



JOHN W. MEFFORD

SERIES BOOK #3

WICKED GREED

WICKED GREED

A Novel

By
John W. Mefford

Greed Series: Book Three

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John W. Mefford Bibliography

The Greed Series

[FATAL GREED \(Greed Series #1\)](#)

[LETHAL GREED \(Greed Series #2\)](#)

[WICKED GREED \(Greed Series #3\)](#)

[GREED MANIFESTO \(Greed Series #4\)](#)

The Booker Series

[BOOKER – Streets of Mayhem \(Volume 1\)](#)

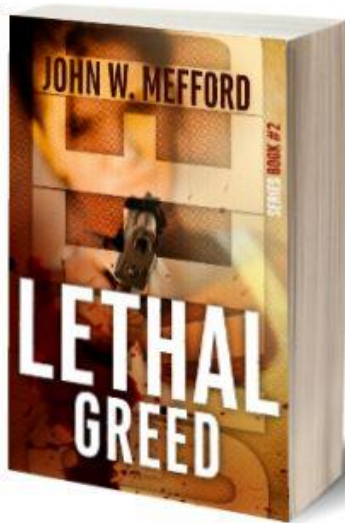
[BOOKER – Tap That \(Volume 2\)](#)

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For Mom and Dad.

"Greed is like a dark side of every man, and you could not see it from the appearance of a man, but in the inside the greedy beast is already dominating you."

— Steven Eric Chen

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Chapter One

Ten Years Ago

"The Hollywood of Europe," the young man read aloud, but could hardly hear his own words. A trio of musicians—playing an accordion, a fiddle, and a banjo—had captivated the frivolous crowd, which responded by singing and clapping to the harmonized tune, bodies swaying this way and that. He was certain nearly every one of them was under thirty years old and inebriated.

It was only two o'clock on a Wednesday afternoon and the whole town was shitfaced. *God love Ireland*, he thought.

The twenty-one-year-old college junior with a sculpted physique, thumbed the name *Jane Seymour* next to the quote on the laminated card. He licked his lips, thinking back through the catalog of Bond movies, and recalled the sultry actress in her prime, sauntering across the beach, more curves than a road twisting through the French Alps, landing on top of the cheesiest of Bonds, Roger Moore. He snapped his fingers and recalled the movie—*Live and Let Die*. Was there irony in that title?

Sitting on a wobbly wooden stool on the second floor of the seaside public house, he noticed two separate pockets of dancers quickly evolve from the mass of people...like boils ballooning from a grease burn.

He shifted his toes inside his Doc Martens and felt warped calluses scratching argyle socks. He eyed frothy suds at the bottom of his pint and allowed his mind to drift away. Bacon crackled and popped on the stove, chafing wounds stung his ankles and wrists, his mouth stuffed with an old pair of underwear. Then, a shot of unbearable pain exploded throughout his body, his toes forever scarred, his mind not far behind. Hidden pain. Breakfast was usually followed by playtime. *Her* playtime.

He blinked the image to the back of his mind and gently touched his face in three places, remaining steadfast to purge every thought from his past and to reinvent his future—molded by his own instinctive desires. He would become a man on this trip. A man with a purpose in life.

"Can I getcha 'nuther pint?"

Startled by the personal engagement, the man lifted his eyes to see the whitest, purest skin set against a sea of kinky red hair. He loved the Irish lilt in her voice. A wave of adrenaline enveloped his body, manifested by a brief appearance of goose bumps.

"Cat gotcha tongue, man?" She arched her eyebrows, highlighting playful turquoise eyes, and lifted his empty glass. "Guinness?"

He was ready to show the world he was finally a man, with undeniable charm, wit, and magnetism.

"If you're serving, I'm drinking," he said, and released a confident smile, knowing it would cause a slight dimple in his cheeks and a spark in his eyes as blue as the ocean.

"From across the pond, are ye?"

"Guilty as charged. Cuff me?" He winked, wondering how it would play.

She looked away, her tongue pressing the inside of her cheek. Was she going to unleash an Irish storm and smash the glass over his head? He didn't want things to get violent—although there was a strange feeling lurking beneath his conscious thoughts. He couldn't put a finger on it. Right now, the hunt was on, and he didn't feel like performing a psychoanalysis.

Her eyes narrowed, and shifted to his, as if she was studying him. He began to wonder if she'd noticed something about his complexion, or even worse, his deepest thoughts.

Without leaving his eyes, she sat down the glass, untied her blue-checkered waitress apron, and flipped it over a stool. She took his hand and brought it to her face. His pulse began to quicken, and he looked around, somewhat embarrassed by her public show of affection. No one noticed, and he realized he shouldn't care anyway.

She moved the beefy section of his palm, just under this thumb, across her lips. Then, she bit it. Softly at first, then with more force, her eyes fixated, not blinking. He did his best not to flinch, believing this interaction was everything he'd hoped for.

"Come with me," she requested, then grabbed his hand and led him like a dog on a leash through the throng of human bodies. Downstairs, she traipsed through the kitchen, dodging cooks and servers and bartenders. She kicked open a black metal door and turned on a dime, moving left down a narrow alley lined with trash bins and stained, gray stone walls. Near the end of the alley, an older woman huddled next to a grocery cart. Homeless, most likely. She glanced upward just as he passed, and he had an instant flashback. Something about her wrinkled skin flapping as her body moved.

The bouncing red hair in front of him re-engaged his senses, and his purpose.

Her pace picked up, and so did his pulse. She hung a right into another alley, then walked down a flight of stairs and turned left twice in twenty yards. He was lost, but he didn't give a shit. No words were spoken, but he couldn't help but eat up this game of...what? Cat and mouse? *Who would eat whom*, he wondered?

She got to a smallish, rounded door and opened it. Despite it being late afternoon, her brownstone was dark and damp, and absent of any sound.

He couldn't help himself. "What's next?"

"Quiet," she said. She leaned up and kissed him, her fang-like teeth tearing skin on his lower lip. "I'll be back in a quick minute. Meanwhile, drop the clothes, would ye?"

The first blood drawn was his. He chuckled. "Did I tell you I like your accent?" That was lame, he knew.

She didn't respond or turn around, as she disappeared into a dark corner.

He'd play along. Isn't that why he'd convinced his dear old dad to fork over ten grand for this trip anyway? Of course, he'd fabricated an entirely different story for his out-of-touch dad. He'd told him it was all about his exposure to new cultures, new ways of thinking—an opportunity for growth and fulfillment. How Dad ran a multimillion-dollar company perplexed him. Dad was so fucking gullible.

The crack of a whip pierced his left ear, and he literally jumped two feet in the air.

"You don't listen very well, do ye?" she asked, sounding more militaristic.

"Shit, you, uh, surprised me." He began to unbutton his shirt, his heart hammering his chest, a touch of fear invading his thoughts, and he eyed her outfit, full of metals studs, leather, and all sorts of piercings in places that normally were hidden.

"Three lashes for ye then."

He knew she was serious, and he ripped off his clothes. For the next hour, she played all sorts of games with her student, leaving welts, breaking skin, and drawing blood. He wasn't as experienced, but he caught on to the game, and knew her ultimate purpose. Finally, she jumped on top of him.

"Now, I'm ready to ride ye all the way home," she said with lust in her voice. She gyrated and clawed his ribcage with nails nearly as sharp as a scalpel.

He looked at the whole package: her pierced nipples, outlined in some type of leather bra, metal studs circling both biceps. Through the smell of sex and copper, he caught a waft of strawberry, as her soft curls swept his chest, then his face.

She began to groan, and she took his hand and rubbed her chest, then wrapped his fingers around her throat. He found it soothing, but also very erotic. He massaged every inch of her ashen skin, feeling every indentation.

Suddenly, the old lady in the alley flashed through his mind, which instantly leaped to a connection to the bitch who used to play her own games with him—when he was young, too young. He recalled hearing her babble on the phone, then releasing a torrent of curse words at him for interrupting her conversation. Her razor tongue would cut right through him, slicing his self-confidence into tiny pieces. Always wearing her stained, yellow-floral robe buttoned to the top of her chest, her jowls jiggled each time she barked, her voice the sound of phlegmy marbles.

They never jiggled as much as they did when she was laughing her ass off when he screamed bloody murder, his flesh burning from hot grease. Tied up and gagged, he couldn't do a damn thing about it.

His chest burned inside, a flame of fury building like an inferno. His whole body broke out in a sweat. He realized he'd been squeezing his eyes shut, and he popped them open and saw his hand gripping the Irish beauty's neck. The whites in her eyes grew larger, but she didn't try to stop him.

And he wasn't going to let go. Slowly, his grip grew stronger, his teeth and jaw clenched to enforce more power, more pressure. He could see a bit of fear in her eyes, and she touched his hand, but she still withheld the urge to yell and hit back.

She obviously thought it was all a part of the game. But he'd just rewritten the rules, and he wasn't removing his hand. Blue veins popped from his forearm, and he could feel sweat roll off his sideburns. Each second that passed, his grip tightened. Harder he squeezed. There was no going back, no stopping his own ecstasy, his destiny. Finally, she stopped gyrating, and dug her nails into his wrist. It only fueled his rage even more. She gasped for a slight breath. He could see panic in her bulging eyes, but he wouldn't let go. He couldn't let go. Her face turned purple and she swatted in desperate, stiff spurts. A swinging nail caught his cheek, drawing more blood, but he only growled like an animal at the height of climax.

Finally, her frame became completely limp. He held on for another full minute, not wanting to release the power he held over her—and his foster mom from so many years ago.

It was early evening as he maneuvered through cobblestone streets, a chilly mist lingering in the air, his mind and body tingling from the incredible sensation he'd just experienced. He exhaled a foggy breath, feeling more alive than any time he could recall.

Ireland. The home of lush, green hills dotted with herds of white sheep and majestic castles. Visitors could kiss the Blarney Stone or admire a bronze statue that highlighted the ample cleavage from the fictional seventeenth-century fishmonger, Molly Malone, the subject of Dublin's unofficial anthem of the same name. Ireland was the birthplace of whiskey and the shamrock, and home to four-hundred-year-old brownstones. But it was this seaside town of Brey, the second stop on his spring-break trip, that would forever hold a special place in his heart—if he truly had one.

He'd never forget the setting or the girl who'd finally allowed him to be the man he was meant to be. *Expressing your desires, your wants and needs...isn't that what life is all about?*

Indeed. Ireland was the bomb.

Chapter Two

Today

"Okay, I admit it. *This* is the third one."

I flapped the warm, printed paper and licked my lips as my wife Marisa raised an eyebrow—the not-so subtle invitation for me to get on with it and recite the words staring at me. Phlegm caught in my throat, and I coughed twice, then reached for a glass of perspiring ice water sitting on my oak desk. A circular water stain threatened to settle into the desk wood, so I quickly swiped my hand across the wet ring, then used a paper towel as a makeshift coaster.

A deep breath. "Look, I didn't tell you about the other two because I really didn't feel like it was serious."

"That's not what your editor thought."

We turned our heads and stared at my editor Brandon Cunningham, who hadn't said a word since my wife of two years had stepped through my office door thirty seconds earlier. Marisa crossed her arms and arched an eyebrow, while I shot mental, poisonous darts at him, and as associate publisher, my darts carried a fair amount of venom.

"You've gotta work on your delivery," I said to Brandon.

"What delivery?" asked Marisa.

"The one that got you so riled up about a couple of innocuous emails."

Brandon had run into Marisa at lunch and happened to mention the two previous pieces of communication that had been sent to our *Times Herald* "Letters to the Editor" inbox. Apparently, he thought I had already shared those with my wife of almost two years now.

"Michael Doyle, I don't equate innocuous with the word 'kill,'" she said.

She'd uttered my first *and* last name. Not a good sign. I leaned forward to comment, but she held up a finger and continued. "But from what I overheard walking in here, the first two emails aren't the real issue. The one we need to be concerned about is fluttering in the wind."

A thin smile escaped Maria's inflexible mouth, and that was difficult to attain, given her voluptuous set of lips. I could see that she'd drawn the conclusion—rightly so, I admitted to myself—that I was hiding something I thought could hurt her. If your hand is ever burned, you only think about never getting near another flame. If it's the hand of the one you love, you'd rather stick a needle in your eye than allow her to feel that type of agony again. My overprotective nature had been too protective for everyone involved, I realized. As I stood before the love of my life and my soon-to-be ex-editor, I knew by trying to avoid drudging up painful memories from her past, our past, I'd allowed my emotional connection with Marisa to screw with my threat compass. And I guess I'd decided that avoidance was my only way to deal with all of this...*What was this anyway?*

"Realize, this one just hit during lunch, so it's fresh off the press." My stomach twisted into anxious knots, knowing I'd been circumventing anything that would remotely bring Marisa close to the stress level—the unmitigated nightmare—from nearly a year ago when she was kidnapped at gunpoint and watched her mother murdered and beheaded right before her eyes. She'd suffered through many sleepless nights and cried more tears than could fill up drought-stricken Lake Texoma. Still, she'd always possessed an innate quality to bounce back from life's biggest tragedies and put them behind her, once again able to open her heart and reclaim her vivacious, spontaneous outlook on life.

She was awesome. And right now, she was pissed.

Two sets of arms were now folded, my audience obviously annoyed by my stalling tactics.

I couldn't avoid it any longer. "Here it goes."

To whom it may concern—and it should concern just about everyone out there:

In my first two notes, I gave you a glimpse into what life can be like as a foster child, bouncing around from house to house, hoping that the next parent or so-called "caretaker" would at the least see you as a commodity, one that if harmed wouldn't bring in the recurring state-mandated paycheck. But we all know there is harm, right? The kind that can really damage a kid's confidence, if you know what I mean. It's documented in the news repeatedly, but still nothing changes.

As for the skunk that I was forced to kill at my first foster home, and the little kitty that died by my seven-year-old hands at the fourth foster home, those were precursors to my future field of study. The female species—and the destruction thereof. Sounds like a great thesis topic, doesn't it?

Why have I shared with you more about my intimate, private life than anyone else? There is a small percentage of my conscience that wants to do the right thing. And whenever I've written about it in the past, that typically has allowed my uncontrollable feeling of wanting to destroy a woman's life to retreat into the back of my mind. It's not like the feeling is swept away, never to be heard from again, but it delays the ravenous all-you-can-eat desire to tear flesh from bone, if you know what I mean. But most of you probably don't.

I could force you to print this, like some of my predecessors in my chosen field have done—the field of crazy, sick bastards. But that would have no impact on my urges. Frankly, I usually can't control what I do. It's...how should I say, organic. A primal feeling comes over me that is insatiable and the only way that it can be truly relieved is by killing a young lady. I know that doesn't sound gentlemanly, or even humane, but some of us are wired differently in this fucked-up world.

BTW, while I'm very liberal in my fondness for all women, I've had a recent yearning for ladies with chestnut hair with blond highlights. Curls, lots of curls. I'm thinking Meg Ryan in When Harry Met Sally. But a modern day version of that.

Hope to hear from me soon. Yours Truly

Chapter Three

The three of us traded stares. Brandon's leg swayed back and forth, and shoelaces from his red and blue high tops slapped the metal leg of his chair. Marisa held her gaze at me, and I knew the thoughts and memories that were battling for supremacy in her mind.

I popped two knuckles and inhaled a deep breath, not wanting to go down this path again. We'd experienced a lifetime of gut-wrenching drama in just the last two years, Marisa in particular. I could never again watch her endure that type of pain—emotional or physical.

Marisa had just returned from a five-day cruise through the Bahamas. Knowing I couldn't get away from the paper, I surprised her with the expensive Christmas gift, and even sprung for her friend, Carrie, to tag along and be her sidekick. From what Marisa shared, Carrie turned out to be more of a sideshow than a tag-along pal. Carrie had spent most of her time trying to snag the most eligible bachelor on board the five-story ocean liner. In fact, one night Marisa was forced to sleep upright against the hallway wall when Carrie's tryst became an all-night marathon. Still, the ladies enjoyed their share of girl time too—relaxing, snorkeling, shopping, and drinking. Marisa returned less than forty-eight hours ago looking like she was twenty-three, instead of the thirty-three on her driver's license. Her youthful energy and playful spirit had been fully restored, and that brought a huge smile to my face.

But the effects of the stress-reducing cruise had probably just evaporated in two quick minutes—which is the main reason I'd kept the first two emails to myself. That and the fact I knew she'd be as protective of me as I was of her.

"I guess we should address the elephant in the room, huh?" I said.

"You mean the chestnut hair with blond highlights?" Marisa held up her locks. "And you gotta love the curls."

"Do you want to go stay with your aunt down in San Antonio for a few weeks, just while we work through this story?" My voice had raised a half octave. I glanced at Brandon, realizing we were playing out all of this personal drama in front of my editor, who, I admitted, would probably keep his job. Brandon's mouth was sealed shut.

"Really, Michael? Come on, you and I know I'm not going to San Antonio or the Como motel, or anywhere. This is all just a coincidence," Marisa said, starting to get up from her chair and put on her tan, all-weather coat. "We just need to chill and not let our minds run wild."

I jumped up, eager to help her put on her coat. I nodded my head at Brandon. Gesturing toward the door, he got the hint to exit stage right.

"Look, I'm glad you're not jumping to conclusions about this. I realize I overreacted, and I didn't use the best judgment." I held her shoulders and looked into her honey brown eyes.

She put her hand on my chest. "It's okay. It's not like we don't have a history of being drawn into some tense interactions."

That's putting it mildly, I thought, but didn't want to further excite the stress meter.

"Deep down, you and I both know it's really not about any threat. Because there isn't one. It's more about you worrying about my emotional well-being. Thank you."

She wrapped her arms around my midsection and kissed my neck. I held fast to our bear hug and returned the kiss on her cheek. Then our mouths met for a brief but meaningful kiss.

"We're both grownups, so let's just agree to share everything and not feel like we need to protect each other," she said.

"I love it when you lay down the law. It's sexy."

I checked out my office window then brushed the front of her breast with my thumb.

"When you coming home?" she said quietly, running her tongue across her lips.

I chuckled and brought her closer. Her eyes danced with excitement.

"Oh, it's good to see blood is still getting to your brain...and other parts of your body," she whispered seductively.

Another deep kiss.

"No working late tonight," she ordered with a smile.

"That's the last thing on my mind."

Chapter Four

Sporadic pops filled the meeting room, where three entire walls were floor-to-ceiling glass, followed by a domino of aluminum squeaks. I took two long chugs of my Diet Coke, and four others did the same with their drinks of choice. Only one chose non-caffeine. Andi, our paid intern who was finishing her last seven hours at the University of North Texas while working near full-time hours at the paper, sipped a Mandarin Key Lime Oogave. She had no issues following her own path.

"We've only got a few minutes to discuss this third note before Detective Pearson arrives with his team," I said over a number of active voices.

A couple of glances, but four of my best journalists—and that includes the coed—couldn't contain their sheer excitement at the thrilling story that had been dropped at our electronic doorstep. They acted like kids exchanging stories and candy after a triumphant Halloween night of trick-or-treating, minus the costumes. Well, all except Stu, whose droopy bags under his eyes, and saggy jowls made him look like a cousin to Richard Nixon.

"Listen up, people. Let's dial back the sugar high for just a few minutes and discuss our next steps."

"You know, they never caught the Zodiac killer. At least, they don't think they caught him. Maybe he's resurfaced here in North Texas, and he's blessed us with his musings," Brandon said, practically frothing at the mouth.

"Do you know how many quacks send letters, emails, black roses with a haunting poem, whatever, to their local newspaper? It's all about publicity, regardless of what the note says. Probably just some college kid getting his jollies," said Stu, who did a double take with Andi. "Oh, sorry. You know what I mean."

"Not a problem. I'm sure there are a lot of college kids gettin' their jollies doing any number of things," she said. "But this doesn't sound like a bored student. More like a bitter, sick man who can't contain his bizarre urges."

Stu took another drink of his canned soda, but dribbled some down his chin and onto his faded-blue, button-down shirt. He grabbed a napkin and dabbed the stain.

"You both make convincing arguments," I stated transparently. "But we're the watch dogs, so we err on the side of caution."

"I really don't think we should print this, even though he's, more or less, teasing us to," Brandon said.

"I agree...for now." I glared at Brandon, trying not to openly roll my eyes. He was wearing his new Boston Strong baseball cap backward. I admired his devotion to worthy causes, but why couldn't he carry out his loyalty without disrespecting the Great Game of Baseball? I clicked my pen twice and refocused my thoughts.

