meeks? No, why?"

"I'm just trying to put pieces together. The estate's been put up for sale, you know."

I didn’t know. I’d heard that everything that had belonged to Meeks—money, land, stocks—was in eternal legal limbo. He’d died intestate, and without obvious heirs, various ex-wives and illegitimate children were trying to cash in. Maybe some or all of that had been sorted out.

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“Hilliard’s always tried to associate you with Meeks,” she said.

I was arrested less than a week after Meeks’ death, and the allegations that he’d used secret technology to spy on underage girls had surfaced only a week before that. Hilliard’s press conference, after my arrest, had deliberately entangled the two cases, suggesting that Tylor’s police department was on a crusade to avenge wronged young women everywhere. Since then, it was rare for anyone to talk about one case without talking about the other. It had been a brilliant PR move, and it was probably the reason Hilliard became police chief, but I didn’t see why it was relevant now.

“People know I’m interested in the Meeks case,” Ms. Marciano continued. “I got a tip a couple of weeks ago that Iliana was seen skulking around his property. I just wondered if this could be connected.”

I shook my head. Meeks hadn’t come up during my encounter—real or imaginary—with Iliana, but I couldn’t exactly say that. “I don’t see how.”

“I don’t either, but you’ve got both Iliana and a cop missing. It makes me wonder if they’re hiding out.”

That surprised me. “From what? Why?”

She shook her head briefly, maybe trying to organize her thoughts. “We’ve all heard that Iliana Marek does shady things for Hilliard. It could be she had Silvestri’s help with something, and it went wrong. What if all of this is not about what they think you did, but what they think you *saw*?”

That hit a little too close to the truth. “I don’t know. Kyle seemed genuinely upset.”

“Maybe he’s upset that you might be in a position to hurt his girlfriend. You really didn’t see anything?”

I hated to lie to her, but recounting the lunacy I imagined was not going to help her navigate my legal situation. The only result was she would look at me differently. “Nothing.”

She gripped the wheel tight, the way you do when things on the road get tense, but we were practically the only ones out there. “If Iliana is missing, then they think you can help find her. And if she’s hiding, then they think you can hurt her. Either way, Bryce Hilliard has his eye on you. You are going to have to be very, very careful.”

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***Aberleigh Alton**: Sarah, we've been receiving some queries from viewers who don't understand why the Tylor Police Department were investigating these crimes at all. Wouldn't criminal activity in a Wildlife Management Area fall under the jurisdiction of the state Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission?*

***Sarah Simmons**: The short answer is that typically it would, but Tylor has a longstanding interlocal agreement with the FWC. Because there are large sections of the Kitchikuti Wildlife Management Area that were once within Tylor city limits, and because in the 1970s, Tylor police found themselves often needing to operate in the area—usually in regards to drug-related crimes—the state agency ceded jurisdictional rights to the Tylor P. D. regarding felonies that had a clear link to Tylor and didn't involve any environmental issues.*

—It's a Great Day, Tampa!

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Chapter 8

When Olga Marciano dropped me off, the sun hadn't begun to think about rising. It was just after four in the morning. I needed to shower and change and probably force myself to eat something. Then I would then drive to the Gas-M-Up and work a full shift. Igor was going to find out that I'd been in police custody and given that he was already talking about replacing me with his slave-wage nephew, I couldn't get away with slacking off.

There is something about the darkness in Florida, when it is obscenely hot and humid, that makes you feel sluggish and vulnerable, like if you find yourself in trouble, there's no way to run fast enough.

As I walked along the side of my parents' house, I saw a light come on. I guessed my parents had heard Ms. Marciano pull up. I'm sure they were wondering what new legal hell their only child was going to rain down on them. Maybe some part of them also worried about me. Was it too much to hope?

I expected to see the house turn dark again, but instead, as I was about to enter my apartment, the kitchen light came on and my father appeared at the back door, which he shoved open with enough force to send it slamming

back against the house. He wore pajamas several sizes too big for him. “What the fuck is going on?”

“It’s nothing.” I had to decide what arrangement of facts and misinformation to offer up. “I mean, it’s something. Iliana Marek is missing along with that cop, and they wanted to talk to me about it.”

My father took a step toward me. “Why? What did you do?”

“I didn’t do anything, Dad. You think I’m going around abducting women and cops? She was seen near where I was on Friday, and Hilliard jumped to conclusions.”

“You’re saying you didn’t have anything to do with it?”

“No, Dad. I did not make two people vanish from this earth.”

“And Hilliard believed you?”

“Why shouldn’t he believe me? I had nothing to do with any of it.”

He folded his arms and stared at me, as though I would wither under the pressure and confess my many crimes. I probably had no business feeling so self-righteous since I actually was hiding a fair amount from both him and the police.

“I’ve been up all night,” I said, “and I need to be at work in less than an hour.”

“So, I’m bothering you? Telling your father why you were arrested is too much of a pain in the ass?”

“I wasn’t arrested,” I told him, “I was questioned.”

“I don’t know what to do anymore.” He sighed like I’d broken his heart. “We’ve tried with you. We really have, but things keep getting worse, and there’s no end to it.”

I understood he and Mom had suffered because of my mistakes, but all I’d done since then was work hard and try to put my life back on track. Yes, I’d recently been involved in something weird and inexplicable and quite possibly homicidal. And yes, after that unintentional thing had happened, I’d lied about it repeatedly, to my therapist, my lawyer, and the police, but even so, I hadn’t wanted any of it. That had to count for something.

I didn’t have the energy to fight with him. I barely had the energy to stand. “Look, it was a misunderstanding. You don’t need to worry about it.”

“Don’t tell me what to worry about,” he said, but I was already walking away.

Somehow, I found a second wind, maybe a third and a fourth. I’m not going to say I was at my sharpest all day, but working at the Gas-M-Up gave me some kind of purpose and direction. A way to focus my foggy thoughts. I didn’t fall asleep on my feet or make stupid mistakes at the register. I’d

managed to set exhaustion aside, and I started to believe I was going to be able to survive long enough for Diego to take the next shift.

Then Kyle Hilliard came in.

He was out of uniform, in expensive jeans, cowboy boots, a tight black T-shirt, and dark sunglasses. He dressed like he imagined he was a movie star or a model, but even the sunglasses could not hide the haggard expression on his already slack face.

“My dad picked a weird time to insist on going by the book,” he announced, after making sure there was no one else in the store. “I don’t have to. Iliana’s been gone almost a week. You know something. Hiding behind your lady lawyer might get you out of police custody, but it won’t help you here.”

“You know we’re being recorded, right?” I gestured toward the cameras around the store.

“Ask me if I give a shit.”

I did not ask him, which I felt deserved some kind of credit.

Kyle took a minute to stare me down until I dutifully averted my gaze. He swept his arm across a packaged snack cake display, scattering fruit pies and cupcakes across the floor. Pink coconut buns wobbled cartoonishly. It probably wasn’t the effect he’d been hoping for, but I was still intimidated, so really, point to Kyle.

“What do you want from me?” I was trying to sound calm, but I was sure I was going to get the crap kicked out of me. “I don’t know anything about Iliana.”

“Not buying it,” he said. “You’re hiding something.”

“What could I be hiding? Do you really think I could have done something to her? That I would have had the nerve to try? And what exactly would my motivation be?”

I feel sure he must have considered this before, but he gave every sign of chewing over what I’d said. I took a moment to congratulate myself for using the present tense to talk about her.

“You were there,” he said, taking a step forward.

“The Kitchikuti is more than 20,000 acres.” I only knew this because I’d recently looked it up to help bolster my dishonest story about not seeing anything. “Even if we were there at the same time, it would be an insane coincidence for us to run into each other.”

He cocked his head, like a dog hearing a distant noise.

“What was she doing in the Kitchikuti anyhow?” I asked.

This was the wrong approach. The semblance of human rationality that had crossed over him was now gone. All that remained was irritation bordering on rage.

Kyle took a step closer, and I understood I was not getting out of this without massive stock loss and likely some physical pain. I had to hope the security cameras would keep him from doing too much damage, but I doubted the threat of being caught would constrain someone who believed himself above the law.

I watched for some sign of his intent so I would know if I should run, duck for cover, or hit the silent alarm. That was why I didn't see the shadow of an approaching customer darken the glass at the front. We were both startled by the door chime.

There, standing at the entrance to the Gas-M-Up, was Iliana Marek.

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Chapter 9

She barely even glanced at Kyle before moving behind him—just another customer, waiting to make her purchases. She wore a long, black skirt and a black-and-red patterned T-shirt. Her thick hair was pulled back in a loose ponytail. She looked casual. Relaxed. The expression was all wrong, almost grotesque. Iliana Marek was a cobra ready to strike. She had never before appeared . . . serene.

An array of emotions passed along Kyle's face. Finally, he settled for anger. "Where the fuck have you been?"

"Go on and finish." She flicked her hand toward the counter. "I'll wait my turn."

Kyle shook his head. "Iliana, where were you?"

She flashed him an exaggerated blink. "Oh. Kyle. You're so insignificant I didn't notice that was you standing there."

"What the fuck are you talking about?" His voice rose an octave and cracked. "You vanished. For *days*. You didn't answer my texts, my dad's texts. Then you show up acting like you don't know me."

She cocked her hip and then adopted a thoughtful pose, one finger on her chin. "It's not that I don't know you. It's that I don't *want* to know you.

Now, hurry up with what you're doing. I have business."

Kyle looked from Iliana to me and then back again. "What business can you have with this shitbag?"

"That, like everything else in my life, doesn't concern you." She stared at him, waiting for him to back down.

He didn't. "'Doesn't concern you?' What the fuck?" He grabbed her wrist, maybe planning to drag her outside. She yanked her arm free and gave him a fierce shove, both hands against his chest. He pinwheeled back and only barely managed to avoid tumbling to the ground. Like an idiot.

Her arm shot out, spearheaded by an accusing finger. "You thought I wouldn't find out about Abby McNabb? That I'm your bimbo and won't care about whatever obvious shit you don't even respect me enough to make a half-assed effort to hide? Get out of my face, and don't ever touch me again."

Kyle, though now a good ten feet away from her, took another step back, looking humiliated but not confused. I had no idea who Abby McNabb was, but I understood she had terrible taste in men and had picked the wrong woman to cross.

I was having a hard time processing any of this. Iliana Marek was still alive, which meant she hadn't been killed by a one-armed maniac with

superior knife skills. I breathed a sigh of relief knowing that there was now no doubt that what I'd seen was indeed a hallucination.

"Stop standing there and gaping at me like you're expecting me to say it's all a joke," Iliana told Kyle. "You're the joke. Spending time with you was a joke."

Kyle straightened up, and his face briefly took on an expression of absolute certainty. "Something happened with you two that night. I'm not leaving here until I know what it is."

"What night could you possibly be talking about?" Iliana asked.

"In the Kitchikuti. He was there the night you disappeared."

She looked over at me. "So, you're saying this dork was in a public place the same time I was in a public place, and so your big brain concluded —what? That he swept me off my feet? That he got the drop on me and kicked my ass? You know what? Don't answer. I've already wasted too much of my life hearing the moronic shit that you come up with. Unless I'm missing some really interesting information, he didn't have anything to do with you hooking up with Abby McNabb. And I'll bet he didn't make her post a video of you two smooching."

"Fuck." He sounded suitably defeated. "If he doesn't have anything to do with you disappearing, then what are you doing here?"

“I’m buying a soda and getting gas. Jesus Christ, Kyle. Did you actually get stupider in the last week?”

Kyle said nothing. Maybe he’d gotten stuck on the weird coincidence that I had been in the same place as Iliana when she’d vanished and now, here I was, in the same place when she returned. Was he calculating the odds? I know I was. Or did he simply think that he’d misunderstood everything, and now he looked like an asshole who’d gotten dumped in front of someone he found contemptible?

All I know is that he left without saying anything else.

“Sorry I called you a dork.” Iliana squatted down to gather the snack cakes Kyle had knocked over. She put them neatly back on the rack. “I wanted to get rid of Kyle, since you and I have to talk. Obviously.”

It wasn’t so obvious to me. She was alive, which, by my calculations, meant she hadn’t been killed. I glanced at the side of her neck, looking for a scar, a scabbed-over wound, any sign that what I’d imagined might have a basis in reality. I saw only healthy, unpunctured skin.

I had no idea what interactions we’d had that night. Clearly there must have been something if she thought we had things to discuss. Part of me knew I had to find out, but another part absolutely did not want to know.

“About what?” I croaked.

Having finished with the snack cakes, she now turned around to see if there was someone in the store she had missed. When she saw no one, when she couldn’t fathom why I was being dense, she looked genuinely puzzled. I’d never seen Iliana puzzled. Normally when she didn’t understand something, she responded with rage. That’s how she’d been in pre-algebra class, when she was likely to hit the person sitting next to her if the teacher made the mistake of calling on her.

“What do you suppose we need to talk about?” she asked. “I walk in and say we need to talk, what’s the first thing that pops into your mind?”

I’m sure my mouth was open. It certainly wasn’t working. I had nothing rational to say, and so I said nothing.

And, it turned out, I didn’t need to say anything. Through the glass doors I saw Diego approaching. He hadn’t shown up fifteen minutes before his shift, as employee policy required, but he was here before his shift started. If he kept it up, he’d be in line for employee of the month.

“I’ve got to go,” I said to Iliana.

She could have kept me from leaving. I had no idea why she didn’t try. I was banking on her not wanting to do anything illegal in front of a witness, and my gamble paid off. I got out of there, and I did not look back.

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Chandler: *So, what was Fallen Angel?*

Mo: *No one knows.*

Chandler: *How can no one know? Gregory Meeks was the man. If he was working on it, people would want in.*

Mo: *But it wasn't unusual for him to be very secretive with projects in development. And keep in mind, not everything Meeks worked on panned out, so he could afford to be secretive.*

Chandler: *But Fallen Angel was something special.*

Mo: *That's what people seem to think, anyway. Supposedly it was Meeks' passion project. He made his billions giving the people what they wanted, and now he was going to spend at least some of that money on Fallen Angel. He was going to give the people what Meeks wanted.*

Chandler: *And there's no record of what he was working on when he died?*

Mo: *Nothing.*

—Tech Time with Mo & Chandler

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Chapter 10

As I was getting into my car, Benito rolled up next to me in his ancient Mercedes which he, of course, worked on himself. I could hear the bass thump of Insane Clown Posse, though he lowered the volume before lowering his window.

"Yo, homes. I hear you had yourself a night."

"Yeah, thank your mom again for me." I was still trying to get my thoughts together, to make sense of Iliana Merek's return, but I didn't want my confusion to be on full display. I tried to act like everything was normal.

Except Iliana wanted to talk to me, and that couldn't be good. I made a decision not to let Benito know about any of this because he'd want to help me. I couldn't risk mixing him up with something that would put him on Iliana's radar.

"She's on high alert," he told me, "ready to swoop in if twelve makes another move."

"It's great material for her future podcast," I said, trying to change the subject.

"Yeah, she'd love to do that, but you know she'd never exploit you."

“I know,” I told him. The last thing I wanted was Benito thinking I resented his mother’s help. “Anyhow, I doubt the cops will be bothering me again. Iliana just walked into the store, which means she’s not missing.” I wished I could have sounded more enthusiastic, but I figured Benito would attribute my ambivalence to lack of sleep.

“Hell, yeah. We have to celebrate. Some homies are getting together tonight for a low-key party, and I’m dragging you along. No excuses this time.”

I shook my head. “I was at the police station literally all night. I’m too exhausted to think about doing anything other than sleeping.”

“Homes, it’s one in the afternoon. Grab some sleep, and I’ll pick you up around nine or so.”

“I don’t think—”

“You got to stop living in the past. I overheard all these conversations when I was grabbing lunch over at the K-K. Everyone in town was talking about how it’s bullshit that Hilliard picked you up for this. People have moved on. Maybe you should too.”

I hadn’t had a chance to eat more than a couple of slices of bread before heading to work that morning, and then a microwave burrito on the job, and those never went down easy. It made me wistful to hear Benito talk about the K-K—Katie’s Kitchen, a local institution. I literally dreamed

about the omelets there. I hadn’t been in for seven years because I didn’t dare sit down and eat at a restaurant, but maybe Benito was right. Maybe most people had moved on.

I felt the seductive lure of a party, talking to people I didn’t know, having a few beers, being normal for once. I was also thinking strategically. With my dad threatening to kick me out, with Igor talking about replacing me, it was time for me to face the very realistic prospect of changing jobs and apartments. It couldn’t hurt to meet people who might know someone who knows someone.

It was ridiculous to imagine this party as a gateway to a new life, but I was tired, and I got Benito’s point. I wanted to pretend I was a normal person. In that isolated moment, it seemed like a good idea.

The house belonged to a guy named Brandon, who knew Benito through something related to his gaming work. There were more details, but they didn’t stick. I’d gone home and managed to get a few hours of sleep, but I was still tired and not at my absolute sharpest.

It was an older ranch house, with an overgrown lawn and faded furniture, but the TV looked expensive and there were several videogame consoles lying around, so it was clear where Brandon’s priorities lay. A few

people were hanging out in front of the TV playing a battle royale game, and others were lurking in the kitchen, but most of the action was outside. It was hot and humid, it being Florida in June, but Brandon had several large fans going and too many citronella candles to count. It was surprisingly pleasant out there.

Everyone was in their mid-twenties to early thirties, but of the three dozen or so guests, I recognized only a handful from high school. It started to occur to me that Tylor really had changed, cycling new people in and out in a way that would have been inconceivable when I was younger. Back then, what passed for adventurous food was a Chinese place in a run-down shack with cracked leather booths and free French fries. Now there were all kinds of Asian restaurants, an Ethiopian place, and several Middle Eastern eateries. There were three vegetarian restaurants, and at least one vegan place I knew of. Those restaurants couldn't have survived in the Tylor where I grew up. Maybe I really was living in a past most people had already forgotten.

Benito got called over by a girl with cat's-eye glasses and pink hair. I didn't want to cramp his style, so I wandered over to the cooler and grabbed a beer. I wasn't sure how many of them I could indulge in with my lack of sleep and my maintenance dose of alprazolam, but it was something to do.

A moon-faced Black guy with short dreads was grabbing a beer at the same time. “Hey, I’m Azi.” He reached out a hand for me to shake.

“Dan.”

“Oh, shit! You’re the dude! Benito said you’d be here.” He clinked my beer bottle with his.

I felt the familiar fear. I was caught. He knew who I was, which meant I would either have to talk about *things* or get the fuck out of there.

“I’m on the *Dangerous Realms* art team,” he said. “Benito’s always passing along your feedback. Man, the suggestions you made for the UI were *fire*. I never would have thought of rearranging the resource data that way, but it really makes the game a thousand times more intuitive. Why aren’t you on our Discord?”

Benito’s publishing deal allowed him to hire people to work with him, but I had no idea any of them were local. It was also weird for this guy to know me not as the person behind a national scandal, but as someone who’d given useful feedback on Benito’s game.

I shrugged. “Honestly, I’m not much of a gamer. I sometimes offer suggestions to Benito, but I don’t really know what I’m talking about.”

“I guess not being in the thick of the development lets you see stuff with fresh eyes. Hey, give me your number. I have a few design ideas I

want to work on a little before I suggest them to the chief, and I'd love to know what you think."

"Yeah, sure." I made no move to actually provide the number. I suspected Benito had told this guy to be nice to me. "Are you from Tylor?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Broward. I moved here last year. I'd been working with Benito for about six months before that, but then I got a second freelance gig at Ripe Mellon, and they wanted to go hybrid, so I figured it made sense to relocate to where the action is."

"Ripe Mellon?"

"Another gaming startup," he said.

"In Tylor?"

He laughed. "Yeah, Tylor's become a mini nerd-hub. I guess a lot of the old money people don't want strangers moving here, changing the flavor of the place, but this town has had a secret tech vibe for a few years. Plus, it's got some history, what with Fallen Angel and all."

"What's Fallen Angel?" I asked.

"Oh, yeah, sorry. I forget that everybody doesn't live in my own rabbit hole. That's the code name of whatever Gregory Meeks was working on when he died. No one knows for sure what it was, and given his track record—a dating app, a cash-transfer app, a social media platform—it could

have been anything. I was just listening to a podcast that talked about how the whole thing was funded with crypto so he could keep it secret."

I raised my beer a little. "Here's to Tylor's storied past."

He clinked his bottle to mine again.

"This town definitely has that."

I looked over and saw the speaker was a woman about my age—slender, Asian, and vaguely goth in a black T-shirt and long, black skirt and a vivid streak of blue in her shoulder-length hair. In addition to more gaming studios, there were way more women with unusual hair colors in Tylor than there used to be.

"The present seems pretty storied too," she said.

"Right?" Azi agreed, clinking her beer bottle with his. "Hopefully in a good way."

Did these two already know each other, or was this how strangers behaved when they were at the same party and had a sense of belonging? I had absolutely no idea.

"Oh, shit, there's my boyfriend," Azi said. "We're looking to adopt a puppy, and he's been trying to get in with a French bulldog breeder. See you guys." Azi ran off to talk to a Nordic giant in shorts and an expensive-looking Hawaiian shirt who'd wandered in brandishing a bottle of expensive tequila.

“Naomi Kwon,” the woman said to me, clinking my beer bottle either in appreciation or mockery of Azi.

“Dan,” I said, opting to leave out the last name because I wasn’t ready to make that leap quite yet, especially not when talking to an attractive woman.

“How do you know Brandon?” she asked.

“I don’t. I’m friends with Benito.” I gestured toward him with my beer.

“The *Dangerous Realms* guy. Nice.”

“Another gaming person?”

She shook her head. “I’m a writer. I did some freelance marketing work for a couple of local startups, including Benito’s game, but that was a while back.”

I was immensely relieved when she asked me nothing about my job, though she probably already knew who I was.

She demonstrated that was the case before I managed another sip of my beer. “I heard you had a run-in with the cops last night.”

Tylor might have way more gaming studios than I would have supposed a couple of hours ago, but it was still a small town where everyone knew everyone’s business. I normally would have hated a stranger

bringing up a run-in with the police, but Iliana was alive. I could tell myself nothing I'd seen that night was real.

"The police chief's foster daughter went missing," I explained. "I'd been in the same general area where she was last seen. She turned up today anyhow, so it was all about nothing."

"It sounds terrifying," she said. "I've heard some dicey things about Tylor cops."

"I was nervous for sure," I told her. "And they kept me there for most of the night, locked in an interrogation room."

"Have you considered suing them?"

I shook my head. "I have to live in Tylor, and that would not end well."

"You're afraid of police harassment?"

I was about to tell her about Kyle Hilliard taking whatever he wanted from the Gas-M-Up, but I didn't want to take any risk that my complaint would get back to the police chief. I also wasn't quite ready to tell this woman that I worked at the gas station. She was attractive and seemed to be hanging on my every word. I had no expectation that this conversation could lead to anything, but I was enjoying cosplaying someone with a normal life.

Naomi took my empty bottle and got us a couple of fresh beers. “Have you ever heard of anything else like that happening?” she asked. “I mean, the cops taking someone in with no evidence and then abusing them. This isn’t a big city with an overtaxed police force. There’s no need to let someone sit for hours. Did they offer you anything to eat or drink? Did they let you use the bathroom?”

“You don’t live here, do you?” I asked.

“Tampa.”

“It’s easy to talk about not putting up with small-town crap, but unless you have a lot of power behind you, you can’t change anything. There’s a system here in Tylor. We have a lot of rich people, and the cops look out for them. The rich people, in turn, look out for the cops.”

She sighed. “Yeah, I get that. I wasn’t saying that all of this is your responsibility. But do people ever complain about it?”

“The truth is the cops keep the town safe,” I said. “If that means running off the homeless or beating up burglars, then most people are happy to look the other way.”

“If they have money,” she said.

“We’re not in the nicest part of Tylor, but crime is low. No one worries about getting their house broken into or their car stolen. I’m not

defending what the cops do, but there's not going to be a public outcry about things most people don't see."

"What about the missing cop?" she asked. "Any guesses?"

I had a clear memory of Quin Silvestri's body, his head turned backward, his eyes open and reflecting the light of his dropped phone.

"Are you okay?" Naomi put a hand on my wrist and left it there. "Did you know him?"

I tried to wipe away my apparently distressed expression. I didn't want to try too hard, though, because I liked the feeling of Naomi's hand on my skin. Did she touch everyone, or was this real attraction? Maybe this was what having chemistry with someone felt like. I'd been shy and awkward around girls when I was still in high school, and being a pariah had left me little opportunity for romance. I was too inexperienced to understand how to interpret either Naomi's actions or my feelings. It was shameful in a man my age, but it was the hand I'd been dealt.

Naomi was about to ask another question when something shifted in the air. The music didn't come screeching to a halt and conversation didn't end, but a significant number of people stopped talking. I think I must have noticed that they stopped moving too. Naomi also looked up, so I understood whatever had changed was not merely in my imagination.

I turned around and saw Iliana Marek strolling through Brandon's back yard.

I had to assume that there were a fair number of people at the party who had no idea who she was. Even so, Brandon's guests must have sensed something about her. They parted as though a water moccasin had slipped into a swimming pool. She eased through the crowds. Her movements had a gentle sway to them, though not quite in time with the music. She languidly grabbed a bottle of beer and effortlessly flipped the top off with her thumb. She took a long swallow as she gazed around the yard.

She noticed the stares and the tension, so she offered a casual wave with her free hand. "Hey, guys."

Brandon seemed to know who she was. He walked over to her, hands slightly raised, palms out, eager to show he was no threat. "We don't want any trouble here."

"Me either!" she announced cheerfully. This was a far cry from Iliana's typical dark, cynical monotone. That was how she had talked in high school and then how I had heard, or imagined, her talking the night in the Kitchituti. I couldn't be sure I'd heard her say much in the seven years between.

She gave Brandon a pat on the shoulder. “Your place is so cute.” She walked right past him and headed toward me. Or maybe Naomi. I mean, there was no reason to believe I was at the center of everything.

“Hi there,” Iliana said to Naomi. “I’m Iliana.”

Naomi gave a little wave. “Naomi. And this is Dan.”

“Oh, I know Dan. We went to school together.”

“We didn’t move in the same circles.” I wouldn’t want Naomi to think that Iliana and I had been friends, which would imply I’d been holding things back from her. Of course, I had been keeping plenty of secrets, but Naomi didn’t need to know that.

“That’s true,” Iliana said thoughtfully. “I wasn’t very nice back then.”

For someone who had been so interested in the workings of the Tylor P. D., Naomi proved strangely oblivious to the danger Iliana presented. If anything, her expression shifted to delight rather than fear. Maybe she was one of those people who clicked with everyone.

“I heard you were missing for a few days,” Naomi said.

“I knew where I was,” she corrected, “which means I wasn’t missing. There were some people I didn’t want to deal with. You ever want to change your life? To become a different person?”

“I guess we all feel that way sometimes,” Naomi said.

“I was involved with people who I realized didn’t care about me, so I took some time to think. It was like I was entering a chrysalis, and now I’ve emerged transformed.”

“Is one of the people you wanted to cut ties with the chief of police?” Naomi asked.

I covered my gasp with a fake cough. What was Naomi’s deal? I got that she didn’t know Iliana, but how could baiting her be a good idea?

Iliana didn’t seem upset at all. “That’s actually kind of personal.” She ran a hand through her tangled hair, and I noticed that she now had a red streak in it, similar to Naomi’s blue streak. What the hell was going on here?

“I didn’t mean to offend you,” Naomi said.

“Oh, you’re fine, but I don’t want to talk about my foster father tonight.” She met my eyes. “You know what I do want to talk about, Dan? I bet you do.”

I didn’t even bother to mumble an excuse. I’d had my most normal human interaction in the past seven years, and Iliana had arrived to upend it. I couldn’t get away from her, even when I wasn’t hallucinating. Trish liked to tell me I needed to protect myself, and I was damn well about to do that.

Benito was talking to a handful of nerdy types, but he looked up in alarm when he saw me coming over to him.

“Look, thanks for inviting me, but I need to get going.”

“What’s up, homes? You were doing all right with that cutie.”

“Yeah, until Iliana showed up. She’s freaking me out. I need to get away from her.”

“I don’t know what she’s up to, but she’s not doing anything to get herself kicked out. And he can’t exactly call the cops.”

“I don’t need to ruin anyone’s night. I’m going to lay low.”

“I hear you. Let me give you a ride home.”

“I can call an Uber,” I said.

“Naw, man. I got you.”

I really couldn’t afford an Uber, so as much as I didn’t want to take him away from his people, I accepted his offer.

It took Benito a little longer than I would have liked for him to extricate himself from the party, so I spent a nervous fifteen minutes hiding in the bedroom, waiting for him to text me that he was ready. Once we got in his car, he kept shifting his eyes, trying to glean some clue about what was going on.

“You had an okay time?” he asked, once we were on the road. “Bang! Pow! Boom!” was playing on the stereo. A lot of ICP fans hated the album’s

poppy direction, but Benito thought it was an accessible masterpiece. It dawned on me that it was weird that I knew all of this.

I ticked down the volume another notch because a song called “Imma Kill U” was not what I needed at the moment. “Yeah, I really did. It was fun until, you know, it wasn’t.”

“What’s up with that?” One arm flew up in exasperation. “I don’t want to pry, but damn. Some freaky shit is going down. The business with the cops thinking you offed her or whatever, and now it’s like she’s stalking you.”

“I think I might have seen something in the Kitchikuti.” Maybe it was time to open up a little. I wasn’t ready to reveal the whole story, but now that I knew Iliana was alive, I could tell Benito at least a portion of it. “I think I saw something that has Iliana and the cops worried.”

“You *think*? Wouldn’t you know?”

“Maybe not. I had an issue with a new prescription. It was nothing major, but I’m not entirely sure what I saw or didn’t see.”

He rounded his eyes and made a big O with his mouth. “You had full on hallucinations?”

“Nothing like that,” I said, even though it was exactly like that. I hated lying to Benito, but I was afraid of how he’d look at me if I told him everything.

“They think you saw something, but you can’t be sure because maybe you were hallucinating?”

“Yeah, pretty much.”

“You hallucinated seeing normal trees and shit,” he continued. “That was your hallucination. *Damn, check that out! There’s no police corruption happening in that spot!* That’s a pretty lame hallucination.”

“It’s a theory.”

“What does Iliana say?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I keep avoiding her.”

“How long do you think you can get away with that?” he asked.

“Not long.”

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Chapter 11

ILIANA

Iliana’s two-bedroom ranch house was fewer than 1,500 square feet, with small bedrooms and closets, clearly pre-war. The exterior flamingo-pink paint was pristine, the landscaping both lush and well-managed. It could have been charming, but the interior felt as sterile as an operating theater. A few generic and lifeless posters hung from the walls, as though someone without any taste—even bad taste—had tried to imagine how a normal person might make a house feel comfortable.

The furnishings were simple and functional. The main bedroom contained a queen-size bed and a night table. The secondary bedroom served as an exercise room. The dining area off the kitchen held a simple wooden table with four chairs, but scuff marks on the floor suggested three of them had rarely been used.

Iliana could recall with perfect fidelity the messages she’d received from both Bryce and Kyle Hilliard. Kyle didn’t concern her. She’d already spoken to him, and he understood her meaning. Or he didn’t, but it didn’t matter. He was a pest, but he had no capacity to hurt her.

The father could hurt her.

After her unsuccessful conversation with Dan Gibson at the gas station that afternoon, she'd driven to the nearest Publix to load up her refrigerator, which had contained only a lonely mayonnaise jar and a Styrofoam clamshell incubating moldy leftovers. Iliana did not plan on remaining in Tylor for more than another two weeks. That should be enough time for her to complete her business or for her plan to collapse. Meanwhile, she wanted to surround herself with the things that brought her comfort.

She wanted foods she liked. She wanted good coffee and a nice selection of teas. There were certain times of day when, if she wasn't busy, she would feel an inexplicable yearning, and only tea would answer. She could sit and look out the window and block out all sensations but flavor and temperature. She suspected her mind still churned away somewhere in the background, but for those few minutes, she could make herself quiet and calm. Even happy.

She also wanted beer, which she had enjoyed for as long as she could remember, and wine, which she was learning to appreciate. Iliana had a sophisticated palate, and she liked breaking down the nuances of flavor and scent and mouthfeel. She could isolate separate components and then break them down to their many constituent parts. Once she'd sat in a motel room and did nothing but take small sips of a bottle of wine over the course of

nine and a half hours. She could have kept going longer, but she'd heard a man yelling at his wife or girlfriend in the next room. It sounded as though things could become violent, so she'd gotten up to correct the situation. After that, moving on seemed wise.

She wondered if someday she could study to be a sommelier. She knew that the training would take years, but it was possible to imagine a future in which she might have nothing but time. There was a long way to go before she got there, but she liked to ponder different futures. If her plan went well, nothing was beyond her reach.

Iliana drove a six-year-old Jaguar XF. It was a dark metallic blue, a color she quite liked—pleasing but also inconspicuous. Curiously, the color triggered an emotion: satisfaction. She could not recall a previous experience in which she entangled color and emotion, and she filed this observation away for further analysis.

The car itself was an interesting signifier. It suggested wealth, but it was not much more expensive than more practical makes from the same year. She'd found it glistening in the spotless garage as though it had just been detailed. The interior was without a scratch or blemish.

At the grocery store, Iliana had parked it near the back of the lot—ideal for easy getaways—not minding the walk, and always eager to avoid unnecessary interactions. Most of the people in the busy store ignored her.

A few made a point of not looking at her. The young woman who checked her out seemed desperate not to make eye contact.

Back at her little house, after preparing a lunch of rice vermicelli with vegetables in a spicy broth, she fixed herself a mug of ginger tea and went back to her ongoing project. The information in the house had not added much to what she knew. There was no computer, no other phone, no records. There had to be more, but Iliana could not locate it. Maybe another pair of eyes would find what she'd missed, but she was certain she had reached her own limit. She had gleaned all there was to learn from her phone, but even so, she returned to those repositories—the photos, the social media posts, the voicemails and emails and texts. It was all she had.

She'd been reluctant to reach out to Dan Gibson, but she had to trust someone. There wasn't much of a chance of succeeding otherwise. Tylor contained too many dangers, and Dan Gibson was not one of them. He already knew more than he should, so even though providing him with additional context brought significant risk, she could think of it as walking through a door that she herself had blown wide open. Besides, there was something about him that she trusted.

The conversation at the gas station had gone about the way she'd anticipated. Kyle had been harassing the guy, and stepping in seemed like the right thing to do. She liked doing the right thing, and hoped Dan would appreciate her efforts, but it hadn't gone that way.

She'd hoped to have more time with Dan when she followed him to the party. Music, alcohol, the smell of cannabis in the air, suggested a more relaxed atmosphere. Dan was talking to a woman who conformed to general standards of attractiveness. Maybe he was flirting. She couldn't always tell the difference between flirting and conversation. She watched him and sipped her beer, enjoying the cold, the explosion of carbonation, and the sense of ease that increased fractionally with every swallow.

There was something about Dan that felt comfortable and right. He was going to be able to help her. She saw it unfold as though it had already happened. There was a lot of history to get past, but she knew how to be charming. She often deployed charm strategically, and its falseness left a cold and plastic-smooth residue in her core. It would be nice to set aside such pretenses.

Iliana watched while Dan gazed at the woman as though he supposed she could change his life. She could not explain why, but that was how she felt about Dan. She would change his life, and he would change hers. He was going to be her friend, a real friend. In a way, it had already started.

The conversation at the party did not go well, but that was fine. It was a process. Maybe she was a little disappointed, but she also recognized that her expectations were unrealistic. She would have to earn his trust.

She stopped at a gas station—not the one where Dan worked—to buy a twelve-pack of the beer she'd enjoyed at the party. It seemed polite to show up with a gift, and it was her experience that alcohol could make big things feel more manageable.

Moments after she left the gas station parking lot, flashing red and blue appeared in her rearview mirror. Cops were always bad. Iliana could not fully articulate, even in the privacy of her own thoughts, how much she would hate to leave Tylor without accomplishing her goals, but she had to be realistic. She gently touched the carbon fiber handle of the knife in her pocket, reassuring herself with its presence. She would only kill if the cop deserved to die, but she knew how to incapacitate without killing. She was prepared to incapacitate a lot of people rather than be captured.

She pulled over and waited for an officer to emerge from the patrol car. No Tylor cop would need to run her plates. She knew she hadn't

violated any traffic rules, because she was always aware of them, always obeyed them. She'd had three beers and was not anywhere near incapacitated. No matter how much she drank, how much she let the alcohol soften and slow the energetic workings of her mind, her coordination and control never wavered. She had tested herself and knew it to be true.

She watched in her mirror as the cop at last stepped out of the car and approached her window.

Lenny Teuling. She thought about the pictures in her camera roll, the police events where he and Iliana were both in the image. She'd been able to identify him by running his image through a search engine. Teuling was always gazing at Iliana as if waiting for her to slip up. It made sense. Teuling had been the old chief's fixer, and now Iliana played that role for the new chief. Teuling was still hanging around, reduced to being an ordinary cop. That had to sting.

Iliana rolled down the window and grinned as Teuling approached. "Hey, Lenny. How's your night going?" She was fucking with him—being friendly and unconcerned, not giving him what he expected. She was also being herself, since she was fundamentally a sociable person.

"You know the whole town is looking for you?" His eyes were the same color as his mustache. There was something pleasing about his look—

the broad face, the squared-off jaw, the intensity of those gray eyes. But Iliana was not fooled by appearances. No one should be.

"I *do* know that," she said. "It's sweet."

He looked at her, as though he expected her to wither under his gaze. "What are you up to? I could almost think you're trying to convince Hilliard not to trust you anymore."

That was exactly what she was doing. "Wow, that's a lot of concern. I love it, but it's also a little out of character."

He blinked a couple of times. "You sound different. Are you fucked up on something?"

"Not at all," she said, "but I am different, though. You're right about that. I'm making some changes."

"I guess you are. Tell me about Silvestri," Teuling said, not skipping a beat, trying to throw her off, as though in an unguarded moment she'd slip up and tell him what he wanted to know.

"I only know he's missing. He rub anyone in the department the wrong way?"

"If he had, you'd be the one to know about it." Teuling did not bother to try to conceal the bitterness. There was a time when he would have been the one to know about it.

“I suppose that’s true.” She indulged in a dramatic sigh. “Is there anything else you need?”

“I’m offering you a hand here, but I don’t expect you to take it. Your problem is you don’t see the rest of us as actual people. We’re, I don’t know, wind-up toys, electric trains going round and round. It never occurred to you that we might notice you and Silvestri vanished at the same time.”

“Electric trains, Lenny?” Iliana said. “You’re showing your age.”

“Cute, but Hilliard is going to have questions, and I wonder if you have answers he’ll like.”

“I’m happy to tell anyone anything at any time,” she said with a grin, thinking about the dozens of ignored texts and voicemails. “I’m an open book.”

“I used to think that was true. I used to think there was absolutely nothing to you beyond what was on the surface. Now, I don’t know.” He patted the hood of her Jaguar a couple of times like it was a good dog. Then he walked back to his car. Iliana did not know what she was supposed to take away from the conversation. She knew there was a message and that Teuling considered it delivered.

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Chapter 12

DAN

When I opened the door to my apartment, Iliana Marek was sitting in my only chair, holding a bottle of the same brand of beer she'd been drinking at Brandon's house. She must have brought it with her because it hadn't come from my fridge. I couldn't afford craft beer. I couldn't afford cheap beer.

Iliana remained seated, taking a sip from her bottle, but her intense green eyes never left me. "Dan, I get that you're avoiding me, but we really do need to talk."

I stood frozen in the door frame, my thoughts pickled in a familiar brine of terror and disbelief and despair. It was happening again. Iliana again. I wondered if I could run. I could take off in my car and, if I got away, I could go—where? Do what? My bank account was almost empty. Iliana had all the resources of law enforcement. Tylor was my prison, and its borders might as well have been barbed wire fence.

There was nothing for me to do but have the conversation, so I stepped in and gently pressed the door to the frame so that it didn't close all the way. It was a childish gesture, as if somehow escape were still an option.

“This is a nice beer,” she said, “so I bought some on the way over. Have you tried it? Though maybe you don’t like it. I should have asked first.”

On rubbery legs, I managed to make my way over to my mini-fridge, which was now overfilled with beer. I grabbed a bottle and fumbled with the opener that she’d also thoughtfully provided.

She gestured toward the bed. “Have a seat. Make yourself comfortable.”

I sat with the empty acceptance of a man sentenced to die, waiting for the inevitable. How was it going to come? A bullet, a knife, a garrote, her bare hands. Anything was possible. She was smaller than me, but I could not stop her. No one could.

No one but the one-armed woman, but that had never happened. It couldn’t have, because Iliana was alive and in my apartment.

“You’ve probably got a lot of questions,” she said, “so ask away, or should I tell you what I think is important?”

My mouth was dry, so I took a sip of the beer, the bottle clicking uncomfortably against my teeth. Even so, the drink soothed the terror fractionally. “What do you want?”

“Huh.” She looked disappointed. “Not what I was expecting. Maybe you’re an incurious person. I can’t imagine being that way, but everyone’s

different. I mean, I'm not being critical. I've been seriously debating how much I could safely tell you, but if you're cool not hearing any of it, that works for me."

"Are you going to kill me?"

She laughed. Iliana's laugh had always been an expression of malice. Not now. It was kind. Everything she did and said seemed kind. "Dan, if I wanted to kill you, you'd have died days ago, and you wouldn't have seen me coming. But I don't kill innocent people. I don't kill people for knowing more about me than I want them to. I mean, I know that now, since I've never been in this situation before. I guess we can call it a policy. It will be my plan going forward. I do kill when necessary, as you well know."

"I don't know anything," I sputtered. "You disappeared, and now you're acting totally different. You keep expecting me to know what's going on, but I don't."

She opened her mouth to say something and then paused. She blinked a few times. "You think I'm the same Iliana you knew before last week?"

I had no idea what to do with this question. "Do you have amnesia or something? Does that happen in real life? I mean, I know you can forget stuff. Obviously, *I* know that. But to forget who you are? I thought that was just a TV plot."

“It’s funny you should ask about amnesia. We can get to that later, but you know I’m not Iliana. Or I wasn’t. You should call me Iliana, because that’s my name now, but Old Iliana is dead. You saw me kill her. I don’t understand what’s going on. Do *you* have amnesia?”

“It’s funny you should ask that,” I said.

“You thought you hallucinated it?” she asked with undisguised incredulity. “Do you do a lot of hallucinating?”

Nothing she was saying adhered to logic or reason or the way the world worked, but at the same time, I was beginning to grow comfortable with her. She was friendly and warm and kind of goofy. Other than being physically identical to the person I remembered, she was entirely unlike Iliana Marek. She was, in fact, the one-armed woman. Only now she was Iliana’ Marek’s double. Simple, really.

“I was on some new meds, and there was some stuff in my past. Besides, what was I supposed to think? That Iliana and a cop wanted to murder me, and then some mysterious one-armed woman killed them and dragged Iliana’s body into the woods. And then, I guess, went back and concealed all the evidence and somehow grew another arm and turned herself into an Iliana clone?”

“Well,” she said. “That *is* what happened.”

“You saw what was going on and figured, what the hell. Might as well kill those two?”

“They were subjecting you to violence, Dan, and violent people meet violent ends.”

“Why do you need my help?” I asked her.

“Because I’m taking over Iliana’s life, and there’s plenty I don’t know—about her and about this town and the people in it. And frankly I’m not sure I always understand human interactions. I worry that there are layers I’m missing.”

Okay, so she was not human. Then what was she? I knew she was dangerous, but she was trying to make it clear that she wasn’t dangerous to *me*. She came across as sincere. Not that this put me at ease. I wanted nothing to do with whatever this was. No one would. “What makes me the person you turn to for this?”

“You’re the one person who knows I’m not the original Iliana,” she said. “And I think you owe me for saving your life. I assumed you might want to return the favor by answering some questions. Honestly, it didn’t seem like that much of a stretch, but you’re a lot harder to deal with than I was expecting.”

I’d made the . . . shapeshifter . . . feel bad. I didn’t want to be hard to deal with, especially to someone who had saved my life, but I was having

some trouble taking in everything she was telling me. Everything I'd seen that night in the Kitchikuti had really happened.

"So, what sort of, I don't know, *entity*, are you? How can you completely impersonate another person?" I asked. "And grow an arm. And why do you want to? And why Iliana?"

"I guess now you have questions," she said.

"Are you an alien or something?"

She shook her head. "It's a possibility. And a very cool one. I'm definitely not ruling it out."

"My first memory is from fourteen weeks ago. I was in the woods in North Carolina, with no idea how I got there, who I was, or really anything. I understood, more or less, *what* I was and what I could do, but not much more."

"What are you?" I asked. "What can you do?"

"I can regrow limbs and impersonate people." She flashed me a big smile. "But you knew that. I guess the best way to describe myself is as a semi-organic artificial lifeform capable of altering my appearance. Which takes time, by the way. That's why I went missing. It depends on how different the appearance and body mass is, but it can take anywhere from three days to more than a week. To become Iliana, I didn't have to change my body configuration too much, but growing an arm is a whole deal."

I shook my head. This could not be happening, and yet it was. I now knew Iliana Marek and Quinton Silvestri had, in fact, lured me out to the Kitchikuti in order to make me bury a couple of dead people, but their plan had been thwarted by a doppelganger. It was too much. It was impossible and yet undeniably real.

“We need to slow down. I have so many questions.”

She tilted her head, amused. “Yeah, that was always inevitable.”

“Where do you come from? Who made you?”

“I already told you. I don’t know.”

“But the technology to do what you do doesn’t exist,” I announced, but then realized the fact that she was here, in my apartment, disproved what I was saying. “Does it?”

“Clearly it does, but I agree that it shouldn’t. I don’t see any evidence for it, even in experimental form, anywhere else in the world. Maybe small fragments here and there, but everything put together on a grand scale? Absolutely not. So, what am I? A super top-secret experimental prototype? A being from outer space? An alternate universe? The future? They’re all options worth considering. Am I the only one of my kind or are there a bunch of us? I wish I knew.”

“Are you an AI?” I asked.

She raised her eyebrows, eager to dive into this. “I don’t have my own schematics, and I can’t really see what’s going on in my skull any more than you can in yours, but based on how I perceive the world, combined with what I understand about human cognition, I suspect I have a modified organic brain taken from a host subject.”

“A host subject,” I repeated. “You mean they killed someone and took their brain in order to make you.”

“It’s a theory,” she answered, “but there’s no way of knowing if anyone was killed. A brain might have been harvested from an accident victim. Or my brain might be comprised of parts of many brains or grown in a lab. I don’t know. I’ve never had any memories that are not my own. I don’t have some other personality trapped inside me. And obviously I don’t know what other people’s thoughts are like, but I’ve done my homework, and I suspect my thinking is more human than machine. But again, just guessing here.”