"Stu, dig into this email and pull it apart. Search our archives and try to find anyone who gives off the same vibe as this nut job." I checked a couple of notes I'd written, then

looked up and noticed Andi had been mute for more than a few seconds—an all-time record for her.

She gave me a wistful smile. I think that meant she was upset with me not giving her the lead role in this story that could explode into something that might draw national attention.

I addressed her near-pout gently but firmly. "Look, I appreciate your initial thoughts on this guy, Andi, but you've got your hands full with this new feature series you've been working, plus there's school."

She brushed her wavy, dark-brown hair to the side of her ear and nodded. The slender, athletic intern, who after just a year working in a professional environment, had more than earned her stripes. And I knew that given her internal drive and the DNA she'd inherited from her much-heralded father, journalistic greatness was just a matter of time. Like most youth, though, patience wasn't exactly her strong suit.

Then Brandon blew a hole in the happy balloon I'd just given Andi. He said, "Do you think there's any way that this guy is connected at all with the weekly features Andi and Hector are pulling together?" Brandon's question was obvious, considering they'd run two feature-length stories about adoption—the process, the cost, the holes in the system, looking at it from every perspective involved. Two more stories were planned for the next two Sunday editions. Hector, our senior photographer, had provided some amazing pictures to accompany each of Andi's insightful stories. Both truly captured the emotion involved from all sides.

"I wondered the same thing sitting here," Andi said. "But the timing isn't right. The first email hit two Fridays ago, but our first adoption feature didn't run until two days later." She shrugged her shoulders.

I picked up the printed email and found myself re-reading the part about forcing us to print the content. Brandon rolled his fingers on the table, and I glanced his way.

"You thinking the same thing?" he asked.

I nodded. "If this guy's for real, and we don't see another email next Friday, then we might be writing a story about a murdered woman."

Chapter Five

I'd first met Detective Carl Pearson when I worked at J&W Technology Services and I was propelled into a murder cover-up investigation. Actually, he was the one leading the formal police expedition, while I joined forces with my journalism friends to determine who'd killed a beautiful, bright receptionist. The tangled web ended up snagging business executives, wealthy community leaders, city employees, even the police chief. While initially skeptical about my instincts and conspiracy theories, Carl finally came around. And, in an unspoken way, we'd developed a bit of mutual respect.

He, along with his partner Roger Smith, sat to my left; the rest of my team—Brandon, Stu, Andi—sat opposite of Franklin's finest. Carl's long legs ate up the low back, swivel chair. He looked like a throwback to Shaft, with his shaved head and well-groomed goatee. He wore a gray mock turtleneck, and his gold watch matched his gold-rimmed Ray-Bans sitting next to his notepad.

"Can I get you anything...water, soft drink?" I asked Carl and Roger.

"Water is good." Carl took the bottle, uncorked the cap, and downed a quick swig while reviewing his notes. He was the epitome of cool.

"Let's start by taking a look at the..." Before he finished, I slid over a copy of the third email. I also gave one to his more doughy, and hairy, partner.

"Wow, Doyle, you attract maggots like you're a walking trash bin," Carl said, setting down the hard copy.

"Uh, thanks."

A flash popped to my right. Our cameraman, Hector, was taking a few shots of the meeting, in case we became part of the story along the way—Brandon's idea. Carl didn't object, although his scowl said otherwise.

The eight-year detective cleared his throat and looked at Brandon, Stu, and Andi, all with pens touching paper, like Carl was about to provide the secret formula to Coca-Cola.

"Anyone else know about this email?" He directed the question at me.

"Just my wife."

"Marisa, right," he held up a finger, nodded his head and let out a subtle chortle.

He crossed his arms, and his biceps and triceps rippled through the shirt.

"Our cyber unit will be here shortly, and they'll want to understand your IT security, firewalls, email software, and then they'll go back to headquarters and start their research," Carl explained. "From there, who knows where this could take us."

Andi volunteered, "Hopefully, to a basement where a psychotic man is sitting in a diaper, sucking on his bottle, bullying other geeks who do the same thing." Everyone stared at her. I rolled my eyes, rethinking her recent maturity leap. Then again, she was years ahead of a twenty-two-year-old Michael Doyle.

Roger took Carl off to the side of the meeting room, and they talked briefly.

Carl walked back to the table and sat down again. "So, can any of you think why this lunatic is targeting your paper with these emails?"

Heads shook side to side.

"Andi's been writing weekly feature stories about adoption, although the first one didn't run until two days after the first email," Brandon offered.

I tossed each detective hard copies of the first two emails, which were, essentially, summarized in the last email.

Carl brought his thumb and forefinger to his chin while looking at the three pieces of paper.

"Outside of warning every female in the region, especially those with curly, highlighted hair, there's not a lot we can do to prevent anything at this point," Carl said. "Our best hope is the cyber team."

"Are you concerned about the pattern of emails hitting each Friday?" Stu asked.

"The content itself is salacious enough. But the need to share his thoughts and desires, along with the patterned repetition of the communication, are traits typical of a certain kind of perp," Carl acknowledged, briefly looking down.

"What kind is that?" Andi asked.

"The worst kind. A serial killer."

Chapter Six

Intellectual stimulation. That's all Whitney had ever wanted. Well, that plus someone with an idea on where he was going in life—and that didn't involve a wide-eyed teenager yanking a stained sheet off his bed, tossing it over his shoulder, and marching off to the weekly fifty-keg toga party.

The twenty-three-year-old graduate student swept her left hand across her tapered houndstooth trousers, then gently raised the cone-shaped stemmed glass and sipped her cosmopolitan. It had been six months since she'd been intimate, and while brains and internal drive were at the top of her 'husband search' checklist, she couldn't ignore the natural urges to be held, caressed by a chiseled, sophisticated man. A man who would desire every inch of her sneaky curves across her five-foot-seven-inch frame—as well as respect and admire her advanced intellect.

Yes indeed, she had to admit, she wanted the whole package.

The local band, The Blasters, had just taken their ten o'clock break, allowing the bouncers to drain the bar of all the under-twenty-one kids, who possessed one-track minds so infantile she couldn't imagine them ever contributing to society. In just the last hour, Whitney had been approached three times by one of these boys, each of whom had the charisma of a Saint Bernard. Come to think of it, the overconfident, inebriated frat boys had just as much drool hanging out of their lustful jowls as the husky dog. She sighed, thinking the four-legged pillow might be a nice back-up companion plan if she didn't start making some headway in the man department. At least a dog was faithful, protective, and always appreciated a good back rub.

Situated on a bustling street, a stone's throw from the tree-lined Ole Miss campus, Proud Larry's had been serving drinks to students for years, but had slowly developed a young professional type of crowd. Jenny, Whitney's long-time roommate had wanted to ride shotgun on this venture, but Whitney realized the multi-friend approach was outdated and, frankly, cramped her style. She had developed into a confident, desirable woman—in every sense of the word. And she'd accept nothing less from her future partner.

She felt a slap of cold wind escape through the front door, and she rubbed her arms, which were covered in a nearly see-through blouse with three-quarter-length sleeves. "Excuse me, I think you might be better off with this." Whitney turned and felt her cardigan sweater being placed over her shoulders. She reached back and touched a hand, a few hairs extending off the knuckles, long, large fingers. A man's hand.

"Oh, why thank you."

His smile was warm, genuine, and he had cute, spiky, dirty-blond hair. She caught herself peering into his magnetic, hazel eyes. An elongated pause.

"Can I get you another cosmo?" he asked.

Whitney flinched, a hopeful spark ignited inside. Then, she noticed the white towel draped across his shoulder. He was a bartender. Her heart sank a couple of notches.

"Why sure, it can't hurt on a Saturday night."

The man reached in front, nearly brushing her D-cup breasts, picked up her empty glass, and wiped the table clean. His plaid shirt rolled up, veins popped on his taut forearms.

"I'll be right back with that drink." He gave her a left-eyed wink and popped his dimpled smile.

Whitney let out a breath, and her shoulders dropped two inches, realizing her heart longed for what it couldn't—or in this case shouldn't—want. She watched the band members congregate on the lectern. The ponytailed drummer caught her eye, but she'd never give in to that temptation. That last thing she wanted was to follow a band from city to city, gig to gig, living a nomadic lifestyle. She could envision the party lasting a few weeks then slowly drummer boy would venture away to experiment with other females of his choosing. Once a groupie, always a groupie, she knew.

"Here you go, miss." The bartender gracefully placed the drink on a napkin. His hands were only inches away from hers. They looked so perfect, almost out of place for someone working the bar.

"Thank you." She batted her plush eyelashes without even trying, and she caught the sparkle of those hazel eyes again.

"Can I get you anything else? An appetizer, anything?"

Sure, just rip off your shirt, swoop me off this stool, and carry me to eternal marital bliss.

"I think I'm good. Thanks anyway."

He turned and ambled away, and she watched each step.

A few minutes passed, and she felt a buzz from her third cosmo. The band jammed, and she tapped her black heels to the rhythm. She caught herself staring at the incredible dexterity and rhythm exhibited by the ponytail, flinging his sticks with such intensity. Maybe drummer boy would get his once-in-a-lifetime shot at Miss Whitney. Even southern belles had yearnings that could be ignored only so long.

Just as the band strummed their last power chord of the evening, Whitney took her mirror out of her silver purse. A little fluff of the hair here and there, some fresh lipstick, and she was ready for action. She pulled her purse strap across her chest and rose from the seat. One step later, a bar waitress hopped on stage—her braless boobs flopping like water balloons under her tank top—and grabbed drummer boy and laid a wet one on him. He didn't appear to be overly interested, but boob girl clung to her new toy like he was the last man on earth.

Fine, Whitney thought. Drummer boy deserved no better than boob girl, certainly not the pure, refined qualities of Miss Whitney Mayfield—sculpted body, charming wit, and endless brains.

Whitney emptied the last three drops of her drink and turned on a dime for the door, ready to end the night and return to her bottled eyeglasses, never-ending science labs, and fading dreams of finding Mr. Perfect before she morphed into her forty-nine-year-old mother, saggy like a dried-up prune.

Three steps from the door, she caught a glimpse of someone familiar off to the right, head buried in a book. She scooted sideways a few feet to see if that could be the same person. His hands adjusted silver-rimmed glasses and turned a page—effortlessly, yet with patience and attention to detail. That was the difference, she could see from a

distance. This perfectly shaped man cared about the small things in life, and she could envision how attentive he'd be in all parts of their life together—especially under the sheets.

Maybe that was the alcohol talking. It matters not at this point.

"Hi."

"Well, hi back," he said, sitting more upright.

"You're done for the night, huh?" She clenched her teeth, thinking she might have blown it by calling out the fact he was nothing more than a bartender in a college town.

"Actually, just getting started." He held up the oversized book, and she read *Business Law* across the hard back. Her heart skipped a beat. "I got at least a couple of hours ahead of me. Big test tomorrow if I plan to graduate here in May."

She held up her hand. "Well, I don't want to keep you. I need to—"

He jumped up and pulled out her chair, extending his hand. "No, by all means, please sit, have a cup of coffee with me. I could use a nice conversation. I'm Sam Baldwin."

"Whitney. Whitney Mayfield."

Jackpot.

Chapter Seven

"Enough about me," Sam said, setting down his coffee mug. "Please enlighten me on what a day in the life of Whitney is like."

A look-away, sheepish grin. *How endearing*, he thought.

"Well, most of the time you won't find me looking like this." Hands framed her round face, accentuated by a cute indentation at her chin. Her platinum-blond hair fell just below her shoulders with a teasing curl at the ends. And that neck was to die for.

"I'd hope not. You'd have to keep a whip in one hand just to keep the men at bay," he said while leaning forward on his elbows.

Whitney snorted then caught herself, like she'd just exposed some dark secret. "Oh my, I can't believe I just did that." She blushed and fanned her face.

"You crack me up. We've been sitting here...what, it's after two a.m., so for an hour or so. I feel like we've been friends for years."

They held their gaze for a good ten seconds.

"So, I know you said you're getting your master's degree in science, but I'm not sure I caught on to what kind. I may get the law, but I'm not a science wiz."

"My studies have an emphasis on computational hydroscience and engineering."

"I'm guessing you'd conduct a fair amount of research, using computational simulation models, studying environmental impacts across a variety of water-oriented and conservation projects? Or something like that."

"And you're not a science wiz? That was amazing."

Whitney couldn't contain herself, and she reached for his hand.

Sam could see her chest heave with excitement, butterflies undoubtedly fluttering inside her pretty little stomach.

He knew he had her.

He grinned, extending that unspoken connection. Then, a timely yawn. "I'm sorry. I've been up studying the last three nights."

"Oh, that's completely okay. I've been there myself."

He glanced at his watch. "Look, I don't know if you brought your car, but would you like me to drive you home before I go catch about fours of sleep?"

She pursed her lips, obviously disappointed the night would end without testing the big bang theory.

"Oh, Sam, that's so sweet."

Five minutes later, Sam's eight-year-old Passat faced south on Lamar Boulevard at University Avenue.

Whitney broke the brief silence. "I'm to the right here."

"I'm down that way, to the left."

A city sweeper crept by, while they waited for a red light behind a Dodge Charger black and white police car. Sam's right arm rested on the center console, his left wrist hooked over the steering wheel.

"I guess it's cool to see the good guys never sleep," Whitney said.

"In this town, the only thing they'll find at this hour is a drunk kid peeing off the side of the curb."

Whitney giggled like a teenager, then she moved her arm on top of his.

"Sam, would you mind turning left?" She raised her eyebrows and clutched his hand. "I can help you study."

"That would be nice." He nodded his head and gave her an assuring smile. He focused to keep his blood rush at bay. It was all about timing, he knew from experience.

Just outside his apartment door, her petite fingers danced along Sam's ribcage, and he laughed so hard he had difficulty getting his key into the lock. "I guess they don't teach coordination in business law class," Whitney said playfully, laughing right along.

They waltzed into the dark apartment, and Sam flipped on a lamp. He turned back around, and Whitney slammed against his body, mouth and tongue first. After a minute of kissing and hands wandering to all sorts of places, Sam grasped her shoulders and looked into her green eyes.

"I want to take this nice and slow. Let me get a couple of things ready for a night we'll never forget."

Whitney twisted her finger in her blond hair and lightly bit her lower lip. "I'll be right back," she said. "Powder room is...?"

"Down the hall, second door on the left."

"Miss me." Off she floated.

Sam moved into the dinette area—void of any furniture—and stood in the middle of the dusty crimson rug he'd recently picked up for four bucks at an apartment garage sale. He de-robed and pulled out his new favorite instrument from the kitchen drawer, hiding it behind his hand, but careful not to bend his wrist.

Whitney exited the bathroom and turned the corner to the kitchen area, only wearing a bra and panties. "I'm all yours," she said, then seductively licked her lips.

"Yes, you are."

She stared at the perfect specimen before her. He could see her eyes ogle every chiseled edge, stopping at his midsection. Just like all the others, she was fixated, consumed by a single tool that she thought would blow her head off. She was partially correct.

She put two hands on his chest and kneaded his skin down to his six-pack. Just as she reached for his tool, he spun her around and kissed the back of her neck. She unhooked her bra and he slid down her panties. He knew she could feel him throbbing against her toned backside.

"I love it this way," she said, her neck limp from his moist kisses.

Sam slid his left hand up her curved hip and brushed the side of her breast. She moaned, and he wrapped his arm around her torso. His already quickened heart rate sailed past one hundred fifty. Anticipation was the most erotic part—almost. His muscles tensed, and he fingered the rounded, number ten scalpel blade.

"Take me," she whispered.

"I'd have it no other way."

"What?"

He jerked his right arm in front of her body, slit her carotid artery, and ripped out her larynx. This climax was unlike any other.

Chapter Eight

Alley. The word didn't fit. I rounded the curve off the narrow path of concrete that connected to the driveway running behind our house. I circled onto the street and approached the home Marisa and I had shared for just six months. Suburban alleys existed to increase so-called curb appeal, and it worked. But in my mind, alleys were an urban fixture, nothing more than a trench of filth, waste and, from what I'd experienced, occasionally, a dead body. I tapped the brakes, simultaneously purging old images from his mind.

I threw the gearshift of my aging, forest-green Honda Accord into park and hopped out to pick up the frost-covered newspaper. A plume of cold air pumped out of my mouth as I gazed across a yard of dormant Bermuda grass, well-trimmed shrubs, and two live oaks, then looked down the street and saw mostly the same on each of the postage-stamp front lawns. God knows why Texas, of all places, squeezed homes together like it was edict from our forefathers. Maybe one day Marisa and I would really spread our wings and relax on a piece of property similar to that owned by my boss, Arthur Spanarkel. He and his wife Trudy had created a prairie-style paradise on their ten acres, full of wild flowers, a Texas-sized pond, overgrown weeping willows, and a thriving vegetable garden—adequately caged to keep out the raccoons and armadillos.

In one smooth motion, I tossed the paper in the passenger's seat, removed my iPhone, flipped it around, swiped my thumb to the right, and tapped the weather button. Thirty-eight degrees. I rubbed my hands, blew into them, and cranked the heat. The engine growled in return.

I glanced at the clock, knowing my post-nine-o'clock Monday morning arrival at the office would turn a few heads. I felt no remorse. Marisa had used her sensual ways to coerce me into jumping back in bed after my shower. A smile crossed my face, and a warm sensation permeated through my core.

We had spent the weekend reminding ourselves how much fun it was sharing our lives. On Friday night, we put on baggy pajamas, cooked popcorn, started a fire, and watched the latest horror flick on Netflix. Amazingly, the bloody showdown made Marisa frisky, and the night ended with our first lovemaking session of the weekend. Saturday and Sunday were filled with a few chores, antique shopping, and an afternoon of playoff football. Nothing says love like having your wife nestled next to you on the couch for six hours while grown men try to destroy each other. While I watched the games, she read her Kindle, one of the new sexy, contemporary romance novels by Melissa Foster, *Game of Love*. Marisa let out three couch-smacking laughs and a couple of sniffles. By the time of the last two-minute warning, Marisa's sleepy head lay against my shoulder, her tousled, frizzy hair tickling my neck, the scent of coconut hanging in the air.

The nasally sound of a horn beeped twice, reminding me to shift right and stay in my lane. I slowed to a stop at the Main Street red light, then exhaled and popped a knuckle.

That head of hair. So many wonderful memories with Marisa, and besides her warm eyes, her hair is what strikes me most vividly, starting with the first time I ever laid eyes on her. Striding down the sidewalk with a slight hip swivel, she'd combed her fingers through those voluminous curls, trying to tame the beast. Now, the golden locks reminded us—me at least, since Marissa had already seemed to erase it out of her mind—of the disturbing email. It sounded like it came from a real, honest-to-God stalker, someone who easily communicated thoughts of killing living things, pets and people—women, especially those with curly, highlighted hair. How had he put it? *Meg Ryan from Sleepless in Seattle. A modern day version of that.*

Marisa.

The Friday afternoon email "intervention" had created more anxiety than I'd felt since...well, before the incident that had left an indelible mark on my life, Marisa's life, and the life we'd hopefully share forever. I let the content of the email churn in my brain, and my palms stuck to the steering wheel. Eager to turn my runaway thoughts into action, I sped through a yellow light and hooked a left into the *Times Herald* parking lot, momentarily squealing the stressed tires.

Almost instantly, I spotted Shaft, the bald head and his tan leather jacket, standing next to a shorter, white man wearing an oversized suit. Four navy blue Crown Victorias were parked at odd angles. Three people wearing navy blue, lightweight jackets milled about, all with serious expressions. One entered the building, turning his back as the door shut. My heart jumped into my throat. I read three yellow letters on the back of his jacket: FBI.

Chapter Nine

"Look what the motherfuckin' cat dragged in," Carl said, sounding a tinge like Samuel L. Jackson from *Pulp Fiction*. He turned his gold watch then glanced back at me.

I ignored the slight dig. "FBI, huh?"

"Michael, this is Special Agent Bobby Guidry."

"Nice to meet you." The FBI special agent shook my hand. *Damn, that was clammy.* He immediately pulled out a comb and ran it through his black, greased-back hair, all the while looking beyond me, turning his head like he was manning a post.

The pair of law enforcement officials agreed to speak inside, and I led the way into the building. I knocked on Brandon's door and waved to get Stu's attention while I walked to the glass wall meeting room. I peered across the newsroom and saw two blue jackets exiting our server room. Before words left my mouth, Brandon entered the meeting room.

"They got here thirty minutes ago. They don't waste time. They said they needed full access to the building, focusing mostly on our IT hardware and software."