This was a lot to take in, and I was having a hard time with the idea that she didn’t know what she was. “When you grow an arm or turn into another person, what are you doing? I mean, you must understand it on some level.”

“When you recover from a cold or heal a cut, what are you doing?” she countered.

“Okay, sure, but I don’t choose to do those things.”

“But what about when you, I don’t know, decide to let a fart rip. You’re making it happen, but do you know how?”

“I could look it up,” I told her.

“I don’t have that luxury. I know how to grow a limb or change my appearance, but I don’t know what I’m doing exactly. I make it happen, just like you can make clearing your throat happen. I can’t explain it better than that.”

I was still trying to get my head around the basic premise. She was some kind of robot or cyborg or android or whatever. I wasn’t sure about the terminology, and I wasn’t clear on if she knew herself what she should be called. On the one hand, I was encountering something unique and science fictional. I’d gone from being an absolute nobody to an extremely marginal figure in a story of undeniable significance.

“I get that I’m someone you can talk to because I’ve seen things that I wasn’t supposed to see, but how am I supposed to help you?”

“Since I first woke up, my biggest challenge has been finding a way to blend in and function. I want to be able to dedicate myself to learning where I come from and if there are others like me, but it’s hard to rent an apartment if you don’t have an ID, a credit history, and general proof of being a human being and a citizen. Getting fake papers, ones that will fool the police if necessary, isn’t easy. Movies and books make it seem

straightforward if you have the right contacts, but even if that's true, it would involve conducting business with unscrupulous criminals. The last thing I want is to get arrested for any reason. I don't know for sure, but I suspect a simple blood test or urine sample would reveal that I'm not a human being, and then I would be locked away forever. When I had to kill the original Iliana, I saw that as my chance to assume her identity. You're the only one who knew she was dead. I could take her place and spend a week or two here making it clear to everyone that I was ready to leave Tylor."

"And you want me to help you impersonate Iliana," I said, "because I know her so well?"

"You know her, and this town, better than I do." She arched an eyebrow. "You know her well enough for her to want to kill you."

"But I have no idea why."

"Huh. That's interesting." She finished her beer and stood up to grab another from my fridge. "You want?"

"Definitely. Also, why do you even drink beer if you're . . . not, I don't know, biological?"

"I'm very biological," she corrected. "Just not one hundred percent. And I require nutrients and liquids to survive, though a lot less than you,

and my body disregards what it doesn't need, so I don't gain weight. Unless I want to. And I drink beer because I enjoy it."

"Can you get drunk?"

She smirked. "It's been known to happen. One more reason to suspect my brain is at least partially organic."

I shook my head. It was all too much for me. "What do I even call you?"

"I'm Iliana now. I don't know my original name, or if I have one, so I've assumed different ones as convenient. But once I take a name, it's mine. I don't have to work to remember it or even to think of myself as that name."

That seemed weird, but I guess no more so than the rest of it.

"What do you have in mind, exactly? I mean, what can I do that would be helpful?"

"Now you're talking! I'm so excited to have you on board, Dan. You can answer my questions. When things come up, I'll run them by you, and you can tell me what you think. You'll be my consultant. I'm so excited to finally have someone I can work with!"

In less than an hour, I had come to believe the impossible. I did not, for a second, doubt that what this new Iliana said was true—or at least part of the truth. I fully accepted that she was not the Iliana who'd terrorized my

high school. I'd seen that person die. Besides, the Iliana Marek I knew could not laugh and hang out with me like we were old friends or something.

It wasn't just that I was drawn to being part of something bigger than myself, of helping someone who was truly remarkable. I also owed her. I would be dead right now, buried with two strangers, if New Iliana had not come along.

"You really don't know why they wanted to kill you?" she asked.

I shook my head. "Not even a crazy guess." I gave her the rundown of what I knew, of why I'd been there that night, but I left out the significance of the Observation Tower. I was not quite ready to get into that with her.

"I don't even know who those two corpses were."

"Oh, I know that," she said. "I mean, generally. They abducted me. They tased me and threw me into a van and zip-tied me. They figured they were safe at that point. But they weren't."

I swallowed. "You killed them."

"I broke free and killed one of them. I snapped the shit out of his neck. Then I tried to take control of the van, but there was an accident, and lots of rolling and smashing into things, which is how I lost that arm. Maybe I could have been more careful, but when you're in a dangerous

situation with bad people, you sometimes only have dangerous and bad solutions."

That explained the burning van. "Why did they abduct you?"

"No idea," she said. "Another mystery."

"And why didn't you take the IDs off one of your abductors? Why were you lurking around the woods?"

"I couldn't find any identification on either of them or in the van, which happened to be about to catch fire, so I didn't have time for a thorough search. I was injured and couldn't risk being found. It was a lucky break for both of us that when I was hiding out in the woods, I heard my predecessor threatening you. I knew someone needed help, so I went to investigate."

Her predecessor, as though Iliana were a position, like being a senator or the commissioner of baseball. I wasn't quite ready to face how casual she was about killing that predecessor. This person, this thing, I was signing on to help had, in fact, killed a decent number of people since rolling into town. All of them had been doing bad things, but this Iliana was awfully comfortable deciding when people ought to die.

"Wait, wouldn't they have found your arm with a metal bone?" I asked.

“I took it with me to reintegrate,” she explained with more cheer than you’d expect from someone discussing collecting their own severed limb.

“And what are you even doing in Tylor?” I asked. “Why come here of all places?”

She pursed her lips. “Random chance. I’m a wanderer. I’ve been wandering.”

“Do you have somewhere to stay?” I asked her.

“I have no intention of staying with you,” she said. “I’m not a sex bot.”

My face turned hot and red. “Jesus Christ, that’s not what I was suggesting.”

Her expression was infuriatingly clinical, like a doctor explaining an embarrassing ailment. “I’m being clear, so we have no misunderstandings. I’m capable of having sex, anatomically speaking, but I don’t have any desire to. I would describe myself as asexual.”

“Neat,” I said. “But also not my business. I just don’t want you to be homeless.”

“I have Iliana’s house,” she said in a tone that I was maybe being a little dim. “All that was hers is now mine. That’s the whole point of this, Dan.”

“Okay, yeah. I guess that makes sense.” I paused to drink, trying to fill the silence and to keep too many thoughts from rising to the surface. “What happens now?”

“Now you’re my consultant. I’ll let you know when I need you.”

“Keep in mind that Iliana and I are not buddies. We should definitely not be seen hanging around each other.”

“Got it. I know how to be discreet, which is good news for you.”

“For me? Why?”

“Because while we’re completing my impersonation of Iliana so I can move on with my life, we’re also going to try to figure out why she wanted to kill you.”

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Chapter 13

ILIANA

She required little sleep and disliked the hours of quiet and solitude. She wished there were records or bills or files in the house that she could review, but her predecessor had been careful. Old Iliana had led an existence that New Iliana regarded as—for want of a better word—robotic.

She was glad she'd made progress with Dan. There were things about his past she did not understand, and she would require answers. Would she then tell him the truth about why she'd come to Tylor? She wasn't entirely sure, but it was hard for her to ignore the growing suspicion that there had been a point in the past where their stories intersected.

She took another sip of her beer and considered her options for the rest of the night. There were always things to do, of course. There was never enough time for everything. She could read books or watch movies or television shows about artificial beings. These were interesting, sometimes disturbing, sometimes hopeful.

She'd read the *Murderbot* books and watched the *Terminator* series *and Ex Machina* and a British show called *Humans*. Her favorite was Data

from *Star Trek*. She didn’t relate to his lack of emotions, but she felt his journey toward understanding humanity was not unlike her own.

She did not believe there was much scientific truth to learn from entertainment, but there might be small, human insights. She was created by human beings, and the same imagination that created these fictions had created her.

Unless she had been created by something non-human. She considered that improbable, but she could not rule it out. She existed, though everything she knew about contemporary science said she should not, which meant unlikely possibilities had to be taken seriously.

Iliana now had a credit card, which meant she could subscribe to streaming services if she wanted to watch television shows or films. She could buy ebooks and read whatever caught her interest. This was a delightful convenience, one for which she had longed. Her viewing choices had been at the mercy of the televisions in the sort of motels where she could pay in cash and didn’t need an ID. Her reading had been limited to what she could take from the free libraries set out by the side of the road or the books she could buy in stores she happened to pass with money she collected from people who’d intended to harm her. Now she had pretty much the entirety of human information at her fingertips.

She went to the refrigerator and took another bottle of beer. It was her seventh, and she felt a pleasant buzz, but no more than that. She chose to put a ceiling on her level of inebriation. She could get sloppy drunk, but she would have to choose to allow it to happen, and she didn't enjoy having too much sensory data dulled. She wanted only to feel the world's sharp corners sanded down, to let a pleasant calm engulf her.

Iliana sat in an armchair looking at a mostly blank wall. Old Iliana had hung a poster-sized sketch of a nineteenth-century man with a top hat and a handlebar mustache riding a high-wheel bicycle. Nothing could be less like Old Iliana. Had she looked at it and thought, *This is what people like*?

She would give anything for a chance to talk to her predecessor. They were alike in a way. Sisters. Both struggling to fit in with the inscrutable people around them. Old Iliana had likely been a sociopath, maybe a psychopath, and New Iliana was an artificial person. Old Iliana had delighted in violence. New Iliana found casual violence distasteful, even vulgar. Necessary violence, on the other hand, was satisfying in ways she doubted others could understand.

New Iliana's decisions had obliterated Old Iliana from the universe. They weren't even decisions, if she were being honest with herself. It had been instinct. She'd faced a situation, and she'd acted. Now all Old Iliana's

dreams and desires and inclinations—these elements that had, no doubt, seemed so tangible to her—were made less than nothing. They were as meaningless as things that had never existed, as impotent as words never spoken. New Iliana, too, could be turned to nothing. Maybe she possessed a definitive, immutable end date, like the artificial humans in *Blade Runner*, and her minutes were rushing by in a torrent outside her perception. Or she might live forever if she were not destroyed. She couldn't know her fate. In that way, she was no different from all the people around her, and when she considered that, she felt cozy and warm.

The slamming of a car door on the street. The sound of footsteps on her walkway. Iliana took in everything on her periphery, and so the pounding at the door, when it came, did not startle her. She set down her beer and went to look through the peephole.

Bryce Hilliard, in full uniform, stood on her front step. His police car was parked in front of her house. When she opened the door, she could smell he'd been drinking, but not excessively. His pupils were unusually large, almost eclipsing his irises. He might have been on cocaine or methamphetamines, but she detected no signs of addiction. She kept an eye on his hand, on any movement toward his gun.

"It's true, then." He stood in the door frame, his body stiff and awkward. He wanted to be invited in. "You're back."

“It’s true,” she agreed. “I’m back.”

He let his gaze drift over her. “And you’re different. That’s what Kyle said, and stopped clock that he is, he’s right. And what the fuck is this?” He gestured toward his own hair, moving the hand downward. He meant the red streak. “Is that your idea of a joke? Should I be laughing?”

The truth was, she couldn’t explain the thin strand of colored hair. She didn’t understand it any more than she understood why being male was possible but awkward and uncomfortable, requiring focus to maintain. Was there something hidden deep within the organic parts of her being, maybe a remnant of a host brain? Was the red streak a programmer’s signature, a kind of maker’s mark? Was it to make her easy to recognize for those who knew how to read the signs?

This last possibility left her uneasy. It was why she’d once tried to resist the manifestation of the red streak, but keeping the color out of her hair for more than a couple of days left her feeling incomplete and off balance. An inability to operate at full capacity was more dangerous than something that might give her away to those who’d created her. Besides, she couldn’t say for sure she didn’t want her creators to find her.

“You look like a fucking—what do you call it? Goth. And where the fuck here have you been?”

“Clearing my head,” she said. “I needed some time.”

“And you didn’t think to tell me?”

Injured as she was, her attention had been on finding a place to hole up and acquiring the food she needed to fuel the metamorphosis. It was only later that she’d begun going through Old Iliana’s phone, studying her life, finding out who it was that might miss her. She had, eventually, learned that Iliana would never have gone away without keeping Bryce informed.

“You going to ask me in?” Hilliard asked her.

“It’s late,” she said.

He pushed past her and entered the house, closing the door behind him. His intense deodorant filled her nostrils.

Stopping him would have been easy, but she was not prepared to manage the ramifications. She did not like this man, this petty autocrat, whose breath smelled of scotch and onions, but for now she needed him to believe she was precisely what he saw. She needed him to be willing to let her leave, even be glad to see her go. She would have to concentrate to keep herself from killing him. If she allowed her thoughts to wander, she might discover that she’d snapped his neck.

“You picked a hell of a time.” He went to the refrigerator and grabbed a beer. He examined the bottle as if it were a piece of evidence. “Since when do you drink this shit?”

“I’m expanding my range.”

Hilliard knew exactly where to find the bottle opener, and he let the cap fall to the floor. Marking his territory. He took a long drink, winced, then took another. Then he laughed. “Who is he? Or she? You’ve always had enough of the freak in you that it’s a possibility. But someone’s been fucking you into some pretty big changes, and it sure as shit isn’t my son.”

“There’s nobody,” she said. “I’ve been examining my life.”

“Have you examined what your life would be like without me?” he demanded.

“That’s kind of the point,” she said.

He took another sip of the beer and eyed her thoughtfully. “What are you saying? You want out?”

Iliana sighed. “That’s what I’m saying.”

“To do what? You love this shit. You tell me it’s the only thing that makes life worth living. I know it’s the only time I ever see you smile. You think you’re going to be happy ringing up groceries? Because you’re not qualified for anything else.”

“I don’t love it anymore,” she said. “I’ve changed.”

He finished his beer in a couple of long swallows, grabbed another, and sat down on her couch, manspreading to prove a point. She took the seat across from him, keeping the coffee table between them. She chose to

pretend she needed a buffer. That she might need one. She suspected that Old Iliana, in this situation, would be intimidated.

“Yeah, well you picked a fuck of a time to start changing,” he said. “All the shit I have going on now. Dealing with that girl, a missing cop, and Teuling, who’s planning some sneaky shit. It’s got to be related to the Meeks estate being put up for sale, but I sure as shit can’t figure out how. I’ve been over that place a dozen times. But right now, I need people I can trust.”

“You can’t trust someone to do a job if they don’t want to do it. You’ve told me that yourself.” In fact, Iliana had no reason to believe Hilliard had said that, but it was banal enough that it was possible, and people liked hearing this sort of praise. “But don’t worry. I can keep a secret.”

“You used to be able to. But you’ve *changed*.” His smile mocked her declaration. “You’re a different person now, and it’s more than your weirdo hair coloring and your fancy beer. But I can’t let you go anywhere if I can’t trust you, and the fact that you want to leave makes me not trust you.”

Iliana had been afraid of this. Hilliard would believe that if she were not currently helping him, then she would be a liability. He might send someone after her once she left. She could handle whoever he sent, but she didn’t want to have to build a new life while disposing of corpses.

“You don’t have to worry about my loyalty.”

“Prove it,” he said, leaning back into the cushions, closing his eyes.

Iliana detected a fog of pheromones seeping into the air. An erection now bulged in Hilliard’s uniform pants.

They’d had a sexual relationship. She hadn’t seen it before. Hilliard and the girl he’d raised since she was twelve. Was that when it started? Had it been going on all these years? Had he twisted Old Iliana—possibly once innocent and sweet—into a monster?

Did this change Iliana’s plan? By any reasonable standards, Hilliard was someone who deserved killing, but creating chaos in Tylor ran counter to the plan to cultivate a clean break. Iliana felt conflicted, and that was something new. She wanted to steal Iliana Marek’s identity and she wanted to destroy Hilliard. Maybe both were possible, but maybe not. Maybe she would have to choose.

After a minute, Hilliard opened his eyes and looked at her. “You waiting for an engraved invitation?”

“I told you.” She crossed her arms and stared at him. “I’m moving on.”

He sat up straighter. “Shit. You did meet someone. My Iliana has fallen in love.”

“It is possible for a person to want to change their lives without a romantic connection,” she said.

His dreamy expression of sexual anticipation was long gone. “You need to think about what’s in your best interests. I’m willing to cut you some slack for a few days while you get your shit together, but there’s work to be done. We haven’t done anything about that reporter snooping around, except create a damn mess. And that wasn’t helped by those two dimwits you hired killing themselves in their own van. I was able to keep that quiet, and I admit you were smart to pick a couple of bottom feeders no one’s going to miss. Still, if you had done it yourself, it would have gotten done right.”

“I didn’t want it linked to us,” she said, though of course she had no idea if that were true. It sounded reasonable, though.

Hilliard nodded, so maybe she had guessed right. “And what the fuck happened with Quin Silvestri? What were you even doing with him?”

“I was going to ask you about Silvestri,” she said. “I have no idea where he is.”

“Are you fucking kidding me? The two of you vanish at the same time, and you had nothing to do with it?”

“Why would I?” She was fishing for information, hoping she wasn’t asking a question to which she ought to know the answer.

“That’s a good question,” he said. “Why would you?”

Whatever Old Iliana had been doing with Silvestri, she’d kept it secret from Hilliard. That meant the police chief might not know what they had to gain by killing Dan.

“I had nothing to do with Silvestri,” she said. If the facts later placed her in a bad light, she could deal with it. Given her involvement with the entire Hilliard family, she had a perfectly plausible, non-homicidal reason to lie. She hoped she wasn’t making things more complicated than they had to be.

“I don’t know if I believe you,” he said, “but if it wasn’t you, we better hope this is him ditching his wife. If someone is offing cops, then things are going to blow up real fast.”

Iliana decided to say nothing. She folded her arms and watched him.

“Just take care of your business,” he said. “That reporter needs to be shut down. Make sure your two dead fuckups don’t become a problem. And find out what the hell happened to Silvestri. Show me I can still trust you, and then we can talk about some changes or whatever.”

“Fine,” she said, though she had absolutely no intention of dealing with a reporter, certainly not the way Hilliard had in mind. Maybe that would prove her incompetence to encourage him to let her go, but that was a dangerous gamble. She’d decide what to do when the time came. All she

knew was that if she had to sacrifice this new identity, she would at least want the satisfaction of delivering justice.

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Chapter 14

DAN

The pounding on my door started me out of a deep sleep. It must be the cops. They had clearly discovered my role in—in I don't know what. Lots of dead people, I guess. My mind was foggy, but I knew I'd accumulated numerous offenses for which the cops could come calling. Murders and burials and secret androids.

It was not the cops. It was Iliana—New Iliana—holding a white paper bag in one hand, a drink caddy with two lidded cups in the other. The heat and humidity washed over me as I tried to process her presence. She wore a black knee-high dress and Doc Martens boots.

"Good morning!" She squeezed past me into my apartment.

I stood hovering at the door for a bit, feeling stupid in my cotton shorts and T-shirt and wild hair. I snapped out of my fog enough to know I should shut the door.

Iliana had already set out the coffees and was now going through my cabinets, looking for plates. "I didn't know what you like, so I got blueberry, banana nut, and sour cream pecan. I guess not everyone likes sweet things in the morning, but coffee and a muffin? That's a hard combo

to beat. Though maybe you're a vegan. I keep thinking I should become a vegan, because I really like animals. I try to avoid eating animal products directly, but when they're cooked in baked goods like these muffins, they're easy to forget about. Anyhow, I should have asked, so if you don't want any of this, don't eat it to be polite. But if you do, dig in!"

She artfully arranged the muffins on a plate, which she set down on my desk before handing me one of the coffees. "Are you ready to get started?"

"Started with what?" I took the cup, hoping caffeine would help me dredge up any relevant memories of having agreed to an early meeting. Did it even matter what I'd agreed to? My life had become the downward run of a rollercoaster. I might object to the upcoming 360-degree loop, but I was strapped in, and all I could do was raise my arms and scream.

She arched an eyebrow. "I hope you haven't forgotten last night's conversation."

I sat heavily on my bed, sipping coffee. "Did you say you were coming over this morning?"

"That is a fair point. We probably should have made specific plans, but you were tired, and I wanted to get out of your hair, and I don't think you'd entirely given up on the idea that maybe I really was a sex bot. I'm not judging, by the way. We're all slaves to our nature."

“I seriously don’t think of you as a sex bot.” I found myself blushing, and turned away. Saying it out loud made it impossible not to think of her as a sex bot, which made me feel guilty for thinking of her as a sex bot. It was a feedback loop.

“Like you’d tell me. Anyhow, you don’t have to work this morning, do you?”

“Actually, I do,” I said. “I have to be there in an hour.”

She put her hands on her hips. “Seriously, Dan. You need to send me your schedule. This isn’t going to work if I don’t know when you’re available.” She took a bite out of half a blueberry muffin and washed it down with some coffee. “You know that bakery on Hibiscus Avenue? These muffins are crazy moist without being too sticky.”

I was having a very hard time dealing with her enthusiasm. She looked like Iliana Marek—cold and cruel, gazing at the world as if it contained only potential victims. This was an artificial construct of unknown origin who had killed four people that I knew of, and there were hints at more. She was strong and agile and difficult to destroy, and she was capable of impersonating nearly anyone. And here she was, sitting in my little apartment, offering me muffins.

Which were, in fact, quite good. That bakery hadn’t been open before Faye Kristic died, so I’d never been. Another sign of a changing Tylor that

I'd missed.

"There are three major things we need to address," she said. "Number one, convincing everyone who matters that I'm Iliana, which should be easy since no one assumes the people they know have been replaced by impostors. Less easy will be making them believe that I'm done with this town. And doing that in such a way that they don't feel like they have to kill me to keep me quiet. I can lay that groundwork in a couple of weeks, which makes that the easiest of our tasks. But I'm going to need you to be on call as much as possible. If I send you a text with a question, you should assume I'll need an answer ASAP. You can do that, right?"

"You know I have a job, and—"

"Great. Number two, we need to figure out what Old Iliana wanted with you. I'm not going to feel good about leaving here until we get that sorted out, because that would mean you're still in some kind of danger. Not acceptable."

"But she's dead, so maybe I'm not in any danger at all anymore."

"Maybe," she agreed around a mouthful of muffin. "Maybe not. We'll find out. And finally, number three. Why did those two guys abduct me?"

"Do you think they knew who you were?" I asked. I didn't want to say *what*. That seemed too rude.

“I doubt it. They were lowlifes. They showed signs of heavy meth use, and only got the jump on me because I didn’t anticipate a taser. I doubt anyone familiar with my true nature would send those incompetents after me. I know that Hilliard wanted someone hurt or at least frightened, and he wanted it done outside of Tylor city limits, so maybe using two people who couldn’t be traced to Tylor P.D. made sense. My working theory is that those guys missed their target and grabbed me by mistake. You know what that means?”

“Well,” I began, but Iliana was on a roll.

“It means that the person they intended to abduct is still out there, in danger, possibly with no idea that crooked cops are hunting for her.”

“But if we don’t know who she is, what can we do?”

“We can do lots of things, Dan. And let’s not forget that Old Iliana and the dead police officer summoned *you* to their crime scene and intended to kill you alongside the two dead kidnappers. Whatever this abduction was about, it concerned you. And if that’s right, then numbers two and three are actually the same number, and so by sitting here and talking, we’ve eliminated a third of our tasks. That’s how teamwork is done.”

“We haven’t really reduced our work, though, have we? It’s just about organizing the information.”

“Glass half full, Dan. Let’s get started.”

“Haven’t we already gotten—”

“Before you go to work, we are going to have a very serious talk with no bullshit. You and me.”

I unconsciously shifted a little farther away from her. I hoped we weren’t talking again about where she fell on the sex bot spectrum, because if she kept raising the subject, I was going to have to worry that she was protesting too much. “What are we talking about?”

“The elephant in the room of your life,” she said. “We’re going to talk about Faye Kristic.”

“I don’t talk about that,” I told her.

“Which is understandable. It was a dark period. I’ve done my research. I’ve read all the stories. The social media posts. The angry letters to newspapers calling for your head. I’ve got the facts. Now I want your version.”

“There’s no version,” I said. “What you read is what happened.”

“Dan, are we a team?”

“I don’t even know what that question means.”

“We are totally a team,” she insisted. “We are working together so we can both benefit, and we’ve got each other’s back. That’s the thing I’ve wanted since I first became aware. I wanted to be part of a team, and now I am, and it’s as much fun as I thought it would be. But if this team is going

to succeed, then we have to be honest with each other. You need to tell me about Faye Kristic. Until Old Iliana got you to come out to the Observation Tower, Faye's death was the only criminal activity that you've been involved with. That I know of. It has to be related to why she wanted you dead, so you are going to start talking."

"If we're a team, shouldn't I get a vote?"

"Not on this," she said, in a way that let me know I'd better start talking.

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Chapter 15

Tylor High School wasn't big enough to have a lot of outcasts. In my year, there was only Faye Kristic.

I don't want to suggest that I was one of the cool kids, because I absolutely was not. People like Kyle Hilliard and Iliana Marek were at the top of the pecking order. Faye was at the bottom. I was solidly in the middle. We weren't nerds in the classic sense—no Mathletics or LARPing—but we were the kids who always looked to the next phase. We were thinking about AP exams and SATs and bolstering our extracurriculars. We passed around books about how to write a perfect college admissions essay. We wanted to get the fuck out of Tylor.

As a group, we were successful. All of my friends went to college out of state. None of them have moved back home. The path led them exactly where they'd wanted to go.

Faye likely would have been in our group, if she'd been interested. She was better at math than any of us, and by the end of her freshman year she'd established side hustles—real enterprises that made her money. None of our crowd were jocks or into fashion, so the fact that Faye was blotchy-faced, bespectacled, and oblivious about clothing would not have mattered.

Under it all, Faye was quite pretty, with a round face and large hazel eyes that looked golden in the right light. Her awkwardness could have been charming, even attractive, but Faye had no interest in her appearance. Which was fine. Totally her business. Until she made her business mine.

It's possible she was neurodivergent, but I don't think she was ever diagnosed. Nothing about that came out after she died, but she had no idea how to carry on a conversation and didn't seem to get when she alienated people. She was happy enough sitting by herself in the cafeteria or taking her lunch outside to sit with a book in the withering heat. A couple of people in our group tried to befriend her over the years, and she'd always shrugged them off with remote indifference. By the time we got to junior year, she was, at best, on the periphery of my notice.

Then things changed.

I don't believe there was anything special about me that captured her imagination. I wasn't the smartest person in our group or the best looking or the coolest. Maybe I was the funniest, but I can't imagine that would have appealed to her since I never once heard her laugh. Most likely she fell victim to random firing of neurons and hormones that, for as long as there have been human beings, have driven adolescents to do the dumbest possible things.

Faye would sit across from me at our lunch table and stare. My friends and I tried to make conversation with her, but she sat with her unkempt brown hair falling into her eyes, ignoring any question or comment made by someone other than me. When she did talk, none of us had any idea what she was trying to say. She would spew out facts and names and coding jargon.

Eventually, I stopped being cool about it. There were only so many times she could try to get me to have lunch alone with her before I got annoyed. Maybe even rude, but I didn't know what else to do. I even asked my father for advice, but he just thought the whole thing was funny.

I had an afterschool job working for the aftercare program for the elementary school I'd once attended. I did not love managing little kids, and I came home each day exhausted and in desperate need of decompressing.

My father smirked at me as I passed him on the way to drop my stuff in my room. I could tell that something amused him, but I didn't bother to ask. He and I didn't share the same sense of humor.

I opened my bedroom door to find Faye sitting on my bed, leafing through one of my SAT prep books. I froze in the door when I saw her, and

only the sound of my father's cackling from the other room penetrated the ringing in my ears.

My father knew I'd been having problems with her. He'd let her into my room and didn't warn me. All I could think was that I needed to get out of Tylor.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"Dan, I need to talk to you."

I probably would have sighed and closed the door—most, but not all of the way. I would have sat in my desk chair and given her a chance to say what was on her mind. It would be awkward and cringey, but I needed to let her say what she had to say so that I could then explain my position.

"I need you, Dan," she said before any of that could happen. "You're perfect. You're exactly what I'm looking for."

She was being weird and spacey and over the top. I had no faith that any long talk was going to be able to penetrate her delusions, and in that moment I decided there was nothing to be gained from indulging her. She would just misread everything I said.

"I think it's time for you to go," I told her.

She appeared to consider this for a moment, but then shrugged. "If that's what you want. I guess it's okay for now."

And she stood up and left. I couldn’t believe my luck. She didn’t try to drag me into one of her inexplicable conversations. She stood up and left. Even with my father guffawing in the next room, I felt a kind of triumph. Maybe it was finally over.

The next week I found the camera she’d hidden in my room.

It was a tiny thing, about the size and shape of a pencil, and she’d lodged it in a crack between books on my shelf.

When she sat with us at lunch the next day, I took out the camera and slammed it on the table, hardly caring if I broke it.

“That looks like mine,” she said.

“That’s because it is yours,” I told her. “You put it in my room.”

I’d told my friends about this, of course, and they were outraged on my behalf. This was a serious breach of privacy and just plain wrong.

“I needed to record your actions,” she said. “I tried hacking in to your laptop camera, but you keep it disabled, so this was the best way.”

“Faye,” I said, “get the fuck out of here, and don’t ever talk to me again. And if you spread any images of me around, I will ruin your fucking life.”

She appeared shocked at the suggestion. “I would never do that.”

“You need to hear me,” I said. “I don’t ever want to speak to you again. I don’t want to hear from you or about you. You are dead to me.”

She studied me for a moment. Her eyes were big and glassy and seemed strangely unfocused. “I don’t know why you’re acting this way.” She picked up her camera and left.

I wondered if she really didn’t know why I was acting that way. Maybe she was that clueless, but I didn’t care. I just wanted her not to be my problem.

“I bet she has hours of you jerking off,” my friend Joe said.

It was, of course, a real possibility.

Much to my relief, Faye did stay out of my way for the rest of the school year. It wasn’t that challenging, as there were only a few weeks left at that point. She didn’t sit with us at lunch or try to speak to me in the halls. I checked her social media feeds constantly to see if she was posting anything about me, but while she posted a lot about her various projects or AI or crypto or investment, she didn’t post a single thing about me. I thought we were done.

I'd parlayed my experience working an afterschool job I hated into a summer job I hated even more—counselor at a day camp run by a local church. I hated it with a passion, but it paid fairly well, and I told myself I could endure the job. I would suffer through it, and then I would get away.

After work I usually hung out with friends, and I came home around eleven one night after eating pizza and watching movies with my usual gang. My dad was in front of the TV and greeted me with a big grin. That should have been a warning sign, but I assumed his team was winning.

Faye sat on my bed, her hair wild, her hands in constant, jittery motion. She wore what looked like a 1950s house dress several sizes too big. She was crying, and the redness of her eyes was magnified by the huge lenses of her glasses.

My dad howled with laughter in the living room while this awkward girl sat weeping on my bed.

The door was already open, but I pushed it hard, and it banged against the wall with a sharp crack. "What are you doing here? Get the fuck out, and don't come back."

Other than what I posted online, these few minutes are what most shame me. Faye was distraught, weeping, maybe even frightened. I should have known she was in a bad place and been more understanding.

Maybe if my dad hadn't been home, reveling in my discomfort, I might have found my way to compassion. Maybe not. I was still a kid, driven by hormones and worries about social status and still haunted by the terror of what she'd seen on her camera and what she might still disseminate. I thought being laughed at was the worst thing that could happen to a person. I had no idea.

Faye tried to take my hand, but I snatched it back.

"Dan, I need you," she said. "I can't do this without you. They'll take everything away from us."

The irrationality of it infuriated me. I would not be incorporated into whatever weird fantasy she had going. Later we would learn how much she needed help, but at the time I didn't care about whatever she was going through.

I've thought, with the clarity that comes over time, that I could have turned the tables on my dad by gently closing the door and talking to Faye. I could have listened to what she had to say and then driven her home. My dad would have milked it for laughs, but the joke would have been on him. I would have beaten him with kindness.

That's hindsight. In the moment, I felt shamed and exposed, and I wanted Faye out of my room.

“Dan, you have to listen.” She shook her head and wiped her face with the back of her arm. “My father doesn’t know. My father doesn’t know. You have to remember that.”

Her father didn’t know what? Had she convinced herself that she was pregnant with my child? She was reeling off an elaborate drama in her head and couldn’t tell what was real and what wasn’t. I was not about to play along.

I shouted again, my voice cracking. I was so angry with her and my father and everything I hated about my life in Tylor where I’d never fit in. I was worried that I hadn’t done well enough on the SATs, that I wouldn’t get into a decent school, that there would be some horrific, unforeseen disaster that would make it impossible for me to ever leave Tylor. I was, in those moments, building the future I dreaded.

When Faye’s trickle of tears turned into convulsive, pitiable sobbing, I grabbed her by the arm and yanked her off my bed. I pulled her to the front door.

“Hey,” my dad snapped, not bothering to get up from his chair. “No rough stuff. You can’t treat your girlfriend that way.” It was still a joke, but even he thought I was out of control.

I opened the front door and shoved her outside. I locked the door, and stormed back to my room. Through the door, my father was yelling at me,

telling me that a man never lays hands on a woman, lecturing me that I'd deeply disappointed him, as though he hadn't set up the pieces and tipped the dominoes. I put a pillow over my head so that his words were muffled and meaningless.

Later the police would show me the autopsy report. She still had the bruises on her arm when she died. My father confirmed that I'd grabbed her. After all the damage her body sustained, Faye carried my mark of shame over into her death.

That wasn't why they blamed me, though. The cops and Mr. Kristic's lawyers didn't emphasize the bruises because they didn't want to dwell on her two intrusions into my room and the secret webcam. They wanted to focus on what I'd posted on social media, even if I couldn't remember writing any of it. They found data that told them I'd been visiting her social media pages, sometimes two or three times a day. They didn't care that I told them it was to make sure she wasn't posting embarrassing videos of me. They'd said I'd tried to destroy her, drive her to suicide, even steal from her. They made it seem like it was me who'd been obsessed with her.

Kyle Hilliard and Iliana Marek had always flaunted their cruelty to Faye, but they were smart enough not to go after her online. The things I posted were malicious, designed to humiliate her, to make her feel worthless. My posts were cruelty distilled to their most painful essence.

Those posts broke her. Those posts, which my disordered mind would not let me recall, are why she climbed to the top of the Observation Tower and threw herself into the darkness below.

Iliana frowned. “That’s a weird story.”

“You told me you read up on it. You should be familiar with the details.”

“Yeah, sure. Nothing in there contradicts what I found online. I mean the way you tell it is odd.”

“I’m sorry I’m not the raconteur you were looking for.”

She took a big sip of her coffee. “What I’m saying is, it was clinical, like you weren’t there. And there were some holes in the story. You told me about how you felt before you wrote those things about Faye, and what happened after, but you skipped over the part where you did the actual crime.”

I’d had to talk about it with Trish for years, and I was so relieved when we could finally put it behind us. I didn’t want to have to revisit the worst moment of my life, to relive that discomfort and explain everything to this . . . . I didn’t even know how to conceptualize Iliana’s nature. She

wasn’t exactly a robot or a machine. She was clearly an individual entity, or at least knew how to impersonate one.

The point was I barely knew this *person*. Her motives and nature remained a mystery to me, but here she was, eating a muffin in my apartment, wedging herself into my life, because she wanted to, and because I could do nothing to keep her away. Who was she to be entitled to my darkest secrets?

“I’m done talking about this,” I told her. “I’ve spent years working through it with my therapist. I hate myself for doing it then, and I would never do it now. That’s all you have to know about me, but if hearing me relive my absolute darkest days is a condition of our working together, then I’ll take my chances on my own.”

Iliana studied me for a very long time. Nothing moved in her face except the occasional blink of her eyes. I guess she was thinking—processing, perhaps.

“Let’s put a pin in it, then,” she said at last. “*For now*, Dan, but we’re going to have to come back to this.”

“Why?” I demanded.

“Because Old Iliana wanted to murder you at the Observation Tower, the place Faye Kristic killed herself. If we don’t find out why, you’re still in danger.”

“I promise you that Iliana Marek had no interest in avenging Faye Kristic.”

“Then why would she go to such lengths to bring you out there?” she asked.

It was a good question. “Maybe she wanted someone to dig that grave, and she knew she could get me out there. No one would make a fuss about me going missing.”

She shook her head. “Old Iliana and Quinton Silvestri could have dug that grave themselves. It’s hard work, but so what? New people add new variables, and Old Iliana was a lone wolf.”

“Why do you keep calling her Old Iliana?” I asked. “Are you afraid I won’t know who you’re talking about?”

She paused and looked thoughtful. “I’m Iliana now. I intend to be Iliana for a long time, but I don’t think she should be erased, even if there are only a few of us who know she’s gone.”

I considered this for a moment. “Do you feel bad about killing her?”

“I’m never happy when people behave in ways that result in me killing them,” she said. “I felt very certain they were going to kill you. At the very least, they were using violence to force their will on you, which is never okay, Dan. Maybe if I hadn’t been injured, I would have risked a non-lethal solution, but I can’t be sure. I’m a very cerebral person. You’ve

probably picked up on that. But, at the same time, under certain circumstances, I'm pure instinct."

"And taking over Iliana's identity had nothing to do with your motivation?" I asked.

She laughed. "You're wondering if I'm a stone-cold murderer, so you call me on it. That takes guts. But I could have killed any random woman at any time. It would be easy to find some drunk in a bar and take over her life. That's not me. I won't hurt someone unless I have to."

"I get the impression that killing is something you've done a bunch of times before."

"A woman traveling alone risks attracting certain types of predators. I've had some incidents."

"Then why didn't you take the identities of someone you killed before? Can you not become a man?"

"I could," she said, "but it doesn't feel as natural to me. Being male isn't comfortable. If I'm going to be someone long-term, I need her to be female."

"And what's with the red streak in your hair?" I asked. "Iliana would never do that."

She shrugged, but she looked at me differently, as if I'd put my finger on something. "It happens without me thinking about it. I could focus on

getting rid of it and keeping it away, but it seems like a waste of energy. Having it feels good. Not having it feels bad."

"People will notice it," I said. "It will draw attention to the fact that Iliana has changed."

"And that is exactly what I want. It makes it easier for me to leave."

"I know you have to get ready for work," she said while she threw away the coffee cups and brought the plate to my sink, "so we'll have to coordinate our schedules. And feel free to offer suggestions. This is a partnership, Dan, and if you want to take the lead on any of this stuff, let me know. I am very open to hearing anything you have to say."

"Okay."

She stopped to look at me. "I'm not hearing a whole lot of enthusiasm."

That was perceptive. My life wasn't great, but it was quiet and mostly dependable. I'd gone to a party for the first time in years, and I'd struck up a conversation with an attractive woman. Other than my father threatening to kick me out and my boss considering firing me, things were generally looking up. Helping a cyborg impersonate the police chief's foster daughter, whom she murdered, might be a step in the wrong direction.

I didn’t know how to deal with the fact of New Iliana. She upended everything I knew or thought I knew about not only my life, but the entire world. The universe. She was a thing that shouldn’t exist, technology that was impossible. If she was real—and there was no longer any denying that she was—then what else was out there? Space aliens? Time travelers? Boarding schools for wizards? The Loch Ness Monster? The last couple were a stretch, sure, but were any possibilities truly out of bounds? Two days ago, I would have considered a shape-shifting cyborg murder machine equally absurd.

“I know this is a lot.” Her smile was genuinely kind, or at least meant to appear that way. I couldn’t know what emotions she might be experiencing, or if she experienced emotions at all. “You don’t want me or my chaos in your life. But you can’t stick your head in the sand and hope your problems go away. There’s a strong chance that someone else could be coming to hurt you.”

I didn’t want to hear any of this, mostly because I knew she was right.

“I’m sure you’re very capable and all,” she continued. “It’s just that I’m good with hurting and killing bad people. I can tell you don’t have much experience with that sort of thing.”

“I’m not offended. My masculinity is not bruised by admitting that you are the more deadly of the two of us.”

“That’s good. Men can be weird.”

“You’re right about everything, but . . . .”

“You’re scared,” she suggested, “and freaking the fuck out.”

I nodded.

“We will get through this together. That’s what friends do.” Her smile was so sweet, so sincere, that at that moment I did not doubt that she meant it, but maybe that was her intention. Maybe I was falling into her trap.

I opened my front door to let her out. The heat landed like a blow, and the glare of the sun nearly blinded me.

“Call me when you get off work,” she said. “We’ll figure out what we’re going to do tonight. Don’t forget.”

“I won’t—”

I stopped talking because my eyes had adjusted to the brightness, and I now noticed my mother in the back yard, hunched over her little herb garden. Her eyes grew wide in shock as the most dangerous woman in Tylor emerged from my apartment.

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People who watch Gregory Meeks closely, and there are a lot of them, have observed that he appeared to be shutting down various projects over the past few months. Now he announces that he's moving to a small Florida town, an hour away from Tampa. There's nothing there. Nothing! He's never said he's retiring, so what is he up to?

—TechGeek Newsletter

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Chapter 16

“Hey, Mom,” I said, groping for something. Anything. “You know Iliana, right.”

Her face was shadowed by her wide-brimmed hat, but I could make out her mouth opening. Then closing. Then opening again.

“Dan’s place is really cute,” Iliana said. “I’d love to have a little apartment outside my house someday.”

My mother took a step back, as though Iliana had just delivered a withering insult.

“Have a great day, you two.” Iliana threw us a wave and then walked —jauntily is really the only word—to the street, where I presumed she’d parked.

My mother watched her go, her face set in something I couldn’t recognize.

“Look, Mom,” I began.

“What are you doing with her?” she stood up, brushing dirt off her blouse. She strode toward me, shaking. “That’s Kyle Hilliard’s girlfriend.”

“We’re not doing anything girlfriendy,” I explained. “We had some stuff to talk about.”

“What could you and Iliana Marek have to talk about?” she demanded.

“It’s not important. Really.” I had a terrible feeling that this was a lie I was going to have to get used to telling.

“Your father is not going to be happy.”

“Mom, you can’t tell him,” I told her, whining like a teenager.

“I don’t keep secrets from your father.”

“Not even when telling him could get your son killed?”

“You said you weren’t doing anything with her.”

“And I wasn’t. I can promise you I never have and never will. There is no mutual interest. But if Kyle Hilliard draws the wrong conclusion, he’ll come after me.”

“I need to think about this.” She looked away, considering her options. “I can’t promise anything.”

“You can’t promise not to say something that would put your son in grave physical danger? This is a gray area for you?”

“I told you I’ll think about it,” she said. “But we can’t afford to make enemies of Bryce Hilliard. Haven’t you done enough to your father?”

“Mom,” I said, beginning an argument, though I had no idea what I could say.

“There is trouble with police. Is bad for business.”

Igor was working the register, which was to say, doing nothing, while I cleaned the windows. We had no customers, so there was nothing to keep him from helping me, but he didn’t want to, and he was the boss. On the other hand, if he was waiting for me to finish cleaning before firing me, I was going to be irritated.

This was the first time I’d seen Mr. Egorov since Bryce Hilliard had hauled me in. So much had happened since then, that the interrogation seemed like the distant past.

My phone buzzed. I glanced down to see a text from Iliana. *I can’t wait to get started! This is going to be amazing!*

“It was nothing.” I gave him the same story I’d given everyone else, that they were grasping at straws because Iliana was missing, but now she was back, so there had been no crime.

“Is what you say, but how do I know you are not guilty?” he demanded.

“How do you know I’m not guilty of something that never happened?” I asked him. “Iliana Marek was missing. Now she’s not. That’s the end of it.”

“Is still bad,” he said. “Police are unhappy with you, they are next unhappy with me.”

I set down the bottle of glass cleaner and glanced over at him. “I’m not sure what I could have done, Mr. Egorov. I don’t have a lot of control over who the police question about a crime that hasn’t been committed.” I was summoning my reserves of indignation. He was being unfair to me, though, at the same time, I recognized that I had, in fact, been a witness to two killings, including that of a police officer, and I was concealing that information.

“You are magnet for trouble.” He shook his head sadly. “I hope no trouble comes to me for my good deed of helping you.”

My phone buzzed again. *Don’t forget to send me your work schedule!* Was it necessary to end everything with an exclamation mark?

“I take risk having you employee,” Mr. Egorov continued. “Maybe you offer me something to repay kindness.”

“I really don’t have those kinds of feelings for you, Mr. Egorov.”

“Ha ha. You are funny boy.” He did not look amused. “Maybe you not ask for overtime. Maybe after forty hours, that is enough wages.”

I bit my lip to keep myself from saying something I would regret. “I hardly ever work more than forty hours,” I told him.

“We are down one worker right now. Until I hire, who knows?”

It was clear that Igor intended to drag his heels with the staffing if he could get me to cover extra hours without getting paid. He knew I couldn't afford to quit the job.

My phone buzzed again. *If I don't hear otherwise, I'll pick you up at 9:00 am tomorrow. I've got some exciting ideas about how to start. I'll bring coffee and muffins!* Maybe ten seconds later: *Or should I get bagels? Do you prefer savory or sweet in the morning?*

"You get too many texts at work," Igor said. "I don't pay you to look at phone."

Given that we were discussing his plan not to pay me for work at all, I didn't think he was on the moral high ground, but I put my phone in my pocket.

The bell chimed and a customer walked up to the counter. I went back to stocking the shelves until I heard the customer speak. She was in her late twenties or early thirties, blonde, dressed in jeans and an oversized T-shirt. She wore massive, hexagonal dark sunglasses, which she did not remove. Combined with the tone of her voice, they gave the impression of someone trying to hide her tears.

"I'm looking for Dan Gibson," she said. "Does he work here?"

"Here is work," Igor said. "Not talk to ladies."

“It’s important.” Her voice cracked, and her lips trembled when she was done speaking.

I wanted to hide, to slip away into the back room. I had no idea who this woman was, and I didn’t want to know, but she was clearly on the brink of tears.

I stood up so she could see me. “I’m Dan.”

“You talk to lady, you punch out timecard first,” Igor said.

The sky was overcast, a churning mix of irritable clouds that promised rain but was unlikely to deliver. I didn’t love being out in the heat and humidity, but I didn’t want to talk in front of Igor.

She led me around the side of the store, closer to the dumpsters than I would have liked, but away from the pair of teenagers who were gassing up their truck and eyeing us with lazy curiosity. “I’m Darcy Silvestri.” She tore off her sunglasses like she was revealing a long-hidden secret.

Now I realized I had seen her before. On television, speaking to the cameras. She’d been remarkably poised at the time, but clearly whatever strength she’d drawn on for that interview had been depleted. I glanced down at her belly, but looked away quickly.