I nodded at Carl and the Fed and said, "Do you guys mind catching me up?" I waved them to grab a seat.

"Look, we don't have a lot to share, so we'll stand," said Special Agent Guidry, pulling up his ill-fitting pants.

"Works for me." I walked to the fridge. "Can I get a drink for anyone?" Stu had slipped into the room. "Diet Coke for me," he said. Three heads shook *no*, so I grabbed Stu's drink and a bottled water for me.

"Never thought I'd be meeting with the FBI. I'm assuming, Carl, your cyber team found something?"

"It's more what they didn't find." Carl and the special agent traded awkward stares, then both held out their arms.

"Is this a comedy routine?" I asked. It was obvious the roles and responsibilities had not been ironed out between our local PD and the federal agency.

"Look, Mr. Doyle—"

"Michael."

"Michael, Carl's team did what they could with the resources they had. Apparently, this email was sent in a sophisticated manner." I heard the hint of an accent that wasn't familiar, like his mouth was full of gumballs.

"So, what does that really mean, Special Agent?"

"Just call me Guidry; everyone does. It means a simple scan searching for the IP address didn't work, so Carl called me up. We've worked a couple of other cases together."

"And?"

"And we've had about twenty-four hours to look into it. Nothing solid yet, but thus far we can see that the email bounced off servers across Europe and the Middle East, even the Far East, until it hopped a few times in the states."

"Is there a possibility then that while we might be dealing with an IT whiz, this guy could very well be sitting in a hut in Pakistan...no harm to anyone?" Law enforcement heads turned to face each other and I tried to study their slight facial movements.

Guidry said, "There's only so much I can share, will share, especially to the press."

"Look, we're not going to print any of this. When we're ready to run anything, we'll get your formal response if we have any questions."

"That works." He licked his lips and jingled some change in his pocket. "Listen, this guy could be in Dubai, he could be in a double-wide in Nacogdoches. I don't want to close any doors at this point on the origin of the email, or his intent."

Stu coughed to get my attention, as if he had a question. "Don't you guys have this Behavioral Science Unit that could look at the email?" Stu asked, taking a quick peek at his notepad.

Guidry jingled more change and stiffly turned toward Carl, who shrugged.

"Did you guys plant a listening device on me?" Carl chuckled at his own ridiculous notion.

"To me, the email content is far too advanced for it to be attributed to someone having a little fun with the press," Guidry said then. "I've seen other notes, similarly written. So, yes, I passed it along to BSU." He nodded at Stu.

I huffed out a breath and bit the inside of my cheek, hoping this guy *was* in Dubai rather than a couple of hundred miles away in East Texas. "Guys, I want to make sure no one at this paper is in danger, or anyone at home, mainly my wife—who happens to have curly, blond-highlighted hair." I looked at the man with all the power.

"We don't either. BSU has their shit together. They'll start putting together a profile in days, looking for obvious connections to other email communications, previous arrests, and so on. Their database is the size of China."

Hearing that the mystery email now held considerable weight with the FBI, my gut began to tighten. I knew we couldn't downplay the serious nature of what this person said he had done—and would do. I realized I'd been sweating and flapped my elbows like a bird.

"We'll try to keep you guys in the loop as we make progress." Guidry clapped his hands, obviously ready to move on.

"Do that, please."

"Any questions?"

"Uh, yeah. Your accent sounds...different. I just can't place it."

"I'm a Ragin' Cajun, my man. Born and bred in the great state of Louisiana."

That explained the gumballs.

Chapter Ten

Steam curled out of the insulated coffee cup, carrying a scent of cinnamon. Andi unhooked her hands from around the container and blew gently before taking her first sip. The flavored mocha warmed her insides. She glanced at the door, but didn't see anyone matching the description of Dawn: white, five-three, larger than the average model, short, auburn hair.

She found herself a bit anxious, likely because of the clandestine nature of this meeting. Her third feature on the adoption process had just run three days prior in the Sunday edition—above the fold, boxed, and with a special headline font reserved for such stories. Dawn had sent Andi a brief email, saying she had additional information she wanted to share—information that would "shock" Andi. Dawn had added that she would only provide her first name and did not want her picture taken.

From Andi's perspective, the series was mundane compared to what her father had sunk his teeth into over the years—secret government operations and related cover-ups, corporate fraud that drained shareholders and employees millions of dollars, international conspiracies—many of which never went punished because of politics. The greed had sickened her father, and it now sickened her. The media could only do so much, except to expose the truth. The authorities had to step up and put the clamps down.

But she realized the pursuit of the truth—regardless of who it touched or the possible retribution—had grown to become her life's mission, just as it had been her father's. She proved as much last year when she nearly got herself beaten up and raped by a pompous, drug-dealing teenager.

A whistle came to life, and Andi shot a nervous glance behind the counter, as a barista leaped into action, flipping switches, changing filters. The racket finally ceased. The young journalist turned back around, and there stood a chubby woman with a blank stare. A scratched, black leather purse swayed to her side.

"Andi?" she asked with a crackling voice.

"Hi, Dawn." Andi extended her hand. It was met by a limp, reluctant handshake. "Are you getting something to drink?"

"Well..." Dawn peered left and right, then grabbed the back of the chair. "I think I'll pass."

Dawn's description of "larger than the average model" didn't quite hit the mark. No more than five-three, her blue, knit pants bulged in all the wrong places, so much so you could nearly see ripples of fabric. She was also heavy up top, carrying a couple of watermelons that appeared to be resting on a mound of midsection flesh. Her stockingless feet were stuffed into stretched flats.

She gave Andi a quick half-grin then focused on the table. Andi could sense Dawn's unease.

"How long have you lived in the area?" Andi threw out a softball question.

"Oh, I—my husband and I—don't live close. We're up in the far northeastern part of the county, a rural area east of Anna." Andi noted the distance from the *Times Herald* office and typical distribution area.

"I found your articles online. I found all three pretty interesting," Dawn said.

"So, why did you want to meet me, Dawn?" Andi instantly regretted the pointed question. She took a breath, recalling her father's advice: *Be patient, let sources get comfortable with you as a person, if you expect them to share their deepest secrets.* "I mean, is there something in the stories that caught your eye? I'd love to get your feedback."

"Well, I'm not a journalist, and I don't want to tell you how to do your job, but..." Dawn paused and picked her nail. Andi did everything in her power not to poke the larger woman.

Dawn reached for her purse and pulled out a cigarette.

"You know you can't smoke in—"

Dawn stuck up her hand, cigarette clutched between two fingers like she'd done this a few times. "I know the law. I'm a little antsy, that's all. I'm just going to taste the end a bit without lighting up."

Heads turned in the coffeehouse, and Andi tried to ignore the cancer stick. She found herself leaning on her elbows, almost invading Dawn's personal space with her impatient desire to find out what the hell had initiated Dawn to contact her.

Dawn's twin peaks heaved with a deep breath, a phlegmy cough spewing out on the release.

"Your stories were great, if they were meant to be PR pieces for the adoption agencies."

Ouch, that stung. Andi counted to three then licked her lips.

"I'm guessing you've had a different experience?"

"Me and a lot of others." She shook her head, looked down, and forced out a half-hearted chuckle.

Andi's mind spun into overdrive.

"Why don't you share your experience with me, Dawn? Let's set everything straight. I'll get my editor to run a front-page story."

"No way in hell." Dawn looked straight into Andi's eyes, her cheeks red.

"Okay, then what can I do for you?"

"Andi, I don't mean to come across all rude-like, but I just can't have my name and story splashed across a newspaper, on the Internet," she said. "But I will tell you what I experienced. It's really up to you to dig further."

Andi arched her back, scooting her butt slightly closer to the edge of her seat.

"I'm all ears. Do you mind if I record this?"

A huff then a sigh. "I guess it's okay, if it helps you remember things better."

Andi pushed the record button on her iPhone then put a pen in her hand to jot down nonverbal observations.

"Did you try to adopt a little boy or girl?"

"A baby boy. Dark brown, curly hair. Just two months old. Even looked a little like my husband." She spoke to the smudged table, as if Andi was no more than an inanimate object.

"I'd been trying to give my husband a baby for years, but it just didn't happen. You see, I've got type 2 diabetes."

Andi could see, noting all of Dawn's habits.

"By the way, I just started smoking once we realized Timothy wouldn't be coming home with us." Dawn brought a pudgy finger to her nose, apparently holding back an emotional response.

Andi's pulse quickened, but she attempted to let the flow of the conversation happen naturally, knowing Dawn might bolt before she had the meat of the story.

"What agency were you working with?"

"The so-called 'agency' is called Big Heart, out of Houston. They were anything but." Dawn's voice went up a half octave. Andi recalled seeing the company name on a long list of Texas agencies, but she never interacted with anyone working there.

"Why Big Heart and not some other agency in the DFW area?"

"We tried other agencies. They all said if we wanted a baby that looked like us, it could take anywhere from eighteen months to three years, maybe more. We just couldn't—didn't want to—wait that long to start a family."

Andi quietly acknowledged similar statistics she'd found and documented in her stories. "And they had arranged for you to adopt little Timothy?"

"At first, they were a breath of fresh air. They gave us more than fleeting hope. They had a real process that essentially guaranteed us a Caucasian baby boy—with no exposure to drugs or alcohol—in six weeks or less. That's just unheard of in the industry."

"How could they make that promise?" Andi's brow furrowed.

"I have no idea. We brushed it off, thinking more about the end result." Dawn fidgeted with her mangled cigarette.

Andi ran her fingers through her hair, sensing they were close to the real reason Dawn wanted to meet.

"Why did Timothy's adoption fall through?" Andi asked.

"Money," Dawn said. "Big Heart said they were an elite agency, which allowed them to work with intelligent mothers and well-run orphanages all over the world. The cream of the crop basically."

Kids being equated with food—not a good sign, Andi thought.

"My husband and I..." Dawn paused and inhaled. "We cashed in his 401k."

"How much were they charging you?"

"They called us back and said we could have little Timothy in two weeks. Just two weeks." Her eyes narrowed and her finger poked the table. "It was going to cost us one hundred thousand dollars."

Andi swallowed hard then realized her eyes likely had bugged out briefly.

"I've never heard a figure that high. But I've also never heard of timing guarantees, especially within two weeks."

"The day we drove down to pick him up, we were so excited. It was the culmination of all of our dreams," she said, a bubble forming in her eye. "We got a call two hours out. They said, rather directly, that unless we upped our 'bid' of Timothy by at least twenty-five percent, we'd likely not get to keep him."

A tear escaped her eye then another rolled down her cheek. Andi felt her sadness, the pain. She reached in her purse and handed Dawn a tissue.

"Thank you."

Andi nodded.

"Did they offer any explanation or an alternative?"

"My husband marched in there ready to chew someone's ass," Dawn recalled, now looking into the corner of the shop. "They hurried us into a room, and a man walked in and very succinctly gave us our options—almost like we were buying a car and we finally got to the heavy."

"And those options were?"

"Up our so-called 'bid' to one hundred thirty and get Timothy, or wait for the next baby, which would still cost more than the original hundred thousand. It just all sounded so inhumane, bartering over a child's life."

Andi laid her hand on top of Dawn's meaty hand. She replied with an appreciative smile.

"I guess it didn't turn out well?"

"That's an understatement. We were maxed out. We had nothing left. My husband threatened to sue, but they said they had an army of lawyers who would only drain us further and then we'd never get to adopt."

"Wow, Dawn, I'm so sorry." Andi knew her statement didn't mean much.

"Once we brought up the lawsuit, I knew they'd never work with us. And they kept our fifty-thousand-dollar down payment too."

Tears now gushed from Dawn's eyes. Andi handed her two more tissues. "Thanks for sharing all of this."

Dawn gathered herself and let out three chest-heaving breaths. "What are you thinking?"

Andi's lips drew a straight line. "Fraud. Maybe more, much more. I've got some research to do. I'll be in touch."

Chapter Eleven

His glassy, unblinking eyes told the whole story. Apprehension, even a hint of fear.

That was three hours ago, when Brandon was introduced to Carrie, Marisa's "in-heat," husband-seeking missile of a friend. Wearing a denim prairie skirt with an uncomfortably low-cut, white—as in translucent—blouse that exposed the whitest parts of her enlarged breasts, Carrie came on stronger than a telemarketer selling the last available seat on a dream, two-day cruise to Puerto Vallarta. Standing in our living room Friday evening, even Marisa's jaw dropped as Carrie swooped down on Brandon the moment he entered the house, invading his personal space, peppering him with questions faster than any human could respond.

"Uh, Michael, Marisa, hello from over here," he said, stretching his neck over Carrie's shoulder, a couple of inches taller than his.

Before we could respond, Carrie continued the barrage.

"So, are you excited about going to Café Pacific tonight?"

"Well, I haven't—"

"I hear the food is just awesome, the best Caesar salad in the Metroplex. The grilled salmon dish was named best seafood plate in D Magazine and the prawns are to die for."

"I just might croak, I'm allergic to shellfish."

Marisa and I traded looks, and Carrie actually paused, apparently only to suck in another bag full of air.

"So what do you think about my outfit?" Carrie spun so fast her skirt whirled into a round tent. "I got the skirt on sale down in Dallas, then I found the blouse at the mall. Where was that, Marisa?"

My wife must have tuned Carrie out because I could see her snap to attention at the mention of her name.

"Jesus, Carrie, I don't recall. Somewhere...?" Marisa shrugged apologetically.

Carrie's brow wrinkled a bit, but she quickly caught her stride again.

"These earrings—handmade, I shit you not. I picked them up at a local arts festival. Man must have been ninety-eight years old. Indian man, didn't speak much English."

"Wish I could say the same about you," I quietly interjected.

"Huh?" She turned her head slightly.

"Nothing."

"I sure am looking forward to tonight, aren't you, Brandon?"

Before he could utter a word, Carrie said she had to visit the powder room before we took off. She blew out of the room, and the three of us were left standing in the aftermath, mouths agape. Brandon took in a deep breath and adjusted his ball cap, words ready to fly out of his mouth.

"Marisa, can I speak with you in the kitchen for a moment? Brandon, hold the fort down. We'll be back before you know it."

"You better."

I followed my better half around the bend, into the kitchen, rubbing my eyes in amazement at what I'd just witnessed.

"I've seen Carrie wired before, but what the hell was that?"

Marisa put a hand on the counter. "She's out of this world. Good gosh, I thought she was going to ignite and launch like a rocket."

"You sure she's not on something?"

"I wish...then we'd have a good excuse. I think she's just really nervous. She heard Brandon's a good guy, educated, has a job, has both legs. She just wants it to work out."

"Brandon's ready to run, literally, out of the door, never to be seen again. His eyes shouted desperation."

"Shhh, he'll hear you," Marisa said, touching my shoulder.

"I knew this would be a catastrophe." I shook my tired head then realized the day could have been much worse. We'd yet to see any more emails from Yours Truly, and so far, no violent crimes had been reported in the area. Carl, Bobby Guidry, and the FBI team were distant memories. I then had a thought—maybe I could call up Guidry and get him to take Carrie off our hands, like within the next hour, before he had a real murder to solve.

"I'm not sure Brandon's going to survive this. If he does, he might just sue me for slave labor charges. I don't know if *I* can deal with it. Any ideas?"

Marisa opened the cabinet and pulled out the hard stuff. "I'll make her a drink for the ride."

"Cool. Do you mind driving tonight? I think I need a drink for the road as well. Make it a double."

After four Caesar salads, a nice meal, a bottle of wine and two shared desserts, the stormy seas had now receded to a calm low tide. Carrie had chilled about four levels, allowing Brandon to catch his breath and even add to the conversation.

"Well, I got this cap when I went up to visit some old college buddies, and they had tickets for this Saturday game, so of course, we all went." Brandon proudly held the cap, underlining Boston Strong, stitched in the traditional red and navy blue Boston Red Sox colors. "Here's the cool part. That was the game where Neil Diamond showed up and sang 'Sweet Caroline' in person."

I felt an empty pit in my stomach. I instantly thought about the terror the people of Boston had recently endured at the hands of a couple of sickos. Then I thought about the note from Yours Truly. He....she, whoever, hadn't committed any crimes. But the words in that email sounded so real, so authentic, they cut to the bone. If indeed this was no joke, it was hard to fathom this human being living amongst the general public—interacting with neighbors, colleagues, the post office clerk, the lady at the cleaners, the teenager bagging groceries—and functioning in any type of normal manner with those corrosive ideas dominating his thoughts. Maybe this person was reclusive, socially inept, and had no clue how to interact with people—especially women. I still couldn't come to grips with what motivated the emails. Why tell the world, especially us at the *Times Herald*? Is this lunatic bragging or desperate to communicate his sick thoughts with anyone who will listen—anonously, of course?

"Are you seeing what I'm seeing?" Marisa whispered into my ear.

"Uh, sort of." I refocused my attention on the two new best buddies sitting across from us.

"No doubt Big Papi is the heart and soul of that team," Carrie said, referring to the Red Sox designated hitter, David Ortiz. "Over two thousand hits and over four hundred homers, he's got a shot at the Hall of Fame."

Brandon's face looked like he'd just witnessed the second coming. His mouth hung open then curled into the widest grin I'd ever seen.

Brandon nodded his head excitedly. "No doubt. I think he's as big of a clutch hitter as the great Ted Williams."

"What was that day like?" Carrie actually peered into Brandon's eyes, her question as genuine as I'd ever seen from her.

"Watching a game at Fenway is really magical. So much history you can just feel it," Brandon said with more enthusiasm now. He scooted a foot closer to his date and even touched her arm. Carrie slurped her whiskey sour through a tiny red straw, nodding her head, smiling.

"When Neil got out there and led the crowd in song, it wasn't about being a Red Sox fan, or even being a baseball fan. We were all brothers and sisters, one team, all supporting each other. It was awesome."

I just saw Brandon wipe the corner of his eye. Nostalgia must have drawn out the emotion. Wait...there's Carrie touching his chin, a twinkle in her eye. I wiped my face to ensure I wasn't hallucinating.

"I think the hunter just changed clothes," Marisa said, nudging me with her elbow.

Ten minutes later, the four of us piled into our car, when suddenly I heard music blaring out of Brandon's phone.

Where it began, I can't begin to knowin'. But then I know it's growing strong.

The odd couple had started belting out the words to "Sweet Caroline." They were seriously out of tune, but very much singing from the same sheet of music, so to speak.

Eventually Marisa joined in, and finally by the chorus, all four of us were dueling for the loudest voice.

Sweet Caroline. Good times never seemed so good—so good, so good, so good—I've been inclined—dah, dah, dah—to believe they never would. Oh, no, no...

We repeated the final chorus about four times, laughing at each other—with each other—by the time we pulled up to our home.

Marisa and I fumbled with the keys, while Brandon and Carrie spoke quietly by their cars. I casually looked over my shoulder and saw both of them engaged in conversation, then a tight hug.

"Miracles do happen," I said as we walked in. I tossed my keys in the bowl.

"Sometimes you just gotta believe," Marisa said, approaching me with a certain look on her face. She leaned up and kissed my cheek then nibbled my ear.

"I believe in you, in us," I said, more like a panting dog.

"I know you do."

Chapter Twelve

Three steps down the hallway to the bedroom, and with Marisa jabbing at my rib cage to find the perfect tickle spot, my phone buzzed in my back pocket. Unfortunately, I couldn't bring myself to toss it in the bathroom toilet off to my left. Brandon is the only person who typically called this late—warning me that we might get some backlash on a probing story we're running the next day or even bouncing an important headline off me. It was all part of the gig. But Brandon was outside probably playing *Name That Tune* with his new bestie, Carrie.

I pulled out my phone and eyed the number. Not in my contact list, but it looked familiar—work familiar. Marisa, who'd made a beeline for the bed, jumping on it while tearing off her sweater, now noticed my serious look.

"Sorry, baby, I gotta take this." The bouncing stopped and she sat on the edge of the mattress, hands folded.

"Hello, this is Michael Doyle."

"Michael, Detective Carl Pearson. Did I catch you at a good time?"

"Uh, could have been worse, I suppose," I said, knowing where things were headed in the next thirty minutes. I sat next to Marisa.

"This is a bit unorthodox, I realize, but I've just received some new information, and I wanted to check in on you," Carl said.

"Okay. Thanks for the concern, I guess."

"I'm assuming Marisa is doing okay? She's there with you? And you're at home?"

"Yes on all accounts. Why?"

He ignored my question—typical Carl. "Have you guys received any further emails from, uh—"

"We call him Yours Truly," I offered helpfully, trying to be patient until Carl got to the point. "Okay, Yours Truly. It's Friday evening, and we're all aware that his previous emails had arrived like clockwork each Friday."

"Haven't received anything yet. I guess no news is good news in this case."

Phone silence was interrupted by distant voices. I asked, "Are you still at the police department?"

He ignored me again. "Look, because we have a bit of history, I think you should know something. I want to conference in Special Agent Guidry. Hold on."

I shot up and immediately started pacing in front of our bed. Twenty seconds felt like five minutes.

Carl popped on the line and said, "Okay, Guidry, do I have you?"

"Here."

"Michael, you still there?"

"Alive and breathing."

A cough and a short pause.

"Michael, I took a couple of days off and came to visit family here just outside of Baton Rouge," Guidry explained. "Anyway, long story short, I'm standing at a crime scene at an apartment just off the LSU campus."

I held my breath and closed my eyes. I almost didn't want to know.

"The agency knew I was close by—they always have tabs on me. Part of the job," Guidry said, pausing briefly before adding, "It's gory. Double murder—in the worst kind of way."

I glanced at Marisa then rubbed my chin.

"Sorry to hear that. Why call me?"

"There are two victims. The one who was *really* butchered is young, early twenties with blond, curly hair. Probably very pretty before she was gutted."

"Dear God."

"I'm not saying there's a definitive connection between the person who wrote those emails and this murder scene. Our CSI team is just getting started—Crime Scene Investigation, in case you didn't know."

"I watch TV and read Rick Murcer novels."

"Anyway, I got a hold of Carl, and we wanted to first make sure you guys are okay."

"Mainly Marisa, right?"

"Actually, yes."

"She's just fine. Sitting right here by me."

Marisa slipped her sweater back on then scratched her scalp, jostling her sexy mop of hair. She knew she was being discussed.

"Good. And no additional emails?"

"As I just told Carl, no. I thought that might be a good sign, but maybe not . . . if what you're telling me is connected somehow." "We're going to look at every possible angle, see where the evidence takes us."

My mind started spinning, wondering if I should take Marisa away somewhere. I heard a couple of voices and a far-away siren on the line.

"So, as far as my wife goes, and every other attractive blonde in Franklin, isn't it a good sign that this killer—connected or not—is three hundred miles away in Baton Rouge? Could be a local guy, right?"

"Could be, yes. There are a hundred plausible theories at this point. When the FBI is brought in, we don't dismiss any possible angles or connections. Which is why we need to keep digging for answers at this crime scene. We're hoping to get some physical evidence. And someone might have seen something. Don't forget, our cyber unit is still working on the email trail."

I could feel acid churning in my stomach, unsure if it was something I ate or the gruesome murders had engaged my senses to the point of literally igniting a fire in my belly.

"Anything else you want to share?"

"We'll keep you in the loop," Carl chimed in.

"Michael, just to make sure, keep tabs on Marisa. Be safe," Guidry said.

Easier said than done on both counts, I thought.

Chapter Thirteen

Red, blue, and white lights danced off dark buildings. He looked left and right, and noticed the carnival-like lightshow flashing off the faces of the people huddled around him. There must have been at least a hundred onlookers, a few with grim expressions holding each other, many others gawking at the surreal scene like it was a made-for-TV reality show.

But it was a scene he knew very well—better than anyone, since he'd created it. Maybe someday they would develop a movie about him, about all of this. Later, when he had some time, he'd think about the perfect title.

Only a few years older than most of the college coeds, the man rubbed his chestnut brown, thick beard, blending in with the crowd. Fortunately, the blood was hidden under his layer of clothes. Well, mostly. He checked his right hand and saw crusted red around the edges of three fingernails, then immediately shoved his hand deep in his pocket. Witnessing the aftermath was new for him, and he felt immense satisfaction in creating such hysteria and panic. He began to salivate and then released a breath, realizing luck had been on his side this time.

"Anyone see anything that they can share with us?" A burly cop whose hat was too small for his head approached the crowd.

The bearded man took a half step back.

"Anything at all would be useful."

Many heads shook "no," his included.

Two girls covered in a blanket got the cop's attention, and he walked over and talked to them.

The bearded man took in the scene like a painter studying his finished product—a canvas that evokes emotion, something for the world to always remember him by. There must have been ten police cars, two fire trucks, two ambulances, a medical examiner, and even the FBI. He knew he was a headliner if the FBI got involved. Unmarked cars, blue jackets, and those big yellow letters.

He watched two body bags roll out on a gurney. Fingers pointed, and there were gasps from his fellow onlookers. He thought more about his latest conquest that nearly went horribly wrong.

Sweet and playful Ariel. Her tousled hair highlighted with gold smelled like peaches. He briefly closed his eyes and recalled the scent when he'd buried his face in her neck. He felt the sloped skin, the way it glided down to her shoulders. Her body was so well-proportioned, like she was the template for every petite mannequin. Her perky breasts popped out just enough to balance her perfectly shaped ass.

He'd been able to ignore one anomaly with Ariel—she had a lazy left eye. He was certain it was a complete turn-off for most guys, a blood-drainer for anyone who got a glimpse of Ariel as she looked you straight in the eyes. But for the man with purpose, such a minor flaw was inconsequential. Their "chance" meeting in the off-campus

bookstore quickly turned into a late-night coffee, then an invitation back to her place. That's where he'd made the mistake—by going into her apartment. Her roommate had gone out of town, off to visit a pseudo-boyfriend in Lafayette.

Still, everything proceeded as planned. From around the corner of the bathroom, she tossed her panties and bra, not even waiting for him to do the honors. She strutted out like she was on a runway, only wearing her black fuck-me pumps. She cavorted around him like he was standing on the main stage at a strip joint, bumping and grinding away. He kind of liked it. But his noticeable arousal wasn't due to what she thought would be the next phase of their relationship.

Five minutes later, he breathed like he'd just run a mile in under six minutes. He stood on a blanket, his chosen instrument still gripped tightly in his right hand. Blood was smeared across his torso like he'd just been body painted. He looked down at Ariel, her body limp, one of her shoes mostly twisted off her foot. Amidst the mess, he spotted the remnants of her neck, her main artery, and her larynx.

To say he had a fetish was an understatement. Some men are fixated on feet and toes and could care less if their lady is a beauty-contest winner. They just suck on those little sausages like a wet teat. For this bearded man, the hair and neck fascinated him, teased him, drove him to be who he was. He couldn't recall when it all had started. Probably something from his nomadic childhood. *Don't we all blame our issues on our childhood? It's the American way.*

He'd felt a quiet breeze hit his genitals and looked up. A girl was standing in the doorway, her face ashen. Shock must have set in. She swayed a bit from side to side, her eyes staring at her dead roommate.

This bitch just screwed up my moment, he'd thought.

Two quick strides and he yanked her arm inside, slamming the door with his back foot. She slipped on the blood and fell into the mess that was her friend. At least he thought they were friends. But they couldn't be more different. Outside of the lazy eye, Ariel looked like a doll, someone who Mom and Dad would gush with praise for her natural southern beauty.

This bitch had black lipstick, hairy armpits, and spiked red hair. She'd started to cry, and he'd begun to lose his patience. One quick slice and her sobs had been muted forever.

That was when he'd heard doors shut and heeled shoes clicking on concrete. *Damn it*, he wouldn't be able to properly dispose of the bodies. He pulled on his clothes and climbed out the bedroom window, then walked through campus to where he'd left his car. After a quick stop at a 7-11 to grab a drink and chewing gum, he'd decided to circle back to the scene. Boy, was he glad he did.

This police and FBI circus was almost enough to erase the unpleasant interruption. Yet he feared he'd constantly be reminded of the disgusting punk rocker rather than the ecstasy of his encounter with Ariel.

He filled his lungs with cool air then felt a vibration in his left front jeans pocket. He read the text:

Need your feedback ASAP. Sent email with details. Please hurry. Not sure I can hold out much longer. V

Another annoyance. He was having the time of his life, but he couldn't ignore the other part of his life forever. After all, he was following a grand plan.

Chapter Fourteen

I'd begun to think the incessant hum of the parallel strips of fluorescent lighting had been permanently transferred into my stream of conscience. Too many meetings in the glass house, or just too much idle time waiting for people to join me. By my count, it was the fifth meeting in the last two days for which I'd been sitting alone staring at nothing, while listening to the single mind-altering pitch of the fluorescents.

I'd been scribbling, drawing shapes, lines, and whatnot on a spare sheet of paper. It reminded me of when I was younger and I used to practice my autograph, prepping me for the day when I'd hit it big and my multitude of fans would be screaming as I left another successful rock concert. What boy didn't dream about strumming a guitar like Eddie Van Halen, girls frothing at the mouth, while he unleashed a majestic riff? I exhaled, knowing my feeble attempt at taking my mind off my growing anxiety, and that damn light fixture, was failing—quickly.

I wadded up the paper and hurled a three-pointer Dirk Nowitzki would be proud of. Oops. Bounced off the front rim.

"Short again, huh, boss?" Brandon said with a smirk on his face as he walked into the meeting room.

"You'd think that with all of the practice I've had playing paper hoops this week, I couldn't miss."

Brandon gave me a perplexed raised eyebrow while he shuffled folders.

I didn't want to explain what I considered to be entirely too obvious. I glanced at the clock.

"Aren't all of our office clocks connected so they display the same time?"

"That's what they tell me." More shuffled folders, then one spilled its contents on the floor.

"So, where's Stu?"

"Right here. Sorry about that." Stu entered the room, moving quicker than I'd ever seen him. At least I saw some urgency.

"I was trying to make at least *some* progress on the situation in Baton Rouge," he said, opening his notebook and putting on reading glasses.

"Those are new," I said, pointing at the readers. "Yep, the missus made me go to the eye doctor. Kept saying I'd have to grow longer arms or pay someone to hold a book four feet in front of me. Ah," he grumbled, realizing his glasses were smudged. He pulled them off and wiped them clean with his shirt.

The specs put ten years on Stu. Poor guy. Thankfully, I'd been able to dodge that age bullet—so far.

I extended my arms on the table and looked at Stu. "So, what have all your contacts in Louisiana come up with?"

"I know it's Tuesday afternoon, and I've been working this since the weekend, but I really can't get much out of them."

I traded glances with Brandon and let out a frustrated breath, recalling that neither Carl nor Guidry had returned my calls in the last two days. Stu flipped through his notepad.

"Just a couple of press guys who knew my sister back when they attended LSU at the same time—they're telling me this double homicide really shook the community. They don't know cause of death yet, but they hear there was a lot of blood at the crime scene," Stu said looking at his notepad.

"Man, I really thought your contacts would give us the inside scoop," I said.

"It's really strange. Everyone's busy as hell covering the story, which is why most said they didn't have time for me."

I brought my fingers to the bridge of my nose. "It could be a territorial thing, thinking we're just trying to scoop them."

"Could be. I thought about that."

I'd been hoping Stu's contacts would be able to start filling in the blanks for the suddenly absent law enforcement communications. I recalled Guidry telling me to keep tabs on Marisa, which told me there was at least a small chance she was in danger, at least in a general sense. I wasn't overreacting—at least I wouldn't admit it to anyone.

I searched my mind for the next step. And patiently waiting for my police and FBI buddies to call me back wasn't a viable option.

I looked to Brandon. "Any ideas?"

"What, sorry?" Brandon was responding to a text, an awkward smirk on his face. "It's just, you know, Carrie, texting me about picking up dinner on the way over."

Seriously? One date and suddenly Brandon looks like a smitten teenager falling for his Spanish teacher.

I had to ignore his response. "I know the double homicide isn't a story that directly impacts our area—at this exact moment—but the email from Yours Truly could be connected. We might be sitting on a story that could implode before our eyes."

"Could be connected. *Could*," Stu said taking off his glasses.

I heard the hum of the lights again.

"Are we ever going to go green and change all of this lighting to LEED?"

Brandon was confused by the change of topic. "Not my call," he said.

"Remind me to talk to Arthur about it."

Another deep breath.

"Brandon, you might be having another visitor tonight at Carrie's place."

He shot me a quizzical smile.

"I need to insert myself into this process a bit more. I'm headed to Baton Rouge."

Chapter Fifteen

The conversation had been brief and one-sided. Actually, it was more like a quick negotiation. Marisa would go stay at Carrie's place if I promised to be back tomorrow, and if I agreed to take her on a date this weekend—just the two of us, minus Romeo and Juliet.

Deal, I said. I packed a quick bag then jumped in the car as the sun began to start its daily fall from its apex. I took I-20 out of Dallas heading east, rolling past Tyler and on to Longview. My phone buzzed. I'd received a text from my faithful editor.

Learned that FBI has set up temp war room at DoubleTree off I-10 in Baton Rouge.
Brandon

Good to see Brandon's laser focus had made a return appearance. Then again, he was probably doing a little brown-nosing, considering his distracted, almost unexplainable attraction to a lady who could outtalk anyone on the planet, regardless of language differences.

I guess Carrie wasn't that bad. She won back some brownie points by the end of our double date on Friday, and she must have a functional brain if she worked with Marisa. I thought more about it and realized my biggest issue was seeing my top guy thrown off his game. It was like someone had poured chili pepper in Brandon's jockstrap. Brandon was the glue, the key to our turnaround in the last two years. I couldn't imagine the paper succeeding without him digging in every day, questioning the status quo, challenging everyone to look at difficult situations differently, and then guiding the team to victory. I knew I needed to let him live his own life, especially on the personal front. But damn it, why did I have to initiate it by setting him up on the blind date? Ah, that was it, I realized. I was really pissed at myself and knew I couldn't turn back the hands of time. Enough self-evaluation for one day. I crossed the Louisiana border and ran through Shreveport, a big casino city. I decided to not lower my net worth and kept moving, taking I-49 South. I passed through Alexandria then blinked past a few small, but very Cajun towns, including Opelousas and Carencro. I took I-10 East, crossing the great Mississippi River. It was wider than I'd read about, but every bit as dirty.

I entered the city of Baton Rouge at straight-up eight p.m. I saw stadium lights burning the sky off to my right. The home of the LSU Tigers—Death Valley, they call it. I thought about the irony of my trip, connected to a double murder just a few miles from the football palace.

The crime-scene apartment complex was off Perkins, just north of the interstate, but I headed directly for the DoubleTree three more exits down I-10. I parked my car and thought about my strategy if I ran into anyone but Guidry. Pretend I was with the police? That would require a badge. Tell them I was delivering a late dinner, courtesy of Detective Carl Pearson? I laughed, realizing I'd have to wing it.

I walked the lobby looking for a sign of the FBI. They probably didn't want to publicize their presence, so I picked the left wing and started opening every door. The

first two were empty, the third holding a seminar on how to sell real estate without losing a dime. I came back up the opposite side and opened the door just as a preacher was closing his eyes, speaking a language I'd never heard, then tapping an elderly woman on the forehead and watching her fall back into the arms of two bald, round men. *That couldn't have been staged for the hundreds of watchers*, I thought with a strong dose of sarcasm.

I got lucky on the second to last door, although within ten seconds, I quickly made an involuntary exit. Two agents grabbed each armpit, picked me up, and literally carried me out of there, ignoring my incessant name-dropping of Special Agent Guidry. I turned and walked toward the lobby bar with the hopes of getting a burger and a beer. Then I spotted him.

"I'll have a double cheeseburger, extra fries, side of onion rings. Hold the lettuce and tomato," Guidry said.

I scooted in across from the FBI's finest.

"Healthy. How you doing, Bobby?"

He looked around like he'd just been punked.

"It's okay. I don't bite. Mind if I join you?"

"Sure. It's Guidry. Only my mama calls me Bobby."

"Is this on the FBI dime? You know, since you haven't called me back...Guidry."

He gestured. "Sure."

Although I wasn't pleased they didn't have my favorite beer—Shiner Bock—I put in my order and set the menu aside.

"Here you go, sir." A lady in a tan skirt set down a plate in front of Guidry, but it was square, had some type of fishy thing on it and was topped with a jalapeno.

I gave him a questionable look.

"I ordered the appetizer before you got here. It's Cajun crawfish sliders. Hey, I'm missing my mama's home cooking because of this homicide case," he explained through a mouthful of spicy crawfish.

On the verge of losing my appetite, I glanced over to the door where I'd been thrown out. Three men went in, a man and a woman came out—none wearing the typical FBI jackets. I turned back around and saw Guidry's mouth attack another oversized bite. This man ate like it was his last meal.

A short-sleeve, blue-striped shirt hung off his thin frame, all three buttons wide open. Similar to when I saw him in his first suit, he looked like a teenager forced to wear his daddy's clothes. His greased-back black hair hadn't changed. The gel he used might be more like super glue.

"Can you share with me what you've learned thus far?"

He chomped on his food and stared at me.

"I'm not used to being this, uh, open with the press."

"I know, I thought we established that already. Remember, we came to you guys with the emails."

He nodded, then he glanced away.

"Our biggest concern is that this is some nut job, a serial rapist and killer who's preying on LSU girls." He wiped sauce off his chin. "We need to find this son of a bitch before he kills again."

I didn't want to get out my notepad or ask to record the conversation on my iPhone. I used mental focus instead.

"How were they killed?"

He took a breath. "Not sure of the weapon yet, but he sliced their throats. One of them was really bad. Neck was gutted."

I tried not to get a visual, but an image started formulating.

"To me, it sounds strange that a rapist-killer would attack two women in their own apartment. Too many things could go wrong."

Guidry took a mouthful of ice water. "We've got an initial theory. The girl with the missing neck, Ariel, she was found essentially naked on a blanket, wearing only two high-heeled shoes. The other girl, Erika, somehow interrupted the killer, and then she was killed."

"Sounds like a good theory."

"We found a couple of footprints off the blanket near the door, both smeared, but we could tell it was a man-sized bare foot, not a shoe."

The same waitress arrived with our main course. Wanting to experiment with the local cuisine, I'd ordered sausage jambalaya. I ate two bites. Not bad, with a bit of a kick. I took a swig from my bottle of light beer.

Guidry stuffed an onion ring into his already full mouth. I wondered if I could get a spit screen placed between our two plates. He was on the verge of making me nauseous.

"This Erika girl had on all of her clothes. So obviously she wasn't raped. Strangely, the preliminary autopsy report on Ariel also shows she hadn't had sex that night either, consensual or forced," Guidry said. "So I know I said earlier that we might have a serial rapist and killer. I guess I threw in rapist because ninety-nine percent of the time, that's the original intent."

I took another sip of my beer. "So, this guy isn't into raping, but she was found naked with two high heels on, like she was doing some type of striptease act?"

"Yeah, thought about that. There's a possibility he was going to rape her after he killed her, but then Erika surprised him."

I watched Guidry order dessert, and my inquisitive nature couldn't take the suspense any longer.

"So, I like your diet."

His eyes shot me a look. "I used to carry an extra fifty pounds, then I went on this strict diet and exercise program, courtesy of an FBI physical. But when I'm stressed out from a case, eating—especially Cajun food—is the only thing that keeps my nerves in check."

"Have you tried chewing gum?"

"Huh?"

"Nothing."

I downed the last drop of my one beer, knowing I needed to keep a clear head the rest of the evening.

"Before I go, any feedback on the emails? Or a connection found to these murders?"

"Cyber unit is still on it. They just said this person might be one of the most sophisticated programmers they've ever seen. So, Yours Truly is no amateur. But no connection to the homicides yet."

"I got the tip." I tossed down a five-dollar bill. "Thanks for the info."

I held up my phone. "Don't be a stranger."

Chapter Sixteen

I could see the yellow tape a block away, speckled between the swaying branches of an old weeping willow. Two police cars, what looked like an unmarked FBI car, and a large white van hugged the curb to the main street side of the corner apartment. I parked across the street and jogged across, noticing three temporary lights set up outside, giving the scene an unnatural daytime feel in the darkness of night, now approaching ten p.m.

A handful of people walked by, stopped and stared, pointed fingers at the law enforcement figures moving in and out of apartment 104. Mostly college kids, a couple walking a small dog, who yelped at one of the FBI agents. He didn't bother turning his head. He was all business, wearing rubber gloves and carrying a gray, rectangular box, possibly a toolbox of some kind—who knows what kind of tools they took to crime scenes. It appeared to be a twenty-four-hour operation. Given the nature of the crimes—double homicide, blood everywhere, in a college town—it was no surprise to see their urgency. I'd imagine their jobs would get ten times worse if another similar killing took place in the same area.

Standing no more than a hundred feet from the front door, I wondered if the killer had crossed this very same spot. A few leaves remained from autumn, loosely arranged on brown patches of grass. The complex was decently kept, with a fair number of shrubs, green metal edging, and even a few flowers sprinkled around. I saw a couple of beer cans between two bushes, but for a college apartment complex, it looked nearly pristine.