My first impulse was to pretend that I had no idea who she was, but that wouldn't fly. Tylor was too small, and my police questioning too recent, for anyone to believe that.

"Any news about your husband?"

Obviously, she wouldn't be here talking to me if there was news, but she was kind enough not to point that out. "I was hoping you might know something."

I tried not to think of Quin Silvestri's lifeless face after Iliana had snapped his neck. His death had been quick and brutal, and I was apparently now buddies with his killer. Not that I was blaming her. Silvestri would have killed me, or, at the very least, looked away while I was killed. Even so, I felt unspeakably, horrifically guilty. I tried to keep my face expressionless but was doubtful of my success.

"I'm sorry, but I don't have any idea why you'd think that," I said.

She sucked in a breath, steadying herself for what would come next. She then took out a piece of paper. I could see by the creases that it had been folded three times, as if for a standard-sized envelope. There was only one line in a neat and boxy handwriting. *If you want to know what happened to your husband, ask Iliana Marek and Dan Gibson.*

“What is that? A note?” It was not, admittedly, my finest hour of prevarication, but I was desperate to buy time while I tried to figure out how the hell to respond.

Darcy Silvestri was kind enough not to respond directly to the idiocy of my question. “It was in my mailbox.”

I took out my phone and snapped a photo of the note. Maybe it would mean something to Iliana. In any case, I thought she should know about it.

“Why did you do that?” she demanded.

I shrugged. “The cops have been hassling me. My lawyer told me to bring her evidence of anything weird going on. Someone leaving you notes implicating me seems to qualify.”

I was happy with this lie, and it appeared to satisfy her.

“I don’t want to get you into more trouble, and I won’t mention your name to the police. I just want to know where my husband is—that he’s all right.” She put a hand on her distended stomach, where the child of a man I’d seen die was now gestating fatherlessly.

I tried not to display any emotion, but this hit me hard. She should know that her husband wasn’t coming home. It would be the honorable thing to make sure, when all of this was over—whatever all of this was, and whatever constituted it being over—to be able to let her know where her husband was buried. I would have to speak to Iliana about that.

In the meantime, I had to deal with the crisis in front of me. “I don’t know who left that note, but it’s some kind of prank. There are a lot of people in Tylor who have an issue with me, and I’m sorry they decided to play this sick joke at your expense.”

I could see she’d stopped listening, and my words became a lot of meaningless noise. She was set on getting what she’d come for. “Please, I’m begging you. Talking to Iliana Marek doesn’t feel safe, and the police won’t help me. Cops and their damn secrets. If you know anything at all, you have to tell me.”

I tried to radiate sympathy and innocence. I was both sympathetic and innocent, but I didn’t feel great about keeping her in the dark. “If I knew anything, I would have told the police already.”

She studied my face for a moment, which I could feel running hot.

“I’m the vice principal at the high school.” Her voice was now sharp. “I know a liar when I see one. And I know who you are and what you’ve done. I don’t think for a second you could bully my husband into doing something foolish like you did to that poor girl, but you’re involved. I can feel it.”

“I’m really sorry about what you’re going through,” I told her. “Anyhow, I have to get back to work.”

“You leave me alone with store!” Igor pointed at me when I walked back inside.

I looked around. We still had no customers. “I’m sorry. It won’t happen again.”

It was easy to say but hard to mean. Someone knew I’d been out there with Iliana and Silvestri. If they had that information, why go to the wife and not the police? My position in Tylor, which was already unbearably complicated, had somehow gotten worse.

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Beckett: *And in your book, you prove that Gregory Meeks had a taste for underage girls.*

Gopal: *There's no doubt. Years earlier, Meeks had developed a relationship with a guy named Zack Watham, who ended up as the police chief of this small Florida town, and he ran it as if it was his personal money-making machine. Meeks moved to Tylor specifically so that he could have Watham secure girls for him.*

Beckett: *Like sex trafficking?*

Gopal: *I didn't see any evidence of that, but certainly sex workers. None that I tracked down were underage when they were hired by Meeks, but appearing underage was one of his requirements.*

Beckett: *And the police chief essentially pimped these girls.*

Gopal: *He worked as an intermediary. He also loan-sharked, shook down local drug dealers, and was rumored to be involved in a lot worse.*

Beckett: *And now Zack Watham is a fugitive holed up in Russia somewhere.*

Gopal: *He is supposedly connected to a high-ranking Kremlin official, but I wasn't able to verify that.*

—*NPR interview with Neil Gopal, author of* Meeks Shall Inherit: A Tech Giant and His Inglorious End

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Chapter 17

ILIANA

Why Tylor? Iliana was not the first to grapple with that question, and she'd read everything she could find on the subject long before she arrived. After spearheading multiple successful Silicon Valley startups, Gregory Meeks was estimated to be worth upward of six billion dollars at the time of his death. Born in 1971 in Marietta, Georgia, Meeks spent five semesters at Emory University before dropping out and moving to California, where he worked for various tech companies, building a reputation as an innovator. He became something of a public figure in the early 2000s as the chief architect behind the revolutionary dating app, Lyps. From there his career soared until he severed all ties from his companies, resigned from all boards, and moved to a house in Tylor, a city with which he had no previous connection.

At the time, the move prompted a great deal of speculation, though mostly in tech and financial circles. Meeks' death sparked a new round of questioning, and still there were no answers. The house itself was certainly impressive, a 7,000-square foot Spanish-style main structure, surrounded by a twelve-foot stone fence and sitting on four acres of mostly woodland.

It fit the real estate definition of a mansion, but Meeks could easily have afforded something much larger. The Tylor estate offered privacy, but Meeks could have gone with something even more private, be it a secluded island or a walled-off fortress in a major city. So, again, why Tylor?

As she scaled the wall to his estate, Iliana thought of nothing but her surroundings. She'd parked three blocks away and moved silently down streets and across yards to climb the stone perimeter on the east side, where she was least likely to be seen. The uneven stonework made for easy grips and footholds. Once, she had read, there had been a thin and discreet string of razor wire along the top of the wall, but no more. To avoid liability issues, the estate lawyers had ordered it removed after Meeks' death, though the house had not been put on the market until recently.

After she jumped down, she moved swiftly through three hundred yards of dense clusters of dogwoods and magnolias until she emerged in the clearing before the enormous, irregularly shaped pool. The far end abutted a stone wall crawling with vines and featuring a waterfall, now dry. The pool itself was covered and presumably drained.

Iliana moved swiftly across the pebbled surface of the patio, past the pool house, and reached the back door. She unzipped her light jacket and removed her lockpicking case. Meeks had good locks, but no lock was good enough, and she performed the work with swift and instinctive precision.

In a moment, the door swung inward, and she was greeted with the insistent beeping of the security system. She quickly entered the six-digit code. The panel's urgent red blinking shifted to a placid green pulse, and the noise ceased.

Iliana closed the door and took a moment to consider her options. From the moment she'd exited her car, she had been operating on instinct. Programming, perhaps. Her mind had not wandered. She directed her attention to immediate problems and their solutions. Now she settled back into herself—though she wondered if perhaps the thoughtless, mechanical mode was her true self. Maybe her consciousness was a mistake. An aberration. It was one of the things she had come to Tylor to discover.

She wasn't certain what she hoped to find in the house. She knew it had been cleared of anything that could be removed. The lawyers had hired a cleaning service to scrub away any trace of Meeks and his appetites. The house had now been on the market for three months, but it had not sold, and Iliana's research suggested it had not received any serious offers. Perhaps it never would.

Iliana stepped lightly in the recoil-foamed and suede-padded sneak boots she'd bought a couple of weeks before at a survivalist store. Even with the shoes, her movements echoed faintly through the empty mansion. The house was dark, too dark even for her excellent night vision, but she

did not want to risk turning on the lights. The flashlight on her phone would suffice.

She thought it would be wise to examine the upper floors first. She believed she had entered unseen, and she knew she had successfully deactivated the alarm, but she wanted to be prepared to get out at a moment's notice. The longer she remained, the greater the odds of having to make a quick escape, which meant saving the ground floor for last.

The second-floor bedrooms and bathrooms meant nothing to her. Had she expected they would? Not really, but she'd hoped there would be *something* here. She'd lied to Dan about that. About why she'd come to Tylor. She'd chosen not to tell him that when she'd awoken in that North Carolina forest, her mind had not been empty. It contained two words: *Tylor* and *Meeks*.

There were other things. Other deceptions. Necessary deceptions. She could not regret what was necessary any more than she could regret the weather. And like the weather, she would deal as best she could with circumstances she could not control.

She completed her walkthrough of the second story and descended to the main floor. Thus far she'd found nothing that sparked memories or raised questions. The massive kitchen, the living room, a screening room. It

was certainly luxurious, but not at all revelatory. It was an empty house, unremarkable to her in all ways.

When she felt she had searched everywhere, Iliana stepped outside and into the heat. She took a moment to watch and listen and feel. Her instincts were good, and she had no sense of being observed or that anyone approached. She still had time, and so she chose not to reactivate the alarm just yet.

The guest house stood above the three-car garage, just off the circular driveway, and not protected by the security system. An exterior staircase led to the entrance, and she easily picked the lock. Inside, she found a large suite with two bedrooms, a kitchenette, a living area, and a full bathroom.

Only the pool house remained. It seemed unlikely she would find anything there, but it would only take her a moment to examine the interior. That this structure was locked at all seemed odd. Even stranger was that a security panel stood inside the door, though it continued to glow an amicable green. Why protect the pool house and not the guest house? She had to climb three stairs to reach the pool house door, suggesting it was slightly elevated off ground level.

As she examined the room with her phone flashlight, she observed that there were no windows, though she had clearly seen several facing the

pool. False windows, then. Interesting and unexpected. It also meant she could turn on the lights without risk.

She flipped the several switches near the door, and a battery of overhead LEDs came to life on the fifteen-foot ceiling. She noticed several things at once. The space was approximately 1,200 square feet. Near the door she found a high-tech thermostat for the building's independent HVAC system. Though the room was empty, brackets remained on the walls. The white tile floor was clearly raised, and a trio of suction-based handles gathered dust in the near corner. She took one, activated the suction cups, and lifted a randomly selected concrete panel to reveal a network of heavy cables.

Iliana replaced the panel, returned the handle, and turned off the lights. She had seen enough. This had been a server farm. This qualified as a surprise but not a perplexing one. Meeks had spent his entire career developing cutting-edge technology. He might well have need for massive computer processing power, and it was his nature to be secretive about his work.

Nothing in the server farm had seemed familiar to her. She had no sense that she had been there before, and yet there was a nagging sensation of significance. It was a vague notion, what she supposed *déjà vu* might feel like. She would continue to think about it. Maybe it would come to her, or

she would learn something else to make her understand the significance. Or not. She knew better than to hope for easy solutions.

She returned to the main house and reactivated the alarm. She then once again made her way through the trees and over the wall, through back yards and over fences, until she returned to her car. It was only once she had started driving, as the music from her stereo soothed her, did she wonder how it was that she knew Gregory Meeks' home security code.

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Chapter 18

DAN

As promised, Iliana showed up at my place in the morning, again with coffee and muffins. I hadn't answered her savory-or-sweet question, but muffins were fine.

"I want you to come by my house," she said while I sipped my coffee and tried to wake up. "I haven't found much, but I think another pair of eyes would be useful. Besides, you knew Old Iliana, and I didn't."

"I didn't know her in any meaningful way," I said.

She shrugged. "Even so. It can't hurt."

"There's something else we have to talk about." I told her about Darcy Silvestri coming to my place of work and the note implicating us in her husband's disappearance.

"That's interesting," she said.

"Just interesting? You don't think it's weird that someone knows about the two of us?"

"Someone knows something about Old Iliana and her interest in you," she agreed. "That same someone probably knows she was working with

Silvestri and that she had an interest in using you for something. If they knew, or thought they knew, Silvestri was dead, it would likely say that."

"Do you think Hilliard sent her the note?"

She shook her head. "He had no idea Old Iliana had anything going on with Silvestri, and he would have no reason to stir the pot."

"Then who?" I asked.

She drank her coffee and looked off thoughtfully. "Someone who thinks they have something to gain by stirring the pot."

"What do we do?" I asked.

She grinned. "We stir the pot first."

After eating, we got in her car, a pristine Jaguar, and I was surprised when music came on immediately. It was some underproduced indie rock band, but nothing I recognized.

"You listen to music?" I asked, as she pulled onto the street. "Is that because you're trying to seem more like Iliana?"

"No, I don't think Iliana ever listened to any kind of music. Isn't that odd?"

"But you do enjoy music? That's what you're saying?"

“You think I shouldn’t? You think I should spend my time listening to zeros and ones being read off by a digitized voice.”

“I guess I don’t know,” I said. “I mean, I have no frame of reference.”

“That’s fair,” she conceded. “The main thing you have to keep in mind about me is that I have interiority. Is it the same as yours? Who knows, right? Is yours like, I don’t know, Michelle Yeoh’s? It’s a timeless mystery.”

“Michelle Yeoh is an interesting choice,” I told her.

“The point is, I have no idea how similar my brain is to yours, and not knowing is an itch I can never scratch. But I think I’m more like you than not.”

The music was a little odd, suggesting peculiar taste, but it also helped me to understand that she really was a person. Not a human being, I guess, but a distinct person. I’m not sure that would change how I engaged with her, but it was comforting in a weird way. I didn’t want to think I was duped into thinking something artificial was real, like when you initially mistake a voicemail for a live person.

Old Iliana’s place was in the cottage district, near city hall and full of charming old houses, all quite expensive, but not demonstrably extravagant. If a news crew from another city were to flash an image of the police

chief's foster daughter's house, most people would not think it was a sign of outrageous graft.

"Do you own it?" I asked as we walked up to the front door. Lizards scurried out of our way and leapt into the shrubs lining the path.

"Hilliard does. He's renting it to me for a nominal amount."

Given the nature of Iliana's work, the most effective arrangement would be for Hilliard to keep her on a short leash and make sure she never forgets she was dependent on his generosity.

"He came by last night and tried to have sex with me," Iliana said as she opened the front door.

"Wait, what?" I stood there in the threshold and air conditioning blasted out at us.

"Yeah. Apparently, they had a thing."

I followed her into her house. "So, in addition to being her foster brother's girlfriend, she was hooking up with her foster father?"

"It's messed up. That family really needs to expand its range."

The house was not what I would have imagined for Old Iliana. Not that I'd ever thought about it, but if I had, it would have included weapons, lurid paintings—mostly involving weapons—and a lot of clutter. She had always struck me as someone who wouldn't clean up after herself.

The tile floors were polished, the furniture was clean and basic. The areas with carpet showed the tracks from a recent vacuuming.

“It was a mess when I got here,” Iliana said. “I had to tidy up.”

I felt some satisfaction in having nailed it. “You did a nice job, but are you okay? I mean, the business with Bryce Hilliard. He didn’t—you know?”

“Try to rape me?” she asked. “No, he was very passive. I had the impression he expected me to perform oral sex, that he wasn’t interested in actual intercourse. My read was that this was a longstanding thing between them, perhaps since Iliana was a child.”

I sat down. This was a lot to think about. “Something that twisted changes the picture, doesn’t it?”

“You mean about Old Iliana dedicating her life to doing terrible things? Maybe. Lots of people are abused without becoming killers. Even so, you can have sympathy for the conditions that produced someone evil without condoning the end result.”

“But are you all right?” I asked, standing again. I thought maybe she needed a hug or something. Or maybe I shouldn’t touch her. I had no idea how to act.

“I’ve had to fend off male advances before. Hilliard is nothing new. I mean, it makes me find him more disgusting, and it’s going to make it more

difficult to leave here without making sure he faces some sort of justice, but, yes, I'm fine."

"Still, it must be upsetting, especially since you don't . . . ." I wasn't sure how to finish this sentence.

She gave me a stern look. " I simply don't have any interest in that sort of connection."

That seemed sad to me. Not that feeling desire was so great when no one in town looked at you with anything but disgust, but it struck me as weird that whoever had chosen to make her a fully formed person in so many capacities had robbed her of that.

"I don't feel the loss," she said. "I can form emotional bonds, or care about people or even feel love, I suspect, though it's never happened. I simply am not interested in activating an erotic capacity. And I can't miss something that I've never felt. You might look at a bird taking flight and wonder what it's like, but you probably don't feel diminished by your lack of wings."

"I guess that's true." And because I found this conversation awkward, I changed the subject. "Any thoughts on where we should start looking?"

"Follow your intuition. I haven't come across any work-related documents, but see if you can find a hiding place I've overlooked. Don't ask for permission. Dive in. Maybe you'll think of something I didn't. You

might have an advantage here, being the same species as Old Iliana and all."

"It's so odd when you put it that way," I said. "I mean, you're what you are, but I feel more similar to you than I ever did to her."

Iliana's face lit up. "That is so nice, Dan. Thank you for saying that. I want you to know that I appreciate you too."

That made things weird, so I turned to start looking around. I spent the next ten minutes wandering through Iliana's house, which was not something I would have ever imagined doing. Her bedroom contained a full bed with a side table with nothing on it. No lamp. There was a dresser, and the closet contained clothes and shoes but nothing else.

There were two other bedrooms, one of which was completely empty. The other had been turned into an exercise room. It had a treadmill and one of those high-end stationary bikes with a video screen. A rack held a series of dumbbells and kettlebells, and a water cooler stood in the corner.

The living room contained a modular sofa, a coffee table, and a large TV on the wall. The kitchen was equally functional. The cabinets had a sprinkling of pots and pans, but they didn't seem to have gotten much use. The refrigerator was full of fresh produce—too fresh to have predated New Iliana—but little else.

A few framed posters hung on the wall, but they had all the warmth of decorations found in a furniture showroom. There were no photos, no mementos, nothing to suggest Iliana herself had ever lived here.

Maybe she spent most of her time with Kyle Hilliard and this house was only notionally hers, but that didn't seem right to me. You can never really know another person, especially when that person is mean as shit and you go out of your way to avoid any contact with her, but I couldn't imagine Old Iliana as a clingy girlfriend. She'd done serious work for Hilliard, and I had a hard time imagining her coming home from a bloodbath to cuddle with Kyle.

I had to conclude that Old Iliana was a broken person who lived to do bad things. Maybe she'd been born broken, but I could not rule out the possibility that Bryce Hilliard had broken her and then exploited his creation. I wouldn't advocate for Iliana to straight-up murder him, but I wanted him to answer for his crimes.

Iliana followed me into the kitchen and hopped up on the counter, swinging her legs before crossing them.

"This place is really spare," I said. "I'd guess she barely lived here."

"What do you know about her background?" Iliana asked me. "How did she end up with Hilliard?"

I dug through my memories of what I knew about her. “I heard her father was a cop. The wife ran out when Iliana was a baby, and then the father died in a car accident. Drunk, I think, though they hushed that up. Hilliard took her in. He was married at the time.”

“And where’s Hilliard’s wife now?”

“Also dead,” I said. “Very sudden, probably within a year or two of them taking in Iliana. The public story was that it was an aneurysm, but rumor said suicide. Who knows, though.”

“That’s suspicious.”

“Given what you’ve learned, it’s fair to wonder if Hilliard killed her father and then his own wife so he could abuse young Iliana.”

She nodded. “Even if it was all a tragic coincidence, I now know that Bryce Hilliard is a piece of shit who deserves anything bad that comes his way.”

“And is something bad coming his way?”

“That depends on the opportunities that present themselves,” she said. “My first choice is to get out of here with as little chaos as possible.”

“And you’re okay with letting him walk, given what you know about him?”

“I don’t love the idea, but I can’t avenge all the wrongs in the world. You ever think about Superman? Every time he’s asking questions at a press

conference or bumbling around the newsroom, adjusting his glasses, there's a murder or a rape or a bombing he's not preventing. He can't stop all bad things from happening, and if he tried, he'd go insane."

"And in this analogy," I said, "you're Superman."

She smiled.

"I found some unopened bills on the front table," Iliana said, "but no other paperwork. She didn't have a computer or a tablet. Her digital life seems to have been managed entirely via her phone, which I've gone through carefully. I found some interesting social tidbits, like Kyle's dalliance with that other woman, but if any records exist of her work for Hilliard, it's not here. It would have to be at one of the Hilliards' houses or the police station. Infiltrating any of those places is not without risk."

I felt a sudden pang of terror. Had I just gone from her advisor to her co-burglar? "Do you know how to break into places? I don't."

"Getting past locks is no problem, but we have to weigh risk and reward. If we're caught breaking in, that could be bad, and from what I've observed, we're not likely to find much at Kyle Hilliard's home. Bryce Hilliard treats him with contempt, and I doubt Iliana would want to leave sensitive material with him."

“Then where do we start?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t ever had to solve a puzzle like this. I tend to be more reactive.” She hurled herself off the counter and filled up a tea kettle with water from the refrigerator. “I’m making some tea. Eating and drinking helps me to think.”

That was interesting. Did intensive thinking consume an inordinate amount of energy, or was this merely a quirk? Did she have quirks?

I didn’t say anything until she set a mug of ginger tea to steep in front of me. I had been mulling things over, however, during the companionable silence.

“Why don’t we go through everything we know,” I suggested. “Maybe we can find something that will point to the identity of their intended victim.”

Iliana nodded. “Hilliard told me he wanted me to deal with a reporter, and my guess is that the two men in the van, the ones who grabbed me, had been hired to do just that.”

“So, they thought you were a reporter? That’s why they tried to abduct you?”

“That’s the most likely explanation. I don’t know if they meant to hurt her or frighten her off, but if we can figure out who she is, we can warn her and maybe learn a little more about what’s been going on.”

“Okay, that’s useful. If we pull up a map, can you show me exactly where you were?”

“Are you asking if I have a GPS in my head? Can I run a map app or come with Wi-Fi.”

“Is that offensive?”

“How do you know if you don’t ask? As it happens, I don’t have any of that stuff, but I have near-perfect recall.” She took out her phone, scrolled around until she identified a section of Highway 82. I expanded a little to see that she was on a half-mile stretch of nothingness between clusters of urban sprawl.

“They stopped you when you were there,” I said, “thinking you were someone else, someone who they expected to be walking along the side of the road at that time. But why would they assume anyone would be there? It’s not exactly a pedestrian-friendly stretch.”

“That’s a good point.” She took the phone back and scrolled around a little more, reviewing what else was in the area. It turned out, not a lot. It was mostly empty land except for one business. “Here,” she said. “Kip’s Tire and Auto Repair. If someone had to stop to get their car repaired, and those repairs were going to take a while, they might have wanted to walk a mile along the road to hang out at this donut place here. Better than spending hours at the garage.”

I was about to ask a stupid question, but then I answered it for myself. “They did something to her car. Something that would require immediate attention, so that when it happened, she had to stop at the nearest mechanic.”

“And I was either a few minutes ahead of her or behind her. They saw me and mistook me for their victim. How many young women can there be walking alone by the side of that road? On that day, by pure coincidence, there happened to be two when there was only supposed to be one. That’s how all of this got started.”

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Chapter 19

The fastest way to get from Tampa to Tylor was to take I-75 and then exit at Highway 82, which, for a few short miles, is called Hilliard Road—named for Jeremy Hilliard, the great-grandfather of our current police chief. You'd think the main link between the interstate and Tylor would be strewn with businesses, but in that you'd be mistaken. Where it intersects with the highway, you can find a sprinkling of motels, gas stations, and fast-food restaurants, and as you get closer to town, you'll see the expected Home Depot and Cracker Barrel and an enormous sporting goods store. In between, you have the occasional local businesses, usually separated by a whole lot of nothing. If something catastrophic were to happen to your car on that stretch, Kip's Tire and Auto Repair would be the only option.

"Why were you walking toward Tylor?" I asked as we drove out there.

"I was hitchhiking," Iliana said. "I got dropped off at that exit, and I wanted to see."

"But why Tylor?"

She shrugged. "I don't know what I'm looking for, so how can I know where I'll find it?"

“You weren’t going to find it in Tylor.”

“I found you, Dan,” she said.

This sort of thing made me deeply uncomfortable. I understood having someone to confide in was new to her, and it must have been a relief to be open and honest after weeks of hiding her true nature, but I didn’t want her thinking I was anything more than what I was—a local fuckup. I felt the sensation of being liked, of having someone who regarded me as special. The euphoria was as potent as any drug-induced high, and part of me craved another hit. I wanted her to keep saying it until I started to believe that I was more than what I had always been, what I always would be.

I resisted because I knew sooner rather than later, Iliana would leave. We would find the intended abduction victim, and she would disentangle herself from Hilliard. There would be nothing keeping her here, and I would go back to being exactly what I’d been before.

Maybe not exactly. Maybe I would be worse off. There was so much out there, more than I had ever imagined, and I would never again have a chance to see it. After what I’d done to Faye Kristic, I had been given a life sentence to remain a nobody in Tylor. A couple of weeks palling around with Iliana could not change that.

At least I would be helping someone. Seven years ago, I inadvertently killed a young woman. Now I might be able to help save one.

I'd driven past Kip's countless times, but I'd never brought my car there. There were places in town that were about as reliable as an auto mechanic could be. A small town can tolerate a corrupt police department but not a dishonest mechanic.

We pulled up into the unpaved parking lot. Iliana's car trailed dust as she parked between a couple of partially disassembled pickup trucks. Maybe they were there for repairs, or maybe they belonged to Kip, which didn't instill a lot of confidence in his abilities.

"What's the plan?" I asked.

"No plan," she said. "I'll ask some questions and respond accordingly."

"That feels a bit ad hoc to me."

She shrugged. "They might be hardened criminals in there. Or they might be decent people who have no idea they'd been used in a criminal scheme. They might have been forced against their will to participate. We can't know, so we'll take it one step at a time."

"I guess I'm asking if things could get dicey."

"Of course, Dan. But that's true of any interaction with anyone at any time."

I did not want things to get dicey. I preferred to be far away from violence and mayhem. I didn't want to be on the side dishing it out, even if the other side deserved it. I also didn't want any more trouble with the police. On top of that, I had no skills for this sort of situation. Iliana was clearly capable of taking out multiple criminals. I'd seen her do it minus one arm.

"Maybe it would be better if I waited in the car."

"No way. You're my partner!" She opened her car door, but then turned back to look at me. "But if things do get a little crazy, you need to get out of the way, and let me do what I do. Guns, hand grenades, surface-to-air missiles—whatever. We're unlikely to run across anything I can't handle, and I don't want you getting involved. Violence can taint people, Dan. It changes them. I don't want that to happen to you."

She got out of the car, and I followed her. For the record, I was totally on board with what she suggested. I'd seen her moves, and they were fast and deadly. I had no problem getting out of the way and letting Iliana be Iliana.

At the same time, if things did get dangerous, I wouldn't want to leave her hanging. She said we were partners. Surely that meant I should have her back, though I had no idea what that would mean in practical terms. I was going to be a liability if the mechanic whipped out a tommy

gun and began spraying the garage with bullets. I realize that was a more 1930s outcome than we were likely to face, but it was where my mind went.

The bottom line was I didn't want to disappoint her. She'd saved my life, and it meant a lot that she wanted me by her side. That was what I couldn't refuse so, nervous as a kid trying to buy a six-pack with a fake ID, I followed her into the garage.

Top 40 country played softly from an old boom box. A slender man of indeterminate age stood with his torso bent over the open hood of a Tacoma. There had been no bell to alert him of our presence, but he knew we were there all the same.

"Be with you in a minute."

One minute was a fairly accurate timeline. Once he finished tightening something I could not see and would not have been able to identify if I had seen, he stepped back, began wiping his hands on a rag.

He was in his mid-forties, with a pointed nose that had been broken more than once. His gap-tooth smile was weirdly charming, but the smile vanished almost as soon as it appeared. His eyes met Iliana's. Then he dropped his rag and ran.

He went through the door to the office, which he slammed and locked, all before I was able to process what was happening. Iliana did not hesitate. She went after him, leading with her shoulder and cannonballing into the closed office door, which splintered with a sonic boom. The remains of the door flew open. By the time I gathered my senses and went after her, another door was open in the back, this one unbroken. I guess the mechanic hadn't had time to lock it.

I ran through and went out back. There was a small clearing before the tree line. I couldn't tell which way they'd gone, but I thought I heard someone shouting dead ahead, and contrary to my general inclinations, I ran toward the mayhem.

I found them shortly after I ran into the woods. The mechanic was standing about ten feet away from Iliana, the pistol in his hand pointed directly at her chest. All around us, birds sang and insects buzzed, oblivious to our drama.

"I'm serious," the mechanic was saying. "I'll put a hole in you and bury you where they'll never find you. You're not giving me any choice here."

Iliana smiled. "You won't shoot me."

"What makes you so sure?" I had the impression he was trying to buy time, and while I'm not expert on these things, I figured if he was going to

shoot her, he'd have done it rather than provide an outline of his plans.

My eyes had trouble registering the speed. Iliana was ten feet away, and then she was next to him, slightly off center, yanking his arm up and to the side so that if the gun discharged, it wouldn't be at me. It didn't discharge.

Iliana tore the weapon from his hand and tossed it into the dirt.

"Pick up the gun, Dan," she said to me.

"I'm not really comfortable with guns, so maybe I'll—"

"Pick up the fucking gun, Dan." I did what she told me to do. I held the gun by the base, and made sure it was pointed downward, with my finger nowhere near the trigger. I hated holding it, and I hated being snapped at, like she was my father or Igor or any of the other people who walked all over me because they could.

I had to shake off my self-pity. When I looked over at the mechanic, Iliana had shoved him down on his knees and was standing over and behind him.

"Goddamn it, Iliana, I did what you said," he whined. "I didn't want to, but I did it, and now it's blowing back on me. I knew it would, which is why I didn't want to do it."

There were a lot of outcomes of this little adventure I'd been fearing. There was the afore-mentioned machine gun mayhem, but there was also

the possibility that Iliana would go all killer-robot on someone. I was now implicated in a violent crime. If my violent co-criminal presented as the police chief's fixer, did that make things better or worse? I had no idea. This was not what I wanted to be doing. This was not what I wanted in my life.

Yet here I was. I could not run away. I could not leave Iliana to do this alone, even though she was completely capable. She wanted me around to help, so I figured I'd better help, even if I had no idea what would be useful.

The mechanic was clearly terrified of her, which only made sense since he thought she was Old Iliana, with whom he'd had criminal dealings.

That, I realized, was how I could help. Iliana couldn't ask a lot of basic questions if she was supposed to know the answers already.

"Are you Kip?" I asked him.

"She knows who I am," he spat.

"But I don't." I glanced around, worried about who might have seen the mechanic fleeing for his life. We were outside Tylor city limits, and I wasn't sure what kind of reputation Iliana had around here or what sort of relationship Hilliard might have with the sheriff's department. There were a lot of unknowns that could lead to us getting arrested for assault. So far, there were no sirens, so I figured I should take advantage of that.

“Yeah, I’m Kip,” he said, maybe trying to fill the silence. “I did everything you said, Iliana.”

Iliana nodded at me. I was rewarded with a flush of pleasure as I realized my criminal instincts were solid. She wanted me to keep going.

I wasn’t great under pressure. I didn’t have a lot of experience shaking down criminals, and I worried I might not be up to the task. But Iliana needed me, so I took a deep breath and tried to put my thoughts in some kind of coherent order.

“Why’d you run, Kip?” I asked, thinking that was a good place to start. “If you did what she asked, why’d you take off?”

“That girl came back,” he said. “She wasn’t supposed to, but she did. I don’t know what went wrong, but it was the two assholes you hired that fucked up, not me.”

“Walk me through everything,” I said. “Give me specifics.”

“*She* knows!” he shouted.

“And she wants you to tell me, so get started doing that.”

The story was simple. There were two assholes. Kip didn’t know their names. They drove Kip out to Tampa, where he rigged the “Chinese girl’s” car so that things would go wrong about a mile before she got to his shop.

“It was all bullshit,” he said. “I fucked with the electronics, and put a smoke bomb in her engine. When those two methheads triggered it,

suddenly she gets a ton of smoke coming out from under the hood, and the CHECK ENGINE light comes on, brighter than she's ever seen it, and flashing. Those lights don't have a *holy shit* mode, but a Chinese girl isn't going to know that."

I withheld my observations on the likelihood of there being Asian women with mechanical knowledge lurking somewhere outside the realm of Kip's experience. "The plan was that she would come in, ask for your help, and then what?"

"I'd tell her it was serious, throw a bunch of things at her she wouldn't understand, and say it's not safe to drive the car. Then I told her I can fix it, and it won't be too expensive, but I need three or four hours."

"She's got an incentive to let you handle the problem, but it will take enough time that she won't want to wait in the garage. Then you suggest she wait down the road at the donut place?"

"You people didn't give me a choice." He glanced at Iliana. "I don't know what it was about, and I don't want to know. The girl came back in three hours, took her car, and left. I charged her a hundred and thirty-seven dollars. I can give that to you."

"Who were the two guys?" I asked.

"How should I know?" Kip asked. "Iliana said they were nobodies."

“What about the woman?” Iliana asked him. “Can you give us her name?”

“It was you who gave me her name in the first place,” Kip protested. “It was Kwon. Naomi Kwon.”

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Chapter 20

The cute girl from the party. Of course she hadn't been interested in me. At least not in that way. She was part of this. A few taps on my phone told me why, and at least it wasn't sinister. She hadn't been out to kill me or abduct me or make me dig a grave. Naomi Kwon was a journalist after a story.

A little more digging revealed she lived in Ballast Point in Tampa, so I knew where we were going next.

Kip remained on the ground, holding his hands up defensively while Iliana and I discussed these new facts quietly a few trees away. When we were done, Iliana turned back to him. "If you say anything about this to anyone, I'll come back. Do you believe me?"

He nodded.

"You might think it's smart to be afraid of Bryce Hilliard. You'd be smarter to be afraid of me. Hilliard can make your life difficult, but I'll put you in the ground. Don't tell your friends or your mother or your dog about this. If I hear any talk about our visit, you will disappear." She turned to me and flashed a grin of pure enthusiasm. "We're making awesome progress."

As we walked to the car, I was still holding the gun out as though it were a stick of dynamite with the fuse lit. Iliana glanced at me. “That little switch there is the safety,” she said. “Flip it to the on position, and the gun can’t fire. It will be perfectly safe.”

“Can’t you—”

“I can’t.” She shook her head with curious sadness. “I am not great with touching guns.”

“Is it . . . a thing with your nature?”

“You mean my programming?” she asked. “I think so. I mean, I can’t say for sure it isn’t a psychological issue, but I think it’s how I’m designed. I can touch a gun long enough to disarm someone, but that’s about it.”

That was interesting. Iliana was a killing machine who could not use guns. This added to my sense that she was built for infiltration and assassination. Maybe whoever made her was afraid she or her kind could become too dangerous and so had imposed limitations.

She turned back to face me, her eyes wide and searching. “I’m sorry I raised my voice. We were in combat, and the most important thing was to control the flow of violence. I’d rather your feelings get hurt than you get shot.”

“It’s okay,” I said.

“I don’t think it is,” she told me. “I mean, I would do it again the same way, because it was the right decision to remove the gun from combat, but I wish I hadn’t been forced to upset you. I ought to have considered something like this might come up and prepared you. I know people have been cruel to you, and I don’t want you to think that’s what I’m doing. I raised my voice because I care about you, not because I don’t.”

There was genuine concern on her face. Or maybe it was the simulacrum of genuine concern, but it sure looked real.

“I get it,” I said. “You were right to worry more about keeping us safe than my psychological issues.”

“I try to worry about both whenever possible, but sometimes you have to make a choice.”

“Thanks for talking to me about it,” I said. “It makes a difference.”

She smiled. “I hoped it would.”

“I’m not comfortable around guns either,” I said.

“I’m glad,” she said. “Violence isn’t your business. It’s mine. But I may ask you to hold one now and again because it’s something you can do without passing out.”

Fifteen minutes later, the gun was not an issue. We'd found a canal, and I tossed it in. Then we were on our way.

"Were you Asian?" I asked as we drove along the highway. "When I first saw you in the Kitchikuti, it was dark. I couldn't tell."

"Yes, Filipina," she told me. "I saw a woman at a grocery store in Georgia, and I don't know why, but something about her appearance appealed to me. That can happen sometimes. I'll see someone and think: I love her look! Being her would be nice! Anyhow, this woman was pushing around an old lady in a wheelchair. I followed them for a while. I didn't learn much in the first couple of days—"

"So, when you say you followed them, you don't mean you tailed them to the produce department? This was full-on stalking."

"It wasn't creepy, so let's call it surveillance. I wanted to know more. How else can I learn? Anyway, I overheard a few conversations, I searched the house, read some texts and emails. I had to learn Tagalog, which is a cool language. So, this woman was an immigrant from the Philippines and working as this old woman's caretaker, and that gave me an idea. I could be a Filipina caretaker, and when the person I was taking care of died, I could become that old person. I could use her ID and move somewhere people didn't know me. An old person's identity wouldn't last forever, obviously, but a good five or ten years should have been possible."

“So you decided to steal this immigrant’s identity first?” I asked.

“It was inspiration, not theft,” Iliana said. “I’m not a body snatcher. I don’t actually need a model to base my appearance on. I didn’t copy this woman exactly, just her general aesthetic.”

“I guess that explains the accent.”

“I go all in.” She looked a little wistful. “Reyna Serrano. I made it up myself. I liked being Reyna. It was comfortable.”

“Wait a minute,” I said, “what did you look like when you first woke up? Who were you then?”

“It was a disguise,” Iliana said. “I was a woman, mid-fifties, plain features, somewhat overweight, white, unflattering clothing. I think the appearance was meant to make me unmemorable. Just another face in the crowd.”

“How do you know it was a disguise?” I asked.

“It’s hard to explain,” she said. “When I’ve just changed forms, my body feels *new*. I don’t know of any other way to put it. But that appearance wasn’t comfortable, and I changed pretty soon after that.”

“Is being Iliana comfortable?”

“It’s getting there,” she said, nodding to herself. I wondered if she was thinking about roughing up Kip. I wondered if she needed violence and surveillance and impersonation. What would happen if she got everything

she wanted, and her life became stable and boring? Would all her deadly abilities need an outlet?

I didn't want to consider that. Or maybe I was already considering it, trying to decide how to protect myself. That's why I figured I should make sure to tell her what I knew. "I was talking to her. Naomi Kwon. When you walked up to me at that party."

I hadn't said anything back in the garage, because it wasn't Kip's business. I also found myself embarrassed to say anything at all, but that was foolish. There was no point in being ashamed of my pathetic, non-existent romantic life with someone who had only existed for a few weeks and never intended to have a romantic life of her own. Besides, concealing things from Iliana struck me as a bad idea.

"Then you know her?"

Was that suspicion in her voice? I started to wonder if Iliana might worry that Naomi was dangerous, that she might know Iliana's secret. If that were the case, how far would Iliana go to protect that secret? It might be a good idea to try to steer Iliana away from thinking of Naomi as an enemy. I wasn't her biggest fan at that moment, but I didn't want to see her get hurt.

"I only spoke to her for a few minutes. She clearly sought me out. I assume she's digging up information about Tylor, and she asked me a lot of

questions, though she didn’t tell me she was a reporter. I’m not sure that’s ethical.”

“Did she lie to you?”

“No.”

“Then I think we can assume she’s ethical until we learn otherwise. And if bad people are trying to run her off, she must be doing something good.”

I continued to dig up information as we drove. Naomi Kwon had worked for a Tampa free weekly for a couple of years, but then the paper folded, and she went freelance, writing pieces for several well-respected national magazines and websites. Her articles ran a wide range from human interest to interviews with B-list celebrities to restaurant reviews to more in-depth investigative pieces. My guess was that she took a lot of the less demanding work to pay the bills while she pursued serious journalism. One of her longer pieces was on the corrupt city government in a small town in Texas. Another was on a crooked school board in rural Oklahoma. Naomi Kwon seemed to have a specialization, and she’d turned her sights on Tylor, which explained why Hilliard wanted to get rid of her.

“This is coming together nicely,” Iliana said. “We found out who she is, and we found out why Hilliard wanted her silenced. We tell her she’s in danger, and our work is done.”

“Why would she believe us?” I asked.

Iliana shrugged. “She’s looking into Hilliard because she knows he’s corrupt. She’ll believe us.”

“You don’t think we should, I don’t know. . . .”

“Team up with a plucky reporter to bring down a bunch of small-town crooks?”

“I’d describe it so it sounds less dumb, but yeah.”

“It’s cool you want to do that,” Iliana said. “I don’t like seeing people getting away with unethical behavior. On the other hand, we’ve got things to worry about, such as you surviving and me not getting caught. Bryce Hilliard will have a deep network of allies and complex systems designed to maintain his power. If we cross him, what exactly will we be up against? If he has a friend who’s a dirty Fed, and he gets an inkling of what I am, I could vanish forever.”

“I’m not suggesting we go to war,” I said. “But we should, I don’t know, do something.”

“That’s Naomi Kwon’s job,” Iliana said. “She’s an experienced journalist with a track record of taking on corrupt municipalities. She’ll

know how to deal with danger. You and I are a couple of amateurs who've stumbled across her work. Isn't it arrogant to assume we can blunder along and do what she does?"

"I hadn't thought about it that way."

"I get it," Iliana said. "It's exciting. You've been locked down in Tylor for years, and you want to accomplish something good. It speaks to your character. I admire that, but we don't have the means or the experience to solve Tylor's problems. We need to solve our problems."

Naomi Kwon lived in the sort of nondescript apartment complex found all over Florida, likely all over the country, if you discounted the aqua blue and pastel green paint. It was a series of four-story rectangles with exterior entrances and railed-off walkways. The buildings sat at right angles to one another, separated by parking lots and patches of landscaping. The reporter's building was likely one of the more desirable ones since it faced away from the main street and toward an artificial pond, on the other side of which was an inevitable golf course.

No one answered when we knocked on her door. Now that we were here, I wondered why'd we come all this way without calling, in the middle of a Wednesday afternoon, and assume a reporter would be at home instead

of out reporting, or writing at a coffee shop, or whatever it was she did to occupy her days.

“I guess we could have planned this out better,” I said.

“Nah. This is fine.” Iliana had by now produced a cloth wallet in which were nestled a series of arced pins with black plastic handles. She selected one and began working at the reporter’s lock.

I looked around to see if anyone was watching us, but who would be? There was no one around except a couple of golfers in the distance. Iliana managed to stand in a way that suggested she was waiting for someone to answer the door, not breaking into the apartment. Deception by body language.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“We’ll have a quick look to cover our bases.”

The lock clicked and Iliana opened the door.

The apartment was neat, but there were signs that it hadn’t been visited for days. There was a sour smell in the air—not strong enough to suggest a decomposing body, but more like trash that had been neglected for too long.

Iliana noticed it too. “She keeps her place nice, but that smell tells me she took off without emptying her garbage. That’s worrying.”

I was still trying to get a handle on Iliana's moral code. It seemed to be much more about individuals than institutions. She could walk away from a city abusing its power, but didn't want to leave a woman in trouble. Of course, that was assuming she was telling the truth about her motivations. I really had no idea. I was going along with someone I knew to be a capable killer. Why? Because she liked to bring me breakfast. She was my friend, I guess, or I wanted her to be. I liked hanging out with her. She made my life more interesting, and even if the experience was only temporary, it was intoxicating. Was I too trusting of Iliana because of what I wanted her to be rather than what I knew she was?

While I wandered around the apartment, pretending to know what I was doing, Iliana started opening desk drawers. The invasion of privacy made me uncomfortable. Iliana fingered through the files in the bottom drawer of the desk, looking for anything to do with Tylor. After a minute she shook her head.

"No luck," she said. "She has files on her other major investigative projects, but nothing on Tylor. Either she hasn't yet made a physical file, she took whatever she had with her, or someone else broke in and beat us to it."

Iliana did a more thorough search, looking under the files and behind the drawer to see if anything had fallen out and gotten lost. She found

nothing.

“Okay, so what do we do?” I asked.

She shrugged. “I think we leave her a voicemail and send an email, warning her. We’ll have to be vague to keep things safe, but we can’t babysit this woman.”

“But what if she’s in danger right this minute?”

Iliana shrugged. “We don’t know where she is or what she’s doing, but everything Hilliard has said to me suggests he doesn’t know, either. I’m not even convinced he wanted to hurt her. I think the plan was to abduct her and frighten her off the story. Maybe find out what she’s already dug up.”

I couldn’t think of anything to contradict her, but it felt cowardly to walk away. I didn’t want to look back later and think of what I could have done, but didn’t. I suppose I wanted to make up, in some small way, for Faye Kristic. Not that I could. There’s no way to make up for a life that’s ended.

Iliana must have seen my expression. “Okay, let’s do a more thorough search. We’re not the bad guys, so we’ll be neat and respectful. But we can look in weird places—hidden nooks, under the mattress, whatever. Maybe there’s something we missed.”

“You do the bedroom,” I said.

“You thought she was flirting with you, and now you’d feel weird about going through her underwear. Got it.”

She seemed to get a great deal sometimes.

She went off to look in the bedroom. I took another look around the living room. When I was in high school, I’d needed a hiding place for my occasional small stash of weed. One weekend, when my parents were out of town, I installed a fake power outlet. It was behind my dresser, so even if someone noticed it, they’d be inclined to think they’d forgotten there was an outlet there rather than feeling certain it was new. It flipped open to reveal a small safe with a three-digit combination dial.

I’d thought myself mighty clever at the time, though now it seemed like a lot of work when I could have just put my weed in a sock. In any case, I checked Naomi’s outlets, and they all seemed legit.

I went into the bathroom, where I opened the medicine cabinet but made a point of not looking at her prescriptions. As someone who’d been on a lot of meds over the years, this was an offering to the karma pool so that someday some intruder would do the same for me. I checked in the drawers, under the sink, in the small linen cabinet above the toilet. I was about to give up when it occurred to me to check the toilet tank. The toilet in my apartment was always a bit of a problem, and I’d gotten good at fixing it myself so I wouldn’t have to talk to my father. It had, from time to

time, occurred to me that the tank would be a good place to hide something if I ever had something valuable enough to conceal.

I lifted the lid and, not surprisingly, found nothing but plumbing because normal people don't stash things in their toilets. As I moved to put the lid back, I noticed a couple of pieces of torn paper lodged behind the tank. They were stuck about halfway down, caught only because one of the pieces had bent into a half-cylinder.

There was barely enough room for me to reach down and grab two portions of a sheet of printer paper that had clearly been torn into four pieces. I was looking at what remained of the printout of a photograph.

Only the bottom half was missing. Placed together, the top quarters formed a surreptitiously taken picture of a meeting in a parking lot. Kyle Hilliard was handing a thick envelope—the kind that gave every impression of being filled with cash—to Olga Marciano, Benito's mother. My lawyer.