I heard something dragging on the narrow concrete sidewalk. Turning to my right, I saw an older black man shuffling along, a large plastic trash can scooting behind him with a long broom handle sticking out. I hustled over to cut him off before he disappeared through a cove.

"Excuse me, sir."

He stopped. His sad, baggy eyes peered at me, but he didn't say a word.

"Hi, I'm Michael Doyle. I'm with the press, and I wanted to..."

"I already talked to the press. Them, the *P*Olice, the FBI. You name it, I've talked to them."

"I'm sorry, I didn't get your name?"

"Jethro."

"Jethro?" I held my pen to my notepad.

"Jethro Tull."

He got me. He was definitely sharper than he appeared. I blew off the name.

"I just got here from out of town, so I'm sorry if you've been asked this before, but did you see anything strange last Friday night?"

"Strange? This is a complex full of horny, drunk college kids. Strange is normal, if you know what I mean." He scratched his thin beard, more than half of it white. His uniform consisted of baggy, green pants, a lighter-green shirt, and working boots that looked fifteen years old.

"I get it. Did you see anyone you didn't recognize, someone near apartment 104?"

"I'll save you some time. I wasn't even working Friday night. I went to the Tigers basketball game over at the Maravich Center. My cousin got me in for free, since I helped him clean up after. Took on the Volunteers. Another close one, but we lost." He shook his head and looked off to nowhere.

"Did you ever happen to ever speak to either victim, uh, Ariel or Erika?"

"Outside of 'good morning' and 'good evening,' I ain't said nothin' to no one. You think these crackers want to talk to an old black man? I'm just the hired help, if you know what I mean." He let out two chuckles.

I extended my hand, and he eyed it, apparently puzzled to see anyone offering a polite gesture. He paused then shook it.

"Thanks anyway," I said. He nodded, then his eyes looked over my shoulder. I turned and saw a college-aged girl scampering down a black metal and concrete staircase. I took an angle toward the street and intercepted her path.

"Hi, miss. I'm Michael—"

"Doyle. I heard. I live on the second floor just above where you and Herb were talking."

"So that's his name."

"Yeah, a nice, gentle man. Just keeps to himself." The girl looked to be about twenty, short, styled brown hair, purple glasses, no more than five-four. Cloaked in what looked like an LSU letter jacket, she held tightly to a pile of books. "Off to study...?"

"Paige. Yeah, this biology lab is kicking my ass. I'm kind of in a hurry. I've got an eight o'clock tomorrow morning."

"Real quickly then, Paige. Did you know the two girls, Ariel or Erika?"

"I spoke to Erika just a couple of times. Not that nice, honestly. Seemed to have a chip on her shoulder."

"And Ariel?"

"We weren't best of friends or anything, but she was a real sweetie." A tiny, right hand brushed a runaway tear off her cheekbone. "Just can't believe this happened to her...Ariel. Right here in Baton Rouge."

I shook my head. "Anything else you can share?"

"Uh, not really. Well, me and Ariel traded books a few times. We both love to read. In fact, I still have the latest one she gave me, a Lisa Gardner paperback."

Finally, a nugget. I had an idea. I asked Paige for the closest bookstore. She rattled off three, providing flailing arms as directions.

I tried using my phone's map application to find the first one, but I must have misunderstood the name. I drove up and down six one-way streets. Then, up ahead, I spotted a lighted purple sign: Books Plus.

Just outside the door, I saw a community paper rack. Mug shots of the two girls were displayed on the front page, above the fold. Only black-and-white, but it gave me a prop that might come in handy.

A programmed bell noted my entrance, but no one seemed to care. For it being late at night, the place was hopping. The books were laid out more like a 1980s music store. In fact, I realized the "Plus" related to a large area of music in all formats, CD, cassette, eight-track, even vinyl. *The owner must be a real historian.* I picked up a Beatles album and touched the cover of Abbey Road. What a find. The four band members were in

single file, crossing a street, three of them bearded. Paul, wearing a blue tux with ruffles, was clean-shaven. *Damn, I'm holding a piece of history.*

The edges were frayed, but I saw no pen marks or goofy coloring marks. I thought it might be a good conversation piece as I walked up to the counter.

"That will be twenty-seven sixty-two." A long-haired man held out his hand. I gave him a gold credit card.

"Uh, we don't take that."

I took it back and handed him a blue one. "We don't take that either."

"Do you have a magic marker? I'll color it whatever you need."

"Funny. Got any cash?"

I slid over a twenty and a ten, then he gave me back the change.

"Do you know much about the homicides that took place the other night?"

"Nothing more than the rest of us? Why, who are you?"

"Michael Doyle, associate publisher with the *Times Herald*." I handed him a card to see if it might impress him enough to get him to answer my question. "I'm from outside Dallas."

He shook his head and handed me the card back.

"Did you know either of these two girls?" I flipped the folder paper around. He took a quick glance.

"I've seen the pictures. Don't recognize them, sorry."

I asked for directions to the two other bookstores. The first one was closed, the second, on the other side of town. Now after eleven o'clock, I yawned as I pulled in front and turned off the ignition. It was one of the chain megastores.

Not nearly as personal, and absent of any Beatles memorabilia, I still lost myself in the books. Attractive displays caught my eyes; some focused on a certain genre, others on certain authors. I picked up a James Patterson book and felt the three-D cover. Every bookstore had a Patterson table.

I walked to the café and waited behind two giggly girls. I ordered a non-caffeinated iced drink and waited my turn.

"Michael," someone called out.

I laid down the crumpled community paper and slid a straw in the plastic lid.

"I knew her," the girl said, fixing her green cap.

"Excuse me."

"I knew the girl...Ariel. She came in here all the time."

I read her name tag: Patricia.

"Did you know her outside of work, or just when she came in?"

Patricia opened her small, round mouth, then she paused and looked back at me.

"Who are you?" It appeared the murders had everyone on edge, and rightly so.

"I'm Michael Doyle, associate publisher with the *Times Herald*, near Dallas." I used the card again. It seemed to work this time.

She flapped the card, igniting her brain it seemed.

"Yeah, we'd sit over there," she pointed toward a two-seater next to the window.

"We'd talk mostly about books. Sometimes about boys, but mostly about books." A grin shone on her face.

"When was the last time you saw her?"

"Not more than a week ago. It was crowded. I worked the late shift. I remember her laughing at all the stains on my apron."

I chuckled to keep her talking. "Was that Friday night?"

"Uh, yeah, I guess it was. I didn't work Saturday or Sunday, so it must have been."

"Do you recall what she ordered?"

She flapped my card against her hand. "Let's see, her typical, a Vanilla Latte Grande."

"I like those," I said, taking a sip of my iced drink.

"Two, actually."

"Sorry?"

"She got two, one for her and one for her friend."

"Girl or guy?"

"Just saw the back of him walking out the door, but a guy."

I nodded, wondering if I was gleaning information the FBI had yet to learn. A bartering card.

"F-O-X," she said. "It was silly and all, but that's what Ariel and I were giggling about. She just kept restating those letters, F-O-X. She nodded over in the direction of a guy thumbing through some books. I figured that was her new friend. Mr. F-O-X." She shook her head and started to wipe the counter.

A man named Fox. The hunt was on.

Chapter Seventeen

Missed your warm body last night. Had to listen to the lovebirds banging against the wall. Ugh. No sleep. See you later tonight. Luv, Marisa

The early-morning text from Marisa gave me a quick smile. I rubbed my crusty eyes then reached for my lower back. It felt like a jackhammer had been doing double duty all night. I lumbered out of bed and released an audible groan. I looked back at the mattress—the culprit—and wondered how some hotels stayed in business with their main product creating more pain than relief.

I put my head under a scalding shower for two minutes, threw on some deodorant, slid my black bag over my shoulder, and exited the room. Immediately, I was hit with a smell so foul I winced, nearly retreating into my prison cell. Fingers clinched my nose, and I made a beeline for the elevator. On the way, I noticed two trays outside a door with remnants of last night's fish. Note to self: avoid cheap hotels.

Having received a text late last night from Guidry saying the FBI would be giving an official statement today at eight a.m., I glanced at my watch—I had twenty-five minutes. I ate standing up at a breakfast bar, scarfing down a cinnamon bagel with cream cheese and grapes, while sipping black coffee with two heaping scoops of sugar. The cream smelled questionable.

I picked up the latest edition of *USA Today* and glanced at headlines. On page twenty, in the state-by-state summary section, I spotted a two-inch story about the Baton Rouge double homicide. It had gone national already, and no one even had a clue about the emails—if they were connected, I had to remind myself.

With two minutes to spare, I walked into a different banquet room at the DoubleTree. This one was set up with a podium, microphone, and a table for reporters to set down their recording devices. Rows of padded chairs faced the front, while a handful of expensive cameras sat on tripods, lens being twisted this way and that. Other still photographers elbowed each other for the best seat on the floor. Nicely dressed men and women stood behind a roped off area away from the leering press, talking, riffling through manila folders. I took the opportunity to use my iPhone and take a wide shot of the entire spectacle. That was far more telling than a close-up mug of an FBI agent, especially Guidry's.

I took the closest open seat possible, fourth row, three chairs in, and nodded to my journalism colleague on my right as I leaned back. Elbow room was at a premium.

I briefly replayed the conversation with Patricia the barista. F-O-X. Realizing I might be sitting on a pot of gold, I pondered when—if—I should tell Guidry and company. I felt privileged to know what Guidry had already shared with me, yet I wondered how much they would communicate to the general public or if there had been any newsbreak overnight. Five people approached the microphone, Guidry amongst them, wearing the same blue, oversized suit from last week.

Special Agent in Charge Trent Tucker, sporting a nifty salt-and-pepper mustache, introduced himself and his team and gave a brief opening statement. He verified the victims' names, ages—Ariel was twenty-two, Erika, twenty—and said the medical examiners hadn't made a final determination on cause of death, although he noted both had been cut with some type of sharp object. Nothing new so far. Interestingly, he made a point to share one item Guidry had already told me: the girls did not appear to show any signs of rape. I believed he did this to calm frazzled nerves, especially those belonging to young girls and their parents.

"We realize these murders are causing a lot of concern in the community." Tucker turned his head left then right, as if making sure each camera caught his best side. *Okay, maybe I'm being a tad testy.* "We are working hand in hand with local officials around the clock. Evidence is being collected, and we are determined to find the killer. We *will* find the killer."

That was bold, I thought.

"We only ask everyone to be vigilant."

There was that "V" word again. Every time a tragedy occurred where officials couldn't get a beat on the perpetrators, their go-to strategy was asking thousands, if not millions, of people to be vigilant. For some, that meant to shoot first, ask questions later. For others, it meant looking over their shoulder while walking through a dark parking lot. For a few, it was met with indifference.

"I'll take any questions you have," Tucker said, briefly glancing at his notes.

The press fired shot after shot, but Tucker held his ground. Each answer was given with an even tone and ended with the same plea: "We're asking everyone to be vigilant until we capture the killer."

Thirty minutes later, the FBI squad walked out of the room. Guidry gave me a slight nod as he followed the procession of suits. Apparently, that didn't go unnoticed.

"You friends with the FBI agent?" the person to my right asked.

I turned and saw a man standing—although he was so short it appeared he could have been sitting—next to me. Polyester was his apparel choice of the day.

"Not friends, but we've spoken," I said.

"I get it. Nice source. I'm Rolando Davis, senior crime reporter with the *Baton Rouge Examiner.*"

"Michael Doyle, associate publisher, the *Times Herald*, outside Dallas."

"Management, huh? Aren't you a little far from your turf?"

"We go where the story takes us. Lots of folks in the DFW are from this area. Double homicide is big news, especially the way it happened. People tend to notice pretty, young girls getting their necks sliced open." That sounded way more sensational than I'd intended and a bit defensive.

We gathered our things and followed the mass of people and equipment siphoning through the banquet door. During the exodus, two reporters started talking loudly...at each other.

"You stole my signoff, you know you did." A man with perfect hair and unnaturally white teeth shook a finger.

"Give me a break. You can't copyright a signoff," said the other man, a half foot shorter and not nearly as sculpted. He swatted at the wayward finger. "Why would I copy anything from you? We double your ratings."

Giggles permeated the shuffling press. It was like a talking head standoff, with two Ken dolls angling for supremacy about nothing that mattered, other than who could win the battle of egos.

Just as the pair got to the door, their shoulders met. Acting like a pair of stooges, each refused to alter their body angle to get through the opening. A nudge, then a leveraged push. The tall one then rammed his full weight against the short reporter. And the scrap was on. The crowd bubbled around the two morons, although a few ignored the infantile behavior and tried to scoot past them.

Rolando and I looked at each other and started laughing. I held my hand over my mouth in order not to look as obvious. I heard voices from the crowd egging them on.

"Do some real damage, will you. You're just huggin' each other."

"Frickin' wimps. You guys are a couple of wusses."

I think the snide comments came from their respective photographers, but I wasn't sure.

Seconds later, with the taller man barreling into the chest of his equally unimpressive opponent, the smaller man grabbed his opponent's hair and yanked so hard his face turned red. Then, it happened. A yelp that sounded like a wounded coyote. The tall man touched his now mostly bald head, and jumped up and down.

"What did you do, asshole? You've ruined me. Ahhhh!"

The tall man scurried away. The short man turned to the rest of us and raised the wig like he'd just triumphed over the evil emperor. The crowd raised their fists and gave an approving whoop in return. It felt like a scene out of a Monty Python movie.

"Hey, man, you want to get some coffee and talk about the investigation?" Rolando asked. "Dunkin' Donuts is just around the corner."

"I'm game."

After waiting for two officers to load up with three donuts each, Rolando and I each ordered a single donut and coffee. This time the cream was fresh. I savored the hazelnut flavor as it slid down my throat.

"How long you been at this?" I asked.

"More years than I can count. My daughter, who's now a junior in college at Louisiana-Lafayette, has only seen her daddy work at one place." I heard a tinge of pride from Rolando, who scooped up some sprinkles and wiped his mouth.

"Yourself?"

"It's a long story, but I've only been in the business for a couple of years."

"No, I mean kids. How many kids you got?"

The question hit me like a Mack truck. I'd never had a colleague, friend, anyone, ask me how many kids I had. Then again, I was thirty-six, married. It was completely normal, but I'd parked that topic in the back of my mind. Even Marisa hadn't raised the kids subject more than a couple of times.

"I just got married. Still newlyweds, enjoying the good life." I chuckled to divert attention.

"Hey, I wanted to bounce something off you, if you don't mind, since you're from out of town and have no skin in the game." Rolando looked me in the eyes, then swiveled his head left and right, like he was making sure no one was listening.

"This whole double homicide has got everyone hoppin'. Our editor is cracking the whip."

Sounded familiar. I just nodded.

"If I tell you this, you got to promise not to share it with anyone." He raised his hairy eyebrows, waiting for my acknowledgement.

"Scout's honor." I held up one hand.

He let out an anxious breath. "I don't have any idea if this is connected to this double murder, but we've received three emails over the last three weeks, and the last one alluded to the unnamed author doing some pretty creepy things, including killing people."

My heart skipped a beat, and I had to ensure my mouth wasn't hanging open. I paused, thinking what I should—would—share with my new press buddy.

I decided to play coy and live to ask questions another day. "The timing is interesting. Couldn't the emails be some stupid college prank?"

"Sure, it *could* be a lot of things. But this guy was over the top, talking about killing animals when he was younger, staying at foster homes," he said. "He acted like he was just frothing at the mouth, waiting to kill women, blondes. He even compared them to that actress in *When Harry Met Sally*."

"Did you guys share this with the police or FBI? They might find it useful," I said with a calm response.

"That's the problem. My editor and publisher are strictly old school. They don't trust any official, and they don't want to share shit with anyone." He sipped his coffee. "Our newsroom, especially behind closed doors, is one tense place. Only four of us know about the emails, but every day we have a knock-down argument about it. We could be sitting on key evidence. That's obstruction!"

His raised voice caused me to look around. The place was empty, except for two uninterested employees playing on their phones.

He could see I was thinking it all through.

"Remember, you can't go back and run a front-page story with this news. I'll get fired, and it may not even be connected."

Don't you and I both know it, I thought.

"I'm cool, no worries. Let me think about it on my way back."

We traded business cards and promised to stay in touch.

Chapter Eighteen

Six more laps. Stay relaxed, focused. Regulate the breathing. Here comes the wall, glide...now flip.

Andi executed another flawless turn in the twenty-five-meter indoor pool on the University of North Texas campus. In all, she planned to complete twenty-four flip turns during her six-hundred-meter swim—unless her breathing pattern went haywire, which had happened more times than she wanted to admit.

She pushed off the wall for lap twenty-three. Her heart rate increased slightly, knowing the end to a successful workout—one of many in her extensive plan to compete in an upcoming triathlon—was just two minutes away. One stroke at a time, she reminded herself. Don't let the form get sloppy. Ten meters before the final turn and the homestretch, she eyed the wall. *Smack*—what? She screamed and coiled left, her lungs filling with anguished force-fed water. She grabbed her side. She'd been kicked in the chest—her left boob—by something, someone. She drifted under water, choking, gurgling. Her foot eventually hit the bottom, and she had just enough self-awareness and energy to push up, hoping air would hit her lungs before she imbibed half the pool.

"Ahh!" A bubbled yell escaped as she burst through the top of the water.

She flipped off her rubber swim cap and coughed up air and water, as her legs moved like spastic eggbeaters attempting to keep her head above water.

Her lungs finally felt a bit of relief and her heart rate dropped south of two hundred. She wiped her nose then jerked her head to the left. A man wearing his own swim cap was treading water three feet from her, a concerned smile flashing across his face.

"Uh, sorry, I didn't see you. I was practicing my breast stroke and my leg—"

"Asshole." Andi lunged right and kicked until she slapped the wall, then pushed off and tried to regain her form for the last lap. Under the water through her goggles, she could see the man still flapping his legs. She thought about veering left and "accidentally" kicking him in the gonads, but that would only interrupt her workout again. She focused on her stroke, using a counting method she'd learned to put her in the zone. Thirty seconds later, she touched the side. A quick glance over her shoulder to make sure she wasn't about to be accosted again, then in one smooth motion she lifted herself out of the water.

After three swimsuit adjustments to ensure the essentials were covered, she tossed her green swim cap over to the chair where her personal items sat. She buried her face in a plush cotton towel and recalled the earlier feeling of helplessness. For just a couple of seconds, she didn't know what had happened and thought she might swallow enough water to send her into a panic.

"Hey, once again, I'd like to say I'm sorry." The friendly voice surprised her. She turned and saw a man with curly, light-brown hair, well-developed chest and shoulders with rippled abs. His entire V-shaped torso seemed to point to a pair of blue Speedos—encasing a well-endowed package, it appeared.

She shook her head and wiped her face, reminding herself of what he'd done.

"I hear you. I just wish there was a time I could get in my workout without amateurs in the pool." She bit her lip, knowing that sounded flippant.

"I can't argue. I swim a few times a month at the most. I'm more of an off-road cyclist, and I jog some. Helps clear the mind, if you know what I mean." He had a warm, handsome smile, but her eyes kept sneaking a peek at the Speedo.

She couldn't hide behind her towel forever.

"Hey, I'm Andi." She held out her hand like she was in a business meeting. *Not very suave*, she thought.

He looked at her hand, then shook it, firm but not in a macho way. "I'm Trevor." She gave him another once-over, thinking—actually hoping—he wouldn't be some college-age kid, with no more direction to life than seeking his next female conquest.

"I'm sorry I got so, uh, irritated." Showing weakness, even vulnerability, wasn't Andi's strong suit. "I was in the zone, if you know what I mean. I really thought I had the whole pool to myself."

"No worries. It is almost ten o'clock at night, so that makes sense." Trevor was meeting her halfway. But why? Was he hitting on her? She nearly blushed, and a smile almost escaped her lips.

"Something funny?"

"No, just happy to get in another workout."

"You take this pretty seriously."

If he only knew. Obsessed is one word she'd occasionally heard her friends use.

"Well, I'm on a pretty strict plan to get ready for the Dallas White Rock Triathlon."

"Ah, very impressive. I wish I had more time to put toward accomplishing a goal like that."

She felt a tickle in her stomach. This guy...Trevor, couldn't be getting to her, could he? She wiped the back of her neck, then realized the cool air had created an untimely appearance of a pair of friends on her chest. Quickly wrapping the towel around her torso, she turned to untangle her T-shirt and baggy, gray sweats. She picked up her cell phone and noticed eight missed calls, all from the same number, a 469 prefix.