There was no date on the back of the paper. No context. All I knew was that the Hilliards were paying Olga Marciano, and doing it in a parking lot at night, in cash, exactly the way legitimate people did not get compensated for doing legal work.

I folded the two pieces of paper and slid them into my back pocket and left the bathroom.

Iliana was coming out of the bedroom. “Nothing,” she said. “How about you?”

I turned away, as if taking one more look. I didn’t want her to see my face when I lied. “Nothing,” I said.

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In a development that shocks absolutely no one, Juliet Doherty, who accused tech entrepreneur Gregory Meeks of paying her for sex when she was 15, has now recanted her story. According to Leonard Teuling, speaking for the Tylor, Florida Police Department, recent evidence was uncovered casting significant doubt on Doherty's account. In a statement provided by her lawyer, Doherty has apologized for her part in the deception and asks that the press respect her privacy.

[turns to camera]

This woman has done incalculable damage to a great man's reputation, and now she has the nerve to ask for privacy. Unbelievable.

—The Straight Shot *with Richard Shooter*

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Chapter 21

Keeping secrets from Iliana was an unambiguously bad idea, but I could not let her learn about Benito's mother's involvement with schemes that included kidnapping and murder.

None of it made any sense. When Ms. Marciano had helped me get out of police custody, the animosity between her and Hilliard felt real enough. I suppose they could have had an understanding that fell apart. I couldn't rule that out, but if they were involved in the same criminal enterprise, I couldn't see what Ms. Marciano had to gain by antagonizing Hilliard.

I had no idea what, if anything, to say to Benito. He idolized his mom, and I'd always thought with good reason. She was funny, attentive, and, most relevant to these discussions, good. She was a kind person who gave to charities, volunteered her time on boards, and was supportive of her son's idiosyncratic path. Learning that she was just another corrupt Tylor insider would break Benito's heart.

"So, what now?" I asked on the drive back to Tylor.

Iliana focused on the road in front of her. "I'm not sure. Until we can find Naomi and warn her, I don't feel comfortable leaving. But that's okay. I

wouldn’t want to leave yet anyhow. When I go, I don’t want any of them coming after me. I want them to be sick of me, to think that I’ve changed and for them to wish me good riddance. Then I’ll be truly free, and I can settle into being Iliana Marek for the next few decades.”

“So, that’s it?”

“I haven’t forgotten about you, Dan,” she said. “I’m not going anywhere until I know why Old Iliana wanted to kill you.”

“But how are you going to find that out without jeopardizing your plan?”

“I’m working on this part,” she said.

“Then you don’t need me for anything else right now?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Then I can go back to my normal life?”

“You’re not having fun?”

“I’m not sure fun is the right word.” Though it was the right word. Watching her terrorize an auto mechanic who’d set up a woman to be abducted had been thrilling. Breaking and entering set off an adrenaline high. I wasn’t sure how I could go back to my dull existence, but sooner or later, that was exactly what I would have to do.

Naomi Kwon was waiting for me in the parking lot when I got off work that night. She wore jeans and a black V-neck T-shirt, casual but effortlessly polished at the same time. “You hungry?” she asked. “I’ll buy you dinner.”

I was struck again by how pretty she was, which made her deception all the more painful. It would be humiliating to let her keep manipulating me. On the other hand, I didn’t have much else going on. She was also the person in the best position to expose the corruption in Tylor, and while I wasn’t anxious for Iliana to pack up and move on, I loved the thought of the people who wanted to kill me getting distracted by investigations and legal trouble.

“There’s a Korean place up the street.”

She raised her eyebrows. “You’re suggesting Korean food because I’m Korean?”

I felt myself blushing furiously. I hadn’t even thought of that. “Actually, it’s the kind of place people looking to beat me up don’t go to. Also, I like Korean food, and I don’t know how to cook it.”

“That’s fair.”

“It’s a little pricy, which makes it the least you can do for me after you deceived me.”

“I didn’t deceive you,” she said. “I may have neglected to mention that I was a reporter, but I’d say we’re even now that you’ve broken into my

apartment."

I thought about bolting to my car and driving home. I'd turn off my phone and ignore any knocks at the door.

But I was hungry, I wanted to learn more, and despite my inner protests, I wasn't too proud to humiliate myself further by being in Naomi's presence.

"I'm writing this story on spec," she said as I looked over the menu, "which means there's no expense account. Don't break the bank."

I hadn't intended to. I ordered what I always got when Benito splurged on Korean food—the bibimbap and a beer. She ordered the same.

"So," she said. "You want to start?"

"We have reason to believe that you're in danger. That's why we were looking for you. To warn you. We learned there was a plot to abduct you, and we wanted to see if there were any signs of someone breaking into your place."

"The way you two broke into my place?"

"We didn't mess with your stuff, and we didn't stay long."

"I didn't see any sign of the place being searched," she admitted. "Not that you'd find anything about Tylor in there. I've learned not to leave

evidence of a current investigation in my home. This isn't my first time reporting on a corrupt town."

We'd found none of her Tylor research except the photo of Kyle Hilliard paying off Olga Marciano, but I wasn't going to bring that up. I was afraid even saying it out loud would allow it to somehow get back to Iliana.

"I get that breaking into your place is a bad look," I told her, "but we really did want to make sure you were okay."

"That makes sense," she said, "except I'm not completely stupid. I know who Iliana Marek is, and if anyone from Tylor is going to hurt me, it would be her. Try again."

"I'm telling you the truth," I said. "Iliana has—she's changed, I guess is the best way to put it."

"She's changed? I've noticed." Naomi touched the blue streak in her hair, which she clearly considered Exhibit A. Did she think Iliana's red streak was an effort to mock her? I couldn't explain that it was all a coincidence, the very coincidence that had caused Iliana to be mistaken for Naomi in the first place.

"I don't think that's about you," I told her. "It's more of a sign to the world that this is not the old Iliana."

“So, the new Iliana will help me expose what’s going on in this town?”

“She would be happy to do that, yes.”

“Even if it means she goes to jail.”

“For what? I mean, do you have any evidence that she’s committed a specific crime?”

Naomi had no answer to that, which was what I was hoping. Everyone *knew* Iliana did Hilliard’s dirty work, but other than rumor and speculation, no one could name the specifics.

“You want me to keep her out of my story?”

“She’s the police chief’s foster daughter, which means she knows a lot. She wants to help you so that she can put her life here behind her.”

“You’d be willing to set up a meeting between the two of us? In a public place?”

“For everyone’s safety probably not in Tylor, but otherwise that’s no problem. Iliana only wants to expose Hilliard and make sure you’re safe.”

“She sounds really nice.” Naomi was making no effort to hide the sarcasm.

“It’s surprising, I know.”

“So, the information I have that she directed a couple of lowlifes to abduct me is false. She had nothing to do with tinkering with my car so it

would give out a false warning?”

I didn’t want to get into specifics with her. They would only come to bite me on the ass. “I told you, she’s changed.”

“Since two weeks ago?”

“It’s been a pretty significant transformation.”

The waiter set down a half-dozen dishes of banchan. I offered Naomi a weak smile. “I’m starving.”

Dinner was delicious but painfully awkward. Naomi rebuffed all of my personal questions. “This isn’t a date. We’re not getting to know each other. I’m gathering information and paying with food.”

“Okay, wow. That was blunt.”

“It’s best to be clear about where things stand. The flow of information goes one way.”

“I’m trying to figure out why you are so reluctant to go out on a date with an infamous criminal who works at a gas station.”

“Don’t ride the self-pity too hard,” she said. “You’ve turned your life around and done very well considering what happened. And I’m sure there are lots of true-crime junkies who would be happy to go on a date with you.”

“I’m not sure being a novelty date is the good time I’m looking for.”

“Your choice.” Her expression made it clear she did not, in fact, give a shit. “But since you quasi-brought it up, can we talk about Faye Kristic?”

“I only brought it up in the most indirect way possible. Also, I don’t see what that has to do with your story.”

“Everything in Tylor is connected,” she said, “and Faye Kristic is a big part of it.”

“I really don’t want to talk about that,” I told her.

“And that’s understandable. I’ll stay away from anything too personal. I’m mostly trying to understand how your past connects to Tylor’s other scandals.”

We had moved about as far away from a date as possible. At least I had a beer to smooth over my discomfort. If she wanted to talk about the past, she was going to have to pay for a second one.

“There is no connection,” I told her. “Gregory Meeks was a wealthy creep who used his tech to spy on underage girls.”

“Yes, I’ve done the most minimal research,” Naomi said. “But what no one knows is how you and Faye Kristic got involved with Meeks.”

A reporter who had done the most minimal research would know Faye and I had nothing to do with him. “It was about timing and spin,” I said, making no effort to hide my impatience. “Faye killed herself at about

the same time the stories broke exposing that Meeks was peering into the bedrooms of underage girls all over the world. A bunch of reporters started looking into the old police chief, Zack Watham. They figured he'd been covering things up for years. Meeks planned to skip town on his yacht, but he died in a speedboat crash while trying to get to the marina without being stopped by reporters. Watham went on the run, never to be heard from again, and after they found all those files of teenage girls in Meeks' mansion, they needed someone to blame. They used all kinds of suggestive language to insinuate that Faye's death was somehow related to Meeks, and so punishing me, by association, meant justice for everyone. Even if they never explicitly connected the cases, they wanted to give the impression of law enforcement taking care of business."

"That's not new information." Naomi sounded irritated, like I'd been mansplaining my own life. "But you did have a connection to Faye, and she was linked to Meeks."

"She wasn't connected to Meeks," I said, maybe sounding a little frustrated myself. Was she wildly misinformed or trying to get a rise out of me? After seven years of obsessive interest in Meeks' life and death, had the world discovered a connection to Faye Kristic, I would certainly have heard about it.

Naomi reached into her shoulder bag and removed a folder, from which she extracted a laser print of a photograph, much like the one I'd found behind her toilet. It showed Gregory Meeks standing by a pool, presumably his own, wearing shorts and a polo shirt. He was tall and barrel-chested and had a pompadour-ish thatch of graying brown hair. In the background, mostly turned away from the camera, was one other person, a slender figure in shorts and an oversized T-shirt, sitting and typing on a laptop. The figure's gender was unclear, but the ponytail sticking out of the baseball cap suggested it was a girl.

I thought I recognized that ponytail and the hunch of the shoulders. I couldn't say for sure, but that person might have been Faye Kristic.

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Chapter 22

“That can’t be her,” I said.

“Why not?”

I thought about that. I looked at the photo again. Only the smallest sliver of a face angled toward the camera. I couldn’t even say with absolute certainty that it wasn’t a boy, let alone that it was Faye Kristic. And yet there was something in the body language, the posture of the figure bent over the keyboard. It would never stand up in court, but it gave me pause.

“Right now, this is the only evidence I have to link them,” Naomi told me. “I admit it’s not rock solid, but it’s a starting point. I hope to be able to prove they knew each other and that she was at his house on at least this one occasion. Given his predilections, that would completely change the narrative surrounding how she died. Don’t you think?”

I leaned back, unable to speak. For the past seven years, I’d trained myself to take responsibility, not to make excuses, to own what I’d done. I’d humiliated a girl online, and she’d taken her own life. It was a straight line from my actions to Faye’s grave.

I wasn’t going to let myself off the hook. I couldn’t. This wasn’t proof of anything. A person whose general shape bore some resemblance to Faye

Kristic being at Meeks' house didn't absolve me of writing and posting terrible things. For Naomi, this was a chance to make a journalistic splash; it was a new angle into an old story that would generate an unfathomable number of clicks. It would send her career soaring. For me it would only be an excuse to undo the work I'd done over the years with Trish. I wasn't going to take the bait.

"If this is Faye Kristic, it's a bombshell," Naomi said. "Prosecuting you was one of the first things Bryce Hilliard did as acting police chief. If he knew Meeks might have had a relationship with Faye, and he kept it secret, you've got grounds for a lawsuit. The fact that he brought you in for questioning when Iliana went missing is also interesting. It tells me that they're keeping an eye on you. They must know there is at least the possibility that evidence is floating around out there—evidence that would make them look really bad. I think they want you to remain in a constant state of intimidation. That way if you do learn anything, you'll be too afraid to say anything."

I was going to need time to process what all of this meant, if it meant anything at all.

"This isn't all I know," Naomi said. "I've been working on this story for over a year. I've dug up a lot of information, much of which you'll be interested to read when I'm ready to publish." She held up her bottle of beer

and swirled the dregs around. “Or I might tell you some of it now, if you’re willing to trade.”

“Trade what? I don’t know anything. Obviously.”

“What’s really going on with Iliana Marek? What is she after?”

I shook my head. “She’s changed. It’s that simple. But if you know something about this story, about my life, you have to tell me.” I had no idea what she was withholding or if she was bluffing, but I wasn’t going to tell her Iliana’s story. Not that she would have believed me.

“Talking always comes with a risk, so if you don’t make it worth my while, it’s better to say nothing.” She raised her hand to get the waiter’s attention. “I’ll take the check.”

When we stepped out of the restaurant, Darcy Silvestri was waiting for us. It was ten o’clock on a weekday night, and downtown was quiet but not entirely abandoned. There were a handful of couples sitting outside at a wine bar across the street. A father was taking a pair of kids—young enough that I would have imagined they should be in bed—into an ice cream shop on the corner. Even so, there would be relatively few witnesses for whatever went down here, and that was good. Or bad. I didn’t know yet.

Darcy's hair looked unwashed and hung over her eyes. She wore jeans and a long-sleeved T-shirt, her arms aggressively folded as though she were cold. It was still over ninety degrees outside.

She turned to me, her movements sharp, like we were in the middle of a vicious argument. "Where's my husband?"

I didn't think *Not in front of the reporter* was a great rejoinder. "I'm sorry, Ms. Silvestri. I don't know anything."

"You're Darcy Silvestri, Quinton Silvestri's wife." Naomi moved toward her slowly. Everything in her affect suggested concern. "Can you tell me why you think Dan knows his whereabouts?"

She was too busy staring daggers at me to listen to Naomi. "I want the truth."

Once again, I thought this was a reasonable demand, but again I had to pretend not to know her husband was dead. "I wish I had answers for you, but I don't."

Her lips pulled back in a contemptuous sneer. "You're a fucking liar."

I was surprised by the change of tone. I was even more surprised when she unfolded her arms and revealed the pistol in her hand.

“Whoa.” Naomi stepped back, now finding the idea of a conversation with Darcy Silvestri significantly less appealing.

I’d like to say I placed myself between Darcy Silvestri and Naomi, but I didn’t. It wasn’t cowardice. I simply didn’t think about it. Despite my recent encounter with Old Iliana, I still hadn’t grown used to having a gun pointed at me.

I raised my hands to chest height. “I wish I could help you, Ms. Silvestri, but someone is lying to you. I don’t know why anyone would say I had information about your husband.”

“I’ll tell you why. You’ve got something going on with Iliana Marek, and she was with my husband the night he vanished.”

My impulse was to say that maybe she should talk to Iliana about that, but I wasn’t going to throw her under the bus. “I know you want answers, but this isn’t the way.”

“Do you have any idea what it’s like?” she asked me. “The bills are piling up. I’m getting harassing phone calls in the middle of the night. I have a baby on the way. I can’t handle this alone. I *can’t*.”

She pointed the gun away from me and placed it under her own chin.

“Whoa!” Naomi said again.

There was no way I was going to let this woman kill herself. I’d been responsible for Faye Kristic’s death—ambiguous photograph

notwithstanding. I'd witnessed two people die in front of me within the past couple of weeks, and I was desperate to avoid seeing someone else get hurt.

I risked moving forward a half step. "I know you feel like there are no options, that the future is bleak. I've been as low as anyone, which is how I also know it gets better. It really does. And you have people who need you. Your baby needs you."

"My baby is going to be born poor and have nothing," she said.

As an actual poor person, I didn't think oblivion was the only reasonable response to financial deprivation, but this wasn't a debating club. "Your baby doesn't care about how much money you have. She just wants you to love her."

Was I being manipulative? Hell yes, but I was trying to keep this pregnant woman from blowing her brains out in front of me. I was withholding facts that she had a right to know. If she pulled the trigger, it would be one more death on my conscience.

Her hand trembled, and she dropped the gun. I moved forward and embraced her as though she were a friend, someone I had long cared about. She convulsed with waves of weeping that were almost seizures. My shoulder grew damp with her tears.

At last, she stepped away. "What am I going to do?" The question didn't sound rhetorical. She really wanted to know.

“You’re going to deal with every problem as it comes up,” I told her. “And then you’ll deal with the next one. You’ll go on, and it will become less terrible. That’s all I can tell you because it’s all I know.”

She ran her hands up and down her face. “Jesus Christ. I can’t believe I did that. In front of everyone.”

It was true. A crowd had gathered. People were watching us. They’d seen the whole thing. This woman had nearly ended her life in front of a cluster of gaping witnesses. That was going to be bad for her, but she could get through it. I knew because I’d gotten through worse.

I squatted down and picked up her gun, which felt heavy and alien. I didn’t know what to do with it. At least it wasn’t my first time holding one. I checked the safety and flipped it on, feeling all action hero-ish for knowing how to do this one gun-related thing.

“I don’t think I should give it back to you,” I told her.

She nodded. “That’s probably smart.”

“You let me know when you’re feeling better,” I told her. I put the gun in my waistband by my back. It was cold and I felt stupid, as though I were pretending to be a tough guy, but I really didn’t want to walk around Tylor waving a gun around. That wouldn’t end well.

“Hey,” Naomi said to Darcy. Her voice had gone gentle, kind of sweet. “I’m Naomi. Can I give you a ride home?”

Darcy nodded, and Naomi led her away, but not before glancing back and giving me a meaningful look. I guess it meant that she wasn't done with me, but I was wondering if I was maybe done with her. Iliana wanted to warn her. She'd been warned, and that just might be good enough.

With a bulky gun wedged against the small of my back and slipping uncomfortably toward my butt crack, I turned to begin the long walk back to my car at the Gas-M-Up. The crowds that had gathered to watch my showdown with Darcy silently stared as I passed and then came the firecracker ripple of palms striking palms, of whistles and hoots. They were applauding *me*, the most hated man in Tylor. I didn't know how to react. I couldn't process the input. It was the strangest, most unaccountable thing I had experienced in the better part of a decade, and that included becoming friends with a shapeshifting-cyborg killer.

I had no idea how to respond. Should I wave? Take a bow? Should I pretend I somehow didn't notice them? I'd spent so much of my life being the villain that I didn't know how to be the hero, but, for this fleeting moment, that was what I was. I'd saved a woman's life—a woman and an unborn child. That was two lives. I'd now saved more people than I'd killed.

I realized I was grinning hard enough that my cheek muscles began to ache. Maybe I really was beginning a new chapter in my life, one in which

people saw beyond my past. Maybe I had opportunities—for work, for a place to live—that I didn't even imagine for myself. Iliana would be gone soon, and my life would return to being small and uneventful, but there were ways in which it might be larger and fuller than I had previously dared to hope. With a surge of powerful and almost indecipherable emotions, I realized I was on the cusp of something remarkable. My chains had been broken.

That's when I felt rough hands grab me from behind.

"Dan Gibson, you're under arrest," a cop I didn't know told me. For the second time in a week, I was being led to the back of a cop car, this time in handcuffs.

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Chapter 23

ILIANA

It wasn't Hilliard's car, at least not the same one he'd driven to her house before. A different engine sound. Iliana shifted her carbon-fiber knife to her left back pocket, where she could grab it easily, and went to the window.

Lenny Teuling climbed out of a massive Ram truck and strolled toward her door. He wore dark jeans and a polo shirt. He looked fit and casual, a thin smile forming under his gray mustache. Anyone would think he was a friend paying a visit.

Iliana opened the door and filled the frame, one hand on the jamb, making it clear Teuling could not expect to be asked in. "First you pull me over, and now a visit to my house? Should I be flattered?"

Teuling fanned himself with a file folder. It was tattered and stained with food grease and a Rorschach of coffee spills. Iliana caught a quick glimpse of official documents, handwritten notes on yellow legal paper, and photographs.

"I'm starting to think I got a bad read on you," he said. "I guess I wanted to find out if that's true. There was a time when you'd have taken a

bullet for Hilliard, but I’m thinking maybe those times are over. How am I doing so far?”

“Incredible. You’re a genius. Good night, Lenny.”

She started to close the door, but Teuling put out his hand. She could have pushed the door closed anyhow. She could have pulled his arm in and slammed the door, snapping his ulna and radius. She did neither.

“If I’m even a little bit close to right, you’ll want to see this.” Teuling fanned the folder again, this time in her direction. “Some interesting stuff about your foster father in here. And your real father. You may know less than you think.”

Iliana considered the risks of inviting Teuling inside. Someone could see her consorting with a cop on the outs with his police chief. She didn’t need to give Hilliard another reason to distrust her. It was also possible she might find herself in a situation in which killing Teuling was the best move. She’d have to be on guard against that.

On the pro side? Not much. More information could never be a bad thing, but she already knew enough to make any necessary call about Hilliard. Nothing in that folder was going to change her mind.

“Whatever you have going on with Hilliard, keep me out of it.” She pushed on the door, and Teuling let go.

He stepped back and held up his free hand in a surrender gesture. “There’s also some intel that might be of real interest to your pal, Dan Gibson.”

Iliana opened the door to let Teuling in and hoped she would not be disposing of his body later that night.

Teuling threw himself onto the couch. “Maybe a beer.”

Iliana studied him. “Your mother didn’t teach you better manners?”

“Shit.” He stood up. “I guess I’m used to dealing with a different class of people. I don’t remember you getting offended by rudeness, but people grow. I’d say it’s a positive change.”

“I don’t need a Yelp review of my personality,” she said. “But I suppose there’s no reason to drag out this exchange. I’ll get you a beer, and then you can tell me what you want.”

With the bottle in hand, Teuling studied the beer label as if it were an alien artifact and then took a cautious sip, shrugged, and took a longer drink. He watched Iliana as she sat, clearly taking care not to ogle, and then tapped his folder. “Real interesting stuff.”

“And what’s the price of gratifying my interest?”

“No price. It’s a favor.”

“A favor I’ll owe you.”

“Look, I get you,” Teuling said. “You assume I have an angle, but do you need to know what it is in order to take a look? My instincts tell me you really have changed, and if so, we might be natural allies.”

There was no harm in looking through the folder, though it felt like making a deal with the devil. Taking down Hilliard was unambiguously the right thing to do, but Teuling had done a lot of evil in his time, and he might be looking to do more, and worse. If she helped him, who knew where it could lead? People might die who would otherwise have lived.

“What does this have to do with Dan Gibson?” she asked.

“Read the file.” Teuling took a long drink from his beer and set it down on the coffee table, careful to place it on a coaster. He stood and walked toward the door, then turned to face her. “If things shake out the way I think they might, just remember I came to you with this.”

He walked out into the night, taking care to close the door gently.

The bulk of the folder was comprised of two autopsy reports. The first was for Jason Marek, Old Iliana’s father, who’d died years earlier in a single-car accident. Photos showed a Dodge Dakota compressed against a massive live oak. The road, thick with emergency vehicles, was visible perhaps

fifteen yards distant. The hood accordioned against the tree, and the doors dangled open, crooked and wrong. Pebbles of glass from the shattered windshield glittered on the surrounding dirt. The body of Jason Marek had been thrown clear, through the front windshield.

The airbag had not deployed, and Marek had not been wearing his seatbelt. The report theorized that in the instant before impact, Marek had partially stood, perhaps imagining he could flee the vehicle, taking his weight off the front seat. The occupant detection system had not registered his presence and did not deploy the airbag. The impact propelled Marek forward, through the windshield and head-first into the tree. There were multiple other injuries, including several bones shattered in his left arm and a lung punctured by broken ribs, but these were incidental. The head wound killed him.

According to the toxicology report, Marek had a blood alcohol concentration of 0.13%. High, but perhaps not completely incapacitating for a habitual drinker. More significant was the detected concentration of the sleep aid zolpidem consistent with ingesting thirty milligrams. Iliana ran a quick Internet and learned this was three times the maximum recommended dose.

The accompanying police report indicated that Marek had been drinking at Legends, a bar where he was regarded as a regular. Another

search revealed Legends was a dive, which featured live music on the weekends, typically bands playing classic country covers, but the incident had taken place on a Wednesday evening. User reviews posted online suggested it would have been a quiet night with most of the patrons there to drink in peace.

The bartender said Marek consumed several pints of beer and a sprinkling of whiskey shots, but the quantities were typical for him. He did not indicate to the bartender that he intended to drive home, and the bartender did not ask. Iliana surmised that either the bartender did not care or knew better than to micromanage a cop's drunk driving.

The zolpidem was another matter. A sedative-hypnotic, sold under the brand name Ambien, it was a common treatment for chronic insomnia. For extended-release tablets, the drug typically took effect in thirty to sixty minutes. According to testimony from one of Marek's coworkers, the victim would sometimes swallow a dose right before beginning his fifteen-minute drive home from the bar. His goal was to get home, brush his teeth, and fall asleep the second his head hit the pillow. He claimed to have the timing down to a science. This coworker said he had repeatedly cautioned Marek against this practice, particularly when combined with alcohol.

This coworker's name was Bryce Hilliard.

Iliana saw a number of possibilities. The accident might be exactly what it appeared. A drunk cop died in a fatal accident. It was also possible that Hilliard had somehow slipped Marek the zolpidem, hoping for a crash. Could it have been even more elaborate than that? Could the victim have been killed elsewhere and the crime scene constructed? It was possible, though executing such a plan would risk complications—more conspirators, more elements that might betray the perpetrators.

Iliana did not need definitive proof, and there was none to be found here. The autopsy report merely implied reasons to be suspicious of Hilliard, particularly in light of a series of photographs included with the file, but not part of the autopsy report. Teuling, or perhaps some other enterprising sleuth, had gone through Tylor Police Department social media posts and newsletters to compile a series of photographs, taken over three years, of a much younger Bryce Hilliard interacting with Jason Marek—and Jason Marek's daughter. At a police department picnic, at a take-your-daughter-to-work day, at a department charity fundraiser. There were seven in all, in which Iliana appeared aged approximately between eight and eleven. In each of the photographs, Hilliard had a hand on her shoulder or her back or her arm.

The photos made an obvious suggestion. Bryce Hilliard became erotically obsessed with Iliana Marek as a child. This clearly indicated

pedophilic tendencies, but there was something else at work since their sexual relationship had continued into Iliana's adulthood—perhaps a pathology related to an individual regardless of age. Did this sort of obsession have a name? Iliana went back to the internet and found some possibilities, maybe paraphilic coercive disorder. She did not need to be certain. She was considering his murder, not his treatment.

Iliana opened another beer before turning to Cynthia Hilliard's autopsy report. This was much less elaborate. Hilliard's wife had been found dead by her foster daughter, Iliana Marek, two years after the Mareks had taken her in. Cynthia hanged herself with a rope tied to exposed pipes in the garage. Toxicology reports indicated a blood-alcohol concentration of 0.19 and the presence of zolpidem consistent with ingesting fifty milligrams. According to the report, Hilliard said she'd recently reported feeling depressed, and he had been urging her to seek professional help. He never suspected she was suicidal.

Both deaths had the same substances and the same primary witness. The events took place two years apart. Did anyone connect the dots? Zack Watham was police chief at the time. Had he known? Suspected? Participated? Given a shit?

Iliana took a sip of her beer, finding it warm, her hand cold. She'd been clutching the bottle, hardly aware of her surroundings.

Time had passed while she was lost in thought. Had that ever happened to her before? There were times when instinct took over, when she gave herself over to action and seemed to surrender the ability to think, but this was different. She had, for a quarter of an hour, been unaware of her surroundings. She had simply been thinking. Being.

She knew people spoke of such things, but she'd never experienced it herself. She went to the refrigerator to grab another beer in celebration. With the cold bottle pressed against her palm, she turned to look at the documents scattered over her coffee table.

There was reason to believe what she already suspected—that Hilliard had engineered Jason Marek's death in order to bring Old Iliana into his house. Two years later, he killed Cynthia Hilliard to guarantee unrestricted access to the child. The evidence would not hold up in a courtroom, but Iliana didn't have to sway a jury any more than she had to diagnose Hilliard's psychological fixation.

She would need time to think about her next steps. She would not be played by Teuling and his secret goals. Since first finding herself alone and confused in those North Carolina woods, Iliana had moved unseen through the world. She sought to leave no wake. Now, through action or inaction, she would have an impact.

Whatever she did, it would be her choice. Teuling clearly knew how to wind her up. That had to be the goal. The next two documents in the file proved it.

One of these was a photocopy of a single page from a witness report. This was what linked these crimes back to Dan Gibson.

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Chapter 24

DAN

Still handcuffed, I sat in an interrogation room that was now becoming distressingly familiar. Bryce Hilliard came in once again. My wrists and shoulders ached. That second beer at dinner had come back to haunt me. I really had to pee.

"What am I doing here?" I asked. Normally I would not have had the guts to confront him so directly, but I couldn't even see his pretense for holding me. I was arrested after saving the life of one of his cops' wives. Widow, really, but he didn't know that.

"You're at the center of too much bullshit," Hilliard said.

I'm the one who's at the center of too much bullshit? Saying this aloud was not a great idea, but not saying it required a lot of effort.

"I'm pretty sure that's not a crime," I said, "so unless you want to charge me with something, you have to let me go."

Hilliard leaned toward me. "Okay, how about this? One of my officers is missing, and we apprehended you with his personal firearm in your possession."

“Are you kidding me? A dozen witnesses will tell you I took the gun from Darcy Silvestri after I talked her down from killing herself.”

“Huh,” Hilliard said. “That’s an interesting story. I’ll have to check it out. You stay here while I look into it.”

“I want a lawyer,” I told him.

“You’re not under arrest,” he said glibly, like he’d just checkmated me. “We’re holding you for questioning, so why don’t you cool your jets while we investigate your claims. We should have this cleared up in a day or two.”

“This is crazy, Hilliard,” I said with way more bravado than I felt. “At least uncuff me.”

“I don’t know about that,” Hilliard said. “A perp who could take an officer’s firearm from him needs to be restrained.”

I was about to start pointing out the flaws in his argument, but I stopped myself. There was no chance Hilliard would decide I’d made some excellent points, shake his head at his own foolishness, and cut me loose. He wanted an excuse to hold me, but what collection of truths and suspicion of truths had led him to decide he needed to detain me? There was no telling what he knew or suspected.

“I don’t want trouble,” I said, “and we both know how I got this gun, so maybe you could tell me why I’m really here.” I sounded small and

scared, which was how I felt. Iliana's presence made me feel powerful, but that was only because she was there to protect me. But this was the real Dan Gibson—powerless and completely dependent on someone else's whims.

Hilliard pressed his hands on the table and leaned in toward me and his face twisted into what I believed to be genuine sadness. "How about you tell me what the fuck is going on with you and Iliana."

"Iliana Marek?" It was a stupid and likely provocative thing to say, and it wasn't going to buy me more than a few seconds.

He slapped the table. "I want to know what you two are doing together."

I wasn't quite ready to breathe a sigh of relief, but I did feel a little less terror. It would have been very bad if Hilliard knew I'd seen Silvestri die. It would have been worse if he had some inkling of what Iliana was. Instead, this was about possessiveness, jealousy, maybe even concern. It was entirely possible that in his own twisted way, Hilliard cared about Iliana. She had vanished for a week and returned with a complete personality transplant. He had every reason to wonder what was going on and how it affected his life.

"She seems really different," I said.

"Yes!" He slammed the table again, but this time with me, not against me. "I'd think she was on drugs, but she's been on drugs since she was

fourteen. At least."

I made an effort not to comment on the quality of his foster parenting. "As near as I can tell, she's not taking any drugs now."

"Okay." He nodded thoughtfully. "That's actually useful. Maybe she had a bad experience, got too close to the edge, and went somewhere to clean up. Did she say anything about that to you?"

I shook my head. "She didn't tell me anything about where she'd been or what she was doing."

"What do you talk about?"

"Nothing really," I said. "She wants to hang out. Listen to music. She acts like she's always been my friend. She brings me coffee and muffins in the morning. It's creepy."

I didn't love talking trash about her, but she wasn't here to protect me. I needed to get Hilliard to believe me. Besides, the business with muffins and coffee was a little odd.

"And you haven't wondered why?" he demanded, now working himself back up to rage. "Iliana Marek wants to spend time with a nobody like you. That doesn't make you curious?"

"Of course it does," I said, mustering a little outrage in order to convince him. "But if Iliana Marek wants to spend time with me, then guess what? I'm spending time with her because I don't have any other choice."

I'd angled as close to the truth as I could while presenting a scenario that he would believe. Iliana was up to something I didn't understand, but I had no choice but to go along with it because she was so scary. Surely he would believe it.

"Fine," he said, nodding to himself. "Okay." He turned away from me.

"Does that mean I can go?"

He didn't bother to look back. "You'll know when you can go."

I tried to relax my arms, my shoulders, my wrists. Anything to ease the pain. Nothing worked. I felt stiff and cramped and broken. I still had to pee.

After a quarter of an hour or five hours or something in between, the door opened. I craned my neck to turn around and saw Lenny Teuling. He wore jeans and a polo shirt, but he swaggered like he had the uniform on. Years ago, he'd knocked me over and given me a concussion. It messed with my memory, but I had no trouble recalling how he'd knocked me backward. I still winced when I recalled the crack of my skull against the floor.

"You can't stay out of trouble, can you?" he asked. "The last place on earth you want to be, but here you are."

“I wasn’t really given a choice.”

“There’s always a choice, son,” he said, looming over me, seeming much larger than his actual size. I could see why he’d been so effective as the former police chief’s fixer. “Though in your case, who knows?”

“I didn’t do anything,” I said. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

He laughed, but there was no humor in it. “All this shit going down now. Quin Silvestri. What an idiot that guy is. Was? Who knows, right? And Iliana Marek. Wow, a complete one-eighty there. You’re probably confused as shit about why she’s hanging out with you, but I think I’ve got a handle on it. Everything is about to open up again, and it still comes back down to you and Faye Kristic.”

I knew better than to ask him anything. It would be twisted into an incriminating slip up. I remained silent, but I hoped his questions might shed some light on what he was after.

No such luck. Teuling didn’t have more to say. I couldn’t see him coming because he’d circled behind me. I didn’t know what he was up to until I felt the sudden, lurching movement of my chair falling backward. Just like last time. I knew it was only an instant of terror and disorientation before I hit the floor. I willed myself to keep my head elevated, and when I made contact, I managed to avoid anything worse than a dull tap.

I almost breathed a sigh of relief, but then Teuling's fist came at me.

I felt the force of the impact along my face, my eye, for a moment consuming everything. It was a bright, cascading agony. My consciousness was all nausea and terror, with just enough concentration on my bladder to avoid peeing my pants, which I'd been close to doing even before Teuling entered the room.

I was on the floor for only a few seconds when the door banged open. Feet scuffled. Then hands were grabbing Teuling and dragging him away.

"You retarded old fuck!" This was the police chief, managing his troops with sensitivity and aplomb. A couple of cops lifted me by my arms and put me back in the chair. Hilliard himself lifted my chin with surprising gentleness and examined me.

"Christ, you got off lucky," the police chief said. "Ten seconds alone with Teuling should mean a trip to the hospital. At least it used to. I guess you'd know that better than anyone."

I figured silence was my best option here, so I said nothing about age discrimination in the workplace. I was also in pain and working hard not to wet my pants.

Hilliard sighed, like he was tired of putting up with my hijinks. He shook his head to make sure I hadn't missed out on his profound disappointment in me, and then he reached around to uncuff my wrists.

"Get the fuck out of here," he said. "I'll let you off easy this time, but I'm getting really sick of your crap."

I didn't have a response to this. Listing the ways in which I could not have avoided this conflict would be pointless. I stood up slowly on trembling legs. My face felt hot with a simmering pain that was only getting worse.

"What?" Hilliard demanded.

"Can I use your bathroom?"

Only after taking care of more urgent matters did I summon the courage to gaze at my reflection in the mirror. I looked like shit. Tired and drawn, my hair a mess. My work polo was torn and stained. My eye was swollen and red, growing more purple by the second. It was going to look a lot worse in the morning.

I splashed some cold water on my face and winced at the sting. All at once I was fighting a powerful impulse to cry. How could any of this be happening? It didn't seem that long ago that I was a quiet, dissatisfied high

school kid, biding my time until I could get away to college and finally start my real life. Now, seven years later—both an endless expanse and a blink of a swollen eye—I was reduced to this, trapped in some crazy bullshit I couldn't understand, that shouldn't even be real.

I splashed more water on my face, trying to snap myself out of it. I was not going to walk through the police station all weepy-eyed. I took a couple of deep breaths, cupped a sip of water from the sink, and wiped the right side of my face with a paper towel. The left side I only dabbed at, but I got it dry enough that no one would mistake undried tap water for tears.

I heard a toilet flush. I hadn't realized there was someone else in there with me. I had to get out of there before anyone emerged. I did not want to be alone with any cops.

The person in the stall must have been highly skilled at pulling up his pants. Otherwise, he hadn't flushed until he'd completed all of his business because I hadn't taken more than a half step toward the door when the stall door opened and Lenny Teuling came out.

A black void of panic bloomed in my core. I was utterly and completely fucked. He was going to move too fast for me, cut me off from the door and then get started. There were no cops watching on closed circuit cameras. No one would know what was going on in here.

I had to run, but in the split second I needed to make that decision, Teuling had already made his. He lifted his chin at me in a ’sup gesture and went to the sink to wash his hands. It was like he had no idea who I was, as though he hadn’t attacked me minutes before.

It was one more bit of confusion to add to the pile. I got the fuck out of there.

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Chapter 25

I stepped out of the police station onto Tylor Avenue. I hadn't checked my phone, but it was surely long after midnight. Maybe close to dawn, but I couldn't even guess, and couldn't be bothered to look at my phone. Time was a black hole inside the police station. It was at least a mile walk to my car, but I wasn't about to ask any of the cops to give me a ride. There was no way that was going to end well.

I turned onto the deserted street, hoping I could make the walk without running into any more trouble. Tylor didn't have a ton of random street crime, but things happened, and I was in no mood to get mugged. I'd gone maybe ten steps before a car pulled up next to me. It was Iliana's Jaguar.

I felt a surge of anger. This thing from another reality was responsible for all my miseries. I knew it wasn't true. I would likely be dead if it weren't for her, but right then I wanted to blame someone, and blaming Iliana was easier than blaming myself. I knew my downhill slide began with Faye Kristic. If I hadn't driven her to her death, I wouldn't have been there in the Kitchikuti, requiring rescue. I bit back my anger and faced Iliana.

“I’ll give you a ride home.” Her tone was subdued. She must have sensed my mood, which in itself was interesting.

I got into her car. “Just to the Gas-M-Up. My car is there.”

“You’re in no shape to drive. I’ll drop you at home and then go back for your car.”

“That’s a lot of work,” I said.

“It’s fine. I don’t need a lot of sleep, and it will give me something to do while the world is being boring.”

I put on my seatbelt and turned away from her.

“I know things have been difficult,” she said, “but they’re going to get better.”

“You don’t know that.” I still refused to turn to her. “You don’t know what it’s been like for the past seven years. I’m not making excuses for myself. I accept that I’m facing the consequences of what I did, but at some point, I should get a break. I want everyone to stop hating me.”

“Benito doesn’t hate you,” she said gently. “And you saw for yourself at that party that lots of people don’t hate you. They’ve moved on, and so can you.”

I didn’t say anything.

“I don’t hate you,” she said. “No one has ever been nicer to me than you are.”

Surely that was cheating. My fury intensified at her being nice to me, but when I looked at her, I knew that she was only being herself. I'm not saying she was guileless. I felt quite sure that she knew how to deceive with the best of them. But there was no guile now.

"Fuck." I shook my head. "I'm tired of living with my back against the wall."

"I understand that. I really do. And we're going to see what we can do to make things better. As soon as we work out this other stuff. I've been thinking about how to help you."

Of course she was thinking about someone other than herself. That was what she did. Everything we'd done today had been to help Naomi—whose identity she hadn't even known at first. Iliana had put herself at risk to save a complete stranger.

Which reminded me that I had a lot to tell her. I recounted everything that had happened that night, including getting beaten up by Lenny Teuling, who seemed to forget his animosity toward me minutes after it had erupted. I did not tell her about the picture possibly maybe linking Faye Kristic to Gregory Meeks. It would have felt like I was making an excuse, trying to get myself off the hook for the terrible things I knew for a fact I'd done.

"The main thing," I said, "is that Naomi knows she's in danger. It's her decision to look into Tylor. That's the career she's chosen. I'm not sure

we can babysit her."

"Probably not," she said, "though we can help her finish her work."

"Why?" I asked.

"Because Hilliard's doing bad things here, and we can stop him."

"Didn't you already make the exact opposite argument?" I asked.

"We are none of us consistent. I contain multitudes. Whatever. I'm allowed to change my mind. This is your town, Dan, and you're my friend, and I can't leave things a mess and hope someone else cleans it up. I thought maybe I could, but I was wrong."

"But you'll be putting yourself at risk," I said. "You told me the thing you fear most is being captured. Going up against an entire police department may be the wrong way to prevent that from happening."

"I know," she said, "but what's the point of existing if you can't be the person you were meant to be? I'm not saying I want to rush into danger, consequences be damned, but I have to help, even if I don't quite know how yet."

She pulled up in front of my house and turned off the engine. She clearly had every intention of walking with me toward my apartment. We were in the middle of a conversation, and she didn't care how late it was. Of course, time didn't mean the same thing to her as it did to me. But even so, I was kind of touched by her dedication.

She lowered her voice once we got out of the car. “Let’s put some ice on that eye. Then I’ll get your car for you.”

“You really don’t have to do all of this.” The truth was, I felt guilty and awkward. I wasn’t used to people doing things for me.

“I love helping people.”

She said this with a weird little burst of enthusiasm, and I was reminded again of how young she was, or at least how young her memories were. I depended on Iliana to protect me, but it was possible I needed to do more to protect her.

We stopped talking and rounded the house toward the back, our footsteps lost in the chorus of cicadas and owls and frogs. I was touched by her desire to take care of me, but all I really wanted was to get into bed with some painkillers and forget the horrors of the night for a few hours. Everything would begin again tomorrow, and I’d be once more trapped between my old life and my science-fictional present. A brief stopover in oblivion sounded appealing.

“What the fuck is going on?”

And, of course, there had to be detours on the way to my pharmaceutical escape. It was my father, standing outside with a flashlight, like he’d been patrolling the grounds when we happened to come by.

“Hey, Dad,” I mumbled. “I’ve had kind of a long night.”

“I asked what was going on.” He was looking at Iliana, not at me.

She noticed this too, and even in the dark, I saw something cross her face. For an instant, a mere fraction of a second, she gazed at my father with naked fury.

And then it was gone. Her face was back to its usual placid and friendly default.

“There was a misunderstanding with the police,” she told my father. “Nothing to worry about.”

“You’ve got a black eye,” he said to me. “What did you do?”

“Not now, Dad.” The steel in my voice surprised me.

“Not now?” he asked. “Bryce Hilliard called me and said you were found with Quin Silvestri’s gun in your possession.”

“Did he tell you how it came to be in my possession?”

“He didn’t get into whatever bullshit story you concocted.”

“It’s not a bullshit story,” Iliana told him, hands on hips. She was mad, but the pure hatred I’d seen—or imagined—was nowhere in sight. “Darcy Silvestri was going to kill herself. In public. Dan talked her down, convinced her to give him the gun. *That’s* why he was arrested.”

He stared at her. “Whose side are you on, exactly?”

“Am I supposed to support Bryce no matter what he does?” she asked. “He’s harassing Dan, and I’m not okay with that. I’ve spent my

whole life in this town, doing whatever Bryce asked of me, but I'm sick of it. I don't want to be his little puppet anymore."

"So, the two of you are a thing now?" he asked incredulously.

"What if we were?" Iliana demanded. "I'll decide who I sleep with."

"We are completely not a thing," I said, but realizing that my tone could be taken the wrong way, I added, "I mean, if that's what we both wanted, then as two consenting adults, we could be a hot, steamy thing, and it would be absolutely cool. In this case, we are two people who happen to be friends."

"Women can sustain non-sexual relationships, you might be surprised to learn," Iliana told him.

"Why are you giving me this feminist crap?" my father demanded. "I want to know why my son can't stay out of jail for five minutes, and you're lecturing me on women's bullshit?"

Iliana opened her mouth to speak, but appeared to think better of it. "Dan's had a rough night. He needs to ice his eye and go to bed."

"And you're looking after him now?"

"I guess someone has to."

My father took a step closer to her. "What is that supposed to mean? I'm his father."

Iliana raised her chin. Even in the dark, her eyes burned with dangerous fury. “When exactly have you acted like it?”

My father looked stricken. He blinked several times and then pivoted toward me. “This is too much. You’re destroying your parents’ lives. Your mother can’t even fall asleep without pills anymore.”

“Mom’s needed pills to fall asleep every night of her life since I was in elementary school,” I said.

“We’re done,” he said. “Your problems with the police. Your refusal to live a normal life. There’s no rent you can pay that will make this worth it. I want you out by the end of the month.”

“I don’t think you understand Florida eviction laws,” Iliana said. “If a tenant is on a month-to-month contract, you have to give at least 15 days’ notice. In writing.”

“And I don’t think I give a shit,” he told her. “Who do you suppose Bryce is going to back on this one?”

He turned around and went back into the house.

The end of the month. That gave me a little over a week until I was evicted. By my own father.

“We’ll figure something out,” Iliana said.

I nodded. Maybe we would. I mumbled my thanks and went into my apartment. I needed some sleep. I had to work in the morning, and I could

not afford to miss a shift.

I knew from experience that the best thing to do would be not to think about any of it—Darcy's almost-suicide, the arrest, the beating from Lenny Teuling, the eviction. I needed to escape consciousness and was exhausted enough that I didn't need pharmaceutical help to get there. The problems would still be there in the morning, but I would deal with them then. Not now.

I stood at the window, swallowing some Advil for the pain. Across the yard, a single light allowed me to see into the dining room window, past the diaphanous curtains. It was only a silhouette, but even so, I could clearly see that it was my father. On the phone. At nearly four in the morning.

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Chapter 26

I was twenty minutes early for work, not wanting to take any chances, but apparently there had been no one to cover the early shift, and Igor was alone, sweeping up some broken glass. His eyes were narrow, and he glared at me when I walked in as though it were inexcusable I had not come in even earlier.

“There is broken glass all over floor.” He pointed in several sharp jabs, wanting me to note each shard as if each was a specific insult.

“I’ll take care of it. Give me a second to punch in.”

“That man, Kristic, did this.” I was moving toward the back room, but Igor’s tone halted me in my tracks.

“Oh, crap, I’m sorry Mr. Egorov.”

“He is here asking for you,” Igor said. “‘Where is he Dan?’ he asks many times, because maybe if he asks enough, I will tell him. I did not want to say your shift started later because then he would come back. I said that if he wanted to speak to you, he should go to your house.”

“Very wise,” I said, thinking about how much my father would love that.

“He did not want to go to your house. He only wants to speak to you here, in my store. I don’t tell him when you arrive, and so he throws things. He like so much to throw that I throw him out, but not before he makes mess.”

“I’ll clean it up,” I said. “I’m really sorry about this.”

“You come in with black eye,” he said. “I hear something about police, about missing cop, and you have his gun.”

“It was a misunderstanding.” I didn’t want to get into the details of how someone who had previously shown up at the gas station had wanted to kill herself in front of me.

“I don’t want problem,” he said. “This is quiet business. People suspicious because I am Russian, but I show them I run clean place. To run clean place, I must have clean employee.”

“I get that,” I told him, “but I haven’t done anything wrong.”

“For many years you work for me,” he said. “You are always good employee. You never do wrong thing yourself. Other people, they do wrong things to you. Is not your fault.”

“Thank you.”

“But now some of those doing wrong things are police, police wives.”

“Yeah,” I agreed.

“It is no good,” he said, looking away. “And so, you are fired.”

The knock at my door startled me awake. I'd fallen asleep at my desk, trying to conduct some research on artificial intelligence, hoping to do something useful with my time. Arguably, looking for a job would have been even more useful, but I wasn't sure how far I'd get in the interview process with a black eye.

I roused myself, thinking maybe it was my father coming to offer me a reprieve. It was unlikely, but just in case, I switched to my homepage and deleted my search history.

"I heard the news, homes." It was Benito, and he'd come armed with a suitcase of Tecate. I opened the door wider.

I didn't bother to ask how he knew. This was Tylor. He could have heard whispers when grabbing lunch or weeding the garden or mailing a letter at the post office. For all I knew, it was posted on the town website.

I crammed an obscene number of beers into my mini refrigerator, and we got started on the ones that didn't fit.

"You had a rough week," he said, gesturing toward my eye. "What's that about?"

I brought him up to speed with my second trip to the police station as well as my father promising to evict me at the end of the month.

“You know you can always stay with us, right?” he said. “We have the room. It’d be a good time.”

“I appreciate it, but I’ll find a place.” I did not want to be a burden to anyone, and I definitely did not want to be under Olga Marciano’s roof—not after finding that picture of her doing dirty-deal type things with Kyle Hilliard.

“Yo, I bet my mom can find a job for you,” he continued. “She knows everyone.”

“Again, I want to solve my problems myself.”

“Making use of the people you know, who want to help you, *is* solving a problem yourself, homes,” Benito said. “I have no problem using contacts to get me introductions or whatever I need to move along to the next step.”

“Yeah, but you also have something to show for yourself,” I said. “Your game speaks for what you can do. I don’t have anything.”

“Not true,” he said. “You had some bad shit in your past. That would have knocked most people down for good. But not you, man. You refused to give up.”

“I didn’t have much of a choice,” I said.

He shook his head. “People give up. They get high or drunk or give up on work. They off themselves. Not everyone tries to make something

meaningful out of their lives."

"I wouldn't call seven years at the Gas-M-Up meaningful."

"You worked your ass off there," he said. "Igor's going to come crawling back to you once he realizes how much he was getting out of you. The trick is to have something better by then so you can tell him to fuck off."

"That would be nice," I said, "but a guy with my rep, in this town, with a black eye. I don't think I'm going to be turning away the offers."

"You ever thought about getting out of town?" he asked. "You could go to Tampa and be just another dude."

"I think they have Google in Tampa. As soon as I apply for a job, they'll know who I am, and that'll be that."

"The past doesn't matter as much as you think it does," he said. "Maybe put in a few applications. You get a job, you can find a place to live. Igor might have fired you to get Bryce Hilliard off his back, but he knows it was a dick move. He'll give you a glowing recommendation."

"He didn't make me sweep up the broken glass before firing me," I noted.

"I guess he knows he owes you one. On the other hand, you can sit here feeling sorry for yourself and drinking beer."

"The beer you brought," I noted.

“For a celebration of the end of your time at the Gas-M-Up. Not so you can wallow in your misery.” He flashed me a thoughtful look. “You don’t want to start over in another place because you don’t think you deserve to have a fresh start.”

“I’ve already got a therapist,” I told him.

“And what does she say?”

I laughed. “Exactly what you said.”

He nodded sagely. “Look, man. Some shit happened a long time ago, but you and I both know you never meant for anyone to get hurt. And that’s assuming— The point is, you got to forgive yourself.”

Benito did not have much of a poker face, and right now he looked red and embarrassed. He’d almost said something he shouldn’t have, and I did not like where that sent my thoughts. I was already deeply suspicious of his mother. I didn’t want to have to suspect Benito as well. I wanted to bury this. Burying things was good, but not this time. Benito was the one person I trusted, and I didn’t want to doubt him. I wanted to know.

“That’s assuming what?” I asked him.

He shook his head. “Forget it. I don’t even know what I was going to say.”

“Benito, you are the worst liar I know. Tell me.”

“In my defense, you don’t know that many people.”

“Stop stalling.”

“Okay, you know my mom and her podcasts, right? It’s so cliché, but she’s got the true-crime bug, and she’s thought about starting her own podcast. I think she’s working on something, and it has to do with you.”

I set down my beer. “Why do you think that?”

“I overheard her on the phone. I don’t know who she was talking to, but I go the idea she was cooking up a theory about how there’s a lot we don’t know about what happened with you and Faye Kristic. There’s a lot *you* don’t know about what happened.”

“That was true right after,” I said. “I remember most of it now.”

“Yeah, but how do you know? I mean, talk to your therapist about this, but I’m sure she’ll tell you that sometimes it can be hard to tell the difference between a real memory and an idea you’ve told yourself over and over again.”

“I can’t go there,” I told him. “You said you think it’s cool that I’ve gotten on with my life, but accepting what I did is a big part of that. It would be a huge regression for me to start letting myself off the hook.”

“I get that, but from what I could tell, my mom thinks that there was more going on than anyone realizes. That’s what it sounded like to me.”

“Did you ask her about it?”

“Hell, no. She’d be embarrassed and light into me for eavesdropping, which is a major no-no when your mom’s a lawyer. Besides, I don’t think she would want you to know about any of this. If she had something to tell you, she would, so maybe don’t say anything to her.”

Benito thought his mom was considering starting a podcast, but I had the photo, and I was reasonably sure that aspiring podcasters didn’t take money from corrupt cops. I didn’t know what kind of dealings Olga Marciano was hiding, but it wasn’t about clearing my name. And yet, my name had come up. Whoever she had been talking to—one of the Hilliards, maybe even Old Iliana—the conversation concerned me.

“When did this happen? When did you hear your mom talking about it?”

“Probably a couple of weeks ago.”

“So, around the time you lost your phone?”

A look of surprise washed over him. It wasn’t full-on shock. I don’t think he realized that what I was saying was important. It was more like the expression of someone who stumbles upon an interesting, if ultimately meaningless, coincidence. “Yeah, man. Now that you mention it, I think it was that day or the day before. How did you know?”

I shrugged. “It was just a day I thought you might remember.”

I didn’t think it was a good idea to keep talking about this, but I was not done thinking about it. If Olga Marciano had been talking about me to Old Iliana on or shortly before the day Benito’s phone went missing, it was a really bad sign. It meant that maybe she had been working with her. It meant that maybe she’d taken Benito’s phone herself. Maybe she was even the one who’d sent those text messages that brought me out to the Kitchikuti. Maybe she’d set me up to be killed.

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Chapter 27

“Can you talk more about that?”

One thing I liked about Trish was that she generally avoided the *How does that make you feel?* low-hanging fruit of therapy. Not this time, which meant I must have thrown her off.

“I’m wondering if it may be time for me to really think about what happened to Faye Kristic. I mean beyond my part in it.”

Trish was great at remaining neutral, at letting me talk my way into understanding or out of self-deception. Now she looked genuinely concerned. “Dan, you did a lot of amazing work to get to where you are now, to accept responsibility. That is impressive, as is your ability to understand that the person you are now is not the person you were then. I worry that what I’m hearing is a regression, an effort to rewrite the past. You have a history of dissociating your behavior, and I would hate to see you fall into that trap again.”

I was prepared for this. I’d been having this argument with myself for some time now. “I’m not denying what I did led to her taking her own life. I own that, and I have to live with it.”

“Then what are you saying?” Trish asked.

“That there may have been more going on than I realized. I know that other people teased her at school, so why was I the one who got blamed for __”

“Everyone gets teased in school, Dan,” Trish said, “even in this era of vigilance against bullying. What you did was so much more, a public humiliation seemingly designed to make her feel worthless.”

“And I’m not denying any of that. It’s just that—I wonder if it would be helpful to spend more time with the past. First, I dissociated, and then I was laser-focused on regaining the memories I’d repressed. I wonder if there is a way to understand the past as the past—not a particular section of my life, walled off from everything else.”

“It *is* different,” Trish said. “It was obviously horrible for Faye and her family, but it was also a trauma for you—so much so that you blocked it out. It’s as though you were injured in a deadly car crash in which your vehicle was at fault. You might be the responsible driver, but that doesn’t mean you meant to hurt anyone, and it doesn’t mean that you didn’t suffer.”

The thing was, I couldn’t tell her that I had my suspicions that there might be more to the story than what I knew. I couldn’t tell her about Iliana wanting to kill me, especially since Iliana’s android doppelganger and I were now besties. There were so many limitations, but therapy is where you are supposed to talk about the things you would not say anywhere else.

Iliana was sure there was more to the story than I believed. It would be nice if that were true, but I also recognized that Iliana wanted to think the best of me.

“This has been a challenging week,” Trish said. “Your father is being unkind, and, as we established long ago, his unkindness was at the root of your reaction to Faye’s inappropriate behavior. On top of that, the police mistreated you despite your saving someone’s life, and your boss fired you for things outside your control. You feel pressure to find a place to live, a job, and you are reasonably concerned about being dragged in by the police for no good reason. It’s only natural that you would reach out to the past, to try to find some comfort in the idea that none of this is your fault.”

“I know it’s my fault,” I said.

“The blame falls on the person you were,” she said, “not the person you are. You can’t detach that person entirely from your current self, but neither can those selves be interchanged. The important thing is that you don’t allow your current challenges to undermine your progress.”

I’d made a point of being honest with Trish, of not holding back anything having to do with Faye Kristic or the fallout from her death, and I hated that I was moving in a different, more dangerous direction. I just didn’t know if I had any choice.

My dad was gone when I got home. I drove to the bar and saw his car in the parking lot. He only went in during the day when he was covering someone else's shift, so I had an opportunity to take advantage of an empty house. It was a Thursday afternoon, when my mother always did her grocery shopping. She hadn't left by the time I got home, which was a bit of luck. I made myself a cup of instant coffee and sat looking out my front window, waiting for her to leave. Maybe she wasn't feeling well. Maybe she'd done things a little differently today and had decided to shop in the morning.

But no. She was a creature of habit, and a few minutes after two o'clock, I saw her car pull out of the driveway. I waited five minutes in case she'd forgotten something. It had been known to happen. Then I grabbed my keys and walked to the back door.

I wasn't entirely sure they hadn't changed the locks. It had been years since I used them, and it wasn't as though I'd ever before gone into the house when they weren't there. When the key easily turned the lock, I quietly thanked my father's indifference or laziness. Or, I thought, maybe it meant they had nothing to hide from me.

It was strange being inside the house with no one lurking over me, waiting for me to get the fuck out. This had been my home from the time I was an infant until I moved across the back yard. Being inside felt like

visiting a location in a recurring dream. It was incredibly familiar and yet jarringly unreal.

What was I searching for, exactly? I had no idea. Maybe I was merely revisiting the past, the way Trish said. I wanted to see what the house looked like, how my years of absence had changed it. Other than the kitchen and living room, I hadn't been anywhere in the house since I'd moved out.

I went to my bedroom first. It bore few traces of what had once been my sanctuary. They'd replaced the carpet, as if to get rid of any stench of me. There was a desk in front of the fake, pot-stashing electrical outlet I'd installed when in high school. Had they ever noticed it was a concealed safe? Maybe they didn't care. After all, the minor infraction of a highschooler smoking weed was nothing compared to driving Faye Kristic to kill herself.

My parents now used the room as an office. The desk in front of the fake outlet held a clunky old desktop computer. Next to that was an old-fashioned metal filing cabinet. They had a landline phone, of course, but a fairly recent model. It recorded past calls and their lengths.

I thought about my father, on the phone after I'd come back from the police station. I closed my eyes and tried to remember if it had been a cell phone or the land line. The image came back to me, the silhouette of my

father’s form against the dim light of a single lamp. I was pretty sure I’d seen the bulky cordless receiver against his ear. It would be interesting to know who he’d been speaking to. I scrolled through the calls on the screen. I didn’t recognize any numbers, but why would I? I took pictures of the calls logged within the past few weeks so I could later run them through a reverse lookup website.

Next, I went through the messy drawers, mostly a collection of crap my parents didn’t want to deal with—old phone chargers, appliance manuals, partially used sticky pads, and irregular paperclips. The filing cabinets contained financial statements, personal documents, old bills, real estate records, and a ton of documents relating to my father’s former businesses. I couldn’t find anything labeled *secrets we’re withholding from Dan*.

I turned on the computer, but it was password protected. Real life is not like the movies. Guessing someone’s password is a long shot, though to cover my bases I tried *password* and *1234*. My parents wouldn’t use my birthday, but I did try my parents’ wedding anniversary and my father’s birthday. No deal. I didn’t know if there might be some kind of security lockout if I tried too many more times, so I powered it down rather than push my luck.

I wandered through the house a little while longer, peeking in closets, riffling through unpaid bills on the front table. I felt transgressive even though part of me thought I had every reason to be in there.

I had to accept that I had no idea what I was doing in there or what I'd hoped to find. I made a pass through the house, looking for anything I might have done that would announce I'd been there and then went out the back, locking up behind me. It had likely been a complete waste of time, but I figured I might as well finish what I'd started. I had a list of about two dozen numbers I'd taken from their phone. I booted up my computer, found a lookup website, and began to plug them in.

The bar showed up quite a bit, as did a few people I knew, or believed, to be bartenders or other employees. One was an old friend of my father's I could recall being mentioned from time to time. Two numbers were more interesting, however. Bryce Hilliard had called four times. Most of the calls were brief, but one had lasted almost half an hour—the call he'd made after confronting me on the lawn. My father hated to talk on the phone, and I found it remarkable he would talk for half an hour to anyone.

I had been taken in by the police several times, however, and I could imagine why Hilliard might call. I couldn't understand why the call would last so long, but it might have been unimportant. My parents and Hilliard had both lived in Tylor all their lives. There might be things to discuss that

had nothing to do with me. On the other hand, nothing could be more logical than my father calling Hilliard when I returned from police custody. Maybe he wanted to know what happened, or maybe he wanted to reem him out for letting me go. Either way, it raised no red flags.

That could not be said of the other number that grabbed my attention. Three minutes and fourteen seconds. Not a long call, but long enough to mean something. Not a wrong number or a misdial. It was a brief conversation, but a conversation all the same.

Why had someone at my house been speaking to Faye Kristic's father?

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Chapter 28

Mike Kristic lived on the outskirts of Deer Pines. Real estate agents considered it part of the high-end neighborhood. The wealthiest neighbors, a few streets to the west, did not. Not that the houses on this street were anything but palatial.

After spending his post-college decade as a Wall Street hotshot, Kristic made a lot of money, but he burned out young. That probably had something to do with his wife dying suddenly of an undiagnosed congenital heart defect, shortly after Faye was born. He'd grown up in Tampa and had always imagined Tylor to be an ideal place to raise a family. Aimless and looking for a change, Kristic moved here with his infant daughter and then kept himself busy by playing the market to augment his considerable wealth.

I really did not want to go over to Mr. Kristic's house, but I had to know what was going on. I decided against bringing Iliana. Kristic was likely to get emotional, maybe even abusive. I didn't want Iliana stepping in. If he wanted to throw a few punches, I figured I ought to take them. I'd been beaten by one of the nastiest cops in Tylor. I could survive a couple of blows from a retired investor.

There was also the fact that, back in high school, Old Iliana had been one of Faye's most consistent tormentors. Kristic no doubt knew that, and seeing me associating with Iliana now would look like we'd formed some kind of legion of super-bullies. Besides, this wasn't Iliana's problem. She was going to be leaving Tylor soon enough, and I would have to deal with all this when she was gone. I might as well get used to it.

The house had a defiantly un-Floridian appearance. The sturdy, two-story redbrick rectangle belonged on a liberal arts college campus. The grass was as green and uniform as a golf course, and all around the exterior were clusters of hibiscus, bougainvillea, crotons, and birds of paradise, with a few tasteful clusters of queen palms. Mike Kristic had stopped looking after himself, but he clearly kept up a contract with his landscapers.

The heavy oak front door had two frosted glass panes, and I couldn't make out anything inside. The blinds were drawn on the front windows. I spent a few minutes pondering the aesthetic while working up the nerve to ring the doorbell. I then spent a good twenty seconds hoping fervently that he wasn't home. These hopes were dashed when a shadow passed across the frosted glass panels. Mike Kristic opened the door and squinted into the sunlight. The house behind him was dark and smelled strongly of overcooked broccoli.

I'd clearly disturbed him from a nap, or maybe depressive lounging. Mike Kristic wore a gray T-shirt with a stretched-out neck and cargo shorts. His hair was messy, his beard stubble advanced. He blinked uncomprehendingly at me from behind his thick glasses.

I'd been forced to exchange some meaningless words with him in the Gas-M-Up, and I'd read a public apology to him at my court hearing, but otherwise he and I had never spoken. Now that I was face to face with him, my mind went blank.

"You should come in." He opened the door wider.

That was why I was there, so I stepped inside and let him close the door behind me.

The front windows weren't the only ones with drawn blinds. The entire house was gloomy, a physical manifestation of the space between who I was and who I am now. Maybe it would be better if we couldn't see each other clearly, if we were not studying one another's expressions, looking for clues on how to conduct an impossible conversation between people who had been destroyed by my single thoughtless mistake.

"I'm told you want to talk," I said. "I guess it's long overdue. First, I want to say—"

It was as far as I got. Kristic raised a hand, which I only then realized had been behind his back. The dull metal nearly vanished into the house's

twilight, but I could see well enough to recognize the outline of a gun pointed at me.

I raised my hands and took a step back. I tried to find something to say, but nothing seemed quite right. I had killed his daughter. Deadly force was not unreasonable. Nothing I could say was going to make this situation any better. I figured being passive was my best bet. The sad thing was, having a gun pointed in my direction was becoming routine. The familiarity didn't make it less terrifying, but some of the shock had dissipated.

"Sit." He gestured toward an archway, through which was a dining room. I sat down on one of the heavy wooden chairs around the dining room table. He went behind me and grabbed my wrist and placed a handcuff around it—more gently than the cops, I might mention. I started to get up, figuring that if he were handcuffing me, he couldn't be holding the gun any longer. He pushed me back down, harder than I expected, and the other half of the handcuff was around one of the chair's thick back slats.

I had no idea what to say. It would seem pathetic to tell him he didn't have to do this, and I doubted that if I lied and said people knew where I was, he would care. If intended to kill me in his own living room, he probably wasn't telling himself he'd planned the perfect crime.

He went into the kitchen, where I saw him pick up his phone. “Gibson’s here. Came over out of the blue. Why would I say it if it weren’t true? I’m telling you he’s here. I’m aware of that. Look, the agreement stands. Yes, I know. Everything equal. You don’t have to say it. Just get over here.” Then I heard him set the phone down.

He came out of the kitchen and stood in front of me, across the table so I wouldn’t leap out and grab him, I guess. The gun was in his hand, but not pointed at me, which I considered a step in the right direction.

“We’re going to have a little chat,” he said. “I have a guest coming who will encourage you to be more forthcoming.”

“I don’t have any secrets,” I said. “Ask me whatever you want.”

“I will,” he said. “Soon enough.”

“Who’s coming over?” I asked.

“You’ll see when he gets here.”

“I came to talk,” I said. “The gun and the handcuffs aren’t necessary.”

“I think they are,” he said.

If grief had driven Mike Kristic insane, that meant *I’d* driven him insane. This was my mess, and I had to fix it. On the other hand, I couldn’t fix it if I were dead, which I worried I might be shortly after Mr. Kristic’s mystery guest arrived.

Iliana had said to me that when you were in a dangerous situation with bad people, you had to come up with dangerous and bad solutions. Violent people, she said, meet violent ends. Mike Kristic was the last person on earth I wanted to be violent with. On the other hand, I didn't want to be shot or beaten or whatever it was he had in mind.

"If there's anything you want to ask me, I'll tell you," I said. "If there's anything you want to say, I'll listen. You didn't abduct me. I rang your bell. So how about you take off the cuffs, and we can have a conversation?"

"You don't want to talk about what's on my mind." His voice was strangely calm. He didn't seem depressed and spacey, as he often had when he came into the Gas-M-Up. He didn't seem manic or drugged or like he was having a psychotic break. He was calm. Thoughtful.

"I know what I did was terrible," I said, "and I can't express how sorry I am, but I want to try. I don't know how I could have done what I did, but my life has been nothing but regret."

If he heard what I was saying, he gave no sign. "All this time, I had no idea what really happened. I thought— Well, you know what I thought. It's what you wanted me to think. But now I know the truth. Your teaming up with Marek made it all clear."

“Look, hanging out with Iliana was the last thing I expected too,” I said. “She’s not the same person she used to be. You honestly wouldn’t believe how much she’s changed. It would be a mistake to think we’ve always been friends because that’s completely not true.”

“I can believe that you two were always working together,” Mr. Kristic said, “or I can believe that Marek suddenly decided she wasn’t going to be evil anymore.”

When he put it that way, I could see where he was coming from. The only thing Iliana and I had in common, as far as he could tell, was that we’d been cruel to his daughter. Could I really blame him for drawing conclusions based on the available facts? Given that I could not tell Mr. Kristic the truth, I needed to come up with another strategy.

“My girl was so brilliant.” He shook his head. “All the things she created. She could do anything. She was smart enough to keep an eye on everyone, but she couldn’t see you for what you were. For what you were after.”

“I wasn’t after anything,” I said. “What do you think I was after?”

Mr. Kristic offered a sad little smile. “We’ll get all the facts. I’ve got someone coming over who knows how to encourage people to unburden themselves.”

I thought I was doing a pretty good job of keeping my cool, considering the gun, the handcuffing, and the promise of questioning. But now I felt panic beginning to set in. I needed to grab the bottle of meds in my pocket, but I was afraid Mr. Kristic would think I was going for a weapon. “You’re bringing someone over to torture me?”

“To question you,” Mr. Kristic said. “It’s not about the torture. That’s not the main point, but, yes, torture will be involved. Honestly, I’m kind of looking forward to it. Maybe I’m kidding myself, and once you start screaming and crying and choking on your own blood and snot, I’ll feel bad for you. You killed my little girl, Gibson, but I know you’re not a monster. You’re just fucked up, same as everyone else. So, if I leave the room, it’s because I’ve lost my stomach for seeing you suffer, but you should know that the interrogator will keep going until we find out what we want to know.”

“Shit,” I said. “Fuck.” I deserved to suffer for what I did, but I had suffered. My life was terrible. My plans had been smashed. I would never have a normal life. On the other hand, I had learned and grown. I could no longer imagine how I could have been so cruel to Faye. I would certainly never do it again. I did not deserve to choke on blood and snot.

I had no clue what Mr. Kristic thought I was hiding, and that meant I couldn’t avoid torture by telling him. I didn’t have a whole lot of secrets I

could give up to avoid more pain. Only one, really. If movies and novels were accurate, then everyone breaks eventually, but I wasn't a tough guy who would hold out for hours. My breaking point would be when the torturer rang the doorbell. I would tell them about Iliana. They wouldn't believe me, of course, which meant the torture would continue, but in the end, when I stuck to my story, they would likely conclude I was insane. There was also the chance, however remote, that they would start to wonder.

I tried to leap up, gripping the side of the chair, and swung my arm wildly. I did not stand as quickly as I intended, and Mr. Kristic had the chance to move back, but not far or fast enough. Painful vibrations coursed through my entire body as I clipped him with the chair leg. He was behind me, and I couldn't tell where I'd got him, but I'd made a solid impact. I had to hope it was enough to unbalance him and that I hadn't just given him an excellent reason to shoot me.

Blind chair fighting might have been one of my underdeveloped strengths, because when I turned, I saw Mr. Kristic lying on the floor, a large gash on his temple.

The blood pooled around his head, and the wound looked serious. Mr. Kristic wasn't entirely unconscious, but he wasn't quite awake either. His

eyes were open and blinking rapidly, and his lips moved soundlessly, but he lay there passively, unwilling or unable to get up.

Or that could be what he wanted me to think, I knew the keys to the handcuffs were in his shorts pockets. They'd hung on him loosely, but they were stretched out against his supine body, which meant I was going to have to really dig in there. I was going to need a minute or two to find what I was looking for. If Mr. Kristic were playing possum, I would be in trouble.

I had no choice. I couldn't leave the house and drive home with a chair handcuffed to my wrist. I couldn't call for help, because the last people I wanted involved were the police. I could call Iliana, but what were the odds she would get here before the torturer? I thought about rushing backward into the wall to try to break the chair, but that could go wrong in all kinds of ways. This was heavy and solidly built furniture, the legs and back were likely properly joined to the seat, not affixed with Ikea screws. I was more likely to hurt myself than get free.

I crept forward, dragging my chair like a ball and chain, and gave him a little kick in the ribs, looking for a reaction. He winced and let out a groan, but that was it. It would have to be enough. I knelt down and shoved a hand in his right pocket. I pulled out a keychain, but there was nothing small enough to be a handcuff key. I'd seen enough of them to know what they looked like. I dove in again, and this time found what I was looking

for. I quickly backed off and, with trembling fingers, managed to unlock the cuffs on the fifth try.

I considered calling 911 but decided against it. I needed to get out of there before Mr. Kristic's associate showed up. A skilled deployer of enhanced interrogation would know far better than I would if someone would benefit from a trip to the emergency room.

I managed to make it to my car and drive a block and a half before I began shaking uncontrollably. I pulled over to the side of the road, turned off the engine, and crouched low. If anyone passed by, they would not see me trembling and freaking out.

I could not live this way. A lot of bad things had happened to me over the past seven years, and every time, I told myself that I deserved it. I'd reaped what I had sewn. There had to be a limit, though. There had to be a point at which I said I didn't deserve this anymore. And all these secrets meant that there were still things about the past I didn't know or couldn't remember.

I had to figure out what all of it meant. And this trip over to Mike Kristic's house, I decided, was the last time I would do anything without Iliana at my side.

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Chapter 29

“You have to promise me not to make any moves without checking with me,” I said.

“Like killing people?” Iliana asked. “You want me to check in with you before I kill anyone?”

“Or, you know, seriously hurt them.”

She sighed melodramatically. “I guess I can do that.”

We were at Katie’s Kitchen, and Iliana was shoveling pancakes into her face with the urgency of someone who hadn’t eaten in weeks. “I can actually control how hungry I am,” she’d explained earlier, “which means I can increase my enjoyment of something I already enjoy. Since I don’t gain weight unless I want to, then why not?”

I had the impression she’d dialed her hunger up to maximum. I’d barely touched my omelet, but Iliana had nearly cleaned her plate.

“I don’t murder people on a whim,” she said as she washed down her food with a swallow of coffee. “Or beat them for laughs. I have a code.”

“I know you do,” I said, “and I don’t mean to suggest otherwise, but there are some sensitive issues involved.”

“Sure,” she said. “Your parents. Mike Kristic. I get it. You’d rather these people not end up in an unmarked grave. Loud and clear, Dan.”

Once I’d gotten my trembling sufficiently under control, I managed to call Iliana, who told me we had to meet for food. She was sure it was what I needed, which seemed strangely maternal to me. I wasn’t in much of a position to argue with her about anything. I wanted to be told what to do, so I followed her instructions.

“Though,” Iliana said, gesturing toward me with her fork, “we could get a lot of answers if I put some pressure on Kristic. Put him in a situation where he recognized it was in his best interest to tell us what we want to know. There’s no reason not to.”

“The reason not to is I killed his daughter,” I said.

“Does that really give him a pass forever?” she asked. “He put you in danger. And he put you in a position where you had to hurt him. You are not supposed to be caught up in violence.”

“You can’t protect me all the time,” I said.

“I can if I’m with you all the time. If I’d been there, I’d have broken his arm before things got complicated.”

“I don’t want you breaking his arm,” I told her. “I wouldn’t feel good about that.”

She made a face, as though she found my reasoning distasteful. “Fine. I won’t do anything for now. I’m not completely ready to take questioning him off the to-do list—especially if he goes after you again. In the meantime, I’ve been thinking about everything you told me, and I’ve drawn some conclusions. Not conclusions, really. More of an observation. Namely, there’s more to Faye Kristic’s death than you realized.”

“It sure feels that way, but whatever it is that I don’t know, it doesn’t change the facts. I’m not interested in going down any paths that might lead me to make excuses for myself.”

“I get it,” she said. “Some of the memories of things I’ve done are very unpleasant. I don’t delete them, but I do quarantine some of them so they don’t creep up on me unexpectedly.”

“That’s a neat trick.”

She nodded. “Oh, it’s great. Anyhow, we’re going to proceed carefully, be cautious about your feelings and not jump into beating the crap out of people you want to protect. But I do think there’s a good place to start. Money.”

“What money?” I asked.

She grinned. “I have no idea, but people are taking a lot of wild risks. This much exposure by this many people suggests to me that there must be money involved.”

“So, how do we find out?”

“You told me when you searched your parents’ place you didn’t find anything interesting other than Mike Kristic’s phone call, but you said you saw financial statements in the filing cabinet. You didn’t say what they revealed.”

“I didn’t look at them. Why would I?”

“It’s a hunch,” she said. “Indulge me.”

“They lost everything,” I said. “Lawyers and a civil settlement and the fact that no one wanted to support my father’s businesses. They were lucky to hold on to the house. I don’t see what their financial statements would show.”

“No harm in looking, right? How about tonight?” she suggested.

“That’s a great idea,” I said, “except my mom will be home and she’s likely to have questions about why I’m searching through her files.”

“Your father says your mother takes sleeping pills,” Iliana said. “And your father works at night. It won’t be a problem.”

“I mean, I guess I could try,” I said, not feeling much enthusiasm for breaking into my parents’ house again.

“*We* will try,” she said. “I’m coming with you.”

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Chapter 30

ILIANA

She hadn’t wanted to leave him alone, but Dan said he wanted to get some sleep before their adventure that night. She’d offered to sit in the room and watch over him, but Dan had pronounced that weird.

Maybe it *was* weird. She couldn’t be sure. Offering had seemed like the right thing to do. Or maybe it had been the thing she wanted to do, and that made it feel right.

She knew that sometimes she had to restrain herself. If she were on a busy street and saw a parent yelling at a child, it made her sad, but she knew she should not break the parent’s finger. Was breaking a finger bad because it was the wrong thing to do or because it would attract notice? If she were to encounter this same parent and child on a deserted road, with no one around to condemn or arrest her, would she show the same restraint?

Bryce Hilliard’s police car was waiting for her when she pulled into her driveway. She hadn’t bothered to check in with him, and she’d been ignoring his calls and texts. She’d known he was going to show up eventually.

Hilliard got out of his car and came to meet her at her front door. No hat, but his uniform was crisp. He wore his utility belt, but devoid of much of the apparatus. The gun was there. Of course it was.

“Let’s go inside.” He acted as though it was his right to be angry, to express it however he pleased. He never doubted it.

“You can say what you want to out here.” Talking in public would be better. It would limit his possibilities, but also hers. She knew she would not kill him in public. She couldn’t be sure what she would do if they went inside. She knew she shouldn’t kill him, but she didn’t know if she could restrain herself. Not in light of all she’d learned—what he’d done to Old Iliana.

“Inside.” He flashed a tight, joyless smile.

She shrugged. Iliana wanted to hear what he had to say, and she liked to think she would be able to resist killing him.

Iliana believed in cleaning up, so Hilliard was not going to see the contents of Teuling’s file spread out on her coffee table, but for a moment she regretted that. She wondered how he would react. She wondered what such a conversation would lead to.

She closed the door behind them but didn’t go any further. She stood still and folded her arms.

Hilliard studied her. “You’ve been ignoring me.”

“I’ve been busy.”

“With what?”

“Doing what you asked. I dealt with the reporter.”

Hilliard shook his head. He went into the living room and sat down. She had no choice but to follow. Let him think he was taking the lead, directing the situation. Maybe he was. He would continue until she decided otherwise. That was probably the safest way to play it.

Iliana remained standing, though.

“She’s been seen around town.” Hilliard put his feet up on the coffee table. “She went for a ride with Silvestri’s wife. That doesn’t feel ‘dealt with’ to me.”

“Trust me. I’ve spoken to her. She knows what’s up. If she’s chasing some other, smaller story, it’s only so she can salvage the time she spent looking into Tylor. And to save face. She needs to be able to tell herself she wasn’t run off.”

“Uh uh.” Hilliard was not hiding his skepticism. “And what about you and Gibson. What’s going on with that?”

“I’m keeping an eye on him,” Iliana said.

Hilliard stood up again. “You think I can’t put the pieces together? You and Teuling circling around Gibson after all this time? I know you found something out.”

Iliana put on an expression of confusion and impatience. She believed it was what her predecessor would have done. “What do you think I’ve found out?”

“Don’t fuck with me,” Hilliard said. “You think Gibson knows something, don’t you? Maybe he isn’t even aware, that he can’t piece it together, but you can. That’s why he’s suddenly your buddy.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Iliana said airily. She glanced out the window, another signal of her impatience.

Hilliard was on his feet and approaching her. When he reached out, she could see her response as though it were a memory, feel his arm in her hand, the bones breaking, but she remained still. She did not have to act. She was in no danger. Not yet.

His hand gripped the back of her neck. His face was only inches from hers. She smelled coffee and bread and frustrated rage coming off of him. “I made you, girl. Your existence begins and ends with me.”

He should be dead, Iliana thought. His neck should be broken. There had been other moments when she’d been touched against her will, no witnesses to constrain her, and she’d reacted without thought. Almost in the absence of thought. She simply *was*. That part of herself was so natural and inevitable, but she held it back because her future depended on it. And for

Dan. She restrained herself for Dan. She was being something else because she liked the idea of the life it might lead to.

“I haven’t forgotten anything.” She met his gaze and kept her voice calm. Defiant, because she could not bring herself to be otherwise, but also accepting.

He squeezed her neck harder and then pushed her away. “I’d do anything for you. You just have to ask. I have a whole department of drones in uniform, but they’re not you. I trust *you*.”

“Then trust me now,” she said. “Tell me what you think I’m doing.”

He let go of her and turned around, bending partly over and clenching his fists. “Stop fucking with me! I thought we were past that childish bullshit. You need to tell me everything. The whole story of what really happened from before you disappeared to coming back all messed up to becoming best friends with Dan Gibson. You come clean now, we can fix things, but I need to know.”

She shook her head. “There’s nothing to tell. I’m . . . trying new things.”

“With Dan Gibson?” Hilliard sneered.

“He’s nice,” she said. “He doesn’t want anything from me. He listens.”

“Fuck you.” He slammed his open hand against the wall and turned toward her again. He took a step toward her, but she did not retreat. “You think you can outsmart me. You think you can beat me at this? It should have been mine seven years ago. You’re not going to steal it from me now.”

“Steal what?” she asked.

He raised his hand as if to slap her, but he winced and shook his head. “Is this really how you want to play it?”

“Of course not,” she said. “I’m telling you I don’t understand.”

Hilliard took a deep breath and stepped back. He looked out the window for a long while, like he was collecting his thoughts. Finally he went to the door and opened it, but only a crack. He turned back to her.

“Teuling’s been taking an interest in you, you know,” Hilliard said. “Quietly asking questions, somehow thinking I wouldn’t find out. Looking through records. He is on your case, girl. And you better believe he can do damage.”

“Teuling doesn’t worry me,” she said.

“He ought to. You know, after all we’ve been through, after all I’ve done for you, I’m holding out hope that maybe I’m misreading all of this. Maybe you’re going through some weird phase, and you haven’t completely turned against me. I’m going to consider that possibility. But if

you’re working against me, I’ll have to deal with you the way I always deal with my enemies.”

“I’m sorry you don’t trust me.” She thought a performance of sincerity might throw him off, make him doubt himself. Maybe it would buy her a moment later on, though she wouldn’t need that moment. If it came down to a conflict with Hilliard, she would win. Some part of him, she believed, knew that, but he would keep fighting all the same.

She hoped so.

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Clara: *To my mind, this kid did something stupid, and his actions should be condemned, but he doesn't deserve the kind of national notoriety and hatred coming his way.*

Sofia: *He murdered a girl with her whole life ahead of her. That seems worth condemning.*

Clara: *He didn't murder her. She killed herself. People have agency.*

Sofia: *The things he posted—*

Clara: *There is context here. She inserted herself into his life.*

Sofia: *There is no context that justifies violence against women. Expressing her sexual or romantic yearning is not a justification for murder.*

Clara: *Again, not murder.*

Sofia: *He might as well have pushed her off that tower. It was murder, plain and simple.*

—Warning: Patriarch in Progress Podcast

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Chapter 31

DAN

My mother's bedroom light went off at about 9:30, which was typical. Even if my father left cleanup for the morning crew, something he often did, he wouldn't be home until almost 1:30. Iliana and I decided to wait an hour to make sure my mother was in a deep sleep, and then we got moving.

I quietly opened the door, and we stepped into the kitchen. My mother left a few lights on for when my father got home, so we didn't need a flashlight until we went into my old bedroom. I didn't want to turn on any lamps. Though a deep sleeper, especially with medication, my mother was also sensitive to subtle changes in the house. A strange light could startle her awake, so I closed the office door most of the way, not pressing it shut to avoid the noise, and I then used the light on my phone to guide us to the file cabinet.

Iliana opened it, more quietly than I could have. More quietly than I would have thought possible. She had some serious stealth moves and hardly seemed to need the flashlight as she deftly searched through the contents and pulled out a file of financial statements. These were monthly reports from an investment firm. We set the file on the desk and examined

the contents. Not ever having more than a couple of hundred dollars accumulated at any one time, I found the columns of numbers and the preponderance of data overwhelming. Pages and pages of statistics and charts and graphs. Iliana, however, took it all in and turned to a final page, pointing to the current balance.

As of last month, my parents had a little more than five million dollars in their account.

“What the fuck,” I whispered. “How can they have so much money?”

“In this one account,” Iliana whispered back. “They may have more elsewhere, but this is what I suspected.”

“Why?”

“Some hints I picked up on along the way. We can talk about it later. I suggest we get out of here and regroup.”

I let Iliana quietly return the documents to the filing cabinet and quietly slide it closed. I turned off my phone’s flashlight and opened the door.

My father was standing on the other side.

“This is breaking and entering,” he snarled. “I’m calling the cops.” But he didn’t take out his phone.

Iliana stepped forward, out of the darkness. It was clear my dad hadn’t seen someone was with me. “Hey, Mr. Gibson. How’s it going?” She sounded casual, like she’d run into him in the grocery store.

An instant earlier, he’d stood proud and defiant, a warrior defending his home. Now he deflated before our eyes. He took a step back, but he still glowered at me. “What the hell is going on here? Your mother called and said she thought she heard someone in the house. Are you itching to go back to jail?”

That familiar tingle of guilt and shame coursed through my blood. I wanted to cringe, to apologize, to run away, but I’d done too much of that for too long. I wasn’t going to be intimidated into silence. I asked myself what Iliana would do, and I decided she would act as though she had every right to be there.

“I wanted to look at something.” I tried to sound casual and confident. “I figured you wouldn’t mind.”

“What could you possibly need to see in there?” he demanded.

“Your financial statements.” I pushed past him, and Iliana followed.

“Those are none of your business,” he said irritably.

I turned to face him. “I kind of think they are my business. For years you’ve been telling me that you were broke because of me.”

“Am I supposed to be the bad guy here?” my dad demanded. “You think *I* did something to *you*?”

“That’s what it’s starting to look like,” I said. “I deserve some answers.”

“If you want answers, why don’t you ask her?” he said, pointing at Iliana.

“I think you should be the one to tell him,” Iliana said breezily.

My mother now emerged from the bedroom looking as though she were fighting the pull of sleep. “Why are you doing this, Dan? Is it necessary to upset your father?”

“It’s time for us to have a family meeting,” I said.

My mother puttered around in the kitchen for a few minutes, fixing my father a cup of coffee. I don’t think it occurred to her to offer me or Iliana anything.

“Tell me what you’re up to here,” my father said to Iliana, once the three of us were seated.

“I’m not up to anything except, you know, keeping an eye on Dan.” She let her eyes drift in a dreamy way, as if to suggest that this was what Bryce Hilliard had ordered her to do.

“Bryce’s going to hear about this.”

“I’ll let you decide if that’s the right way to play it,” she said. “Maybe what Bryce doesn’t know won’t get other people into hot water. It won’t cause other people to have their brake lines cut or have poison slipped into their food.”

My father blanched. He didn’t much care for being threatened, but it was clear he was afraid of Iliana.

When my mother returned and set a steaming cup of coffee next to my father, he was finally ready to begin. He turned his gaze on me, cold and unforgiving.

“When you murdered that poor girl, everything fell to shit. You think I made that up? I wish. Business fell off, the lawyer fees killed me, and I knew Kristic was going to take me to court. Watham was on the run because everyone found out about his ties to that Meeks pervert. Hilliard was new to the job at the time, but he was clever. He came to me with a deal. He would help me offload my businesses for less than they were worth, but more than I could get with everything going on. He’d help me conceal the sales and

make it look like the businesses went under and sold after I went ‘bankrupt.’” He used air quotes here.

“So, the people who bought your businesses knew they were doing something shady?” I asked.

“If they were smart, they didn’t ask any questions. That Russian you worked for before you got your ass fired was smart enough to keep quiet. He knew something was going on, but a little corner cutting didn’t bother him.”

I hadn’t told my parents I’d been fired, but word got around fast in Tylor.

“Everyone thinks I was wiped out,” my father continued, “so when Kristic came to pick my pockets, there was almost nothing for him. He took all the crumbs he could find, the greedy fuck, but the joke was on him. I got the last laugh.”

I couldn’t quite see the punchline, but that wasn’t the point. It was clear that my father had broken a lot of laws in order to conceal that he wasn’t as poor as he wanted people to think.

“Okay, I get why you wanted to fool everyone else, but why did you let me believe for all these years that I’d ruined you?”

“You *did* ruin me,” he said. “I lost everything I was trying to build. You think having a few dollars stashed away changes that?”

I considered five million to be more than a few dollars, but I took his larger point. He'd loved building his empire, and I'd taken that from him.

"Besides, I didn't trust you not to shoot off your mouth. For all I knew, you could have another crazy episode and post all that shit on the internet and then 'forget' you'd done it."

It was meant to hurt, and it did.

"So, now you've got the whole truth. The big conspiracy. You wrecked my life's work, but I managed to save a small piece. That's my secret. Are you ready to get the fuck out of here?"

I felt impossibly stupid. I'd violated my parents' privacy and exposed them only to discover that their sins were of the non-horrible variety. I didn't know how to feel about my father concealing his hidden stash from Mike Kristic, though he didn't need the money. I certainly felt less bad than I might have before he handcuffed me to a chair and picked a torturer out of his contacts.

As I moved to leave through the kitchen door, I turned back to him. "If you didn't really need the money, why did you charge me to live in the apartment all these years? Why did you jack up the rent beyond what you knew I could afford?"

"You killed someone," my father said, meeting my gaze. "You took an innocent life. I did it because I can't stand to look at you."

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Chapter 32

ILIANA

She adjusted her inner temperature. Dan's parents kept their place too cool, and stepping through the door to their lawn was like passing through a portal into a different world. Except, of course, it was still the same world, maybe a worse one. Dan's father had been cruel, looking to cause pain, but why? To deflect? To distract? It seemed that Dan's father was too busy protecting his own emotions to consider his son's.

Dan had disregarded Faye's distress, and that had led to her death, but he would not behave the same way now. The distinction mattered to her because Iliana wanted to believe in her own capacity for change. She did not want her past to define her present.

Iliana steered Dan to his apartment, where she poured them both hearty portions from the bottle of bourbon she'd brought with her. She suspected he would need something strong.

"You know what?" she said. "Fuck them. Fuck everyone in this stupid town. I've laid the groundwork. I can go pretty much any time. All I need is another day or two to set the table, and I can be out of here. You're coming with me."

She did not want to go. She had more to do.. Her past, and so her life, was linked to Tylor, and she did not want to leave before discovering what there was to learn. But Tylor was bad for Dan, and didn't that make it bad for her as well?

It occurred to her, perhaps for the first time, that she was more than her goals, more than her mission. Helping someone she cared about was important. Besides, she did not have to abandon her goal. She had time and resources. She could come back, with a new face and name, to conduct her investigation without the attention Iliana drew. It didn't have to be now. It could be in a month or two months or whenever she wanted. Why not?

Dan took an earnest swallow of his liquor. "Coming with you? Where? For what?"

"I don't always know how to deal with people," she said. "You can be my . . . my personal assistant, we'll call it. We can come up with a better title if that's not okay. You can pick your salary. Whatever seems fair."

He looked at her as though she'd offered to let him choose the color of the sky. Iliana understood his confusion. She, too, rarely had the opportunity to select the degree to which her life could be made easy. She liked that she could provide for him what she could not give herself.

"How would you be able to pay me?" he asked.

Iliana knew nearly all human desires were gated by money and the means of acquiring it. Money meant little to her, perhaps because its acquisition, at least in moderate quantities, required little effort. Accumulating as much as someone like Gregory Meeks would demand more time and effort, but it was not outside her abilities, merely her interests.

“Money is easy,” she said. “Bad people always have money, and I have no problem taking it from them. I know how to get into systems and redirect funds from larger institutions. If they have predatory practices, I have no problem siphoning off some ill-gotten corporate gain.”

“And what are you going to do when you leave here?” he asked.

“I’ll have a legitimate ID. I can do anything. I can go anywhere and start investigating my identity for real. Where we go can be up to you. Making those types of decisions will be what I pay you for. How much would you want, anyhow? Does a hundred thousand sound okay?”

His eyes widened. “A year?”

“Not a month,” she said. “I mean, I *could* do it, but it would take a lot more work, and then I would have less time to dedicate to my real project. Anyhow, forget about the money. The point is, you can put all of this behind you.”