"Listen, you seem like an interesting girl, and a hell of a swimmer. Would you like to continue our discussion about your triathlon quest another time, maybe grab some coffee and dessert?"

Andi stared at her phone in the palm of her hand, trying to think through who would be trying to reach her so urgently. "Uh, I'm sorry. Just distracted by all these missed calls. Did you say something?"

"Maybe you're not into desserts. I'm no vampire; we could do lunch some time?"

Just then, Andi's phone buzzed and she answered it, while holding up a finger to Trevor and nodding at the same time.

"Andi, this is Dawn."

Andi heard snuffles. "Hi, Dawn...is everything okay?"

"Well..." An audible breath, then silence.

"Look, I've only had a little bit of time to look into what we talked about the other day." She kept it generic since Trevor—an absolute hunk, but a complete stranger until ten minutes ago, she reminded herself—was hulking a few feet away.

"I plan to spend more time the end of this week. Thus far, I've only been able to find marketing material on the company in Houston. But I'll keep—"

"My husband left me, Andi."

Heaving sobs pulsed through the phone. Andi's heart ached for this woman, who'd lost everyone close to her—even her future child.

"He said he couldn't take it anymore, Big Heart taking our baby away, stealing our money. He said he couldn't look at me anymore because of what it reminded him—that I couldn't give him a child, that we'd lost everything."

More sobs. "I'm so, so sorry, Dawn." Andi glanced at Trevor, his brow furrowed with concern, possibly empathy. *Damn, this guy has it all.*

Another exhale, then five consecutive nose blows.

"Andi, I think I have some information that might help you get to the bottom of this charade at Big Heart." Dawn sounded more lucid.

"What can you tell me? I'm all ears."

"The day after we got back, I got a call from this girl who worked at Big Heart. She sounded a bit hesitant, even frightened," she said. "She's one of their guidance counselors, working with pregnant mothers and prospective families."

"Okay, why was she scared?"

"She knew she'd get fired if they—the owners—found out she was talking to me at all, let alone what she said." Another nose blow.

"She said that Big Heart was essentially a black-market baby-selling operation, and they didn't give a damn about the mothers, the families, even the babies. It was just a business, set up to sell an infant to the highest bidder."

Andi's stomach tightened, and she put her hand on the back of the chair. "Why would she tell you this? Why didn't she go to the police?"

"Retribution. She knew it wasn't right, but she has to keep her job. She has a special needs kid at home, no father to help her, and she can't afford to lose the job."

"Jesus, Dawn. This is big, as I'm sure you know." Andi's mind spit out all sorts of internal questions, although she wasn't certain which path she should take. *Trust your instincts*, her dad had always said.

"Do you have her name?"

"Jenny. And I have her number too. I saved it."

"Good thinking, Dawn. Please text that to me. Thank you for calling and sharing this with me. I really think it will help."

Andi punched the line dead, then put her fingers to the bridge of her nose, her eyes shut. A gentle hand touched her elbow.

"Sorry, I don't mean to pry. Is everything alright?" Trevor asked.

"Not really, no. It's connected to my job."

"Oh, I assumed you were a student, maybe a grad student here at UNT."

"Well, yes, but...there's more to it than that." Andi started picking up all of her things. She didn't have time for opening up and sharing her feelings, her life. There were too many bad people out there who needed to be exposed.

Her phone vibrated, and she saw a text from Dawn. It was the phone number. Her next step just became clear.

"Look, Trevor, I gotta go. It's been nice talking to you." She slipped her white T-shirt over her head.

"Do you think we could grab a sandwich sometime?" His eyes seemed so sympathetic, so genuine.

Andi admired his tenacity, even in the face of drama. She flipped her thick, wet brown hair out of her shirt and slipped on her sweats and swim sandals.

"Okay, we can do lunch. But not until I get back."

"Where you going?"

"To meet a very frightened girl in Houston."

Chapter Nineteen

I'd accidentally set the alarm for eight, instead of six. I nudged Marisa, who took one look at the red digits, then flung off the covers and raced to the bathroom, muttering something under her breath about me needing glasses.

My pace was much slower, due at least in part to my restless sleep the night before in the Baton Rouge hotel. I put one leg in my pants then tripped before the other leg found the hole. I heard a door open and shut. I guess Marisa really was in a hurry. Ten seconds later, with my foot still searching for the magic drop into my other pants leg, the back door opened and shut again. Marisa marched into the bedroom.

"Forget your earrings or something?" I turned to look at her vanity, my junk still half out of my pants.

Her hand grabbed me by the balls, literally, which caused my eyes to pop. I wasn't sure if I'd feel a sharp yank, or something more soothing.

"Don't move."

I dared not.

She gently touched her lips to mine.

"That was nice. What gives?" I asked.

"I forgot to tell you goodbye, have a good day, and give you a kiss."

"Sorry about the alarm."

"I'll have to walk into a meeting—which I set up—thirty minutes late." Her serious look morphed into a warm smile. She kissed me again. "I forgive you."

"We could play hooky?"

She took her hand off my junk. "Down, boy." She shook a finger.

"By the way, I think your editor is trying to reach you. I heard your phone buzzing away on my way back in. Ciao. Love you."

Now a bit more energized, I stepped up the pace, putting on shoes, socks, and a belt in no time. I'd heard a cold front was blowing through, so I slipped a sweater over my flannel shirt. In the kitchen, I grabbed a crunchy breakfast bar for the road, then looked at my phone.

Just received another email from Yours Truly. Need help to decipher. Getting to work soon? Brandon

I snatched up my keys and computer bag and raced to the car. Four blocks from my house, I sat motionless, watching three road workers picking up rebar that had spilled off a long bed truck. Actually, two men with yellow helmets pointed fingers in every direction, while the other, manning the crane, ambled at the speed of a four-ton snail. Finally clear, I zoomed into work; fortunately, black-and-whites weren't out in force looking to fill their coffers.

Three steps into the office I was met with a foul stench—rotten eggs or a dead animal possibly blowing in through the vents. Four more steps and I realized it wasn't contained to the back. I held my breath and headed for the glass house, but when I

walked in, the room was empty. Only a loud hum greeted me. I turned, took in a deep breath, and pinched my nose—quickly picturing a skunk carcass rotting in a wall, maybe even the ventilation system—now on a single-minded mission to find Brandon and Stu. I darted through the sea of cubicles, mostly half empty, and heads down in the others. Finally, I caught Stu exiting the men's room holding a paper towel.

"Have you seen it, read it?" I waved him on to follow me.

"Seen what? I've been taking care of some personal business." I would have laughed out loud if the subject matter wasn't so serious. Stu kept pace three strides behind me until we stopped at Brandon's office. Huddled behind the antique roll-top desk that he inherited from his grandfather, his eyes locked in a deep conversation with Andi, sat my editor.

"I didn't see you the first time I walked by," I said motioning to him.

"I'm right in the middle of an important conversation with Andi here. I'll meet you in the glass house in two minutes." I realized that would be more like ten minutes in Brandon time, but at least I'd found him.

"Oh, Andi, nice series on the adoption process. I read your fourth and final feature this past Sunday. Well-written, succinct, factual."

"Thanks, Mr. Doy—I mean Michael."

I smiled, glad she was finally coming around to calling me by my first name, instead of using what I considered to be my dad's name: Mr. Doyle.

Ten minutes later, Brandon shut the meeting room door then slid over hard copies of the latest email to Stu and me. Apart from the annoying hum that had now become embedded in my brain, the room was blanketed with silence. I lipped the words of the email then paused, wondering what it all meant.

"Do you get it?" I looked at Stu, who shook his head.

I turned to Brandon. "You?"

"I have some ideas, but nothing solid." I re-read the content once more then let out a breath.

"Grab the Polycom. Let's try to bring in Carl and Guidry for a conference call."

While I located their numbers and tried to get them on the line, Brandon took out his iPad and forwarded the email to both law enforcement officials.

"Sent," he said.

I thought about the secret Rolando had shared with me, and concluded now was not the time to bring this up. I'd mull it over some more before I figured out how to get the FBI to connect the dots without me breaking my promise to Rolando.

The Polycom conference-call system beeped throughout the room like we had surround sound. *"I'm sorry, you have dialed a number that is no longer in service. Please dial again."*

I must have fat-fingered it. I tried again and reached Guidry, but it rolled to voicemail. I called Carl, and I asked if he'd received Brandon's email.

"Let me refresh my email. Not yet," he said. "Can't you just tell me what the note says?"

A muted, beeping sound. "Hold on, that might be Guidry. Let me try to bring him into our call."

"I was just dialing your number, Michael. Give me a sec." His voice sounded like it was being flushed down a toilet.

"Sorry, just doing some multitasking. I'm good. Go ahead."

"We got another email from Yours Truly this morning. Brandon sent it to your email box."

"Haven't seen it on my phone yet, but it could be hung up. My box might be full. I'm headed back to the war room now, so before I share my news with you, go ahead and read it to us."

To whom it may concern:

Do you ever feel you've become the worst version of yourself? That a Pandora's Box of all the secret, hateful parts—your arrogance, your spite, your condescension—has sprung open? Someone upsets you and instead of smiling and moving on, you zing them. "Hello, it's Mr. Nasty."

Yours Truly

I heard two deep breaths. They, like the rest of us, were likely pondering what the hell that meant.

"So any thoughts you'd like to share?" I prompted.

Carl spoke first. "I can't get a bead on this guy. For starters, it sounds like some type of response or reasoning related to the murders in Baton Rouge, if I had to guess. But I'm not the expert. Guidry?"

"Who's to say this email is related to the Baton Rouge homicides?" Guidry offered.

More silence. Perhaps Carl wasn't pleased with Guidry poking a hole in his theory.

"If this person is connected, and that's a *big if* at this point...it really sounds like he's trying to explain his feelings, possibly his motive. This could be a good sign that he wants us to know who did it. Once I'm back at my computer, I'll forward it to our cyber unit and the BSU."

I rubbed the center of my forehead, knowing Guidry's logic made sense. I'd hoped, however, that this would all be swept away, disregarded as a simple prank by someone who couldn't harm a soul—and from what he said, it was still possible, maybe even probable. But I couldn't help myself, wondering whose instinct to trust. Feelings of helplessness swept over me again, wondering if I had the power to keep Marisa safe, although she'd yet to be personally threatened in any way. Was I overreacting...again?

"It's my turn now." Guidry's twang interrupted my thoughts.

"The stage is yours."

"The cyber unit did get us feedback on the third email," he said. "Hold on." We heard a door shut and papers shuffle. My back began to perspire.

"They still don't have a sent-from address yet, but they have found three other places that received the same email. Oddly enough, they're all newspapers—one in Baton Rouge, Oxford, Mississippi, and Tallahassee, Florida."

"Shit," Brandon said.

"Exactly."

Chapter Twenty

Fans kicked in, and within seconds the rancid smell from the hallways and newsroom permeated the glass house. Both Stu and Brandon took turns swatting air and pinching their respective noses, while I simply held my breath and twirled a pen.

"What is that crap?" Stu asked.

"Smells like it," Brandon said, deadpanned.

"Huh?" Stu turned toward his younger boss.

"Just saying I smell it too," Brandon replied.

"Care to share with us?" Carl asked over the open conference line.

"I think a rat died in the walls or ceiling. The whole place is starting to smell...bad," I said, still twirling my pen like it was propelling my brain to try to understand what Yours Truly was trying to communicate.

We'd spent the last five minutes saying very little, each of us pondering what the latest Yours Truly email meant for our community, if anything at all. We at the paper did have a responsibility to the people, regardless of our relationship with the police and FBI. That said, I couldn't hold back what I'd found out at the bookstore about F-O-X, although there was a possibility the FBI was one step ahead of me on that anyway, just like they'd been on the email being sent to the *Baton Rouge Examiner*.

"Have you guys reached out to the newspapers in question?" I asked.

"As we speak. Fellow agents and cyber teams are either at or on their way to each office. After the homicides here in Baton Rouge, we're taking this very seriously," Guidry said with the most concerned tone I'd heard from him. "Technology certainly helped us on this one."

"I took a more simplistic approach last night."

"Excuse me?" Guidry said.

"Well, after watching you devour food like it was your last supper, I dropped by the crime scene, just to get a feel for what might have taken place."

"Did the spirits talk to you?" Brandon joked. I didn't smile.

"Uh, no. But I did find out that Ariel, the older girl, enjoyed reading quite a bit. So, I hit all the bookstores I could find in the area."

I only heard a throat-clearing cough.

"Long story short, after eleven o'clock last night, I got to the last one, the megastore on the northeast side."

"That's odd. That's not anywhere close to her apartment or campus," Guidry pointed out.

I hadn't really thought about that. Hmm. Something to ponder later.

"I ran into an employee, Patricia, who recognized Ariel from the mug shot in the local paper. I asked a few questions, and she had a good memory."

"Young minds are the sharpest," Brandon said, like he was bragging. I questioned his timing and content, and wondered if the Carrie factor had infected his thought process.

I half-rolled my eyes and spoke to the Polycom.

"Apparently, they'd gotten to know each other pretty well. Patricia would take breaks, and they'd discuss books, and even boys on occasion, but mostly books," I said.

"She recalls seeing Ariel last Friday night, without a doubt. She even remembers what they ordered: Vanilla Latte Grande."

"I'm sorry, but you said *they*?" Carl interjected.

"Uh, yeah. That was my reaction too. Ariel was with another person, a man."

"Holy cow," Stu said.

"Batman," uttered Brandon. I gave my editor the eye, wondering what extraterrestrial being had taken over his brain.

"Michael, did you get a name, a description?" Guidry asked.

"F-O-X," I spelled out.

"Sorry?"

"That's what Patricia said Ariel kept repeating. F-O-X. Apparently, they were joking around up at the counter while he was over at a table checking out the latest best sellers. Ariel giggled and nodded toward him, and Patricia figured it was the man's name."

"Why did she think that?" "Other than the two lattes, she saw the man leaving the store, but just the back of him. Not a good look, but she knows it was a man."

"Wow, great work, Michael. I appreciate it. We'll look up Patricia and get her on the record, maybe see if she can provide further physical description."

"Cool."

I took a deep breath, knowing there was still one more elephant to bring up.

"Guys, I know you've got your hands full with an investigation that may or may not be expanding exponentially, depending on whose theory we should believe," I said. "But our reading public has no knowledge of these emails—only those of us in this room know—and we're concerned. By not telling the public, are we putting people's lives at risk? Particularly pretty ladies with blond-highlighted hair."

"Don't forget about the punk rocker," Guidry said. "I say that because we can't solely focus on the one description Yours Truly gives in the email. He might have put that in there to throw us off, who knows. However, I understand your concern. We might need to take our plea of vigilance national, or at least regional." Guidry appeared to be thinking out loud.

The "V" word again. Now we were really making progress.

Chapter Twenty-One

"Okay, okay. Try to slow it down just a bit, if you can," Andi said, trying to comprehend the rapid-fire data points being tossed at her. "At a high level, I think you're saying the owners are in the kid trafficking business and essentially using this adoption agency as a front?"

More tears. Guilt tears, she could see. Andi handed Jenny two more tissues as heads turned to catch a glimpse of the female train wreck that had arrived about fifteen minutes prior.

"Let's just focus on breathing for a minute. We have plenty of time to catch up on everything else." Andi found herself using her hands to demonstrate a proper method for breathing in and out, trying to encourage Jenny to match the same pace.

Jenny blew her nose and tossed the mangled, wet tissue on the tiny table, a growing soggy mound. Her eyes bugged out, but she hid the expression from her new, seemingly unstable source.

Suddenly a giggle. Then another.

"Did I make a funny face?"

"Kind of. You blowing in and out reminded me of the exercises moms are taught when they give birth. Except, your version was ten times funnier, like a *Saturday Night Live* skit." Jenny laughed through more tears. Andi relaxed her shoulders and laughed at herself, relieved that Jenny had regained a degree of emotional normalcy.

Andi took a sip of her Starbuck's usual: Cinnamon Dulce Latte, hoping to recoup some energy after a long trip—humming down I-45 in her ancient minivan, dubbed the Mystery Machine—to Houston that afternoon. She'd called Jenny from the road, catching her just before the work day ended, and convinced her that as a friend of Dawn's, she was eager to hear Jenny's story of life at Big Heart, as well as how she was managing her special needs child. Another bit of advice from Dad: relate to your sources—they're not pieces of meat, they're people too.

Jenny swallowed some ice water and wiped under her eyes to ensure makeup hadn't started leaking. Then she began talking—unplugged. Just three years older than the reporter, Jenny, at age twenty-five, had already lived a long life. After years of watching her alcoholic father abuse her mother, he turned his rage on Jenny. She only put up with it for six months—about five months and twenty-nine days longer than she should have, she told Andi. She left home at age sixteen.

"You'd think I would have learned the lesson of my life." Jenny's dark eyes penetrated Andi's soul. Andi opened her mouth, her mind swirling with more questions, but Jenny held up a hand and continued reciting her biography.

Living off the street for the rest of her junior year in high school, Jenny moved in with a friend and graduated. It was a proud moment for her, although neither of her parents attended. In fact, she'd not spoken to either of them since she left. She couldn't tell Andi if they were happy or even alive. A school counselor saw a lot of promise in

Jenny and was able to get her a partial scholarship to the Art Institute of Houston, a small private school off Yorktown in West Houston. She worked nights at Walmart to supplement her scholarship...until she met Alec.

"My knight in shining armor." Jenny rubbed the side of the chilled plastic cup. Then she continued to share her life story.

A recent graduate from Rice University, Alec was uber intelligent and full of dreams, but short on drive, Jenny said. Still, he doted on Jenny and gushed over her artwork. She felt love like she'd never felt before...safe, taken care of. She moved in with him, and for the first time in her life, she felt anxiety release its ugly grip on each muscle in her body. Money didn't come easily for the young couple—Alec never held a job longer than two months, usually blaming a colleague or boss for sabotaging his career. Then Jenny got pregnant, and everything changed.

Alec became withdrawn, at first not paying her much attention, then ignoring her altogether, including her needs as a young, pregnant girl.

"He started drinking, and I feared that I was watching my mom's life repeat itself."

Four months into her pregnancy, he came home drunk one night and unleashed a barrage of insults at Jenny. She felt devastated and locked herself in the bathroom. He kept drinking, adding fuel to his rage. He crashed open the door—ripping the hinges out of the frame—and smacked her around. She fell into the tub, and he reached down and started choking her, his eyes bloodshot and possessed. Seconds before she was about to black out, he let go, walked out of the apartment and never returned.

All alone with no one to offer help or support, especially financial, Jenny moved into a smaller place in a questionable part of town, quit school, and started working at a daycare facility, hoping they'd provide a discount once her child was born. At age twenty, Jenny gave birth to a seemingly healthy and chunky eight-pound boy.

"But Nicholas was different, as much as I didn't want to admit it. There was something wrong...very wrong," Jenny said.

Andi felt a lump in her throat, but tried not to be overcome with emotion—that might derail the whole interview.

A single tear rolled out of the corner of Jenny's eye, but she didn't waver in finishing her story.

Over time, Jenny said, she noticed other kids' progress through different stages of childhood. Her little Nicholas didn't babble or coo, then after a year or so, he failed to say "mommy" or any other word. As he got older, he didn't want to be held and threw tantrums for no reason. It tore Jenny's heart apart. It all came crashing down in a cold medical office with Nicholas sitting in her lap—completely aloof and unresponsive to her rubbing his back or touching his cheek. The doctor said the little boy likely had autism.

With her cash flow dwindling by the day, one of the kid's parents at the daycare facility approached Jenny about a job opportunity at Big Heart, saying they needed caring, nurturing guidance counselors in their adoption agency. Jenny felt like a prayer had been answered—she now had benefits to help with the care for Nicholas, and her pay had increased.

"At first, it felt like it was my life's calling. At first." Jenny's voice trailed off.

"When did you first notice something illegal?" Andi asked.

Jenny looked into the corner of the coffee shop. At first glance, Jenny could be a cover girl. A petite five-two, Jenny had straight, jet-black hair, appeared to be part Asian, and God had given her the gift of a perfect complexion. No blemishes, the purest cream-colored skin Andi had seen. In fact, at five-eight, Andi felt like a beast next to Jenny, a little Asian doll.

"I'd only been there three months, and I felt like I'd gotten lucky, working with two couples to find their little dreams in just under two months," she said. "The next day the manager walked in and told us the house rule: find babies or young children for couples in no more than six weeks. If we could do it in less than four weeks, we'd see a little bonus in our next paycheck.

"It just didn't seem right. It felt more like selling used cars."

"Appalling," Andi said. "That isn't right, but what part of it is illegal?"

"I became curious and began listening to other conversations, some in English, some in Russian." Andi pinched her right ear, a lifelong habit that always seemed to accompany deeper focus, and nodded for Jenny to continue. "My father, as crazy as he was, lived in Eastern Europe until he was seven years old, and he taught me Russian."

"What did you hear?"

"I heard the co-owners talking to the manager about a week delay in getting their latest shipment of kids, and the number was down to twenty, instead of twenty-five. It sounded like they were bringing in kids from Russia, or that part of the world."

Andi's heart accelerated like a horse just let out of the gate. She shut her eyes and used the same counting exercise she'd used while swimming.

"What led you to share this with Dawn and her husband?"

"They were just so devastated. I slept on it one night, then I knew I had to reach out to Dawn." Her voice became meek. "But I knew I couldn't stop what was happening. I can't leave the job. I have to keep Nicholas in good care."

Andi contemplated how to play this.

"Jenny, we need evidence, solid proof of what is going on."

"But—"

"Jenny, there are babies being sold like candy. Who knows how this operation is set up in Russia? People are getting swindled and someone is getting rich off it. It's inhumane."

"I know." A tear came alive.

"Will you help me?"

"My little Nicholas."

"I'll figure out something for you and your little boy. All these parents and kids who are being abused by these ruthless assholes...you will help them, help me, won't you?"

She looked away then back into Andi's eyes. "Yes."

Chapter Twenty-Two

A bath had been drawn, but the two feet of water was motionless. Hunched down, I dropped my hand closer to the water, but before it touched, I heard a creak behind me. I jerked my head but only saw a darkened bedroom, flanked by an empty closet. A single drop fell from the phallic spigot, puncturing the deafening silence, and my heart pinged in my chest.

I sloshed my hand in the water, noting the room temperature and wondered how long the tub had been waiting for its occupant. I caught a waft of something fruity, and I sniffed to the air like a puppy.

"Hiya, Mikey."

I flipped on my knee and viewed a beautiful, alluring woman, her hands cupped around a silver candleholder, the three-inch, orange flame illuminating her chest, light and shadows flickering off her neck.

"Where you been all my life?" One eyebrow popped up on the last word.

I took three cautious steps forward. "Are we replaying Casablanca?"

No response, but a thin grin. She set the candle on the dresser and leaned her naked body against me. She grabbed hair on the back of my head and pressed her lips against mine. A gentle, soft kiss grew into a head-turning, deep show of passion, both of us immersed in the other.

She rested her hands on my chest and stared at me, her eyes looking almost amber with the candlelight splashing in our direction.

She slid each button of my shirt through its hole, taking her time, looking back into my eyes after completing each task. My pulse quickened by the pace of her tease, hoping we'd soon reach the end of the game.

This stunning woman—my wife—grazed the front of me and sauntered toward the Jacuzzi tub. She bent over to turn on the warm water, purposely tempting fate—the ultimate tease. She even peered over her shoulder, wondering if I'd take the bait. I took a step forward and felt the warmth of her backside. I kissed up and down her neck and nibbled at her ear, then closed my eyes and buried my face in her expertly-highlighted, curly hair, taking in every scent that existed, coconut and vanilla most prominent.

"Here's to you, kid," I said, playing along, and then I went in for the kill.

Ding dong! I flinched, initially forgetting it wasn't even completely dark outside yet. "What's that?"

"What do you think it is, silly?"

"Right, the doorbell."

Three more successive rings.

"It's probably just a door-to-door vacuum sales guy, or two ladies from the Jehovah's Witnesses church from down the street."

Marisa slid on sweats and a T-shirt. "Sorry, we'll have to pick up where we left off later."

She looked at me, still fully prepared to finish the game now. Two more doorbell rings.

"These people just don't give up," I said, staring at the ceiling, fists lifted in frustration. "Why me...or should I say us?"

Marisa smiled and walked out the bedroom door. A minute later, she popped her head back in. "It's Carrie. Trouble in paradise, it seems." She checked out my package, which still longed for her, and she shook her head. "My, this might be harder on me than it is on you. Then again, maybe not."

"Thanks." I reached for my robe.

"Hey, put on some real clothes. We don't need a tent popping up in the living room." She winked and shut the door.

I splashed water on my face and bemoaned the thought of engaging with Carrie. I thought about putting on boxers and vegging out in the bedroom, catching up on my latest Konrath thriller. But I knew I'd eventually get a return visit from Marisa, so I bucked up and got fully dressed and joined the conversation.

"He's just so inconsiderate. I just don't know how I didn't see it before." I heard Carrie babbling away long before I entered the main living area.

I took in a deep breath. "So, can I get anyone a drink? Bar's open. I'm going to have a Shiner."

A shrill pierced the air. "Oh, that's Brandon's favorite. What have I done, Marisa?"

Good gosh, why now? Why ever? I stood at our makeshift bar adjacent to the kitchen. I opened the fridge, popped the lid off my Shiner Bock, and took a swig. After a tiring trip to Baton Rouge and learning that the emails and double homicide had a more likely connection, we'd received that odd diatribe from Yours Truly, possibly rationalizing his involvement in the murders. *Who knows?* He never outright admitted it or even named the victims. Was this Fox fellow involved, if indeed that was his name? And I wasn't sure what to make of the emails being sent to the other newspapers, including Rolando's in Baton Rouge.

That was over twenty-four hours ago. Nothing new today—Friday—from Yours Truly or the law enforcement side of the free world. So, I'd decided to leave an hour early and set up a romantic scene for Marisa before we headed out for date night. Turns out, she beat me to the punch with her water ballet. With no guidance, I created my own concoctions for the ladies, and then I played bar waiter.

"Here you go, Carrie. This should help calm your nerves." I'd just given her a whiskey sour, heavy on the whiskey.

"For you, Marisa, I've created a new masterpiece."

"A Bloody Mary? That's a first." She took a sip and grinned. "Thank you, baby. You're so sweet."

Carrie grabbed a tissue and sobbed, rocking back and forth like she'd just lost a limb.

Standing behind Carrie, I held out my hands asking Marisa nonverbally what the hell had happened. She shrugged her shoulders, then reached over and rubbed Carrie's back.

Wanting—needing—to have a more peaceful Friday evening, I couldn't resist trying to find a resolution and move on.

"Carrie, what did Brandon do? If he hurt you, I'll fire his ass." I didn't intend to say that, my abruptness perhaps influenced by recurring memories of holding Marisa's hips.

"Oh no, he would never do that." She flipped her wrist, her tissue fluttering behind.
"It's actually worse than that."

Marisa and I glanced at each other, and I scooted closer to the edge of my leather chair.

"He called me fat." Here come the sobs again.

I'm sure my forehead was as wrinkled as crumpled bacon. I was, once again, perplexed by the female species. Marisa just kept rubbing her back.

"I'm sure he didn't mean it, Carrie," Marisa said.

"He never said those words, but he meant it."

"What words did he say?"

"I asked how I looked in my new gray stretch pants from White House Black Market. He said I looked better in my new purple skirt." She blew her red nose, then used the same tissue to dot her wet eyes.

Gross.

The doorbell rang. Maybe we could trade a vacuum for Carrie. I handed our guest a full box of tissues and escaped the emotional black hole.

"Hey, Michael." Brandon stood on our tiny front porch, hands buried in his jean pockets, his eyes averting mine.

"Hi, Brandon. I suppose you'd like to speak to Carrie?" I reluctantly turned and extended an arm into our home, a.k.a., the counseling center.

"Sorry, I don't mean to bother you and Marisa with all this relationship stuff."

I'm right there with you, I thought but dared not say.

As Brandon walked timidly toward Carrie, Marisa took that as her cue to exit stage right. We both met in the kitchen.

"Any hope of resolution without having to call in UN peacekeepers?"

"Very funny, Michael." Marisa playfully poked my chest. "Women think differently than men, if you haven't figured that out yet. Certain words and mannerisms are code for something else."

I leaned against the counter and finished my beer, then opened the fridge to grab another.

"Do you hear that?" Marisa whispered.

"What?"

"Exactly. They've either made up or left."

"Maybe Brandon put us all our out of our misery and suffocated Carrie under one of our throw pillows."

"You're sick."

"You're right, I don't want to ruin a fifty-dollar pillow."

Marisa jabbed my ribs, and we exchanged a quick giggle as we peered around the corner into the living area.

"Good gosh, get a room, will you?" The pair had officially made up, and apparently, they thought they were alone—at their own place. Hands and tongues were moving everywhere, and they sounded like two wet seals.

The two of us continued gawking, and I whispered to my better half, "Can we stop this behavior, please? We live in Texas...there are laws against all that."

Marisa snorted. "I'm not going to be the one who interrupts their moment." She backed up a couple of steps.

"Seriously, this is like watching *Animals Gone Wild*."

"What's that?"

"A new program starring Carrie and Brandon—in heat."

The doorbell rang...again. I put my hand to the side of my face as I walked through the living room, blocking the lovebirds from my vision. The lip smacking ceased.

With Marisa two steps behind me, I opened the door.

"Hi, Michael?" The man's voice sounded uncertain.

I didn't recognize him. "Yes, can I help you?"

"I'm your brother, Jeremiah. Nice to finally meet you."

Chapter Twenty-Three

"Thank you...Marisa, is it?"

"Yes, Marisa." My wife stared at the person who claimed to be my brother.

"I'm not real good with names. Cool." He took a quick drink from the beer bottle we'd just offered him then wiped his mouth clean with the sleeve of his brown and green flannel shirt. "I don't get to drink fancy beer very often. Tight budget and all."

Ever the pragmatic mediator, Marisa had chosen to let this clown into our house and give him a chance to explain himself. There was power in numbers, she said, whispering that the presence of Carrie alone would frighten away even the seediest of criminals.

"Look, I'm sorry to show up, unannounced, and spout off that you have a brother you never knew existed," he said, looking at four sets of eyes fixated on him. "I'm assuming you never knew?"

"No, I never knew." My voice faded, as my mind swirled with endless theories, most of them irrational or impossible to believe. "If indeed it's true."

Now four sets of eyes turned to me.

"Look, no offense, Jeremiah, but what do you expect me to say? I've been an only child for thirty-six years," I said, my arms splayed wide. Marisa laid her hand on my knee, calming my nerves a tad.

I turned to Brandon, who up to a week or so ago, had been my wingman, a steady beacon of light any time the seas became turbulent at work. Apparently, he hadn't lost his quest for the truth.

"So, Jeremiah," he said in a slightly accusatorial tone, "Why now? Why show up unannounced and surprise Michael like this?"

Glad I wasn't the only one who wanted to pin this guy to the wall and pepper him with questions.

"I've been an only child for all thirty-one years of my life. I just found out a couple of weeks back. I mulled it over and figured I'd head this way," he said.

"Where did you head from?" Brandon asked.

"I live on the East Coast, in God's country near the Appalachians, Greensboro, North Carolina."

"Did you say you're thirty-one?" Carrie asked, a gleam in her eye.

"Yep." He took another swig of beer.

"My, you are young looking," Carrie said.

Brandon turned his head and opened his lips but didn't say word.

"Just like Michael," Marisa said instinctively then quickly realized I didn't need to hear that.

Jeremiah and I exchanged an awkward look.

"Who told you?" Brandon wasn't thrown off by the girls' comments.

"My parents told me I was adopted back when I turned twenty-one."

Brandon nodded, pondering the location of his next fast ball.

"It took you ten years to cross the Mississippi River?"

"It took me ten years to have the guts to find out who my real parents were."

I thought that the girls, Carrie in particular, might go over and hug the guy.

Brandon and I traded an unspoken head nod.

"Look, I can give you all the details. I just didn't think you'd want me to come in here and rattle off a bunch of names and addresses," he said. "I only wanted to meet a brother I've never seen, and any family. Like I said, I'm an only child—at least to my adopted parents. I don't have other family. When you turn thirty, you start asking yourself questions. Where did I come from? Is my brother in the US senate or in prison?"

We all laughed at that notion, including me, which lightened the mood.

"I could imagine the Senate before prison. Your pretty-boy face wouldn't last a minute," Brandon said with an extra chuckle.

"Hey now."

"If Arthur had his wish, you'd at least be in the Texas Senate." Marisa held my arm.

"Who's Arthur?"

"A special friend," Marisa said.

"And my boss."

"Maybe you'll meet him someday," Marisa offered.

Marisa took round two of the drink orders, and I went to the bathroom. I washed my hands and looked in the mirror, studying my features. I took that mental picture back to the living room.

I stopped before entering the room and looked Jeremiah over. I couldn't see the resemblance. Eyes, mouth, nose, cheeks—all looked foreign to me. His hair was a little lighter and a little longer than mine, but he had a similar wave. His beard was closely shaven, but thick.

"Before we put Jeremiah through another grueling line of questioning, why don't Carrie and I run into the kitchen and try to pull some dinner together?" Marisa said. "Michael and I were going out on a date tonight, so I don't have much to offer. Maybe we can make some homemade chicken soup."

"I don't mean to interrupt your plans. I just wanted to drop by and say hello." Jeremiah stood in front of his chair.

"I wouldn't think of you leaving now. We have a lot to catch up on," Marisa said.

"Well, thank you Marisa. And it's not good to waste a cold brewsky."

I hadn't heard that term since college. Geez. I shook my head, but Marisa went about her business, leaving Brandon and me alone with my new, uh...Jeremiah.

"What kind of work do you do back in Greensboro?" Brandon sounded like my paid spokesman.

"Oh, a little this, a little that. Most recently, I was a carpenter at a millwork company," he said. "But I'm comfortable in just about any setting, as long as I don't have to sit in an office." He laughed. This guy seemed less like my relative the more I got to know him. Then again, how much of who we are as adults is defined by our DNA? Or are we more influenced by our environment—in this case, adopted parents?

"What do your parents, adopted parents, think about this trip to Texas?" My elbow propped up my chin on the arm of the sofa.

"Paul and Sarah Weldon died eight years ago."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that."

"Apparently, they died instantly, thank God. Their car stalled on a railroad track and a train hit them. Sent them flying two hundred feet."

I looked down and retied my shoes for no apparent reason other than to just take this all in.

"Hey boys, can we get some help in here?" Carrie called out.

All three of us walked into the kitchen. Brandon and I stopped at the doorway, staring at the broken cabinet door. Jeremiah didn't.

"Let me see what I can do."

Five minutes later, the door was just about reattached. "Thank you," Marisa said.

"I like to work with my hands—no problem at all," Jeremiah said while twisting in the final screw, the last turn creating a bulging blue vein in his muscular forearm.

"I can see that," Carrie said, her eyes ogling him top to bottom.

Brandon huffed and shook his head.

Jeremiah and I did have similar builds, although he was a couple of inches shorter and had a stockier build, at least in the chest and shoulders, and even the arms. Then again, with the job eating my lunch, I hadn't put enough time toward working out in the last few months, and my eating habits had gone to shit.

We sat down and ate dinner, Jeremiah sitting in the offset fifth chair. Conversation stayed light, allowing me to think things through a bit. Jeremiah was, from what he said, five years younger than my thirty-six years. I wondered why Mom and Pop would have put him up for adoption. Mom passed away over ten years ago, but Pop and I had grown closer as I got older, and he'd never said a word.

Marisa must have been reading my thoughts. "Jeremiah, I don't want this to be awkward, but have you thought about visiting your dad, you know...Bart? Did you know he lives in Oklahoma?" she asked, giving me some relief.

"I had a feeling this would come up." He played with his fork and glanced at the table. "Once again, I don't mean to bring undue pain to anyone." He looked at me.

"Michael, we share the same mother, Teresa. I did a little homework before I made the trip, and I know she is no longer with us."

I nodded, encouraging him to continue.

"But we don't share the same father. My real dad lives...lived in Corpus Christi. You see, no family except you."

A hush swept through the nook, and I put my hands to my head. Was he saying my mom had a baby with another man, put him up for adoption, and then went on living her life like nothing else happened?

"I don't know what to say." My eyelids felt heavy.

Small talk stole back the silence, followed by the clang of dishes, pans, and flatware. We walked everyone to the door.

"I'll be in town a few more days, just staying down the road in a motel."

I looked at Marisa, daring her to invite him to stay. She declined.

"Maybe we can see each other again," I said for some reason, probably simple curiosity.

The door shut. Unsure how—if—I'd sleep tonight, I was damn certain I was going to call Pop first thing in the morning.

Chapter Twenty-Four

A swarm of cars and trucks buzzed under our feet. It was an odd sensation. Then again, we were walking on a true engineering marvel.

February's early sunset had come and gone, but the moderate temperatures—holding steady in the mid-forties—brought out a fair share of Dallasites to the burgeoning downtown Arts District, including Marisa and me, walking arm and arm through the new Klyde Warren Park.

"Think about it, Michael. We're surrounded by grass, flowers, trees even, and it's all built over a highway," Marisa said, trying to take my mind off murders and a supposedly long-lost brother. "Yep." I didn't have a lot to say, but it was obvious that Marisa was attempting to get me to open up, learn about my conversation with Pop. I'd just as soon forget it ever happened—the same thing I felt about Jeremiah invading our lives.

I leaned down and picked blades of grass, impressed, actually in awe, of the park's concept and finished product. Civic leaders had raised private funds to build a downtown park—amidst all the concrete and buildings—over Woodall Rogers Freeway, an east-west, below-ground road. The park not only provided a welcome patch of nature—all four acres of it—but also connected true downtown, including the heart of the Arts District, with uptown, home to numerous five-star hotels, restaurants, and high-priced condos. Central Park it wasn't, but Dallas had taken another huge leap to add to its unique footprint.

"Pretty cool shit." I released the grass and noticed the breeze was blowing out of the north.

"Such a way with words tonight." Marisa tickled my ribs. "Usually you're the one who leads the conversation."

We ambled to the east side of the park and, standing behind a crowd of about three hundred, listened to a talented jazz quartet, which had me tapping my foot. At the end of the set, they reminded the crowd they were from Booker T. Washington High School—the Dallas arts magnet school located less than a mile from the park, in the heart of downtown.

"Must be child prodigies or something," I said, shaking my head.

"You know, Norah Jones graduated from that high school too."

I nodded, remembering parents had the ability to help mold us, or bring us down.

We turned south back into the teeth of the city, walking down Pearl Street, searching for a quiet restaurant. A half block from the Belo Mansion, flanked by high-rise office buildings, we found a nice café—quiet, muted lighting and a wait staff that was attentive but not overbearing.

Marisa used a tiny red straw to stir her Amaretto Sour. "So you going to keep everything inside? It might help to get it out there."

"Yep."

"Don't let me stop you." Her foot touched my leg under the table, forcing a grin out of my tight lips.

I released a deep breath and opened the mental box holding my thoughts and emotions.

"It's all cool, me and Pop."

Marisa set down her drink on the white linen tablecloth and crossed her arms.

"Anything more you'd like to share?" I could tell she was impatiently kicking her crossed leg under the table. "Okay. I put it all out there, and Pop got silent for what seemed like eternity." I chewed ice from my empty glass. "He finally admitted the truth. It was really hard on him."

"Which is?"

"He and Mom had a time when they weren't getting along, and eventually she left him...us," I said. "She said she needed time away to think things through, so she went to visit her sister in Corpus Christi.

"That's when Pop choked up a bit when telling me the story." I felt a tickle in my throat and took a sip of water, then cleared my throat.

"One month turned into two. She kept giving excuses for not coming home. Finally, she returned after eleven months, apparently with a much better outlook on life. She was honest with Pop, though, and it broke his heart."

"Just like it's breaking yours now."

"Yeah."

The waiter refilled our waters and said the main course would be out shortly.

Without further encouragement, I let it all out there, as embarrassing and hurtful as it was.

"Mom met a guy down there. He worked near the beach, and she apparently was swept off her feet, not caring that she had a family back home." I shook my head. "They dreamed of traveling the world, taking in all the different cultures and experiences. But then she got pregnant and the reality hit her hard. Him too...so much so that he couldn't deal with the pressure. He left town, apparently going solo on his world excursion."

Bitterness filled my lungs, and I tried to let it drain by exhaling.

"Mom and Aunt Lucille didn't know what to do, so Mom stayed away, had the baby, then put it up for adoption. And then next thing you know, a studly nature boy knocks on our door: *surprise!*"

I held up my hand to get the waiter's attention.