“It’s very kind of you.” Inexplicably, the opportunity she presented appeared to sadden him.

“It’s not going to be very demanding work,” she said. “Maybe on the front end. I’ll need help getting settled and all that, but once that’s done, you should have plenty of free time. You could maybe take college courses part time, and after a year or two you can transfer to the real thing. Dan, this is your chance to get your life back on track. I don’t know why you’re hesitating.”

He ran a finger around the rim of his glass, a gesture associated with feelings of anxiety. “I’m hesitating because my father is right. I killed Faye. I don’t get to start over.”

Iliana had killed many people and never felt remorse, but she had also never killed anyone unintentionally. She thought, like Dan, it would make her feel bad. “Making a mistake with terrible consequences is not the same as choosing to do something terrible. Assuming the story as we all know it is true, you weren’t trying to kill anyone. And there are some other truths you need to hear.”

“None of those truths will change the past,” he told her.

“I admire that you don’t want to shirk responsibility,” she said, “but I’m talking about context. There are a lot of things about this incident that have never sat right with me.”

He held up his hand, as if he could stop the truth. “I told you. I don’t want to hear—”

She did not understand that. Why would someone not want to know their own story? “Dan, I’m leaving town soon, and before I go, I’m going to need to say this stuff, so we might as well get it over with. First of all, you didn’t kill anyone. Faye Kristic took her own life. No one made her do that. Lots of people put up with worse and endure. She didn’t. Yes, you were unkind to her, but you didn’t force her to give up. She had a wealthy, loving father, she had real world skills, and she had a year before she could leave town and start college. Life is full of challenges and setbacks, and she didn’t know how to handle them. I feel bad for her, and I wish she’d gotten help, but she decided to end things. Not you.”

“But I—”

“But a lot of people,” Iliana interrupted. “And that’s the thing that I keep coming back to. You rejected her cruelly, yes, but she also stalked your ass. She would show up in your room, which is bullshit. She put a webcam to spy on you. I’m sorry, but that’s unforgivable. And, yes, you posted some stuff, but Faye put up with crap for years from a lot of other kids, including Kyle Hilliard and Old Iliana, two people who enjoyed the protection of the newly appointed police chief.”

“I’ve talked about this with Trish,” he said. “She helped me to realize that someone else’s bad behavior doesn’t excuse mine.”

Iliana poured them both another drink, which they sipped in silence. The choice seemed so obvious to her, but not to him, and she could not understand why.

“I’ll stick around for a few more days,” she said at last. “I want to make sure there’s no chance of them coming after me. Then I’m leaving, and I hope you’ll come with me. If not, I’ll let you know where I land. You can always join me later, but I can’t stay here. This place is too fucked-up for me. I can’t fix it, Dan. I need to get away before things get worse. I need to be Iliana Marek somewhere else.”

“I get it.” His voice was heavy with resignation. “And I really do appreciate the offer. I owe you a lot, including my life.”

“I showed up at a good time, but I know I imposed myself on you. And you’ve truly helped me. I believe I’ll look back at my time here as a turning point for my life, that that’s thanks to you. You’re a good person.”

“I’m trying,” he said with profound sadness.

It occurred to her that he needed to spend more time being and less time thinking. “I don’t think you have to try anymore. You just have to forgive yourself.”

“I don’t know that I can do that.”

“I can forgive myself,” she said, “And I’ve killed way more people than you.”

He let out a genuine laugh. She reviewed her memories and could not find another instance in which Dan had been quite so unguarded. She knew he would miss her, but he had closed himself off to what she had to offer. She opened the door to the temptation of forgetting, and he would not let himself walk through. She knew she could force him to do what was best for himself, but she did not know if that would be right.

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Chapter 33

DAN

My things were packed but I had nowhere to go.

I had three appointments to look at apartments, and I needed one of them to work out. I only had days before I had to move out, and my father showed no signs of changing his mind. I wasn't talking about my housing woes with Benito, because I knew he would pressure me to stay at his place until I got things sorted out. There was no way I was staying in the same house with his mom, not after learning about her apparent dealings with the Hilliards.

I'd already looked at a few apartments with affordable rent, but no one had called me back. I also had a job interview later in the afternoon. It was to manage a gas station in Yancy, a town about fifteen miles north of Tylor. The drive would be a strain on my aging Subaru, but I doubted I'd find anything closer to home. I'd exchanged a few texts with Igor, and he said he would have no trouble giving me a glowing recommendation, despite firing me. "Your problems are Tylor problems," he'd written. "To get away is for you very good."

My phone rang and displayed an unknown number, so I assumed it was a job or apartment prospect. When I put the phone to my ear, I heard: “You need to come over here right now.”

The voice sounded familiar, but I couldn’t identify it. Maybe that was because of its jittery, agitated tone. “Who’s this?”

“It’s Mike Kristic.”

I tried to think clearly. I’d told Iliana that I needed to stay in Tylor, to face the consequences of the things I’d done. If I meant it, I couldn’t run away from conflict. What was the point of staying if I couldn’t bring myself to talk to someone I’d wronged? On the other hand, the previous conversation had involved abduction and threats of torture.

“I don’t think a private meeting at your home is a great idea. We could talk in a coffee shop or something.”

“Fuck your coffee shop.” He sounded nervous and twitchy, like he’d been popping uppers. Mr. Kristic didn’t strike me as a cokehead, but you never could tell. “I shouldn’t have done what I did. I got some bad information, but things are different now.”

“I’m glad to hear that.” I tried to project calmness. I was not going to put myself in a position where he would be able to handcuff me to his furniture, but I was curious about why he was calling. “There’s no reason we can’t talk on the phone.”

“There are things I need to show you,” he snapped. “Here! Not somewhere else. If you want protection, bring a gun. Bring a bodyguard. Anyone but Iliana Marek. But otherwise, I don’t care. Get over here. As soon as you can.”

“Maybe if you could tell me more about—”

“It’s about the money, you moron!”

“What money?”

He made an exasperated groaning noise. Did he mean the money Hilliard had funneled to my parents? That didn’t feel right to me. I’d only just learned about that, and it would be odd that Mr. Kristic would bring it up after all these years.

“It was always about the money,” Mr. Kristic said. “They really played you, didn’t they? They made you their bitch, and you let them get away with it, you weak fuck. You’re a stupid doormat, and that’s why there’s been no justice for Faye.”

“I’m sorry, but I really don’t understand,” I said, “and unless you can help me to understand, I’m not going over to your house.”

“Then let me make it plain,” he said. “There are things about what happened to Faye that have nothing to do with you. It was about her surveillance.”

“You mean the webcam she put in my room?” I asked. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“Jesus Christ, how can you be this much of an idiot? Don’t you get it? They knew everything that she was up to, and I can prove it. Now, get over here.”

Benito was at my place in fifteen minutes. He wore oversized jeans and a white T-shirt with thick horizontal black stripes. I’d known Benito for years and he’d always been nothing but mellow, but I tried to imagine him as a stranger would see him. He was a big dude, and if you didn’t know his peaceful nature, he would be intimidating. Mike Kristic might have another abduction attempt on his mind, but hopefully Benito would make him think twice.

We took his car. He had *The Marvelous Missing Link: Found* playing softly on the stereo, and he tapped his fingers on the steering wheel out of time with the beat. He was nervous, and rightly so. I provided a recap of my previous encounter with Mr. Kristic, rushing through the details of being held at gunpoint, handcuffed to a chair, and told to wait for a guy to come by and torture me. I’d described all of this to Iliana, but Benito was someone for whom abduction and torture remained thoroughly outside the

realm of ordinary events. His eyes had gotten huge, and his lips drawn. I couldn't tell if he thought I was insane and making this up or insane for not completely freaking out.

"And," he said after a brief pause, "you're going back over there?"

"There's been some stuff going on," I began.

"Yeah, I'm feeling that."

"Mr. Kristic, Hilliard messing with me, the missing cop—"

"The missing cop?" he repeated. "How is he involved?"

"I think whatever happened to him has something to do with Faye," I told him. "Mr. Kristic was talking about money, and money makes people do crazy things. He hasn't exactly been the most stable guy, so maybe this is just his delusion, but if it is, so what? If he wants to rant a bunch of wild nonsense at me, I owe it to him to listen."

Benito nodded. "I get it. But you ever think that your shit has been getting pretty wild since you started hanging with Iliana? No judgement, homes, and I get that correlation is not causation. But, you know. Just saying."

"Iliana is complicated."

"No doubt," he agreed.

"It's possible that stuff she's done may have stirred the pot a little, but she's on my side. I know that for certain. But Mr. Kristic doesn't want her

around."

"Very reasonable," Benito said.

"The time will come when I'll be able to explain all this better," I said. "For now, I need you to back me up and look like you'd be willing to punch someone who tries to handcuff me."

He glanced over at me. "If there's a problem that involves the cops, my mom can help you. No judgment. You know what she's like."

Part of the problem was I now had no idea what his mom was like, but I couldn't tell him that. "Let's hear what he has to say. After that, I'll figure out if I need to involve anyone else."

Benito pulled in front of Mr. Kristic's house and turned off the car. Almost instantly, the Florida heat began to penetrate, but he made no move to open the door. "You're sure about this?"

"Not exactly sure," I said. "But I am determined."

He shrugged. "Then let's see what's up."

We walked up to the front door, which we found slightly open.

"Is that good or bad?" Benito asked.

"Maybe neither," I offered, but I wasn't being honest. I was sure it was bad.

"Mr. Kristic!" I shouted. I reached up to take the doorknob, but Benito slapped my hand away.

“Have you ever watched television in your life? This is a corny-ass setup.”

Using the toe of his high-top, he pushed open the door, which squeaked ominously. We slipped inside the house, and we did not have long to go before we found Mike Kristic. A rope had been affixed to something on the second floor, slung out over the railing. The other end was wrapped around Mike Kristic’s neck.

His face was wide and discolored and terrible. I glanced only for a second before turning away. I had enough time to see that whatever happened, it had not been long ago. The body still gently rotated on the rope, turning slowly as if looking for someone to witness his terrible end.

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Chapter 34

ILIANA

The house stank of death and shit. Iliana chose not to notice. She felt anxious, though not that the police might arrive. She could easily avoid them. She was anxious because Dan and his friend would be upset and frightened. They would need her reassurance, so she could not afford to take as much time in the house as she would like. Concern for her friend's feelings was important, and she allowed it to hum in the background, but it would not prevent her from acting. She needed to be quick but thorough.

She ought to have recognized Mike Kristic's importance. It would have been wise to search, or at least scout, his house long before this. He was Faye Kristic's father, and everything led back to Faye. Iliana had been aware of that for days.

She moved through the ground floor, ignoring Kristic's now still body dangling from a rope. She found neither a computer nor a filing cabinet. It did not mean that what she sought wasn't on this level, but she would exhaust all obvious choices before looking for hiding places. She moved swiftly up the stairs, past the top of the banister, to which the rope was affixed, and began a systematic search of the second-story rooms. A quick

survey revealed a full bath and what appeared to be four bedrooms. Only one door was closed, and Iliana assumed that it had once belonged to Faye. That seemed consistent with her understanding of human grief.

The master bedroom held nothing of note at first glance, and neither did what she assumed was a long-unused guest room. The last bedroom served as an office, and this was what she'd hoped for.

The computer was password protected but circumventing the standard log-in by accessing the correct registry file took only seconds. To her delight and surprise, she found a great deal of information. She read quickly, far faster than human eyes could process, but not as fast as human imagination might suppose.

She copied the relevant documents and then logged into an anonymous email account she'd established for this purpose. After dropping the documents into an unsent message in her draft folder, she scrubbed the computer of any evidence she'd been there. An intensive diagnostic review by a skilled technician would reveal what she was now hiding, but it seemed highly improbable anyone would bother with that, and even if her actions were discovered, they would not lead back to her specifically. At most, a technician might learn that someone had copied files.

This information changed everything, but finding the right way to tell Dan would require a greater understanding of human psychology than she

possessed. She would keep it to herself, but not for long. The next steps presented themselves to her, and the plan felt sound. If she turned out to be wrong, she would pivot, which she considered one of her particular skills.

Iliana directed Dan and his friend to meet her at a gas station just outside Tylor city limits. She didn't foresee any problems—particularly not after what she'd found in Mike Kristic's house—but there was no harm in taking extra precautions.

"I'm really proud of you both," Iliana said, "for getting out of there without vomiting."

Vomiting had happened. Iliana knew Dan's scent well enough to track it, but he'd been wise enough to do it on the neighbor's lawn where distance from the crime scene and exposure to the elements would render it a non-issue in an official investigation—particularly after she'd ground it into the St. Augustine with the heel of her athletic shoe. Dan had been too agitated to drive, but Benito—also quite unhappy—had still managed to get them to Iliana's suggested meeting spot. She'd gone inside the gas station and bought them both bottles of cola, which a movie she'd once watched insisted was curative for nausea.

“Where the hell were you?” Dan asked. “You took more than an hour to get here.”

“I had a few things to do,” she told him from the back seat.

“We have to call the cops.” Benito, clearly agitated, began speaking as though continuing an ongoing conversation. “Someone might have seen us going in there. I’m going to be in a lineup and they’re going to ask the witness *Is that the big-ass Mexican Jew you saw fleeing the motherfucking crime scene?* And the answer is going to be yes. Even if it weren’t me, the answer would be yes, because that’s how this shit works.”

“No one will take you in for questioning,” Iliana said. “You were never there. I’ll deal with the cops.”

Benito did not know that by *deal with* Iliana’s options included the possibility of killing all of them, but she thought it unlikely it would come to that.

“Benito’s right,” Dan said. “We have to tell someone what we saw.”

“Absolutely not.” Iliana made certain to imbue her voice with authority. She needed them to understand that she had taken charge. “If they know you were there, they will one hundred percent pin it on you. You’re sure neither of you touched anything?”

They both nodded.

This, she thought, was a good time for positive affirmation. “You guys are the best.”

Benito glanced at Dan with obvious confusion. His voice went up an octave. “What the fuck is going on here? There was an actual one hundred percent dead dude in that house. This shit is real. We can’t pretend it didn’t happen. And Dan knows things the cops need to hear.”

“It’s best not to assume the cops will do their job,” Iliana explained. “I think the cops have evil things in mind for Dan, and if you decide you need to do ‘the right thing’ and report this or even tell your mom, Dan could end up dead. Maybe you too. We’re dealing with some dangerous forces here, Benito. You need to trust me.”

“Nobody trusts you,” Benito said, maybe a little hysterically. “Not being trustworthy is your whole personality.”

“That *was* my old personality,” she admitted. “My new personality is being super dependable and someone you should absolutely listen to. Isn’t that right, Dan?”

Dan sipped his soda and nodded. “It is.”

She could tell he meant it, and Iliana felt herself flush with pleasure. He really was her friend. She loved that.

Iliana turned to Benito. “Dan and I have some things we need to take care of. Your job is to go home and forget about this. Don’t tell anyone—

again, that includes your mom. She's an officer of the court, and that means she'll be ethically obligated to do certain things. In a normal world, her impulses would be smart, but in this world, with the stuff we're dealing with, it could be very, very bad for Dan. So, we're trusting you. We can do that, can't we, Benito?"

Benito looked at Dan, who nodded.

"For now," Benito said.

Iliana lunged forward from the back seat and gave Benito a half hug. It seemed like the right thing to do. It was also what she wanted to do, and she liked when those things aligned. "Thank you for being such a good friend to Dan. I appreciate you so much."

She let him go, and Benito looked more disoriented from the hug than he had from the dead man.

"What exactly are you two going to be doing?" he asked.

"We're going to peel back the onion," Iliana said.

"What the fuck does that even mean?" Benito asked, his voice growing shrill once more.

"I'll let you know if anything important comes up," Dan told him. "Thanks again, man."

Iliana felt bad about leaving him there. He'd had a difficult day, and her impulse was to remain with him until he was settled, but she had things

to do. She had almost all of the pieces of the puzzle, and soon they would begin assembling them. She supposed she could offer to take him with them, but that would be wrong. Dan wouldn't want her to drag Benito into what was coming.

"You're not supposed to do dangerous things without me," Iliana scolded him as she drove. "What if the killers had still been there?"

"Mr. Kristic said not to bring you." He sounded defensive, which was good. His response was normal, which suggested he was not in shock.

"Oh, we'd better do what the guy who handcuffed you to a chair wants. Is that the logic here? Now you got Benito involved. He looked really upset."

"Yeah, I feel bad about that."

"Don't," she told him. "He's your friend, and he knows he helped you. He can be proud of that. I'm just glad you guys didn't get hurt."

Dan drank some more of the Coke. The air conditioner was running hard, but sweat still formed on his forehead. His frequent swallowing suggested nausea, but she believed he was moving in the right direction.

"You think someone saw us?" he asked.

“It’s a real possibility,” she said. “But we have bigger things to worry about. It’s very unlikely that Mike Kristic called you over to tell you something important and then suddenly changed his mind and killed himself. I’m assuming someone didn’t want him to reveal his secrets, and that someone is cleaning up.”

“Cleaning up what?”

That was a large and potentially destabilizing conversation. She knew her words alone would not be enough. The difference between telling and showing would be profound.

“How much of this are you ready to hear?” she asked.

He took another sip from the bottle. “All of it, I guess.”

She knew that wasn’t true, but it was time to start. “Think about what was going on the night we met. Old Iliana wanted you out there to eliminate you. She probably intended to kill you in a way that looked like suicide, near where Faye killed herself. No one would think twice about it. Now someone has taken over whatever she was doing. Kristic obviously figured it out, which is why they dealt with him.”

“Then whoever killed Mr. Kristic is. . . .” He chose not to finish the sentence.

“Yes, going to want to kill you too,” she agreed.

He took another sip and stared out the window. The perspiration continued, and his pulse remained accelerated. These were clear signs of anxiety, and yet his voice was steady. “So, what do we do?”

“Well, we celebrate this bit of good news,” she said. “They might have made his death look like a murder and set you up. The faked suicide gets you off the hook.”

“Yay?” he proposed.

“We need to find out what really happened,” she said, “and I don’t think we can do that here. The answers we’re looking for are in Tampa.”

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Chapter 35

DAN

We had already been on the highway for ten minutes before my fight-or-flight mode began to ratchet down. Iliana had taken charge, which was for the best, but I still wanted to know what she had in mind. “Why are we going to Tampa?”

“Dan, we can’t deal with what’s going on without first talking about Faye,” Iliana said gently. “I need the history of what happened. The whole history, including everything you left out before. I want the version that only you know, but not the chronological history. Begin with Faye’s death and go from there. Everything you remember after that, even if it’s something that happened before that moment, comes later. You understand? I don’t want to hear Faye’s story. I want to hear yours.”

I took another sip from my soda bottle. It was empty now, but it was something to do. The sun was setting to the west, blinding me. Drivers slowed down as the worst of the glare destroyed visibility. Iliana, who had no sunglasses, didn’t seem bothered. She continued straight ahead, glancing over for a brief second to give me a reassuring smile.

“I prefer not to talk about that,” I told her.

“No kidding.” Her laugh was warm and genuine. It filled me with a confidence I hadn’t felt in a long time. Maybe never. She was my friend, and she wanted to protect me.

“Dan, I would do anything to recover my memories, and you’d do anything to forget yours. What a pair we are, right? But the thing is, if you’re going to have a future, you’re going to have to revisit the past. You’re going to have to share it with me. Now.”

I couldn’t say exactly why, but I believed she was right, and I started talking.

Most of my life I was barely even aware of Faye’s existence. Then she died. Looking back, the period between these two markers feels like an unfathomable expanse. In reality, it was no more than six weeks. That’s how time moves, I suppose. As an adult, the space between school ending and starting up again feels like the blink of an eye. In high school, summer break unfurled in an endless expanse, an epic saga with a thousand plotlines and dramatic turns.

I’ve often wondered what would have happened if Faye had died during the school year. How would the administration have handled it? Would there have been counseling and assemblies and conversations about

suicide and, ultimately, bullying? I suspect so, and it would have been awkward and strange because so many of the people sitting and listening to these talks would have been guilty of contributing to Faye's death.

News of her suicide circulated through our chat groups and social media feeds within hours, and honestly, I did not know how to feel. Faye was a person, a living human being my own age, with her own thoughts and dreams and interior life, and now she was gone. It was hard to fully grasp that. But that wasn't all. It's shameful to me now that I was relieved that she would no longer bother me. The memory of her coming to my house, of confounding and embarrassing me, and of my own outburst, still filled me with shame. I thought, at least I won't have to see her at school next year. It was a terrible thing to think, and fresh shame burned through me again. So I tried not to think about her at all.

I was mostly successful until the police came for me.

That had been my first time in police custody, and I was scared, but also weirdly defiant. As I sat waiting endlessly in the interrogation room, I told myself it was all a misunderstanding. I hadn't done anything wrong. I wracked my brain, trying to think of what the cops would want to speak to me about, and I came up with nothing. I didn't even have any weed stashed

in my room at the time. I was completely clean. This was before I hit my head, but I never once thought about what I'd posted on Instagram. It never even occurred to me that I might have done something wrong.

Innocent people go to jail all the time, I told myself, but I couldn't believe it was going to happen to me. They couldn't prove I'd done something I hadn't done. Could they?

The first person who came in was Teuling. I didn't know his name, then, and he didn't give it to me. His affect was flustered, as though he was doing his absolute best, but knew he was likely to fail.

"Cameras are on the fritz," he said. "They'll be up again in five minutes, so there isn't much time. Hilliard wants to nail you, boy. He wants your name all over this. He's already leaking the story to every reporter he knows. *National* reporters. He wants this to be a big story. And then, I guess, maybe a jailhouse stabbing before you get to trial. You're silenced, and his hands are clean. That's what you're up against."

I'd been nervous before, but now I was terrified. I'd been assuming this was a misunderstanding, but if what this old cop was telling me was true, I was being framed. I only really knew Hilliard as asshole Kyle's father. I was seventeen years old, and not terribly interested in Tylor's municipal politics, but even teenagers knew the town's police department

was crooked. If the acting chief wanted to set me up, I was probably screwed.

“I don’t even know why I’m here,” I said.

“You’re here to provide cover,” the cop said. “They need someone to blame to clean up their messes, and you’re the victim of opportunity. I’m the only one who can help you.”

“You want me to confess?” I asked. “I don’t even know what crime I’m supposed to have committed.”

“If you know where it is,” the cop said, “now is the time to tell me.”

“Where what is?” I demanded. “What are we talking about?”

I tried to think. I dug deep for anything that might get me out of this mess, or at least understand it. Even then, before I hurt my head, my thoughts never once went to the Instagram post. That was how clueless I was. Unless misremembering, even now, was part of the amnesia. Maybe I was sitting there wracked with guilt, and I just don’t remember that part.

“What are you talking about?” I asked. “Where what is?”

“We’ve got seconds,” he said. “If you know, tell me now.”

I couldn’t even find the will to speak. I just shook my head.

I watched as the cop glanced over to the surveillance camera. A red light blinked on. And that’s when he knocked me over.

Things were a blur. Other cops came rushing in. The old cop was pushed out. People were helping me up. They offered me a glass of water. They told me to shake it off. They told me not to be so clumsy. And then the questions started for real.

At first, I had no idea what they were talking about. I had no memory of posting anything about Faye. I had social media accounts but didn't post much. Then the police started showing me my Instagram feed in which I said unspeakably cruel things about Faye's grooming, how she talked, how she dressed. I called her ugly. I predicted a miserable and lonely life for her, doomed never to fit in or find anyone to love. I promised her that senior year was going to be a nightmare.

"I've never seen any of this," I told them, and I remember believing it. I don't know if I did believe it, but that's how I remember it.

"It's your account," Bryce Hilliard said. "Right there with your name on it."

"Someone must have hacked me," I said. "I wouldn't write anything like that."

"It's not a hack," Hilliard said. "We found drafts on your hard drive. We can prove the posts came from your computer at times when we have confirmation you were home, in your room, with the computer in your

possession. What we want to know is why, Dan? Why did you do it? Do you have something of Faye's? Did you take something? Did you hide it?"

"I didn't do it," I shouted, but writing a rough draft *was* my style. I was outraged and scared, but even though the memories are cloudy, I recall, at that moment, beginning to feel guilty.

I can't remember the moment things fell into place, but after my arrest, after the arraignment and the hearings and the concussion diagnosis and the bail hearing and then the plea bargaining that kept me out of jail—both of which were helped along by the video of Teuling knocking me over. The plea bargain was contingent on my agreeing to undergo extensive psychiatric counseling.

After that, I settled into the understanding that I had done it. I still couldn't remember writing or posting any of it, but I recognized that the evidence was irrefutable. I could not deny it. I simply couldn't remember it.

It wasn't until I started seeing Trish that it came back to me. Not all at once, but in pieces. "You've experienced what is called post-traumatic amnesia," Trish explained. "It usually occurs with more direct, violent trauma, but your head injury explains a lot. We often see it in cases where a person does something, often unintentionally, with catastrophic

consequences—a traffic accident that ends in a fatality, for example, or a prank meant to be harmless but results in a serious injury. I saw a patient who talked her husband into skydiving with her. The husband didn't want to go, but the wife insisted. He died in a freak accident, and after, she remembered nothing, including her own role in his being there. This is how the mind works, Dan. It wants to protect us from things that we can't accept. Your mind is protecting you because what you did is at variance with who you are. Do you understand what I'm saying? Your concussion plays a role here, but in the final analysis, you can't remember because you did not intend to hurt anyone."

I liked Trish at once. She was warm and sympathetic, and treated me like a patient, not a criminal.

"Your behavior is understandable," she said. "Faye violated your personal space and made you uncomfortable. No one would encourage online cruelty, but using social media to vent is common enough, particularly among people who would be more restrained in a face-to-face conversation. You needed to let off steam, and you didn't know how else to do it."

Talking with Trish helped me to reconcile the impossibilities in my life. I had no memory of writing those things about Faye, but by exposing her online, I'd humiliated her to the point where she felt she had no choice

but to climb to the top of the Observation Tower and throw herself to her death. I did not imagine myself the sort of person who could be that vindictive, and yet I'd done a thing for which I would condemn someone else. It was these contradictions that made me worry I was losing my mind, but Trish helped me to talk through them, to imagine myself doing them, and this helped me not only to remember, but to accept responsibility. Without Trish, I can't say how I would have ended up.

Iliana remained quiet for a long time after I was done speaking. The sun had dropped below the horizon, but it was not yet full dark. I watched the colors fade from the chain restaurants and strip malls as we approached Tampa. I still didn't know why we were going there, but I wasn't ready to ask. Mike Kristic was dead, almost certainly murdered. It was all too much to process.

All these deaths had something to do with me. I had wiped out an entire family. Faye's young life was erased, living on only in Mike Kristic's memories. Now those memories were washed away. To be the engine that powers such obliteration is a terrible thing. I didn't know how I could live with this.

I was only vaguely aware when Iliana pulled off the highway and began winding through suburban streets. It took me a moment to realize that

I knew these streets, but it wasn't until she stopped the car that I realized where we were.

She'd driven us to Trish's house.

I shook my head, rejecting whatever Iliana wanted to come next. "I have no idea what you have in mind, but I know I don't like it."

"We're going to pay a visit to your headshrinker." She got out of the car.

I waited a beat, and so had to rush to catch up. "I'd be dead without Trish."

"We're just talking to her, Dan. That's it. Talking is her job, so it shouldn't be a problem."

"No one gets hurt," I said.

"No one gets hurt." She rang the doorbell. "Unless someone needs to get hurt."

My heart pounded. My throat turned dry and full of sharp edges. I felt as though I'd been caught doing something terrible. Maybe it was simply the fact that I was now likely wanted for questioning in a murder—a murder for which there was evidence to tie me to the scene. That can be unnerving.

The idea of confronting Trish also did not sit well with me. There was something deeply personal about my time with her. I'd trusted my therapist more than I'd ever trusted anyone. In many ways, she was the closest thing I had to a parent. I wanted her to think highly of me, but now I'd brought a chaos agent to her home. I'd come to care about Iliana, to admire her tremendously, maybe even to love her in a weird way, but I did not trust her not to murder my therapist.

It was hard to hear anything above the pounding of my heart and the rasp of my breathing, but then, in the distance, came the sound of shattering glass. I was still in a fog, but Iliana was not. She took off around to the back of the house.

By the time I got back there, Iliana was gripping my therapist's wrist. Trish was wearing shorts and a T-shirt, and her feet were bare. It was strange to see her looking so vulnerable.

"I don't know what you think you're doing, but you better let go of me before—" She stopped when she saw me enter her yard. "Dan, do you have something to do with this?"

"Why don't we go inside and talk," Iliana said.

“Dan, what have you gotten involved in?” Trish asked, her voice wavering.

I shook my head. “I have no idea what’s going on. Iliana, let go of her.”

“She was so scared to talk to us that she ran away,” Iliana said. “She didn’t take the time to put on her shoes. I kind of want to hear about that.”

“I know who you are,” Trish said to Iliana. “Anyone would be scared of you.”

“You have no reason to be scared,” Iliana said, “unless you lie.”

“That’s something that terrifying people say,” Trish objected.

Iliana cocked her head. “Very fair.”

Iliana led Trish to the couch and then sat on the other side of the coffee table in an armchair. I’d never been in any part of the house except the office. It was nice—open and airy. I could see it would get a lot of natural light during the day.

Trish had dropped a wine glass when she realized who was at her door, and I cleaned up the mess while the two of them were getting settled. I poured another glass and handed it to Trish, who gulped half of it down.

“I don’t get any wine?” Iliana asked.

“Do you want some?”

“Nah. I’m working. But it would be nice if you offered.” She turned to Trish. “I have some questions about Dan’s treatment.”

“Give me a break.” Trish tried to sound defiant, but she sounded small and scared. It was hard to see her so diminished. “I told you I recognize you. You must already know everything.”

“Let’s pretend I don’t,” Iliana said coyly. “Dan’s been kept in the dark for long enough.”

“Kept in the dark how?” I asked. I was pacing around behind Iliana, trying to keep my movements slow so as not to make anyone jumpy, but I could not bring myself to sit still.

“That’s what we’re here to find out,” Iliana said. “If you know who I am, then you know I’m capable of unspeakable violence. I mean, wow.” She shook her head and looked off into the distance. “Absolutely terrible stuff. Dan doesn’t want me to mutilate you. He thinks you’re his friend, but we know better, and I’m not leaving until Dan hears everything. If I have to start ripping the teeth out of your face, I can do that. I don’t need pliers, either. I can do it with just my fingers. You want to see?”

“Iliana,” I began, but she waved me off.

“The teeth,” she said to Trish, “are just a warmup.”

Trish had gone pale. Her hands were trembling. She was glancing at her kitchen counter, where her phone lay inert, unable to help her. She was in trouble, and she knew it.

“Dan, I’ve helped you, haven’t I?” She studied me. “When was the last time you took alprazolam?”

When was the last time? A day? A week? I couldn’t remember. “I guess it’s been a while.”

“See!” she said. “I’ve done that for you.”

“You hooked him on it in the first place,” Iliana said, “and if he’s tapered off it’s because I’m an excellent influence on him. So, I suggest you start talking because I’m growing impatient.”

Trish looked at me for help, to see if I was going to object or stick up for her or change the subject. I wasn’t. I needed to hear this. I guess she understood that. I saw her face, her whole body, grow slack. She had surrendered.

“Bryce Hilliard,” she began. Her voice was syrupy and slow. She took another long gulp of her wine. “He’s my cousin.”

“Well, that’s fucked up,” Iliana said. “Kind of a conflict-of-interest situation, I would say.”

“Iliana, please,” I said. “Let her talk.”

“I was having financial problems. My husband died, and he left me in debt. Crushing debt. He had gambling issues, and he was cheating on me, emptying out our savings. I didn’t know anything about it.”

“Not the best evidence of an insightful therapist,” Iliana observed.

“I was going to lose everything. Bryce told me if I took Dan as a patient, he would help dig me out.”

“That’s it?” Iliana asked. “You were to see Dan? Provide some wholesome therapy?”

“Bryce said it was important for Dan to remember what he’d done.” She was not looking at either of us. I had the idea she was delivering lines she’d memorized long ago.

“Whether he’d done it or not,” Iliana said.

“I don’t know!” Trish nearly shouted. “How could I know? I wasn’t there.”

“But you acted on the assumption that he was guilty. You never considered the possibility that he wasn’t. And your guided exercises to help him remember, were they maybe actually designed to make him think he remembered something that never happened?”

Trish now looked at me. “Dan, we’ve made amazing progress. Your issues with your parents and your self-esteem. Your success at your job. I know I helped you.”

It was true. She had. And I could see how important it was for her to believe that. But the truth, the big truth, that was right there in front of me, was too enormous for me to process entirely. The defining event of my life hadn't happened.

"I didn't post those messages," I said quietly.

"I don't know!" Trish shouted as though exasperated by my stubbornness. "It's possible you didn't. But the evidence was overwhelming, and you admitted guilt in court. The world believed you'd done it, and coming to terms with that was really the best thing for you."

"Let's not bother with the self-justification," Iliana said. "You can't explain away the fact that you violated every conceivable professional ethic to help your criminal cousin make an innocent teenager believe he was responsible for someone's death."

"He may have been," Trish said quietly, but I had spent seven years talking to her once a week. More than three hundred hours. More than two weeks' worth of time doing nothing but talking to Trish. I knew she was lying.

"Why?" I asked. "Did you ruin my life for money?" I could feel myself growing angry. Furious. How could she have done this to me? I trusted her.

“I took money, but I didn’t ruin your life,” she said quietly. “I *saved* it. If I hadn’t been able to convince you—if Bryce even suspected you weren’t buying the post-traumatic amnesia diagnosis, he would have killed you, Dan. You would have ended up a suicide. Like Faye. Convincing you of your guilt was the only way to keep you alive.”

I sat down. I tried to understand what I was feeling, but none of it could be translated into words. I hadn’t done it. I hadn’t bullied Faye into killing herself, and yet I’d been weak and pathetic enough to let them convince me that I had. I’d wasted the last seven years of my life. I could never get back to where I was supposed to be. Everything I had wanted had been taken from me, and I hadn’t put up a fight. It was all a lie, and for what?

For what?

“Kyle did it,” I said. “That’s the only thing that makes any sense. Bryce framed me to cover up for his son.”

“It’s too much work,” Iliana said. “Too expensive. Paying off this crooked piece of shit here. Arranging secret deals with your parents. There was something else at stake, and I’m sure it involved big dollars. Otherwise, you don’t get to that level of conspiracy.”

“Then maybe Faye didn’t kill herself at all,” I said. “Maybe she was murdered.”

Iliana smiled. “I see you’ve finally arrived.”

“Why?” I wasn’t sure if I was asking Trish or Iliana. Maybe I was asking the universe. Trish said nothing, only shook her head. I believed that she didn’t have any more information. I couldn’t imagine Bryce Hilliard taking her into his confidence. He told her what he needed from her and no more than that.

“I have theories,” Iliana said. “But things are still a little vague. There is definitely a ton of money involved, though, and I’m sure it’s connected to why they took you out to the woods that night. They think you know where the money is, or how to find it.”

I looked around, as though there could be an explanation hiding behind an armchair or a credenza. “I don’t know anything about any money.”

“I get that,” Iliana said, “but they think you do.”

“It’s been seven years. Why now? Why suddenly decide it’s time to start asking me questions about money. Why would Iliana and some random cop—” I stopped talking because he wasn’t a random cop, was he? He was the missing piece. “Quin Silvestri worked in records. He found something, and that’s what put things in motion. That’s how he got involved.”

Iliana nodded. “I’ve wondered about him, but yeah, that makes sense.”

“Let’s go,” I said. “I’ll tell you where when we get to the car. The fewer people who know our business, the better.”

Iliana glanced at Trish. “She already knows too much. We have to kill her.”

“Hold on,” I began, but Iliana was smiling playfully.

“I’m fucking with you. We won’t kill her. If Hilliard finds out she spilled to us, he’ll kill her himself. On the other hand, if I’ve misjudged your intelligence and you tell anyone about this conversation, I will, in fact, come back here and kill the shit out of you. I think you know I’m not lying.”

Trish nodded.

“And start looking for another job. I’ll also kill you if you continue to practice as a therapist. Honestly, I’d kill you for fun, so don’t give me an excuse.”

“She did help me,” I said, “with other stuff.”

“Actions have consequences,” Iliana said. “Debts have to be paid. Now let’s hit the road. I’m in the mood to find answers and exact some vengeance.”

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Chapter 36

There were three people we might speak to next, but I was not going to mention two of them: Kyle Hilliard and Olga Marciano. I'd seen them doing crime-y stuff in that photo I'd found in Naomi's apartment, but I was still keeping those dirty dealings to myself. I was not ready to have Iliana do her Iliana thing with Benito's mother. If my newest friend started threatening to mutilate my oldest friend's mother, things would get awkward.

There was one more person who was withholding information, and it was time to get her to talk. She had her own motivations, and they were directed at finding the truth—or something close enough.

"Let's hear what you have in mind," Iliana said.

We were in a strip mall parking lot, engine and lights off. People streamed by us on the way to and from a handful of bustling restaurants, but no one noticed us.

"Naomi Kwan. She's said she had more information about my past. She offered to trade with me in exchange for talking about my dealings with you, but she didn't buy my story about you becoming a nice person."

“People can be so cynical,” Iliana lamented. “I guess we should find out what she knows.”

“Gently,” I said.

“Don’t worry. I went out of my way to keep her from getting hurt. I’m not going to mess up the girl you have a crush on.”

“I don’t think I have a crush on her anymore,” I said.

I was glad to be busy, doing things, hashing out a strategy, determining actions. I did not want to think about what had just happened and what I’d learned. Trish. My memories of things that had never happened. More or less the confirmation that Faye Kristic had been murdered—and not by me. Everything I knew about myself and my world had just changed. It was too much to consider.

Before Iliana started up the car, I wanted to check the news, to be sure I wasn’t wanted for questioning about Mike Kristic. After all, my life had been derailed by one apparent suicide. There was no reason to think it couldn’t happen again.

I didn’t see any coverage of Mike Kristic’s death, which was good news, but there was a major story breaking from Tylor. Quin Silvestri’s body had been discovered.

I used my phone to track down a clip from a Tampa TV station, not all that different from the previous coverage: pictures of Silvestri, a shot of his house, with a closeup of a handwritten note on the door, asking for privacy, a public statement from Bryce Hilliard. This time we also had some grainy footage of a taped-off crime scene in the Kitchikuti.

"I didn't bury him too deep," Iliana said. "I was okay with them finding him. There's nothing to tie him to me, and I didn't know if he had a family who might want to know his fate."

She remained a contradiction in all things. "There's, um, no chance of, you know . . . ."

"That they'd find old Iliana's body? No, Dan. Even without your help, I realized that it would be a bad idea if the cops found the body of the person I'm impersonating."

I watched the clip on my phone, mesmerized for some reason. Then I watched the coverage from another TV station. There was something there, something I was missing. It was beyond my reach, like I was trying to remember a dream.

I told Iliana, and she shrugged. "You might be reacting to seeing his photo. You did have a pretty freaky encounter with him, and you're still dealing with this Trish bullshit."

I shook my head. “I don’t think that’s it.” I was happy to have something to think about other than Trish’s betrayal, though. That much was true. And I believed her, that if she hadn’t done what they asked, they would have killed me. Even so. She’d given me false memories, false guilt. I’d been living out someone else’s lie. It was too much to process, so I set it aside. I knew I would have to come back to it, but not now. Any time but now.

And Faye Kristic was still dead. Murdered, not driven to suicide by me, true, but I had been unkind to her. That night, when I found her in my room, I’d said things I would always regret. I wished I could go back and do things differently, to try and help her. Maybe it wouldn’t have made a difference for her. There were people who wanted to kill her, after all. Still, one more moment of kindness would have mattered in her short life. It would matter still.

I couldn’t change that. All I could do was deliver justice for her, however late. It was the only way I could think of to make things right.

I’d texted Naomi, so I knew she was home. She didn’t seem thrilled that I was bringing Iliana with me, but she wanted her story. She’d talk.

She opened her apartment door, a dubious expression prepared. “Fair warning,” she said. “I’ve got webcams set up, and a journalist friend is watching, ready to call 911.”

Iliana pushed past her. “If that makes you feel better. The cops wouldn’t be able to get here fast enough if I wanted to hurt you, but I don’t, so it’s all good.”

“That makes me feel safe,” Naomi said to her. “Come on in. I believe you know the way.”

I followed Iliana inside. She wasted no time before throwing herself down on the couch and stretching out her legs. “Does your friend have a good view of me here?”

Naomi ignored the question. I was almost certain that I did, in fact, no longer have a crush on her. She had zero interest in me, which was a vibe killer. She did look very cute, though, with her hair pulled back. She wore jeans and a T-shirt with Radish Growers Association embroidered on the left breast, with a particularly delicious looking radish underneath. Someone had done some ironic thrifting.

I sat next to Iliana and Naomi sat in a chair across from us. “Make yourselves at home. Again.”

“We really were trying to make sure you were safe before,” I said. “Did you have the webcams going then as well? Is that how you knew?”

“Break-ins are an occupational hazard,” Naomi said. “It comes with the territory when you investigate small-town corruption, you can expect certain consequences.”

I hated being recorded. It recalled how betrayed I felt when I’d discovered Faye Kristic’s webcam hidden in my room all those years ago. Then, I could only think of the embarrassing things she must have watched me do. Now I had to worry about the various criminal things Iliana and I had done. Fortunately, Naomi seemed to care more about her story than exacting legal vengeance.

“Last time we spoke, you said you wanted to trade for information,” I began.

“I wanted to know what was up with Iliana,” Naomi said. “I’m not convinced you brought her over here in order to spill her secrets.”

“There’s no story there,” I said. “And we don’t have proof for some of this, but we’ve learned some big things, and maybe if we all share, we can get closer to the truth.”

Naomi looked at me. “Dan, I don’t understand what kind of a game your friend is playing or how she has you so convinced you can trust her, but I think she already knows the whole truth. If she would tell us, both our lives would be easier.”

“She’s not holding anything back,” I said. “Not about this. I can’t tell you how I know, but you’re going to have to trust me.”

Naomi rolled her eyes. “Fine. I’ll play along. So, who spills first?”

“We’ll tell you everything we know,” Iliana said. “We have nothing to hide. Keep in mind we can’t prove a lot of it yet, but we’re getting closer.”

Naomi looked skeptical. “You’re going to share without getting something in return?”

“We want to expose these guys,” I said. “That’s what you’re after too. If you decide not to hold up your end, we’ll be disappointed, but we’ll still be closer to our goal.”

“Huh. Okay,” Naomi said. “Let’s hear it.”

“First of all,” Iliana began, “we learned tonight that Dan’s therapist was paid by her cousin, Bryce Hilliard, to make Dan believe he created those posts about Faye Kristic. Dan was set up seven years ago.”

Naomi’s eyes widened. “That’s pretty big. Also very convenient for Dan. Do you have evidence to support this claim?”

“No,” I admitted. “Not yet.”

“We can’t prove it happened, but we can prove his therapist said it.” Iliana set down her phone and began to replay our conversation with Trish. I’d had no idea she recorded it. I looked at her and she shrugged, as if to say she thought it would be better if I didn’t know.

“That is definitely interesting,” Naomi admitted. “Can I have a copy of that recording?”

“I’ll text it to you now,” Iliana said.

“Maybe edit out the parts of Iliana threatening Trish,” I suggested.

“Yeah, that doesn’t interest me,” Naomi said. “Setting up a teenage boy does. Why do it?”

“Did you hear about Mike Kristic?” I asked.

She shook her head.

“He’s dead,” I told her. “It looks like suicide, but it happened right after he called me and begged me to come over to his house. He said he’d learned I wasn’t to blame, and that Faye was killed over money.”

“What money?” Naomi asked.

“We still don’t know,” I told her.

Naomi opened her mouth as if about to speak, then bit her lip. “Dan, can we talk alone? I know you believe you can trust Iliana, but everything I’ve learned about her says you can’t.”

“There’s no reason—” I began, but Iliana cut me off.

“I can wait outside,” Iliana said. “I don’t mind.”

I watched her go, feeling a little less safe to be out of her presence. I wasn’t afraid of Naomi, but there seemed to be a lot of bad guys involved in whatever this was. You never knew.

“You’re going to tell her what I tell you, aren’t you?” Naomi asked.

“I know you find it hard to believe, but I trust her more than I’ve ever trusted anyone. I have zero doubts about her intentions.”

“It’s your funeral. Probably literally.” Naomi sighed dramatically. “What do you know about Fallen Angel?”

“Not as much as I think I should,” I said. “Some kind of tech company linked to Gregory Meeks. I’ve bumped into the name a bunch of times since this all started, so maybe tell me what’s relevant.”

“Meeks was a perv, right?” she began. “He went on the run and ultimately died because he was exposed using his tech to spy on underage girls. That’s what everyone knows.”

“It is, in fact, what everyone knows,” I agreed.

“Except I no longer believe it,” she told me. “Meeks was set up. Selected files, and incriminating evidence of Meeks’ connection to those files, were leaked to reporters. A story about a reclusive and undeniably creepy tech genius hacking into phone and computer cams to watch underage girls undress—no journalist can resist that kind of catnip. But I don’t think that’s what Meeks was doing. Honestly, if reporters hadn’t fallen into groupthink, I don’t know that anyone would believe it. And there were voices who tried to tell the truth back then, but they were shamed and silenced. It was happening against the background of a lot of high-powered

pervs getting busted, and it would have been career-ending heresy to defend Meeks."

"So, he wasn't hacking into computers to spy on teenage girls?" I asked.

"No, he absolutely was," she said. "But it wasn't just teenage girls. It was all kinds of people of all ages. Someone carefully curated the files before sending them to reporters. Whoever did it wanted to make it look like Meeks was perving on underage girls. He'd had some inappropriately young girlfriends in the past. The idea that he would use his technological genius to be a peeping Tom felt so on-brand that it didn't matter that it wasn't true."

"But if his creepiness didn't motivate him, what did? Why was he spying on all these people? And why didn't he deny it? Why run away?"

"Meeks had a complicated relationship with the Tylor P. D.," she said. "They were practically his private security guards, and they provided him with sex workers. Some of those workers were under eighteen—I've been able to confirm that. Watham, the chief before Hilliard, had his own financial problems, he had set up and recorded encounters of Meeks with underage escorts. He then tried to blackmail Meeks, but Watham hit a brick wall. Meeks believed in his own brilliance and superiority, and he wasn't going to give in to a smooth-brain like Watham."

“So, Meeks fled?” I asked. “That hardly makes sense. He was super-rich. He could have easily relocated and used his lawyers to make all his problems go away.”

“Maybe he wasn’t fleeing, then,” she said. “Maybe he was just out for a boat ride, and the media called it “fleeing.” But I don’t think his death was an accident.”

“You think he was killed. By Watham, I’m guessing.”

“Most likely, yes.”

“But what does this have to do with the surveillance?” I asked. “If it wasn’t to get off on teenage girls changing clothes, what was it about? And what makes you think there is any link between what happened to me and Gregory Meeks?”

“I think he was collecting data,” she said. “I think he was working on a tech project that required crunching the data of how people behaved in private. Some kind of app or ad-targeting software. I have no idea. But there is one thing I do know.”

She arched her eyebrows and then reached into her shoulder bag, which was propped up against her chair. She took out a folder and leafed through, finally selecting a single sheet of paper. When she set it down, I saw it was a printout of a photograph, very similar to the one of Olga Marciano and Kyle Hilliard.

“The picture I showed you wasn’t the only one I found. It was less definitive. I wanted to see your reaction, to try to find out if you knew more. I guess you didn’t.”

The picture captured what was likely the same captured in the one I’d seen earlier. Gregory Meeks sat in shorts and a polo shirt by a pool, presumably his own. Next to him sat an underaged girl.

There was no doubt about her identity in this picture. The girl was pretty but unkempt, wearing an old-fashioned flower print dress.

The link between me and Meeks was Faye Kristic.

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Chapter 37

“She was involved with him?” I asked.

“You mean sexually? Who knows?” Naomi shook her head. “I’ve seen no evidence of it, but he was drawn to underage girls.”

“But if it isn’t that, what was she doing there?”

“Faye was working with him,” Naomi said. “She was a genius, and she had some tech idea she wanted to develop. Meeks had money and resources and was also a genius. I think she pitched him something that required deep pockets, and he ran with it.”

“Come on,” I countered. “Meeks helped develop some of the most successful tech companies ever. If he was working on something, people would know. There would have been a money trail to follow.”

“You’re thinking like a reporter.” She nodded at me. “It’s my theory that Meeks wanted to keep this project secret. I have evidence that Meeks sold off tens of millions of dollars in stock, and I can’t trace what he did with those funds. My guess is that somehow Faye’s abilities came to his attention. Maybe he was creeping on her at first, but he came to recognize she was some kind of programming wiz. He ended up wanting to exploit her mind rather than her body and converted a bunch of his money into

crypto to fund his venture with Faye. If he wanted to keep things quiet, it would be a smart way to go. The whole point of crypto is its anonymity."

"And what happened to the money after they died?" I asked.

She raised her eyebrows. "No one knows."

I thought about everything she'd been telling me. "This is all obviously important. It changes how the world would see Meeks, but it doesn't explain why things are blowing up seven years later."

"I'm still working on that," Naomi admitted. "But the cop who disappeared—the one who turned up dead today—worked in the records room. He might have uncovered something incriminating about Tylor P.D.'s ties to Meeks. I believe he was killed so he couldn't talk, same way as Mike Kristic, I suppose."

She also thought it significant that Silvestri worked in the records room, though she'd drawn different conclusions than I had.

"Honestly," she continued, "I'm worried about Silvestri's wife. They might go after her next."

"Did she say anything to you when you drove her home?"

"Not really, but she's afraid. I think she knew that her husband hadn't run off or had a random accident. And I get that she's grieving, but it's kind of weird that she's barricaded herself inside her house."

"What do you mean?"

“She hasn’t come out. She put a note up on her door and is refusing to speak to anyone, including the police.” Naomi did some scrolling on her phone and handed it to me.

I found myself looking at an article that included a photo of a bunch of reporters standing outside her house. A little farther down there was a closeup of a handwritten note taped to the door. I studied it for a minute, trying to figure out why these images felt so familiar. Then I got it.

I handed Naomi her phone and took mine out, opening my photo roll. I didn’t take many photos, so it was right there on top—the picture I’d taken of the note Darcy Silvestri showed me, the one linking her husband’s disappearance to me and Iliana.

I sent the picture to her. “Silvestri’s wife showed me this when she came to my job to speak to me. She said she was sure I had something to do with her husband’s death because someone left her this note. Do you see what I see?”

Naomi looked at the picture and then compared it to the one in the article, “They were written by the same person. Darcy Silvestri wrote the note herself as an excuse to come talk to you. What exactly would she believe you could tell her?”

It was a good question. I thought about what little contact I’d had with Silvestri, how he’d tried to play good cop, to reassure me. *You’re going*

to be fine, he said. *You're going to be able to help us. You know more than you think.*

Silvestri didn't think I knew what he wanted. Or rather, he thought I knew without understanding its significance. I couldn't tell Naomi that, though, since I would have to admit I'd been there when Silvestri died.

"Clearly Darcy believed you knew something," Naomi continued. "That's why she wanted to talk to you. I wonder if the suicide attempt was genuine, or just a way to get your sympathy."

I ran my hands over my face. "Fuck. I really don't want to be in the middle of all of this, whatever it is."

Naomi leaned forward so she could talk more quietly. "I know you're under a lot of pressure, but Iliana Marek? Really? You have to know she's still loyal to Hilliard. Maybe you think since you're sleeping with her—"

That snapped me out of my brain fog. "I'm not sleeping with her, and I trust her. She's not in Hilliard's camp anymore. I get that it's hard to believe, especially since I can't tell you more, but I promise you it's true. And we'll get a lot further if you trust her."

"I don't know that I can," she said, "but I can pretend to for the sake of the story."

"Never change," I told Naomi and then called Iliana back in.

Iliana showed no expression as she studied the picture of Faye with Meeks. I expected her to look angry, as though she were ready to find Meeks' corpse and kill him all over again, but she appeared indifferent. Or maybe guarded.

Naomi must have sensed something as well, because she flashed me a look. I couldn't blame her for not being able to get past my trust in Iliana, but she was going to have to accept it.

"Dan, I need to know why you are so willing to trust someone who's clearly been involved in a lot of dirty shit, including working for the guy who framed you."

I shrugged. "Some secrets aren't mine to share."

"Huh," Naomi said. "Neat, but it's a no-go. I've indulged your trust in Iliana about as much as I can. If you want my help, the information needs to flow both ways. I can keep it off the record. At least for now, but you need to tell me everything."

"I think we already got what we need from you," I said. "I mean, is there something else you know, which you might have told us, that you've been holding back?"

Naomi opened her mouth and closed it again.

Iliana clapped her hands and stood. “Well, I guess that’s it. Thanks, Naomi. Good luck with the story.”

I started to get up, but Naomi put a hand on my wrist. “Hold on. You’re going to see Darcy, aren’t you? I’m tagging along.”

The pretty-girl-touching-me trick still had its magic, but I had the strength to pretend it didn’t. I stood up and moved away from her. “I think we’re done with the team-up.”

“It’s better you don’t see how the sausage gets made,” Iliana told her.

Naomi looked desperate now. She sensed something was going on, that her months of work were now building toward something huge, and she wanted to be part of it, to see it when it came together. “I still know things. I have an informant inside the Tylor P.D. Someone who’s been feeding me information.”

“If he’d told you anything useful, you’d have already passed it along to us,” Iliana said.

“No, wait. He knows all kinds of things, and what you’re telling me now is that all of this hinges on something that Dan maybe knows but isn’t aware of. This guy might have the piece that will tie it all together.”

Iliana folded her arms and did her best skeptical look, but she wasn’t leaving. Not yet. “And he’ll tell us if we ask him politely? I doubt it.”

“My source has . . . resentment issues, let’s say. He’s talking to me, wannabe podcasters, anyone he can get to listen. And to pay him.”

Maybe the cool thing would have been to say nothing, but I wasn’t cool. I was mainly excited to have figured it out. “Wait a minute. Your informant is Kyle Hilliard?”

In my defense, Naomi didn’t even bother to hide her surprise. “How did you know that—? Goddamn it, you found something when you searched my place, didn’t you. That picture. I thought I’d destroyed it.”

“So Olga Marciano was doing research,” I said with some relief. “She paid Kyle Hilliard for info.” Intense relief washed over me. The burden of knowing Benito’s mom was in league with the Hilliards had been making me miserable. Now it was gone.

“See, I do know things you want to know,” Naomi said eagerly.

“I don’t think Kyle Hilliard is going to be of much use to us,” Iliana said.

“You might be surprised. He wants out. He’s sick of living under his father’s thumb, and he has this crazy idea that if Bryce goes down, you two will get back together.”

“There’s no chance,” Iliana said.

“But he doesn’t have to know that, does he? Not until we all get what we want.”

“Thanks again, Naomi,” Iliana said. And then we were out of there.

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Chapter 38

I kept things simple when I called her from the highway. I said that I was ready to talk to her. Nothing more than that. “Let me give you an address,” Darcy Silvestri said. “There are reporters camped outside my house. One of the teachers at my school is away, and I’ve been watering her plants. We can meet there. You’re not bringing Iliana Marek, are you?”

I thought about lying and surprising her, but if things were going to turn hostile, I’d rather it not be my fault. “I feel safer with Iliana around.”

There was a long pause. “You have to know she’s going to betray you.”

“I understand why you might think that, but she’s completely trustworthy. “No matter how many times I said that Iliana had changed, people still didn’t believe me.

She hung up, so I had to assume she was okay with me bringing Iliana.

I doubted she was okay with me bringing a reporter, but Naomi pulled up behind us when we parked on the street outside the address Darcy had given me. It was a middle-class neighborhood only a couple of blocks from

the high school. I could hear kids shouting in the distance. Probably a pickup game of soccer or football on the unused field during summer.

Naomi got out of her car and grinned at us, clearly pleased that she had managed to follow us. I blamed Iliana's habit of obeying traffic laws at all times.

"Hey, guys," Naomi said. "What is this? Darcy's hideout?"

"You are not coming in with us," I said.

"Why not? Are you protecting her? What haven't you told me?"

"I'm not hiding anything," I said quietly. "I don't know the same is true for Darcy Silvestri, though. And for some reason, people who don't want their criminal activity exposed don't talk freely in front of reporters."

"Finding out the truth is my job," she said with what I took as unironic self-righteousness.

"Dan's trying to not get killed," Iliana told her. "If he later wants to tell you what he learned, that's his business. Maybe you can work him over because he thinks you're super pretty—"

"Hey!" I said.

"But," Iliana continued, "I won't tolerate you getting in the way of doing what he needs to do."

Naomi was kind enough to ignore Iliana's comment about me finding her pretty. "Counterpoint. Maybe she'd be more comfortable having a

reporter present when being questioned by a notorious psycho."

Iliana glanced at me to suggest Naomi might have a point.

"Let's ask her," Naomi said. "If she doesn't want me there, I'll leave."

I wasn't thrilled by the idea. When trying to get someone to reveal their secrets, it seemed like a bad idea to begin with asking if they want what they tell us to be published. Iliana was eager to accept Naomi's help in counteracting her reputation for being terrifying.

Darcy opened the door looking appropriately haggard. She wore a white T-shirt under a rumpled black blazer and faded jeans. Her hair hung loose and looked unwashed. She wore no makeup. Since realizing she had written the note linking me and Iliana to her husband's disappearance, I'd begun to see Darcy as a villain. Now I also realized that she was a grieving widow. That didn't prove she wasn't up to no good, but I did feel a measure of sympathy for her.

"I see you've brought several people," she said to me.

"You remember Naomi. She's a reporter and she wants to listen in on our conversation. We can send her away if you want. It's up to you."

Darcy shrugged. "Everything's off the record until I say otherwise."

Naomi grinned. "Works for me."

We followed Darcy into the house, which was small but pleasantly furnished. Lots of dark wood and clever lighting. I thought that if I ever had

a real place, I would have no idea how to decorate it to make it look this nice. We passed through a front room and then an open kitchen to reach a living room area, where she already had a guest seated with a glass of water in front of him. It was Lenny Teuling.

Iliana's easy expression, a tic away from a smile, was gone, replaced with something other than human. I felt the air grow thick. Could the others sense it too, or was I coming to know Iliana too well?

Teuling was on his feet, hands up and palms forward, his expression sheepish. "I'm sorry about what happened the other night, Dan. I was worried that if they kept you overnight, you wouldn't make it out alive. I knew if I roughed you up a little, Hilliard would have to let you go. That video of me knocking you over kept you out of jail. It probably saved your life."

I thought about what Hilliard had said to me the other night, that I was lucky to get off so easy. And then there was Teuling's casual indifference when I later saw him in the bathroom. Teuling as my savior was not something I expected, but it tracked. However, that didn't mean I was ready to trust the guy who'd pummeled me during the majority of my visits to the police station.

“What’s your involvement in all of this?” I asked. “And why are you here now?”

“He’s here because I invited him,” Darcy said. “I figured if you were bringing Iliana, I needed some protection as well.”

Iliana had assessed the situation. I saw her posture ease. “As long as everyone behaves themselves, no one will need protection.”

“I think we’re all on the same side.” Darcy gestured for us to sit. “Let’s see what we can figure out together.”

I sat on the couch with Iliana between me and Teuling. Darcy sat across from us and Naomi in another chair a little off to the side.

“You showed me a note linking me and Iliana to your husband’s disappearance,” I said to Darcy, “but when I saw your other note asking for privacy, I realized they were both written by the same person. I’m assuming it’s you.”

She nodded. “I knew that Quin wanted to get Iliana involved, and I knew that he thought you had money stashed away. Gregory Meeks’ money. I didn’t want him getting involved in any of that, but he said it was going to change our lives. I guess he was right, but not the way he meant.” She bit her lower lip and then looked me in the eye. “Did you kill my husband? Maybe you thought it was self-defense. I need to know what happened.”

“I didn’t kill him,” I said.

I think she was about to ask Iliana the same question, and while I was confident that Iliana could lie effectively if she chose to, I wasn't entirely sure she would see the point. I was relieved when Teuling cut in.

"It had to be Hilliard," he said. "There's a history there of getting rid of other cops, including his predecessor, Zach Watham."

"I thought Watham was on the run," I said.

"He fled to the Caymans, grabbed his money, and then vanished into Russia," Naomi said. "At least that's the story."

"That's all it is," Teuling said. "A story. Watham's little empire was in disarray, and he owed some major debts, but he had millions stashed away. He wouldn't have run. I think Hilliard killed him and took the money for himself. He'd have had no problem killing Silvestri if he believed there was a secret stash of Meeks' money to be found."

Darcy shook her head. "Quin told me no one would have to get hurt."

"That's not how it works with Hilliard." Teuling looked at Iliana. "You know that."

"I no longer answer to him," Iliana said. "I'm doing things differently now."

"Yeah, that much is clear," Teuling said. "But Hilliard sees himself as your savior, your white knight. When he learns about your betrayal, it's going to set him off."

Naomi smiled at Teuling. “And how did you get involved in all of this?” She sounded interested and nonjudgmental.

Teuling spread his hands, as if to say the universe itself had moved him into this position. “I want a piece of the missing money. A small piece, and then I want to get the hell out of here before Hilliard realizes he has a reason to kill me.”

“A small piece of what missing money?” I asked. “I still have no idea what any of this is about. How much are we talking about?”

“You know about Fallen Angel?” Teuling asked.

“It keeps coming up,” I said. “People think it was Meeks’ company, funded by crypto. Supposedly he took its assets when he went on the run. I don’t get what it has to do with me.”

“If he’d had the money on him when he had the boat accident, then it’s gone,” Naomi said. “There are a ton of stories about people who’ve amassed crypto fortunes who then die. If their families can’t find the passwords, the money is out of reach forever. It might as well have never existed.”

“This is a different situation,” Teuling said. “Meeks was funding Fallen Angel, but it wasn’t just his project. So, yeah, he might have wanted to lay low, but the project was still active, so maybe another person had access to the money.”

“Faye Kristic,” Naomi said.

“You got it,” Teuling said. “Meeks knew he was being set up by Watham as a perv. He was a perv, by the way. I could tell some stories. But he wasn’t a perv in the way Watham was leaking to the press. Meeks’ plan was to go into hiding where he couldn’t be harassed and manage his PR counter-offensive from a safe location. So, yeah, he ran, but he didn’t touch the Fallen Angel funds. Those were still controlled by the Kristic girl. We think there was at least thirty million worth of a cryptocurrency called X-Ordium. Back then, X-Ordium wasn’t getting a lot of attention, in part because it was built on a long-term investment model. No one was supposed to get rich quick off of it, but to sit on it for years. It wasn’t used by criminals or the NFT types or any of the other uses of crypto that tended to get a lot of media play. That’s what’s missing and what we think is gettable.”

“What’s it worth now?” Naomi asked.

Teuling looked like he was striving to show no emotion, but the corners of his mouth twitched. “The crypto market has been up and down over the past few years. The overall tendency has been upward, but things are declining at the moment. My guess is that missing X-Ordium is worth about 1.6 billion, though it would have been more last week.”

More than a billion and a half dollars. There was a lot of insanity going on, even by Tylor standards. Conspiracies and killings and general mayhem. That kind of money went a long way toward explaining why.

“I don’t see what this has to do with me,” I said. “How did I end up in the middle of all this crap?”

“Before she died,” Teuling explained, “Faye Kristic said she gave the money to you.”

“Um, no,” I told them. “If I was worth 1.6 billion, I wouldn’t have spent the last seven years living in my parents’ backyard and working at a gas station.”

“What do you think your arrest was all about?” Teuling said. “Hilliard could have covered up Faye’s murder or pinned it on Watham or Meeks. Instead, he created a big, complicated machine whose only purpose was to make sure everyone blamed you for Faye’s death.”

“So, Hilliard knew,” Naomi said. “He wanted an excuse to search through every part of Dan’s life to get the crypto.”

Teuling nodded. “Back then, X-Ordium was losing value. Fast. There’d been a high-profile hack, and the developers or whatever they’re called were slow to respond. Everyone thought the currency was going to

tank entirely in the next few weeks. It ended up recovering, but Hilliard couldn't know that. He just wanted to get the crypto and sell before it became worthless. He believed he was up against a serious ticking fucking clock."

It all sounded very dramatic, but there was one major problem. "Faye never gave me anything."

"Hilliard figured that out eventually," Teuling explained. "He couldn't find the wallet, and the way he questioned you, he knew you were broken. You'd have given it up if you had it. But by then he was on the move. Watham was dead, and Hilliard had hold of his secret stash. He was in the process of taking over Tylor P.D., and pinning Faye's death on you to cover his tracks and create the impression he was taking care of business. He paid some people to plant documents on your computer, and then post and backdate it all on Instagram. It can be done if you know how. At least it could then. I think they have better security now."

"But he paid off my parents—or at least he arranged a payoff from potential buyers. It was big money. Why would he do that?"

"Ask your new pal." Teuling gestured toward Iliana. "She knows why."

I looked at Iliana and there was something on her face. Shame? Regret? I had never seen her look that way.

“I’ve been trying to find the right time to tell you all this,” she said. “I wasn’t even sure if I should tell you at all, but I guess it’s now out of my hands. Teuling brought me a file. Among other things, it has information about your dad owing money to Watham. A lot of money. Hilliard got hold of his books and used the debt to pressure your dad.”

“Oh, come on now,” Teuling said. “You might as well tell him the rest.”

“There’s some evidence to suggest that your dad helped Hilliard get rid of Jason Marek. You know, my biological father. Your dad was tending bar the night Marek died and may have slipped him a heavy dose of Ambien. As near as I can tell, he figured that if he was in debt to one cop, helping out another was a smart move. Maybe he didn’t even know that my, uh, dad was going to die. But in any case, your dad and Hilliard were already bound up together, so they each had a motivation to keep the other happy.”

“Holy shit,” Naomi breathed. “That’s intense.”

“Hilliard needed to pin Faye Kristic on you so people didn’t start looking into her death,” Teuling said. “A real investigation would have accounted for a lot of missing money, and Hilliard couldn’t have that. What he stole from Watham got him set up pretty sweet. Some of that went to getting your father taken care of, but that was only a fraction of the Watham

haul, and it guaranteed Dan's father would never roll over on Hilliard. Everybody got something. Except Dan, of course."

I was still processing this. "My parents served me up for money?"

Teuling shrugged, like this angle of inquiry was too tedious to belabor. "Maybe they convinced themselves that Hilliard was telling the truth, and he needed their cooperation. Computers were involved, and I think files and social media and online bullying was mumbo-jumbo to them. Maybe they thought you were guilty and didn't see why they shouldn't take the money as compensation for the trouble you caused them. Maybe the money helped them to not even wonder about it."

"And all of this resurfaced now because Quin Silvestri found something in the records room?" Naomi asked.

Teuling nodded. "They tried to erase all evidence of what they'd done, but they made a mistake. They left something behind. I'm not even sure what. Maybe a few notes in different files, none of them significant unless they were read together. That's my guess, anyhow. Silvestri got bored down there and was killing time. I don't think he was on the hunt, just snooping for its own sake, but somehow he pieced together at least some of it. He knew that Watham, and then Hilliard, had been looking for a device that can store crypto—a cold storage wallet—in the wake of Faye's

death. A little more digging got him the rest of the way there. Then he got to wondering if the money was still gettable."

"None of this explains why Hilliard killed Quin Silvestri," Naomi said.

"It was probably a heat-of-the-moment thing," Teuling said. "Hilliard can get worked up. You know that, Iliana. In this case, I'd bet good money he got sucked in by the idea of finding the wallet with all that money and acted rashly."

"Finding the wallet wouldn't be enough," Darcy said rather clinically, I thought, considering Teuling had just been discussing her husband's murder. "They'd need the password. They must have believed you had it. A string of words. Something that hadn't been written down, since they searched through all your stuff. It was either with the wallet, wherever that was, or something you knew."

I looked at Darcy. "You knew what your husband planned to do?"

"He wasn't going to steal the money. He figured you deserved it after all Hilliard had put you though. But he also thought that if he helped you to figure out what you already had, he should get a finder's fee. He thought you'd be grateful to him for helping."

"And that's what you're still hoping for," I said. "Part of the missing fortune?"

“A cut,” Teuling said. “A few points here and there off a take that big, one you didn’t even know you had. You’re not going to miss it. And the thing is, X-Ordium is on a downturn. That wallet is worth three million less this week than it was last week. You can say that’s a rounding error when the sums are that big, but three million is still a lot of money. Could be worth a whole lot less next week. It could collapse entirely.”

“That’s why Iliana’s been willing to put all this effort into wrapping you around her finger,” Darcy said. “It’s greed. Nothing more.”

“It adds up,” Naomi said.

It did. If I were on the outside, I’d believe I was being used by the evil and one hundred percent biological Iliana Marek. Everyone was sure Iliana was playing me because they were missing important facts that helped put things in perspective.

As I had been. Suddenly so much made sense. First, learning that Trish had always known—or at least suspected—I was innocent. That she had been paid to make me believe I was a killer. Now all this, what Faye had been doing. The things she knew. The things she said.

I realized I knew where the crypto was, and I had a pretty good idea about the password.

Teuling must have seen something on my face. “Well shit. I think our guy just connected some dots.”

“Maybe,” I said. “I’m not sure.” I was sure, though. At least, I was sure about where I could look and what the password might be. I could be totally wrong, but somehow I didn’t think so. I wasn’t about to explain all this, though. The only person I trusted was the one I knew would put my safety above money or, in Naomi’s case, a big story. Maybe money for her too. That much money could make anyone shift their priorities.

“Why don’t you tell us what you’re thinking,” Teuling said.

I shook my head. “It’s not even a whole idea. Let’s call it some stuff to consider. I need time to sort it out.”

“The thing is,” Teuling said, “if you leave now, and you find the money, how do we know we’ll get our cut?”

“Why do you deserve a cut exactly?” Iliana asked. “Just because it’s a lot of money and you’d enjoy having some of it?”

“And why do you get a cut?” he demanded of her.

“I don’t care about the money,” she said. “I only care about keeping Dan safe.”

Darcy laughed. “Maybe you’ve convinced him of that, but no one else believes it.”

“I think we’re done here,” Iliana was on her feet. “Let’s go, Dan.”

Things happened very quickly. Darcy stood and pulled a gun from the inside pocket of her blazer. She pointed the weapon, moving it among all of

us—except maybe Teuling—but it was Iliana she seemed most worried about. Rightly so.

“Hold on,” Teuling said to Darcy. “This isn’t how we play this. We’re all friends here.”

“Your friends aren’t going to be okay with sharing unless we’re in control of the money,” Darcy said. “We need to know what they know. Now.”

“Not like this.” Teuling held out a hand, as if he wanted Darcy to give him the gun, but she ignored him. He turned to me. “Dan, we’ve got a little predicament going here, but we can still all be friends and get out of this okay. Just tell us where you think you can find the wallet and what you think the password is. Then we’ll be on the same footing. That’s all Darcy wants. Everything equal.”

Everything equal. Mike Kristic had said that when he’d tied me up and made a phone call. Now Mike Kristic was dead.

“Tell us what we want to know, Dan,” Darcy said, gesturing at us with the gun.

“You’re on the wrong person’s side,” I told Darcy. “Teuling’s not going to let any of us live once he has what he wants. Cooperating didn’t help Mike Kristic.”

“I didn’t kill Kristic,” Teuling said, as if he’d already explained this a dozen times. “I don’t want to double-cross anyone. It’s so much money. There’s no reason I can’t have a little slice of the pie.”

Iliana sighed, cocked her hip, and crossed her arms. She looked bored and disappointed. “I’m the reason. You’re clearly a bad person, and your partner is trying to make your case by threatening us with that gun. That’s why you don’t get anything. Also, you don’t get a reward for killing Mike Kristic. It would be his money if he weren’t dead.”

“Oh, so now you’re the righteous one.” Darcy rolled her eyes. “It’s not working on me. I need Dan for the moment, so that means to prove I’m not fucking around, I’m going to start putting non-fatal holes in you, Iliana. If Dan still hasn’t told me what I want to know, I’ll kill you and see if that shakes anything loose. Then I’ll start on the reporter. Or you can talk to me now—”

I’d thought Iliana fast when she smacked the auto mechanic around, but when she moved now, it was on a whole different level. She was up and closing the distance to Darcy, who didn’t have time to register what was happening. There was no time to get off a shot before Iliana grabbed her forearm with one hand and yanked it upward. The gun discharged with a deafening pop, but it was pointed at the ceiling.

Iliana took hold of the gun and tossed it to the floor while raising her left hand, prepared to strike. Then she thought better of it. Darcy was already cowering, her arms raised defensively.

She studied her crumpled form. “Dan, grab the gun before Darcy here decides to get stupid again.”

I was getting more familiar with guns than I ever would have imagined. I picked up the weapon and found the safety, the way Iliana had taught me, while keeping an eye on Teuling, who I expected to rush me. He made no such moves. He sat with his palms on his knees, his fingers pointed upward in a lazy gesture of surrender. Whatever mayhem Darcy had in mind, Teuling wanted no part of it. Or at least, he wanted us to think that.

Iliana grabbed Darcy’s handbag and looked through it, finding yet another weapon. She removed it by inserting a finger through the trigger guard. She set the weapon on the coffee table near me. “Take that.”

“You touched it,” I said.

“I can remove a gun from a potential enemy,” she said. “It’s not comfortable, and I can only hold it long enough to make it a non-factor.”

“What the fuck are you even talking about?” Darcy asked, sounding a little deranged. She’d been remarkably calm when holding us at gunpoint, but now seemed to be cracking under the pressure. “What’s your deal with guns? Are you in some kind of martial arts cult or something?”

“Exactly that,” Iliana said. “Got it with the first guess. You ready to go, Dan?”

I nodded. “I think I know what we need to do. Let’s get out of here.”

Teuling shook his head, but did not move. “I’m trying to work with you two. Maybe you should bring me with you.”

Neither of us thought that worth responding to.

“You’re going to regret trusting that bitch,” Darcy told me.

Naomi looked on. It was obvious she agreed with Darcy’s assessment, but she was smart enough not to say anything that might limit her access to what might be an exciting moment in her story.

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Chapter 39

Naomi followed sheepishly as we walked to the car. Iliana beckoned her forward. “You’re riding with us.”

“Because I know too much, and you don’t want me out of your sight?” she asked.

“Because I think the cops are less likely to do anything fundamentally stupid if there’s a reporter with us. It doesn’t help our odds astronomically, but it might give them a split second of hesitation, and we can use that.”

“To do what?”

“I don’t think you’ve earned the right to know our plans in advance,” Iliana said. “Given everything you’ve seen, you’ll have to decide who you think the good guys are.”

“I’m not convinced there are any good guys,” Naomi said.

I found this a little hurtful, except I knew I wasn’t really innocent. I’d driven Faye out of my room that night. She was desperate for help, ashamed and terrified, and she had no idea how to tell me everything she needed to say. Maybe if I’d taken the time to help her, she would have been able to give everything voice. If I’d done that, she might still be alive. I’d be living an entirely different life.

Being furious with her for sitting in my room had seemed so natural, so justified. I now saw it as a turning point, a branch in the timeline. How many people would still be alive if I'd shown a little understanding?

"I'm not desperate for you to join us," Iliana said. "I'm playing the odds, which improve slightly with you around. But we don't have all day. In or out."

Maybe Iliana was being honest, but maybe she knew that she could get Naomi's cooperation a lot faster if she threatened to leave her behind.

"In." Naomi got in the back seat.

"Let's improve the odds a little more," I said, once we started driving. "I'm calling my lawyer."

"I know what they're after," I told Olga Marciano. I didn't want to give her all the details over the phone. "I know why they've been targeting me. And I think I know how to put a stop to all of this, but I'm going to be a lot safer doing it with a lawyer around."

"Dan, it's the middle of a workday," Mrs. Marciano said. "I've got meetings."

"They're literally trying to kill me," I said. "I was just threatened at gunpoint while a cop looked on."

“That’s a fair counterpoint to my busy schedule,” she agreed.

“If I’m right about all of this,” I said, “I’ll be able to pay you.”

“Were you supposing I was on the fence about saving your life,” she said, “but if there’s a chance of generating some billable hours, then I’m in? Where should we meet?”

“Your house,” I said. “I don’t want to say anything else over the phone.”

Benito was in his room working when we got there, but he was willing to drop everything when we explained what was going on. He seemed much calmer than the last time I’d seen him. The fact that the police were not treating Kristic’s death as anything but a suicide probably helped. I think he was also glad to have something to do.

I was still hesitant to talk too much in front of Naomi, so while Benito was getting her a drink, I took Iliana aside and told her what I had in mind.

“It doesn’t entirely make you safe,” she said. “They could still try and torture you for the password. If Teuling’s account is credible, we have to assume Watham tried to get it out of Faye. That could be how she died.”

“They won’t torture me,” I said. “We have a reporter with us, and as soon as the money is safe, I’m going to encourage her to post something, a teaser for her longer article. Once she gets it out there, it will be too dangerous for Hilliard to do anything. Besides, if I have that money, I can

leave Tylor. They're not going to cross state lines and try to abduct me. If they were willing to do that, they could target any random billionaire. This started because they became convinced there was low-hanging fruit. Let's get the fruit out of their reach."

"You know, you don't need this money to leave Tylor," Iliana said to me.

"I know," I said, "and I will absolutely help you do whatever it is you need. This has become about doing the right thing."

She smirked. "And the right thing is making sure you get your hands on an absurd amount of money?"

"When you put it that way, it sounds less heroic," I agreed. "But all I want is to keep it out of the hands of the bad guys who have already killed a bunch of people to get it. I'm not even sure I'd want the money."

"We can find some way to honor Faye's memory with the rest. Set up a foundation or something."

When we returned to the living room, Naomi was sitting with a glass of water, asking Benito questions about the history of his friendship with me.

"Listen," I interrupted. "Would you feel comfortable posting a preview of your big article? You don't even have to name names. Maybe

give a hint of what you know so that Hilliard understands it will be too much trouble to come after me."

Naomi thought about it for a minute. "Yeah, I could do that."

That took me by surprise. I'd assumed she would want to barter before agreeing.

"You thought I'd be an asshole just because?" she asked me.

"Kind of, yeah."

"I have no objection to writing something that will keep you from getting killed," she said. "And a brief preview article might help me get better placement for my article."

"Don't ever change," I told her.

We turned at the sound of a key in the door. Olga Marciano stepped through, followed by Kyle Hilliard.

I couldn't quite find the words to articulate my outrage, but I think my expression communicated where I was coming from.

"Relax," Kyle told me. "I've been helping Olga out."

Olga. They were on a first name basis. She'd never invited me to call her Olga.

"Why is he helping you?" I demanded of her.

“Why is *she* helping you?” He pointed at Iliana.

It was a good question from his perspective, but it didn’t actually illuminate anything because Iliana was a doppelgänger and Kyle very likely was not.

Fortunately, he decided not to wait for me to answer his question. “Look, I’m sick of my dad’s shit too. I’m a cop. I don’t want to have to be a criminal.” He turned to Iliana. “If you’re really serious about helping these people and not playing some kind of long con for my dad, then we’re on the same side.”

“In that case, I won’t kill you,” she told him, “but it doesn’t mean anything more than that, so turn down those pheromones.”

“Let’s worry about who’s dating whom another time,” Ms. Marciano said. “I want to know what’s going on.”

I decided not to press her about how much she trusted Kyle. She was smart and cynical, and if she believed he was on the up-and-up, I was willing to go along with it. It would be useful to have someone around who knew how Bryce Hilliard thought. And I figured if he decided to betray us, Iliana would deal with him.

I told her as much as I dared about my plan. I expected her to find a million flaws in it, but she seemed to agree that it was solid. “Okay,” she said. “It seems doable.”

We had to take two cars. I rode with Iliana and Benito. Naomi, not surprisingly, wanted to ride with Olga and Kyle. She had lots of questions for them.

We pulled up in front of my parents' house. I was hoping no one would be home, but no such luck. And I wasn't entirely sure how things were going to go if my dad tried to keep me from getting in. I'd made sure Iliana understood she couldn't hurt them, but she wasn't against restraining them.

"What is this?" my father asked as our crowd of incongruous people approached.

"Hey, Dad. I kind of need to get into my old room for a few minutes."

"It's not your room anymore," he said, folding his arms.

"I am aware. Even so, I think there's something there that belongs to me."

"Not anymore. My house, my stuff. What is it?"

"Mr. Gibson," Ms. Marciano said, stepping forward, "Dan wants to reclaim his property. It's legally his. If we have to sue you to allow him access, we'll win, and you'll be stuck paying the court costs."

I suspected this was complete bullshit, but Ms. Marciano delivered the threat with such conviction that my father stepped aside. "Get whatever

it is and go," he said. "But I'll be watching you to make sure you don't take anything that's rightfully mine."

He followed us as we walked through the house to my old room. I had to push the desk away from the wall, which he objected to, but we ignored him. And there it was. The fake outlet that functioned as a safe. I flipped it forward to reveal the tiny safe.

"That's why that outlet never worked!" my dad said. "Who told you it was okay to put that in the wall of my house?"

The safe opened with a three-digit combination, which in this case was 420. I'd been in high school, and so required to do stupid things. When I entered the code, the little door clicked open to reveal a tiny chamber.

It was only a few inches across and deep, but it had served my purposes. And, evidently, Faye's as well. There it was. It looked exactly like a flash drive. If Teuling had been right, it was a crypto storage device and worth more money than I could comprehend.

Faye's webcam had caught me hiding weed in my secret safe. She'd either figured out the combination or forced the lock, which would not have been difficult. She clearly hoped no one would find her cold-storage wallet there—no one but me. She didn't count on my life turning upside-down. I'd had no weed hidden away the night she put the wallet in there, and with all the trouble that came my way, I never used the safe again.

I picked up the device. If Darcy and Teuling were right, this was the reason Old Iliana had been on the cusp of murdering me. This was the reason Faye Kristic, and later her father, were killed. This little thing had the power to destroy lives. I was tempted to crush it.

“Let me have it,” Iliana said.

“Hold on.” Ms. Marciano turned to me. “I know you trust her for some reason, but we should think about this.”

I ignored her and handed the device to Iliana.

She frowned.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“I’m not sure this is what we were looking for. This is a simple flash drive, not a cold-storage wallet.” She turned on the desktop computer and waited for it to boot up. “Put in the password,” she said to my father.

“I don’t have to listen to you,” my father said, but he put in the password all the same and then stepped back, as if the computer was set to explode.

Iliana plugged the device into a USB port. “Yeah, what I suspected. This is an ordinary thumb drive, but maybe it contains the information we need. I need the password, Dan.”

“I’m not a hundred percent sure, but I have an idea.”

“Time to whisper that idea in my ear,” she said. “It’s probably the same password as the cold-storage wallet, so best if we’re the only two who know it.”

That last night, Faye had said something that made no sense. *Just in case. My father didn’t know.* The “just in case” was likely meant for me. The rest was the password, and that was what I whispered into Iliana’s ear.

She started typing. It took a few tries, with variations for spacing and capitalization, but I guessed Faye wouldn’t have made it too difficult if she wanted me to have access.

“Got it,” Iliana said.

“Wait a minute,” my father said. “Is that the crypto money?”

I turned to him. “You knew about that?”

“Hilliard said you had it. I thought he was full of shit, but I guess not. In my house this whole time. That means it belongs to me.”

“You get exactly nothing,” Iliana said, “in part because there’s no money here.” She shut down the file, but not before I had a glimpse. It was a scan of a series of drawings and what appeared to be a map. The fraction of a second I’d glimpsed it proved to be enough for me to recognize a place that had changed my life forever. It was the Observation Tower in the Kitchikuti Wildlife Management Area.

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Chapter 40

“Just the two of us,” I said. “There’s too great a chance of someone getting hurt.”

We’d left my father’s house and driven to a strip mall a half mile away. Everyone had followed us and were now waiting for us to get out of the car to learn what we’d found on Faye’s flash drive. The problem was, we were not getting out. I wanted Iliana to explain some things to me. I was worried about how things were going to go, and I needed a backup plan.

“You can assume your dad will call Hilliard,” Iliana said. “I don’t think he got a glimpse of the map, but if Hilliard knows you’re on a treasure hunt, he’ll likely conclude we’re going to Mike Kristic’s house, the Meeks estate, or the Observation Tower. The police have control over the first, because it’s a crime scene. There’s a security system at the Meeks estate. I doubt anyone was worrying about it before, but they’ll be keeping a close eye now that the money is in the wind. That means Hilliard is going to figure out where we’re going.”

I hadn’t thought it through, but I didn’t see any reason not to pretend I had.

“Dan, the more people witnessing what we do, the harder it will be for crooked cops to interfere.”

“But what about their safety?” I asked.

“They’re already involved,” she told me. “Hilliard suspects all the recent mayhem is about the wallet. If your dad talks to him, he’ll know for sure. He’ll talk to anyone who might have answers, and he won’t be gentle. I can’t keep them safe if I’m not with them.”

“You’re probably right, but too many people have already died for this money,” I said. “We need to make sure we can handle what comes next.”

She took out her phone and began typing away. “Give me a few minutes. I need to set something up, and then I’ll walk you through what I have in mind.”

When she was done, she set down her phone and put a hand on my arm. “I wish you hadn’t heard about your dad from Teuling.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I asked.

She shook her head. “With everything that was going on, I was afraid it would be too much. One more thing to make you feel terrible. I was going to tell you eventually, but maybe wait until things were going better. I’m sorry if I messed up.”

“You were looking after me,” I told her. “Thank you.”

Iliana hugged me, and then moved to open her door, but I put a hand on her arm to stop her.

“What else aren’t you telling me?” I asked.

I couldn’t have said why I believed she was withholding anything. It was a gut feeling. Nothing more.

“Some personal stuff.” She gave my hand a squeeze. “Things about my story, not yours. Mostly not yours.”

“Iliana,” I began.

“I’ll tell you everything when we’re safe,” she said.

“You promise?”

She nodded and then opened the car door.

We hit a wall of impatient glares when we reached the others.

“Here’s how it’s going to go,” I told them. “Two cars only. Iliana and Ms. Marciano. You can ride with one of them, or you can stay here. Ms. Marciano will follow us, because no one can know in advance where we’re going. Everyone turns off their cell phone and gives them to me now. You can have them back when we’re done. Those are the terms.”

“Fuck your terms,” Kyle said. “I don’t take orders from you.”

I shrugged. “Then stay here. I’m not sure why you think I give a shit.”

“Dan,” Olga Marciano said. “Is a treasure hunt really the smart move? What about going public? Calling in the FBI or the national news media?”

“Is the FBI really going to drop everything and send a team of crack agents?” I asked. “Is CNN going to fly down here at my request? At best, it would take days, maybe weeks, to put something in motion. Hilliard can do whatever he wants in the meantime.”

I could see by their expressions that they understood. Until this was resolved, no one involved would be safe.

“Okay, point well taken,” Ms. Marciano said. “Everyone turn off your phones and give them to Dan.”

“Don’t we need to take out our SIM cards or whatever?” Benito asked.

His mother shook her head. “It’s theoretically possible to track a phone when it’s turned off, but Tylor P. D. doesn’t have that kind of tech, and I doubt Hilliard will want to explain his need to the NSA. Powering down is good enough.”

Once I had everyone’s phones, I put them in Iliana’s glove compartment, and we were on our way. The next few hours were going to be bad, I thought. There was going to be a lot of danger. And after that, there would be a few days of anxiety. And then, I would be free.

I owed nothing to Tylor, nothing to my family. I could go off with Iliana and be her boy Friday or whatever. I could help her find out where

she came from. I could do something meaningful with my life. I was finally ready to let go.

But first I had to do a lot of dangerous shit.

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Chapter 41

Iliana did not have to change her driving habits for Ms. Marciano to keep up. She always drove cautiously. At first, I thought Iliana was taking a weird route to throw off anyone who might be following, but then I realized she wouldn't want us to be parked conspicuously in the Kitchikuti lot. Instead, she parked behind the Publix on Huber Road.

Employees parked back there. There were a series of loading bays and dumpsters stinking of rotting foods. Behind the store ran a dirt road used by maintenance vehicles to access the power lines. Beyond that was a wall of foliage. Hiking through those trees and bushes would lead us directly to the northern perimeter of the Kitchikuti.

"What the fuck are we doing here?" Kyle demanded.

"You're following us," Iliana said. "It's too late to back out, so shut up and watch your step. I don't want to have to deal with one of you getting snakebit."

Ms. Marciano volunteered to run into the store with Benito to buy some water and mosquito repellent. Once they returned and we all sprayed up, we were off. I insisted on walking behind Kyle, so I could keep an eye

on him if he did anything sneaky. Also, he cleared the brush for me, so hopefully he would get a spider in his face instead of me.

It was a much longer walk to the Observation Tower from this side. Probably two miles. It was in the upper nineties and humid, and the mosquito spray did not seem to be doing a whole lot. I still wasn't entirely sure what the plan would be when we got there. There were several possibilities, and I needed to sort them out, to have a contingency, because I still didn't believe it was going to be as easy as we'd planned. With so much money on the line, how could it be?

Finally, we broke out into the clearing surrounding the Observation Tower. No one said a thing. I suspected they'd all figured out our destination long ago, just as they understood why we hadn't parked closer.

"I've seen the map Faye left behind," Iliana said. "I know where the cold-storage wallet is—or at least where she left it. No offense to Dan, but I'm more agile than you. Than anyone else here, really, so I'm the logical person to go up. You all stay put. No one moves. That's the plan. Any questions?"

It was Benito's turn to look skeptical, but I shook my head at him. I trusted Iliana, and he was going to have to accept that. He saw my expression and read everything I had to say, all the responses to his arguments, and he offered a brief nod.

A part of me, the stupid part steeped in American-masculinity nonsense, wanted to say that, no, I should be the one to climb the tower. This was my mess. Faye had come to me, and I sent her away, refused even to try to understand her. The tower was dangerous, and it was my burden to ascend it. But I didn't raise these objections because there was no doubt Iliana could do things in ways I never could. And if she made a mistake, she could just regrow whatever she damaged—a skill with which macho bluster could not compete. So, no objections from me. I told myself that if she were just as human, just as vulnerable as I was, I'd choose differently, but I was secretly happy I did not have to argue with her.

Then I heard a sound in the distance, unmistakable and terrifying: the shrill, twin blasts of a police car announcing itself. As near as I could tell, it was coming from the Kitchikuti parking lot.

Hilliard was coming, and he didn't care who knew it. He wanted us to know it.

Iliana looked up and cocked her head. "Change of plans," she told me. "You're the one going up the tower."

#

I knew she was right, but I wanted to argue anyhow. All the macho chest-puffing I'd contemplated only moments before now seemed idiotic. I did not want to go up that rickety, condemned, crumbling tower.

“I can keep everyone safe,” she said. “Hilliard is coming alone, Dan. He thinks he can intimidate you and your friends and that, in the end, he can control me. And he won’t risk having to explain what he’s doing to other cops because there’s too much money at stake. It would break anyone’s loyalty. That’s what he thinks is going on with me.”

“But even Hilliard alone is dangerous,” I said. “What if he shoots you before you see him? What if you take a shot to the head? Iliana, you’re not indestructible. You can’t be. Nothing is.”

“He won’t take me by surprise. The people we’ve brought with us can keep us safe, but he can also use them against us. I’m the only one who can make sure Hilliard is disarmed without hurting anyone. You do what you have to. Move slowly and carefully. Measure every step. Take your time. Hilliard thinks he knows what motivates me and so how to manipulate me. He won’t be ready for what he finds.”

“Maybe don’t kill him,” I suggested. “That would make it much harder to get out of this without scrutiny.”

“I get that,” Iliana said. “I’ll do my best to keep everyone alive.”

“This makes absolutely no sense,” Ms. Marciano interjected. “We should get out of here.”

“If we leave, Hilliard might end up with the wallet,” Iliana said. “If he has that, he’ll need the password, and he’ll do anything to get it.”

“No offense,” Naomi said, “but I value my life more than I value Dan getting rich.”

“She’ll keep you safe,” I said.

“How can you know that?” Naomi demanded. “Everyone here can see you’re convinced she’s changed, but what if you’re wrong, Dan? What if she’s played you? You can’t rule it out. No matter how smitten you are, you have to see that.”

“I can rule it out, and I’m not smitten.” Then Iliana narrowed her eyes at me. “Except,” I continued, “in the sense of non-romantic respect and admiration. I can’t tell you how I know what I know, but I have seen irrefutable proof, things that can’t be denied. If you don’t trust Iliana, I get it, but trust *me* when I say I know she will protect us. That means I don’t have any excuse for letting the people who killed Faye Kristic win.”

Everyone was staring at me. Maybe it was a more impassioned speech than they expected. I had put everything I had into my vague pronouncements, but there simply wasn’t the time to fuck around, and I would never ask Iliana to offer up some kind of proof. Instead, I was asking them to have faith in my judgement.

“What about witnesses?” Benito asked. “Maybe Naomi can get a bunch of reporters out here. That would make us safer, right?”

“The nearest local reporters I know are in Tampa,” she said. “It would take them too long to get here, and how exactly would I convince them to go trekking through the woods, to a place that’s not even on a trail, in order to prevent a news story from happening in the first place? People don’t just drop everything for no reason. Also, my phone is back in the car.”

Benito didn’t have an answer for this.

Olga Marciano turned to me. “I guess there’s no choice. Okay, Dan. There’s a lot on the line. Like, our lives. You seem pretty sure.”

“I’m sure.”

“Then get started,” she said, “because I’d really like to get the fuck out of here.”

The tower. It was the last place I wanted to be.

This is an exorcism, I told myself. This is my chance to be rid of this curse forever. But first I would have to slay the dragon. I was recklessly mixing metaphors in an effort to motivate myself. I had to climb this thing that should not be climbed. I had to go someplace stupidly dangerous. I felt like I was abandoning my friends, even though I knew they could not be in safer hands. Everything would be okay, as long as I didn’t fail.

I climbed awkwardly under the loose fence, feeling everyone's eyes on me. I wanted to look cool and confident, but I'm sure I failed. Sweat stains had formed under my arms, and my every movement telegraphed uncertainty. I stepped into the shade of the tower and then entered through the arched doorway. Rusted hinges suggested there had once been actual doors, but they were long gone.

Inside, I found a massive trash heap. Beer and soda cans, fast-food wrappers, used condoms on sticks, displayed like planted flags. Flies buzzed around half-eaten burgers and potato chip bags and gummy accumulations of soda. An interspecies gathering of birds noisily complained and fled through the doorway. I ducked, and covered my head.

The tower had been designed to create a mood, not serve a function. It was cavernous and dark. Shafts of light squeezed through the narrow windows to pierce the gloom, illuminating the dust kicked up by the birds' hasty withdrawal. The wooden spiral stairs that led up to the second level had long since collapsed, but some enterprising adventurer had brought in a metal ladder. I gave it a tug. It seemed locked in place. Maybe it was affixed up above, or maybe its base was sufficiently driven into the exposed earth. Either way, it wasn't the wobbly nightmare I'd been fearing. That didn't stop the fear.

Hilliard was on his way, packing weapons and malice. I needed to get moving, so I pushed back my fear as far as I could—not as far as I would have liked—and grabbed the sides of the ladder with both hands. I started climbing.

Two rungs up, I wanted to quit. I felt exposed and unsafe, and more afraid of heights than I recalled being in the past. The drizzles of dust and echoes of my every movement only underscored the danger of what I was attempting. But fuck that, I told myself. My friends were counting on me, and finding that wallet was the only thing that was going to make all of our troubles go away.

I moved deliberately, one rung after another. Each step brought me closer to my goal, and my friends closer to danger. There was nothing I could do about that. It was all in Iliana's hands. I had to take care of my business and trust she would take care of hers. That said, I had more faith in her abilities than mine.

I reached the second level and found that there was nothing affixing the ladder to the upper level. That meant I was going to have to be careful climbing off, and I anticipated my terror when it came time to climb down. I filed that anxiety away and carefully, if inelegantly, crawled off the ladder and onto the second floor.

It was made of stone, at least, and not wood. I didn't have to worry about falling through, though I did worry about the entire thing collapsing under me. Once I was on my feet and rubbing the grime off on my shorts, I had a look around. The ladder had deposited me in the center of the floor. As with the ground level, the area was poorly illuminated by narrow windows. It was a wide-open space, and it brought me to about one third up the height of the tower. Toward the north side was an archway, also wide open, leading to nothing. Once, I knew, there had been a wooden walkway five feet in width that encircled the entire tower. It was long gone.

There were no more stairs now. The way up to the third floor was by a stone climbing wall. I think there had once been wooden handholds, but they had rotted away. It was hard to get a sufficient grip, and I feared what might be lurking in each recess as I climbed up, but there was no choice. I stood and faced the wall, tried not to think about falling, and I began the climb before I could talk myself out of it.

It was awful. Sweat and dust made gripping the stones almost impossible. I felt fingernails chip and skin tear, but not continuing wasn't an option, so I put quitting out of my mind. I moved carefully, not daring to look down, preparing myself to hold on if, when I reached for the next handhold, I felt something sting my fingers. Some bug or other biting or pinching or just ramming some kind of malevolent stinger into my flesh. At

last, I pulled myself to the third floor, wondering briefly how I was going to work up the courage to descend that thing when the time came.

I checked my finger where I'd been stung, and it was only slightly red. I was unlikely to die from the venom, then. Some good news there, at least.

The third floor also had an open archway, this one leading to a stone balcony. There was only one more floor above, the top level, with its crenellations and, I was sure, a spectacular view. This level had been divided into different chambers, perhaps used for storage or servants to prepare luncheon or who knows what. It was here, I believed, that Faye Kristic had spent her last, terrified moments. It was through the open archway that she had jumped or, as now seemed more likely, been pushed. It was here that her map had directed me.

I paused, looking around me. Besides the archway leading to what remained of the balcony, there were three other archways leading to small, poorly lit chambers. The map indicated I had to go through the door directly across from the balcony opening. The level's window slits had filled with grime, and the light was poor inside, so I took out my phone and activated the flashlight. I heard the slight movements of birds or rodents elsewhere on the level, and I steeled myself against the fear of being bushwacked by a territorial rat.

I examined the chamber by the light of my phone. The stones in the walls were rough and loose. The map had labeled arrows scrawled in a shaky hand, so I knew the one I wanted was on the east wall, four from the left, seven from the bottom. My phone in one hand, I counted and put my right hand on the specific, slightly extended brick the map had indicated.

I gave it a pull. Nothing happened. I set my phone down on the ground and put both hands on the brick. My fingers were slick with sweat and slightly numb. My heart pounded in my ears. I gripped as best I could and pulled again. The brick shifted slightly. I planted my feet, hoping not to drive myself through the floor and to my death, and pulled again.

The brick came loose.

I picked up my phone and shined the light into the gap. There, inside, was a small, round tin, adorned with faded images of berries. It was one of those decorative hard candy containers favored by old ladies. My fingers were clumsier than usual, but I picked it up and managed to pry open one side, then the other, easing off the lid.

There, inside, was the sleek device, longer and wider than a USB drive. This was it. The cold-storage wallet. I was holding in my hands somewhere around a billion and a half dollars. It was so much money that it might as well have been no money at all. It was enough to move the

concept of money from the practical to the theoretical. It broke my understanding of math and consumption and possibility.

Iliana and I had discussed what I was supposed to do. It really wasn't complicated, but it had also been theoretical, a project of no real significance, like a child making a baking soda volcano in science class. This was a real volcano. The cold-storage wallet contained the power of gods, and I held it in my hands. Maybe it was a good idea to pause and consider my options. I had a mindboggling fortune in crypto. It was enough money to do whatever I wanted, however I wanted. Enough money to buy Hilliard out of Tylor, to remake the town. Enough money to walk away from all of this, from everything, including my need for Iliana's protection. Enough money to buy Benito his own gaming studio. I could do anything. Everything. Did I really want to think small?

Maybe thinking small was what would save me. This was the money that Faye Kristic died for when I hadn't been kind or smart or attentive enough to hear her begging for my help. Keeping it would be a curse. And I had more important things to worry about now than acquiring ridiculous wealth. I had Iliana, who needed my help, and whose origins and potential interested me more than abstract money, even such a massive amount of abstract money.

I reviewed my notes. I remembered what Iliana had explained, and I went to work.

When I was done, I put the wallet back in the tin for notional protection and then put the tin in the Velcroed pocket of my cargo shorts. All I needed now was to survive climbing down and hope Iliana had managed to keep everyone alive. I walked out of the alcove.

“You got it?”

I turned, grateful I’d already put the tin away, because I surely would have dropped it and sent it bouncing out of the tower and into oblivion. But that didn’t happen, so instead I turned and faced Darcy Silvestri. Her jeans were torn and her black blazer was covered with grime and dust from her Observation Tower adventures. Evidently, she possessed a bottomless supply of pistols, because she was pointing one at me.

“You know, there’s a very decomposed dead body in that room right there,” she said, pointing to one of the open archways. “It’s the old police chief, Zack Watham. He was mostly bones, but there was a knuckle missing from the little finger of his right hand. That’s how I know. I guess the story about him hiding out in Russia is bullshit.”

“I guess so,” I agreed, keeping my hands in the air. “How’d you figure out we’d be coming here?”

“The old-fashioned way,” she said. “I put a tracker on your car. Pretty simple. It doesn’t have to be a big deal, Dan. Give me the wallet. We can work out an arrangement that’s fair for both of us.”

“You don’t want to shoot me,” I said.

“I don’t,” she agreed. “But I really was ready to kill myself the other day, and if you imagine I’d be willing to kill myself but not you, then you don’t know the first thing about human nature. Or my nature, I guess.”

In books and movies, there is always the moment when the unlikely hero faces this kind of crisis, where he has to decide if he wants to dig deep for courage or capitulate, out of a craven desire to save himself. Maybe that hero would have tossed the tin over the side of the tower or stomped it under his boot. But I wasn’t that sort of hero.

“I’m going to reach into my pocket to take out the wallet,” I said.

“I want us to be partners,” she said. “No sudden moves, and we’ll be good.”

I lifted the tin out and held it out to her. She snatched the tin and slid it into the back pocket of her jeans. “What’s the password?”

“When we’re down at the base of the tower,” I said.

“Once we’re down there, your friends will be able to overpower me. I don’t think waiting is a good idea. Tell me now, or I really am going to have

to shoot you. I'd try to make it non-fatal, but I'm not that great with guns. You could end up rotting away forever next to Watham."

Another moment to take a principled stand, and once again, I decided against it. I told her the password, explaining the spaces and capitalization.

"You see," she said. "This is much better than dying. Now I have the wallet and the password, but I won't cut you out. I just want a fair share."

Darcy receiving any share didn't seem fair to me, but it wasn't really my money, and given she was taking what didn't belong to her, she wasn't really obligated to give me any of it. Nevertheless, I suspected she'd rather not murder me. We were both going to have to do a lot of dangerous climbing to get out of here. It would be better for her if we were on the same team, at least until we were on solid ground.

"You're being reasonable," I said. "I'm very comfortable with this arrangement."

I heard a crack and a cloud of dust kicked up above us. A brick fell from the top of the tower and landed hard, not a foot from where Darcy was standing. A spray of dust and jagged bits of stone burst up in a cloud, spraying grit in my eyes.

"Time to get moving," she said. "As fast as you can, while also being slow and deliberate. I've got enough money to live stupid rich for the rest of my life, and I don't want to die in this tower."

Without raising the gun, she gestured toward the wall with the handholds. My cue to start climbing. I was reasonably sure she was not going to kill me or even push me as I searched for the first foothold. The tower hadn’t seen this much activity in years, and a gunshot might be enough to bring the whole thing down. Maybe she really would be content with half the money. As compromises went, it wasn’t a bad one. I suspected, though, that when the time came, rather than seeing it as keeping seven hundred and fifty million, she might ask herself why she should give away an equal amount. Then she would ask herself why she should give away anything at all.

Getting down was as frightening as I imagined. I was tired and sweaty and scared out of my mind of falling, of having the tower fall on top of us. There was nothing to do about it. There was no other out. I had to take one step after another, to crawl and grasp and inch my way toward the ground, to measure every handhold and foot placement. There was simply no choice, and so I kept moving and tried to think as little as possible about how dangerous it was.

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Chapter 42

I climbed down the final ladder to the ground level. I waited for Darcy to make sure she didn't need help. Yes, she had just secreted herself in a crumbling tower in order to steal a fortune from me at gunpoint, but that was no excuse for not offering to help a pregnant woman. Once she was safely down, we turned and exited the tower. I wanted to move fast because the whole thing seemed poised to come down at any second.

When I stepped outside of the gloom, I knew something had happened while I was up in the tower, treasure hunting and convincing a widow not to murder me. Benito, Ms. Marciano, Naomi, and Kyle were all standing off to the side. Facing them was Hilliard, who had his gun drawn. Standing next to Hilliard was my dad, who held a slack backpack in his left hand.

"Where's Iliana?" I asked.

"That's a good question," Ms. Marciano said bitterly. "She went off into the woods, and we never heard from her again."

Had Hilliard gotten to her? It didn't seem possible. She had to be out there, planning something. Or had she decided she didn't need me anymore? Had her talk about friendship been bullshit? Everyone told me I

was being conned, but they didn't know she was New Iliana. Maybe New Iliana wasn't so different from Old Iliana and had decided that this was her moment to do whatever served her own selfish needs—in this case, escaping with her new identity. Maybe she believed that with all the fuss over the money, Hilliard would let her go, having bigger things to worry about it. I didn't want to believe it, but I could see that it was possible.

"You get it?" Hilliard asked Darcy.

She raised the tin. "I got it." She walked over to Hilliard and my father.

"Give it to her," Hillard said to my dad, who reached into the backpack and produced a lightweight laptop, which he handed over to Darcy.

"Here's how it's going to work," Hilliard said. "Darcy will access the money and transfer it. When that happens, we all go our separate ways. Sorry, Dan, but you don't get jack shit. You didn't have the money before, and you don't now, so you haven't lost anything. I hope we won't have any complaints."

None of us said anything.

"Now, maybe you're thinking that Iliana is out there, planning to do something to me, but that wouldn't be too smart. If she shows up looking for trouble, I'll start shooting. If I hear a gunshot or even a rustle in the

leaves, bodies are going to drop. Besides, once I have the money, she'll fall back in line. That's how the world works. So, the sooner you accept—"

"It's not here," Darcy said, interrupting him.

"What are you talking about? It has to be there," Hilliard snapped. "Did he give you the right password?"

"Yes, the password worked, and I'm in, but the money is gone. It was transferred out to another account . . . . Shit, ten minutes ago." She turned to me. "You did this, didn't you?"

"I did," I admitted. "Iliana planned it in advance. As soon as I got the wallet, I went on my phone and moved the money out of your reach."

"Where did he send it?" Hilliard demanded.

"How the fuck should I know?" Darcy asked, her voice rising an octave. "That's the whole point of crypto."

Hilliard turned to me and leveled the gun at my chest. "Where's the money?"

"Where you can't get it," I said.

He then pointed the gun at Kyle. "I will shoot him. My own son. That should be a pretty good indication of how serious I am. Then I shoot your Mexican friend in the head. That's number two. You get the point, right? There are a lot of people to shoot before I start in on you, boy, and I don't think you've got what it takes to stand up to that kind of pressure."

“I have the money,” Iliana said as she emerged from the woods, hands empty, her gait casual. She looked calm and fresh, not a drop of sweat on her forehead. “He sent it to an account we set up in advance, and I’m the only one who knows the password. Shoot me, and you’ll never see any of it.”

Of course she hadn’t abandoned us. Iliana was mysterious, but she was not unknowable. I knew she would protect us, and I knew she had a plan, but I didn’t understand it. I had to hope it was rational and she could pull it off.

“You shouldn’t have trusted her, boy,” Hilliard said to me. “Letting her control all of the money? You have any idea what you’ve done?”

“Shoot her,” Darcy said. “She’s afraid of guns.”

Hilliard laughed. “Yeah, like bees are afraid of flowers.”

Darcy sneered at him. “I’m telling you, she’s afraid of guns. I’ve seen it. She won’t go near them.”

Iliana smiled as if all of this banter amused her. “I can kill you before you get a chance to fire that thing,” she said. “At anyone. I will know the instant you shift from threatening to intending to shoot, and you’ll be on the ground before you can pull the trigger.”

“Then why don’t you do it?” Hilliard asked her. “If you’re so goddamn quick and all-knowing, why stand there talking shit instead of

acting?”

“Because none of these people want to see what would happen next,” she said. “It would traumatize them. Also killing you in front of a bunch of witnesses would make it harder for me to move on with my life. And that’s all I’m looking for, a chance to move on.”

“To move on with a billion and a half dollars,” Hilliard said. “That doesn’t seem so noble.”

She shrugged. “Dan’s in charge of the money, not me. I’m just holding it for him.”

Hilliard turned to me and raised the gun. “Then I don’t need him at all, do I? And maybe you really do have a soft spot for him, which makes him the one I start ventilating first.” He turned to my father. “You got a problem with that?”

My father, to his credit, looked ashen. “Nothing fatal, right?”

Hilliard grinned. “It’s not an exact science, but let’s see what I can do.”

The pop of gunfire echoed across the Kitchikuti. I felt my blood pressure drop and my vision blurred. The world began to spin. I looked down to see where I’d been hit. I felt no pain—not yet, but I knew it would come though.

I saw no blood on my clothes or skin. I felt panic wash over me. Had I been shot in the head? Was that why I didn't see anything? I looked around, expecting to find everyone staring at me in horror. Perhaps half my skull was missing, and the remaining parts of my brain were refusing to acknowledge the devastating damage. But no one was looking at me. They were too busy either looking at Bryce Hilliard, who held a hand to his neck while arterial blood pumped through his fingers. Or if they weren't looking at him, they were watching Lenny Teuling, emerging from the trees, a pistol in his left hand.

"Everyone relax." Teuling took a few steps closer.

Hilliard staggered twice and fell to his knees, then onto his side. His grip on the bullet wound had slackened, and blood pumped past his hand in sickening bursts. Kyle looked on as his father blinked a few times and then closed his eyes. The frequency of the blood spurts slackened. He was dead, or close to it.

So, I hadn't been shot. That was good. I felt relief but also confusion. Of all the people to shoot, why Hilliard? Maybe this was Teuling's way to prove he was serious, as Hilliard himself had just threatened to do. If he wanted our attention, he certainly had it.

“I’m continuing to point the gun at all of you because it makes good strategic sense,” Teuling said, “but I really hope not to have to shoot anyone else. No one come at me, and no one gets shot. Iliana’s fast, but even she’s not quick enough to guarantee no one gets hurt accidentally if she makes a run at me.”

Kyle turned to him. “You killed my dad.” It was almost, but not quite, a question. Kyle looked confused, as if he didn’t know if he should cry, get down and hug his father’s exsanguinating body, or lie down and take a nap.

“Your dad was a piece of shit who needed killing more than anyone I’ve ever known,” Teuling said, “and I’ve known some pieces of shit.”

“And that’s why you’re here?” Iliana asked. “You’re a vigilante. You came to clean up Tylor, and now you’ll ride off into the sunset?”

“Not quite,” Teuling said. “I’m here to get rich.”

Everyone stiffened. There would be more threats, maybe more violence. None of this was going the way we intended.

“Not the way you think,” Teuling said. “I don’t want to threaten or outwit or extort. I’d never be able to pull off the first two, anyhow. The last one I might try, but I’m not an idiot. It wouldn’t go well for me. I know I can’t beat Iliana, so I’m not going to try.”

“Then what happens next?” Mrs. Marciano asked.

“A bargain, pure and simple.” He turned to Iliana. “You give me ten percent of whatever you got off the cold-storage wallet. In exchange, I’ll give you your answers.”

Iliana took a step forward, eying him with naked defiance. “Answers to what?”

“I’ll tell you everything you want to know,” he said. “I’ll give you what you’re looking for in Tylor—the reason you came here in the first place. Iliana, I have a pretty good idea of your—let’s call it a background. I’m willing to sell you the answers you want. Or at least the answers I have.”

Iliana and I exchanged a look, but I found her expression unreadable.

“And I’m supposed to ignore the fact that you murdered someone right in front of me?” she asked.

“Give me a break,” he said. “You’d have happily done it yourself. This was me doing you a favor. A bunch of witnesses saw me do it. I’ve taken eliminating Hilliard off your plate, and now you can leave Tylor without having to watch your back. I can’t make you give me anything, but having enough money to get away to somewhere I’d be safe would help. So how about we make that deal?”

“What exactly do you think you know?” she asked.

He shook his head. “You really don’t want me to answer that question in front of everyone, do you?”

“I suppose I don’t,” she conceded. “But why should I believe that you have any of the answers I’m looking for?”

He smiled. “If you’re not satisfied, don’t pay me. It’s as simple as that. I’ll need your word of honor that if I do give you what you want, you give me ten percent of what you retrieved from the wallet and let me leave unharmed.”

“What makes you think I’ll keep my word?” she asked.

“Because you’ll need to give it in front of Dan, and you won’t want to make him believe you’re untrustworthy.”

Things were moving too fast. Before I could comprehend what had happened, we were leaving to have a private meeting with Lenny Teuling.

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The accusations are quite damning, and the evidence appears to be irrefutable. Reporters in Tampa, Miami, and Orlando have all published stories this morning accusing billionaire and tech entrepreneur Gregory Meeks of using a proprietary technology to hack into computer and phone cameras to spy on underage girls. We warn our viewers that even with the victims' faces blacked out, the footage is quite disturbing.

—Fox News Network

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Chapter 43

Everyone was irritated that we were just leaving, which was not unreasonable.

“You’re going to let us deal with the corpse of the police chief while you traipse off with the guy who murdered him?” Mrs. Marciano asked.

“Call the cops,” Teuling said. “Tell them exactly what happened, though it might be a good ideal to be vague about the amount of money recovered. Say that everyone was looking for something Faye left behind.”

“You’re telling us you don’t mind that we report this to law enforcement?” she asked.

“I shot him, so yes, tell them that,” he said. “I’m not driving my car, and I have no plans to return to my house. They’re not going to find me, and even if they did, I have plenty of witnesses who will say he was threatening to execute a whole bunch of people.”

“What about my share?” Darcy asked.

“Your share of what?” Teuling raised his eyebrows. “I’m the one who has something to bargain with. You’re just the widow of a cop who thought he could crime his way into a fortune.”

This left Darcy speechless, and reasonably so. Teuling had been doing plenty of criming himself until coming up with a new plan.

My bewilderment, fortunately, did not get in the way of my survival instincts. “Darcy’s got a gun,” I told Iliana.

Darcy shot me a look of disgust, as though we’d been on the same team, and I just betrayed her. Had she forgotten that she’d recently pointed the gun at me in order to force me to surrender at least part of a fortune to which she had absolutely no claim?

“What are you going to do about it?” Darcy asked Iliana. “You’re afraid of guns.”

“Do you want to find out what I’m going to do about it,” Iliana replied, “or would you rather remove it slowly and carefully and hand it over to Dan?”

Darcy had seen how quickly and violently Iliana had disarmed Teuling. She inched the gun out of her waistband and held it out to me, her fingers on the barrel.

Iliana looked over at Teuling. “You give your gun to Dan too.”

“How many guns am I supposed to take care of exactly?” I asked.

Iliana sighed. “Then give it to Benito or his mom. Or give it to the reporter. Any one of the confirmed non-villains will work, and then we’ll see what’s what.”

Once we were in our car and driving to the address Teuling gave us, I had a few minutes to process everything that had just happened.

“So, we’re in control of a billion and a half dollars,” I said.

“Technically I am,” Iliana said. “But I’ll give you full control as soon as we’re out of danger. Since it can’t be tortured out of me, I figure I should hold on to that for now.”

“And I can trust you?” I asked.

She glared at me. “You think I’m going to steal money from you, Dan?”

I swallowed hard. “That doesn’t seem to be your style, but you did lie to me. You said you came to Tylor randomly, but Teuling says you came here for a reason, and I saw how you reacted. It’s true, isn’t it?”

She sighed. “It’s true that my showing up in Tylor wasn’t random, but I didn’t really know what drew me here. I just had this place name in my head. I thought it was important, but I couldn’t be sure. I didn’t want to tell you that at first because it made me seem, I don’t know, kind of robotic. I didn’t want you to think I wasn’t in control of myself or my motivations. I felt weird talking about it with someone I didn’t know well.”

“And then you got to know me better,” I said, “and you still didn’t tell me.”

“That’s true,” she admitted. “I came to suspect that my story might be somehow entangled with your story.”

This surprised me. “How?”

“Faye and Meeks,” she said. “The fact that they were connected made me think there was more going on here than I realized. Once that became clear, I knew I had to prioritize getting to the bottom of what happened to you. I worried if you found out that I wasn’t putting my own answers first, you’d be weird and self-sacrificing about it.”

“So you decided to be a good friend and lie to me because you were afraid I’d be a good friend and make a stink about your priorities?” I asked.

“Exactly,” she said. “They were trying to kill you, Dan. I needed to make sure you were safe. I figured my answers would wait, and I could always come back later.”

“Wow,” I said. “Thank you.”

“That’s how friends roll, Dan.”

“I guess it is,” I agreed. “What do we do about the fact that Teuling probably killed Mike Kristic? I don’t feel great about rewarding that with a hundred million dollars.”

“We don’t know that he did,” she said. “Anyhow, I agreed not to stop him from leaving. I suppose I could still go after him, but I’d need a good reason.”

“Sending you out to commit a revenge killing isn’t really a great outcome either.”

“Let’s just see how things go,” she said.

“That’s not really a solution,” I noted.

“I like to let things unfold spontaneously.”

“I’ve noticed.” After a minute, I said, “Do you really think Teuling knows what you are?”

She chewed on her lower lip. “He seems to know something. It sounds like he’s figured out a lot more than I would have thought possible. That’s why I agreed to his deal. If he really does have information, then I’m willing to do whatever it takes to get it.”

“Even pay a ridiculous amount of money to a possible murderer?”

“It’s your money,” she said, “so if you don’t want to, then we won’t. But if it were my money, I’d . . . .” She took a deep breath. Did she even have lungs? This didn’t seem the time to ask her. “I don’t know,” she finally said.

“And what if this is all some massive trap?” I asked.

“I don’t think it is.”

“But if you’re wrong?”

She grinned at me. “Then I will fuck his shit up.”

The meet was at an isolated cabin surrounded by trees, well outside Tylor city limits. It was both rustic and designed with an eye toward aesthetics—a wealthy person’s idea of roughing it. As soon as Iliana killed the engine, I heard the muffled whine of a generator. The place was evidently off the grid, and I had to assume no one knew Teuling owned it, or maybe that it wasn’t his at all. Whatever the reason, he believed this was a safe place to chill after murdering Hilliard in front of witnesses.

“I’m going to scout the perimeter,” Iliana told me. “If Teuling or anyone else approaches the car or threatens you, shoot them, and I’ll come running.”

I didn’t love this plan, but she was gone before I could object. Fortunately, she returned quickly, and I was not required to shoot anyone.

“Take the gun with you,” she told me, “but keep it hidden. Do not take it out unless more hostiles arrive. No matter what happens in there, if it’s just Teuling, I can handle it. If he takes out a machine gun or a hand grenade or a tactical nuke, just sit still. I’ll deal with it. Introducing another weapon during a crisis just introduces more chaos.”

“If there’s going to be chaos—” I began, but she cut me off.

“If I thought this was likely to turn dangerous, I wouldn’t bring you,” she explained, “but I could be wrong, and I believe in being prepared. Be vigilant, but not itchy. If you can manage that.”

I absolutely could not, but I liked to think I was getting good at pretending.

Teuling answered as soon as we knocked, and he gestured for us to come inside. The living space and exposed kitchen appeared to comprise most of the cabin, though there were two doors toward the far end, which I presumed led to a bedroom and a bathroom. His armed minion could be hiding out in there, but somehow I didn’t think so.

“You sure you want Dan here for this?” he asked. “You can decide later how much you want to tell him.”

“I trust him,” she said. “I don’t want there to be secrets.”

He invited us to sit on a sofa, and he took a chair across from us. “I just want to review the details of this deal. If I give you information you don’t have about your origin, you give me ten percent of the money you recovered from the wallet. Then you let me walk away. You don’t come after me, and you don’t kill me. Ever.”

“I don’t want anyone killed,” I said to Iliana, “but I’m having a hard time getting past the fact you murdered Mr. Kristic. Paying you a hundred

and sixty million dollars from a fortune that would rightly belong to the guy you hanged feels a little icky."

"Understandable," Teuling said. "But I didn't kill Kristic."

"I heard him on the phone repeating 'everything equal.' Then you used that exact same phrasing with Darcy. It had to be you he called."

"Nice work, junior-grade detective," Teuling said. "And you're right. He did call me. Told me he had you tied up in his house. I believed him, too. At least I did the first time he called to tell me that you were lurking in his bushes with binoculars or that you were hiding in Faye's room, jerking off to autopsy pictures of her. Just to be safe, I went by to check the second time. After that, any time he called to say you were at his house, I figured he was just having one of his episodes. I humored him and hung up. I'm not saying I should have believed him that last time, because why the fuck would I, but I kind of wish I had."

"So, who did kill him?" Iliana asked.

"My guess is Hilliard," Teuling said. "But it could be he actually killed himself. I don't think we can rule it out. The point is, I'm not the villain you think I am. I've been helping you this whole time, whether you realize it or not. And I'll take that thanks in the form of crypto."

"If you helped us, it was only because you thought there'd be a payday in it for you," she said. "And I'm skeptical you have any

information for me."

"You'd be surprised," he said. "I worked pretty closely with Meeks back in the day. Watham was too lazy, too busy counting his money, to put on a friendly face. That was my job—dealing with reporters who got too nosy or hookers who thought they could put the squeeze on a rich guy. I was his fixer, basically, and yeah, it wasn't pretty, but it had its moments. I got along with Meeks pretty well. I always knew he was messed up, but he treated me good, like a friend. He gave me gifts: electronics, box seat tickets, $5,000 bottles of wine. That sort of shit. And he liked to get drunk with me and talk about his projects, past and present. That's how I know what he was working on when he died. It's how I learned what Fallen Angel was really about."

"I probably got most of what you know from Mike Kristic's computer," Iliana said.

This was news to me, but I decided to save my complaints for later.

"I figured you knew some of it," Teuling said, "but I promise I know more than Kristic did. I'm not saying I know all this in order to convince you to pay me. I'm telling you so you know how I figured out what you are."

This, I thought, is getting interesting.

"'*What* I am?'" she asked coyly.

“Let’s skip past the denials and the part where you assure me you’re a real girl.” Teuling said the first part in a falsetto. “I’m going to suggest some wild stuff, and we can save time by stipulating to your denial. That work for you?”

Iliana looked rattled. She was studying Teuling as though he were a peculiar specimen, but she offered him a hint of a nod.

“Yes, Meeks and Faye were working on a project together. She wasn’t assisting him, mind you. It was her project. Meeks recognized her genius and was giving her a lot of resources because he believed in her and he had the means to bring her vision to life—and, no doubt, make money off it down the line. Maybe he was perving on her too. I was never completely sure, but the guy was a creep. Not news. Anyhow, he gave that girl whatever she wanted. He built a server farm for her, and he let her have at it. She even picked the name of the company. Fallen Angel. The AI itself was named F.A. The goal was the most sophisticated AI ever built. It was conceptually different than what people talk about all the time now, the large language models, whatever the fuck that means. I only know that because Meeks liked to talk about this stuff.”

“F.A., Iliana repeated dreamily. “Faye. She named it after herself.”

“It was like her child,” Teuling said. “I talked to it. It was incredibly sophisticated, but also weirdly naïve. As a precaution, they kept the AI

firewalled from the internet. They were afraid of what it might do or become, so it was in a closed system. But F.A. wanted to learn more about people. They began by showing it movies, clips from social media, and that sort of thing, but it wasn't enough. F.A. asked to see real people, for extended periods of time, when they didn't know they were being observed. That's how it wanted to learn how to understand people."

"Meeks wasn't a peeping Tom," I said. "He was spying on people because F.A. wanted to learn more about humans."

"Watham doctored the evidence so people would think he was only spying on underage girls. He wanted to frame Meeks in order to extort money, but the AI wanted to watch all kinds of people. It didn't put limits on gender or age or anything else, really. And that is how you got involved, Dan. Faye had a crush on you, as you know. She thought you were the shit, which is why she set up the camera in your room. My guess is she thought you'd be a good model for her AI because in her deranged teenage mind, she believed you were a great person rather than an ordinary teen."

This was the most heartbreakingly sad thing I'd ever heard. I had to hold back tears. Yes, putting a secret camera in someone's bedroom is a bad thing, and she clearly watched me herself or she wouldn't have known about my safe, but even so. She did it because she wanted her creation to

learn from me. It was sweet and flattering, and for the millionth time, I wished I could go back and do things over.

“Fuck.” I wiped at my eyes with the back of my hand. Then a surge of anger coursed through me. “Why didn’t you say anything back then? You could have saved me from everything that happened.”

“I could have,” Teuling agreed, “but Hilliard probably would have killed me. I helped you out as much as I could by knocking you around.”

“Yeah, thanks for that,” I said.

“I’m detecting some sarcasm, but it worked then, and it worked last time you were in custody, so you’re welcome.”

“Don’t try to pretend you were being altruistic,” I said. “You were after the money, then and now.”

“The money would have been nice,” he agreed. “The funny thing is, if I’d found it then, I would have had the financial cushion to make myself safe, and I’d have revealed what I knew about Hilliard and Watham and Faye’s death. But I didn’t find it, so I kept my mouth shut. I’m not an evil guy, Dan, just a normal selfish one.”

“How commendable,” I said. “So how did Faye die?”

Teuling shook his head. “I wasn’t there. Maybe Watham killed her. Maybe Hilliard. Maybe they were trying to scare the shit out of her and she fell. No matter how it went down, they brought a teenage girl up to the top

of the Observation Tower to threaten her until she spilled her secrets, and she ended up dead. They both killed her as far as I'm concerned. Hilliard got what he deserved."

"So did Watham," I said. "His corpse is up there in the tower."

"Huh," Teuling said. "Interesting."

Iliana continued to look on in a daze, which Teuling took as some kind of a prompt.

"So, let's get back to the AI, since I'd prefer to get my money and the fuck out of Florida. I told you that Meeks liked to show me what he was working on. He would also get drunk and tell me how he saw the project evolving. They had all kinds of crazy plans for future phases. They wanted to create an artificial body to put the AI into. They had a plan even to let the AI pick its own form. I mean, all of this was years ahead of where they were. They didn't even have an idea for a plan for how they would do any of this, at least as far as I knew. But it was something Faye intended to build toward. Artificial people with real intelligence. That was the dream."

We all sat with that for a few minutes. I'd always thought of Teuling as little more than a bully with a badge, but he was obviously more sophisticated than I'd realized. That Iliana was, at least metaphorically, a different person was pretty obvious, but it took a level of insight or luck or

lunacy to conclude that she must be the shape-shifting AI that Faye Kristic and Gregory Meeks had imagined years before.

“What happened to this AI?” Iliana asked. “After Meeks and Faye died, who took possession of it?”

“No idea,” Teuling said. “The lawyers shut down the server farm and sold off the parts. I always assumed Fallen Angel died with that, but maybe not. Maybe there was always an emergency plan that if something happened to Faye and Meeks, their creation would be unleashed into the wild rather than be owned by someone else or outright destroyed.”

“Is it possible that it could have evolved?” I asked. “Could it somehow have become the final iteration that Faye imagined?”

“I don’t see how,” Teuling said. “Not without help. But if I were to, I don’t know, meet a shapeshifting, human-appearing AI, I guess I’d have to conclude that either someone rescued the project or the project rescued itself. If I were to encounter someone whose entire personality had changed right after they’d gone missing for a bit, I guess I’d wonder if maybe some kind of AI might have taken that person’s place. If it was a bad person, I don’t know that I’d much care.”

He was silent for a long time, clearly not having more to say.

“Is there anything else?” Iliana asked.

“No, that’s all I’ve got. I think you got what you paid for, though.”

Iliana looked at me. “Are you okay with this?”

I mostly was. As Teuling himself said, he was no hero, but he had been given bad options, and while he hadn’t always been on the side of the angels, the choices he made had been not completely unreasonable. He’d looked out for me when no one else had. He might even have kept me alive. Most of all, if I said no, then we’d have a conflict on our hands, and it would end, sooner or later, with Iliana killing Teuling. I did not want another death on my conscience. I gave her a nod, and she took out her phone to make the transfer.

“One more thing,” I said. “Given that Watham is dead and not in Russia, the way everyone thinks, is there any chance the accepted story about Meeks is also false? Is there any chance he’s still alive?”

Teuling laughed and shook his head. “That is definitely a possibility I wouldn’t rule out.”

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Epilogue

ILIANA

She kept her eyes on the road, of course. Being careful did not become less important just because a crisis had passed. Even so, she kept glancing over at the kudzu-infested Georgia landscape. An alien thing had taken root and thrived and entirely transformed its environment. Maybe it was a metaphor, though probably not.

The plan was to go north and west, but beyond that, things were fuzzy, and that was okay. Iliana believed she could drive days at a time without taking a break, though she'd never put this supposition to the test. It didn't matter, because Dan didn't want to spend so much continuous time in the car. They agreed to no more than fourteen hours a day, which was plenty for people who were in no rush and had no destination.

Money had never been an issue for her, but now it was a non-issue in ways she'd never anticipated. Iliana had turned over ninety percent of the crypto to the Faye Kristic Foundation—to help young women develop tech projects—and she had appointed Dan the foundation's "mission consultant." Setting up a foundation was a great deal of work, so this was an actual job, and it required Dan to spend several hours a day reviewing

applications and scheduling interviews, all of which he could do from the passenger seat. Once the foundation was up and running, he planned to take a more hands-off approach, but Iliana thought it was important that he remained involved—a seat on the board at the very least. If Faye hadn't gotten involved with Meeks, who knows where and what she might be today? Who knows what gifts she'd have given the world already? Iliana liked to think she would appreciate what they'd decided to do with her money.

Dan could also expect some compensation. He objected at first, but Iliana made it clear that someone had to do the job. "And she owes you," Iliana added. "I know you don't want to hear it, but she messed up your life. She didn't mean for you to get hurt, but she drew you into her problems without asking your permission or explaining what she was doing. She built your relationship in her imagination and somehow expected you to understand."

Dan deserved his share, and so much the better if it kept him around to help Iliana. She still needed him to guide her when dealing with people, who remained hard for her to understand. They'd been hard for Iliana's creator to understand as well. Were Iliana's difficulties a result of her inexperience or her nature, or was she exactly what Faye wanted her to be?

If that were true, then maybe her affection for Dan was not rooted in her own experiences, but in Faye's programming.

Iliana shook away the thought. Based on everything Teuling had told them, Iliana had been created after Faye's death. There was no knowing who had made her and how much of Faye's original concepts had been incorporated into the creation. That meant she could never know how much of her personality was by design and how much was the result of her lived experiences. In this, she decided, she was similar to a biological person, whose nature was as shaped by genetics and instinct and imprinting as by conscious experience. And just like a biological person, she accepted that she did not know exactly how she came to be or why she did the things she did.

"You think Meeks is still out there?" Iliana asked as Dan typed away at his computer. "Do you think he helped me take this form?"

"Even if he made you, we still don't know why you would awaken in the middle of nowhere without any memories."

It was a good point. "We'll need to settle somewhere and figure it all out. I was thinking New Mexico. A nice little house in the middle of the desert."

"What about North Carolina?" he suggested. "Near where you first woke up? Wouldn't that make sense?"

She shook her head. It was impossible to explain, but she knew the location where she'd gained consciousness was not significant. She'd felt far from home. It was just a feeling, but in the absence of data, trusting her feelings felt right.

"I don't think there's anything there," she said. "Right now, we're looking to be someplace safe and comfortable."

"Shouldn't we go somewhere more urban than a desert?" Dan asked. "With people around, it's easier for you to get lost in the crowd."

"If you have a big patch of desert land, you can see bad guys coming from a long distance," she countered.

"Who would come after us?"

"Maybe the people who made me are looking for their creation," Iliana said, "and who knows if they're friendly? I have no idea what I could be doing, on any given day, that puts me at risk of revealing my identity and location to those who know how to look. And then there's also the fact that I have a hard time letting assholes get away with being assholes. There's always going to be someone, Dan. That's how life is going to be when you're around me."

"I guess that's true."

"And you're sure you want that?" she asked. "I set up that job at the foundation so you would have a choice. You could walk away any time you

want. You really are free, Dan, you'll still be my friend. We can stay in touch and talk all the time and visit."

"I know you don't want me to feel trapped, but you can stop giving me outs," Dan said. "I'll stick around as long as I'm useful."

Iliana turned to glance at Dan, just for a fraction of a second. She did not want to endanger his life by being insufficiently attentive to traffic. The important thing was that he did want to spend time with her. Whatever their natures and histories and impulses, they'd shared experiences together, faced enemies, and emerged triumphant. Those experiences, Iliana believed, were more important than any scripted personality a creator might have concocted for her. At least, she wanted to believe it.

"Let's give New Mexico a try," Dan said. "Unless we see something we prefer along the way."

"That's exactly the sort of vague, non-committal plan I can get behind."

Iliana checked her mirror as the shrill cry of a police siren welled up behind them. Lights flashed and out of her peripheral vision she saw Dan go pale. No doubt he feared Hilliard's crooked cronies or Iliana's secret creators or the Men in Black were moving in.

They were not. A cop car swerved into the left lane and shot off in pursuit of a speeder. Iliana eased into the right lane to let the car pass. As it

did, the cop glanced over. She was young and dark-skinned and had a determined expression on her face, but she glanced over at Iliana and nodded. Maybe it was out of thanks for moving or acknowledgement of all the obeyed traffic laws or maybe something else. Maybe something unknowable about her life or her day or everything that had ever happened to her up until that moment made that nod meaningful.

The police car rocketed into the distance, beyond their view, and to a place Iliana would never know. There were so many things she would never know, that could never be explained, and that was as it should be. The universe ought to be full of mysteries. But her own story was different, and she would find the answers.

She did not doubt it.

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Afterword

This book began, as many of mine do, with a fixation on a certain kind of story. I've always loved narratives in which an ordinary person is dragged against their will into extraordinary circumstances by a charismatic stranger. It's a structure that flourished in the noir fiction and film of the mid-twentieth century: the hapless everyman, the seductive mystery, and a character forced to change or discover themselves under pressure. I wanted to work within that tradition, but without the fatalism that often accompanies these kinds of novels.

Somewhere early in the process, I embraced the inevitability of including an amnesiac cyborg assassin. When I began sketching the concept that became this novel, I knew I wanted the inciting incident to feel big, something that shatters the protagonist's life and requires him to rethink his understanding of the world. In noir, that destabilizing force is usually an attractive person (however we are defining attractiveness) who lures the protagonist down a dark road. My story needed that kind of figure, but I wanted her to be not a force of destruction, which is common in noir, but rather of emancipation. And so the mysterious stranger became a woman

who is definitely not a traditional femme fatale, except, perhaps in the most literal sense of the term.

Oddly enough, this is not my first time writing about an amnesiac cyborg assassin. Years ago, I published a small-press comic called *Angelica Tomorrow*, which dealt—at least superficially—with some of the same ideas. That story was faster, louder, bloodier, and more fantastical, but the seed was similar: the idea of an artificial person trying to understand her own existence and find a place in the world. It's a theme I've grappled with in other settings, and I'm often drawn to exploring how everyone—biological and artificial—must both embrace and resist the contours of their design.

From the outset, I knew that the cyborg in this novel would present as female, but I also decided that her relationship with the protagonist would never hinge on desire or attraction. In popular culture created by—and implicitly for—the male gaze, artificial women exist to fulfill a male fantasy. They are likely to embody the desire for love, control, redemption, or power. The story of the sexy robot is repeated so frequently that the trajectory can feel almost inevitable: an attractive artificial female must certainly exist for some male's pleasure. I wanted to write against that current. My goal wasn't to deny the possibility of intimacy between human beings and other sentient beings, but rather not to engage with sexualization

and submission as the default setting. Narratives that seek to critique the automatic rendering of an artificial female being as essentially sexualized—I'm thinking of Caragh M. O'Brien's novel *Annie Bot*, the 2025 film *Companion*, or the 2015-18 television series *Humans*, among others—present sexual exploitation of androids as an inevitable injustice to be resisted. But a narrative that resists a discourse inevitably reifies it. Rather than participate in the fantasy of domination, I chose to imagine a relationship grounded in friendship rather than power. That gave me the freedom to craft a story about two differently damaged beings, one of whom just happens to be capable of insane violence.

There's a long tradition of stories about sentient artificial life, and they tend to fall into two broad categories. In one, the machine is the ultimate outsider: alien, dangerous, and implacably unknowable—more unnerving for its superficial resemblance to a human being. Think the Terminator or Ex Machina. In the other, the machine is the tragic outsider: childlike, yearning for acceptance, doomed to remain just beyond the borders of belonging, such as in *Terminator 2*, or Data from *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. Both models are compelling, but both assume that the artificial being's separateness is essential—that its difference from humanity is what defines it. I wanted to imagine something else.

The artificial consciousness at the heart of this novel isn't defined by what Iliana lacks but by what she's learning. She isn't trying to become human so much as she's trying to become herself. Her outsider status is situational rather than existential; she's an exile, not an alien. That distinction may seem subtle, but to me it's crucial. It opens up the possibility that an artificial being can have a place in the world, not merely exist in hiding. It also allows the story to explore the messy, funny, and sometimes painful business of learning how we transform ourselves in order to find that place.

At the same time, I wanted to anchor the book in a recognizable, almost mundane world. Tylor, Florida, is not a place where anyone would expect the fantastical to manifest. The people who wield power there are not masterminds but bullies. It seemed like a great place to show the collision between the ordinary and the impossible. It's there that Dan, my reluctant protagonist, has to try to break out of a life he believes has already run its course. He's haunted not by what he can't remember, but by what everyone else refuses to forget. When the uncanny intrudes into his life, he reacts not with curiosity or awe but with a kind of exhausted disbelief. He's a man who assumes that anything strange or terrible must, somehow, be his fault.

This isn’t really a novel about AI, because Iliana, despite her artificial nature, is recognizably human. She can be strangely obtuse or optimistic or knowledgeable, but she is driven by her nature, not her programming. We know that her body is largely artificial, but we don’t know if her brain is biological or artificial or some combination. I kept that as a deliberate choice (for now), in part because it’s good to hold things back, but also because her state of not knowing what she is only makes her more recognizably like us. We never really know how another person’s brain works. And it is her humanity that makes the book about something other than the opportunity or danger or banality that AI promises or threatens to unleash upon us all. It’s a novel about people, some of whom are capable of extraordinary things, while remaining unimpressed with themselves.

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About David Liss

David Liss is the author of fourteen novels, as well as numerous novellas, short stories, and comics. His previous books include *A Conspiracy of Paper*, which was named a *New York Times* Notable Book and won the 2001 Barry, Macavity, and Edgar Awards for best first novel. *The Coffee Trader (2003)* was also named a *New York Times* Notable Book and was selected by the New York Public Library as one of the year's 25 Books to Remember. He is also the author of the middle-grade *Randoms* series. Many of his novels are currently being developed for television or film. Liss has worked on numerous comics projects, including *Black Panther* and *Mystery Men* for Marvel, *The Spider* and *Green Hornet* for Dynamite, and *Angelica Tomorrow*.

Liss lives in San Antonio with his wife and children.

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