He approached with an apology on his lips. "I'm sorry, sir, your entrees should be out in two minutes."

"No, no . . . that's fine. I'd just like another." I dangled my empty glass.

"Maker's Mark and Coke, right?"

"You got it."

I immediately dug in my pocket and handed Marisa the car keys. She took my hand and squeezed it, her eyes filled with unconditional love.

"Michael, you were just four or five years old. Do you remember any of this?"

"Vaguely. I thought Mom had gone down to help Aunt Lucille with *her* new baby. Never knew she was looking for a new life."

Warm plates arrived, and we ate our wonderful meals, a bowl of pasta for Marisa, a tasty lobster dish for me. We shared a crême brûlée, and Marisa even pulled a couple of

laughs out of me. The temperature had dropped another five degrees by the time we headed out. The conversation had been therapeutic, yet I still felt emptiness.

"Can you feel abandoned after the fact...ten, eleven years after the person died, thirty years after it took place? That's how I feel right now."

Marisa practically cut off my left arm's blood flow, and then she stopped me on the sidewalk, no one within sight.

"Michael, we can't ever predict what life is going to bring us. I know how tough this is on you. It will take some time, but you'll come to realize that we can't change the past," she said. "We all want our parents to be perfect people. That's simply unrealistic. They're human, make mistakes, and get lost at times, just like the rest of us."

I watched the cold air take my breath and send it skyward, then I wrapped my arms around Marisa and didn't let go.

"Growing up doesn't end once you finish school, I know," I said. "And having kids can't be easy. Now making them...that's another story." I looked down and winked at her.

Marisa's eyes sparkled from the corner street light. "Let's go home and practice a little."

Chapter Twenty-Five

A heel caught the edge of the blue-painted wooden stair, and Andi lunged forward, unsure if her hand would catch solid surface or if she'd face-plant onto the front porch. Fortunately, her reflexes kicked in, and she finished the double-step standing upright, ten feet from the front door. A quick body check—nothing strained, and her dress didn't ride up to show her butt, thank God. She pulled both sides of her black, body-hugging dress down her slender, hips, caught her breath, and opened the door to the Victorian home.

The clomp of her three-inch heels on the wide-plank hardwoods made quite an entrance, as heads flipped her way. A few of the males held their gazes. She looked around but didn't see Trevor's curly hair. She glanced at her wrist—forgot her watch. Way too casual for this little black number anyway. She pulled out her iPhone: nine fifty-five. She was five minutes early.

The host led the way to a back table, nestled by an enormous fireplace. The old home seemed to be a wonderful setting for this Italian restaurant, creaky floors, wainscoting covering the first three feet of the walls, old chandeliers strung from the ceiling in every room, and hanging pictures of noted figures in Texas history. She turned to her right and saw a black-and-white of Davy Crockett, he of the Alamo fame.

Andi felt a bit antsy, not sure if it was because of her attire, the setting, or the fact that she'd actually admitted this was a first real date with Trevor, the man with the Speedo. She realized she hadn't let go of her gray leather clutch—a friend's gift for the night. She removed her mirror and turned her face both ways, looking for a flaw in her makeup. Seemed a bit overdone, but Trevor had warned her this place was fancy. Her hair was pinned up in a bun, with loose ringlets hanging down each side, framing her face. Amazingly, it had been quick and reasonably painless to create, considering her thick, brown locks. Her brother once called it a horse's mane. Screw him.

Waters arrived, but although her mouth was dry, she didn't want to leave her lipstick imprint on the glass—her mom once told her it gave off the wrong impression, especially for a first date. Whatever.

"Is this seat taken?" came a familiar voice. She couldn't hide her ear-to-ear smile, as she turned and got out of her chair to meet Trevor. He gave her a warm hug then held the chair for her to sit back down. As he walked to his side, she instantly noticed his outfit—a pair of blue scrubs. She couldn't help but stare.

"Hey, sorry I couldn't match your beauty," he said. "I just got off my shift...well, two hours later than I'd planned."

"Shift?" She knew he was too educated to work as a grocery bagger. But seeing some type of medical scrubs caused her to pause. He could be a nurse or an x-ray technician. Or he could be...

"I'm finishing up my residency at Denton Regional Medical Center, over off 380."

She nodded very deliberately. Her hunch had been right, but it actually caused more butterflies in her stomach, which surprised her.

"That fire is a bit warm," Andi said.

"Do you want us to get a different table?" he offered, looking for a waiter.

"Oh no, I'll be fine." She took a sip of water then discretely wiped red lipstick off the glass. She'd heard stories of doctors going commando under their scrubs. She blinked, hoping to put that image in the back of her mind—way back.

"So, what is your specialty?"

"I'm an orthopedic surgeon. You know, knees, shoulders, ankles. I loved sports growing up but always found myself suffering some type of season-ending injury."

She could see he had a great "bedside charm."

"I've been interested in medicine since high school, at least the part about healing and fixing things that are broken or don't work right."

Andi learned Trevor was twenty-eight years old, five years older than she. The more they sat and talked, the more she dreamed about sitting next to a fire in their own home, sharing their lives. She did a double take at her thoughts. This wasn't the Andi Osborne she knew.

"Hey, Andi, did I lose you?"

Only in your emerald-green eyes. "Uh no, just studying this menu. What do you recommend, since I'm sure you've been here before?"

He let out a chortle. "This won't help my cred any, but this is the first date I've had in...forever. I've been buried in books and working long hours at hospitals. I'm just now coming up for air."

Do you need mouth-to-mouth?

"I guess I should feel privileged," she said with more confidence than she felt.

Drinks showed up, followed by an appetizer they both shared—bruschetta with tomato and basil.

"So are you in training to swim the English Channel?" Trevor joked, as bruschetta crunched between his pearly whites.

"Actually, I want to break Diana Nyad's record for swimming from Cuba to Florida," she deadpanned. "Who doesn't want to take a night swim with man-eating sharks and jellyfish? I have another forty-one years to hit that goal. "Actually, I'm training for a mini triathlon. Fifteen-hundred-meter swim, twenty-five-mile bike ride, and a five-kilometer run."

"I grew up on the Florida coast. I had a shark bump my leg once."

"I guess you single-handedly killed him by tearing apart his lethal jaws, then cooked him for dinner?"

"Uh yeah, something like that."

They were lost in each other, each appreciating the other's mastering of the "humble brag."

After dinner, with the restaurant-house half empty, they sipped coffee and continued getting to know one another.

"Did you accomplish what you wanted in Houston?" he asked.

"Uh, I guess I never told you what that was about."

"I just know it was emotional."

"It was worse when I got there."

Andi explained her role at the *Times Herald* as she finished her undergrad this semester. She talked through her adoption feature stories and how Dawn reached out to her with a shocking and sad story, which then led her to Jenny.

"I'm not sure how to help Jenny and her autistic son. But if I can't find some way to help her survive financially, she won't be able to quit that horrid job and get me the dirt on the owners," she said.

"I can see this is a real passion of yours," Trevor said.

"Kids?"

"Maybe. But I was more talking about getting to the truth." Andi felt her pulse increase, and a warm smile crossed her face.

Outside the restaurant, stars sprinkled the dark night sky as they waltzed down the stairs. All of a sudden, one of Andi's heels stuck between two planks, and she fell to her right, grasping at Trevor or anything to keep from falling on her face. A wayward hand found the inside of his scrubs, and she used the leverage of his waistband to keep from tipping over. His pants came halfway off—exposing the same tight derriere she'd seen in his Speedo. "Wow, can I get any more awkward?" she said, trying to collect her strewn hair into a revised bun.

He laughed good-naturedly. "It's cute, more than cute. Let me take you home," he said.

Hailey raised an eyebrow.

"No, it's nothing like that. It's chilly outside, and you're just wearing..." He used his hands to outline an hourglass.

"It's okay, thank you. I enjoy walking. It keeps me in shape."

She took two steps toward him, leaned in, and kissed him gently on the lips. It sent a shockwave of adrenaline through her body. She put her hands against his chest, wanting to grab hold and go in for more, but instead she playfully pushed away.

"I guess we're good for a second date?" he asked, walking around to the driver's side of his faded-red Altima.

"At least."

"I'll call you." He put his hand to his mouth and blew her a kiss, then hopped in his used car and took off.

She turned and walked on air for about thirty yards, then clipped the shoulder of someone—a man—walking at a fast pace the other direction, wearing a black leather jacket. *No apology or anything? That's rude*, she thought. She ignored the asshole and skipped down Locust Street and off to her apartment, her mind thinking about scrubs and Speedos.

Chapter Twenty-Six

He'd seen the brunette from afar, her skimpy black party dress practically painted to her athletic, toned body. Tempting indeed. But that wasn't his game this go-round.

Sam walked three more blocks south, then left two more blocks, finding a raucous scene of bars and clubs, live music booming from at least four of the late-night scenes.

He felt a vibration from his back pocket and pulled out his smart phone. It was a Google alert notifying him that a particular name had been identified within the Google search spider. Few people knew this app existed within the Google portfolio. The man clicked the link and read through the brief story.

"Roy Dixon holds up his award-winning twenty-eight-pound fish, standing in front of his new yacht, recently christened Little Darlin." The man's eyes rolled into his head, and he took a deep breath. He recalled his euphoria when Dixon had completed the most important task of his life. The next day the headline on Huffington Post read: *Air Marshall Kills Hijacker after One Passenger Tossed from 737.*

Then, he recalled his last communication to Dixon: *"Two kills w/one shot. U earned the dough. Be smart...or I'll gut you."*

Apparently, Dixon had ignored the warning, or forgotten what had allowed him to enter early retirement. He huffed out loud, then pocketed his phone. One more task just got added to his list.

A familiar tune re-focused his thoughts. He heard the chorus from the song, "Lyin' Eyes," and knew that Dan's Silverleaf was calling his name.

"You can't hide your lyin' eyes. And your smile is a thin disguise. I thought by now you'd realize. There ain't no way to hide your lyin' eyes."

The clean-shaven man with a blond ponytail and black-rimmed glasses sat at a table toward the back, where conversations didn't require hand signals.

Whoops, hollers, and clapping. The wannabe cover band ended its set. A fifteen-minute break, a fifteen-minute window to identify a girl of his choosing to share a final night—for her—of intimacy and ecstasy...well, ecstasy at least for him, in the worst kind of way.

A warm hand touched his back. "Can I get ya anything?" The twang of a country girl. How alluring. Her hand moved to his shoulder as she showed her face. He tried not to regurgitate his dinner, a mushy chicken potpie that he envisioned looking even less appetizing strewn across the table with a side of bile.

"Uh, I guess," putting his hand to his chin and feeling bare skin. He glanced around the active bar. Girls at this age typically traveled in groups, but he had no interest in a multi-girl arrangement. He knew most men dreamed of bedding two women at the same time. The thought didn't arouse him. His peers weren't mature enough to appreciate the shared bond with their partners. *Their losses.*

"Mister, you want a drink of some kind, a beer, liquor, one of our specialty drinks? We got a good list, see here." She flipped a rectangular menu in front of him. He glanced down, then peered out the right side of his peripheral vision.

His eyes zeroed in on a lone, white female, wearing a dark-gray jacket with rolled-up sleeves, covering a cute purple and gray shirt that hung three inches above her ripped and trendy low-rise blue jeans. A set of jewel-blue eyes complemented long, flowing, blond locks, wavy and curling at the ends. She slurped a straw in a curved glass—which happened to match her figure.

"I'll have what she's having. And please offer her another, compliments of me."

"Whatever, mister. I'll have it right out."

He removed his glasses and cleaned them on his shirt, then pulled out a crumpled paperback, *Abbey Road to Ziggy Stardust*.

"So what do I owe you?"

The blue-eyed blonde had snuck up on him, causing blood to race through his veins.

"Your life."

She laughed so hard her eyes shut, and he followed suit.

As she sat down, he noticed two necklaces, a brown, natural stone choker, accenting a silver chain around her neck. A thick, metal rectangle that looked like a tongue depressor hung from the chain.

"That's really unique."

"Thanks. I don't know if you can see it or not, but it says, 'May the force be with you.'" She gave him a smile that lacked confidence.

"And with you," he said, waving a slow hand in front of her face. He held his gaze at her neck. He wasn't sure he'd ever seen such a perfect complement of jewelry and beautiful feminine features.

She giggled and touched his arm, as if she suddenly was feeling a little more at home with him, an older man. He raised his drink and admired the contoured shape of the glass. "So what are we drinking tonight, uh...?"

"Olivia. It's the bomb."

"Yeah?"

"Belfast bomb. And with whom am I sharing this drink?"

"I'm sorry. Sam. Sam I am." He reached over and shook her hand—velvety skin and full of grace. He sucked in another mouthful of the bomb, and she followed suit, raising her eyes to look at him.

"So, are you a music lover or you just like to come to noisy places to read books?" She nearly shouted, nodding toward the paperback.

Sam picked up the book and strummed the cream pages. "My mind is always thinking. I think I like to have constant stimulation—music, a great story...I'm drawn to words and how people use them to evoke a thought or emotion."

"Wow, you sound like the late John Lennon," she said, not blinking. "You kind of look like him too."

He ran his ponytail through his hand. "I'm not exactly someone who enjoys following the crowd."

"Do you teach here?" she asked, and he wondered if this would be a turn-on for her. "Can't say I do, no. Well, I used to teach at a small liberal arts school east of here, Austin College. I taught creative writing."

She nodded then took another slurp.

"There's something about you that radiates creativity," he said.

She gave an *aw-shucks* look. "I'm in grad school finally."

That's a relief, he thought.

"I'm working toward my Graduate Artist Certificate in Music Performance."

Just as he'd imagined, a gifted artist and one who could appreciate a deeper relationship. He asked, "Do you have an instrument of choice?" *I'll share mine if you share yours.*

"I can play any of the string instruments, but I'm focusing my training on the piano."

"Tell me more. Tell me how your mind works when you translate a sheet of notes into a melody that infiltrates your soul."

Olivia flipped her hair back, exposing more of her delicious neck, then engaged Sam in a deep conversation, sharing how she'd developed her musical prowess. Sam tilted his head on occasion, nodding at the appropriate moment, his eyes never shifting away. He was engulfed in everything that was Olivia.

Their chairs grew closer, magnetized by the couple's remarkable connection. By the time the cover band started its last song, Sam and Olivia were attached at the hip.

"Hey, come on. You're a confident, spontaneous man...get up here."

He took her extended hand and moved just a couple feet from their table. She pulled him closer and placed his hands on her hips. She stared into his sky-blue eyes with a serious but vulnerable look as they swayed and shuffled to the slow rhythm of "Desperado."

"Now it seems to me, some fine things have been laid upon your table. But you only want the ones that you can't get..."

The classic rock song hit its final magical note, and Olivia leaned on her toes and kissed Sam on the cheek.

"I heard Don Henley went to UNT for a while back in the day, before he headed out to California," Olivia said, an obvious attempt to show her age didn't affect her appreciation of knowledge of all types of music.

Olivia grabbed his black leather jacket and slipped it on. He took her hair and gently pulled it out, resting it on the back of the jacket.

"Now that's a look that doesn't require any words."

She smiled and took his hand as they ambled out of the bar.

An hour later, his bare feet were stuck to plastic that lay on top of an old rug. He'd learned that two layers were the most effective. He panted, his breathing so deep he could see his chest swell with each release.

The final verse now complete, Olivia twitched, as blood pooled around her gashed neck and torso. He glanced down at the tattoo located at the bottom of her back: *Insert Coins Here*. He shook his head, amazed at the trashy phrase connected with such a classy, intelligent, talented girl. *Sometimes you just never know about people*. He thought about slicing off the tattoo, just so his final image of her could be pure and clean. But he thought the better of it.

She'd meant so much to him—for the last three hours—until it ended with one grandioso finale.

He walked to his pants and pulled his cell phone from the back pocket. He fingered a text.

Still on track. Hope to finish soon. Stay strong.

Sam glanced back at Olivia, the red lettering from her tattoo screaming at him now. He shook his head in disgust, then grabbed the scalpel and made four precise incisions in the shape of a square to extract the unsightly image from his memory.

He would sleep well tonight.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

"When did they arrest him?"

"Uh...shit, I don't know." Rolando released an exasperated huff. "Actually, they say they're holding him as a person of interest. Not a formal arrest."

"When?"

"Yesterday, right after Bruce and his family got home from church."

I wondered how all of this fit together. I looked across my desk to Stu, elbows on knees, rubbing his hands together and deep in thought. He pursed his lips. Brandon, the consummate multitasker, studied the emails we'd received from Yours Truly, moving his head back and forth between the hard copies on my desk.

The call had come within five minutes of me arriving at the office. Rolando, my new journalism buddy from the *Baton Rouge Examiner*, said he hadn't slept all night, not since the FBI had picked up his own editor as a "person of interest" in the investigation of the double homicide.

I still couldn't get my mind around all of this. As Stu had educated me over the last couple of years, a person of interest was a designation law enforcement officials used for a potential suspect, someone for whom they usually had circumstantial evidence and were close to filing formal charges. But sometimes those charges never materialized, whether they couldn't find that key piece of evidence that directly linked that person to the crime or the link to the crime simply didn't exist.

"In this type of high-profile crime, the Feds have to act fast," Stu said over the speakerphone. "Bringing in your editor, Bruce, was a bold move. With him being a member of the press, the heat gets turned up, along with exposure for the case. If this didn't get national attention before, I'm sure CNN, Fox, and every other media outlet will be all over this.

I nodded, glancing at the dust clinging to the vintage clock near the edge of my desk.

"They can't be wrong on this. If they are, they lose all sorts of credibility and the public will lose faith," Stu added "And when that happens, people get scared and do stupid things. Remember the scene from the LA riots back in 1995?" I chimed in. "Ugly."

An indiscernible grunt from Rolando.

The senior crime reporter said the local police and FBI showed up unannounced last Friday—similar to the scene at the *Times Herald* the week prior—and interviewed everyone who'd been in the loop on the Yours Truly emails, then got their cyber unit access to the paper's IT assets. From there, apparently their investigation turned to focus on his editor. Curious to see what a possible homicidal maniac looked like, I asked Rolando to email me his editor's mug shot.

The JPEG slowly opened as I turned my screen so Brandon and Stu could also see it. We saw a white man with a blank stare, dark hair, matted but parted in the middle. You could say he had a beard, but it looked more like a checkerboard, something you might find on a seventeen-year-old kid.

"Have you been able to learn anything since he was arrested?" I asked.

"I've spent most of my time being interviewed by the FBI or local Baton Rouge detectives, and then I met with our management, publisher, and two assistant editors. It's frickin' chaos!" Rolando exclaimed. "But to answer your question, I have a good source within the police department, a sergeant, who's plugged in to the FBI investigation. He said that Bruce doesn't have a solid alibi the night of the murders."

I popped a knuckle and put my hand to my chin. "Interesting. Did the sergeant give you any details on his alibi?"

"Zilch," Rolando said. "But after I asked ten more questions, he finally told me that they learned Bruce had been stalking some girl, a sophomore at LSU, for the last couple of months. Apparently, they'd met at that mega bookstore on the northeast side of town. They talked about her interning at the paper and then dated for two or three months."

"Didn't you say he was married?"

"Yep. Two kids, and he's forty-five years old."

I turned to review Bruce's mug shot and tried to imagine a twenty-year-old college sophomore being attracted to...*that*.

"This guy looks like he'd have a tough time scoring a date with a blind prostitute," I said under my breath to Brandon and Stu, who both nodded.

"What'd you say, Michael?"

"Nothing. The sergeant give you anything else on Bruce?"

"They're bringing in that girl from the café, Patricia, to see if she can ID him, although she only saw Ariel's friend from the back, real quickly as he was exiting the door.

"By the way, I heard you found that source on your own. Nice work."

"Thanks. Any connection made to our mutual email lunatic, Yours Truly?"

"The sergeant either is a good liar or he doesn't know a thing. Which tells me—"

"They haven't been able to make that connection," I finished.

"Right, but they did take Bruce's work computer, and I heard they did the same at his home."

I picked up my pen and scribbled out the names of the four places in which emails were sent: Baton Rouge, Oxford, Tallahassee, and our paper in DFW. I circled each and wondered if Bruce had been taking a college tour.

"I'm sure your work life is a load of fun right now," I said. "I can feel your stress, Rolando, but I can't tell which way you're leaning. Pro Bruce or pro law enforcement?"

A loud exhale. "It's almost surreal. Frankly, Bruce has been a pain in my ass for years. He's always taking the opposite perspective, and usually, his instincts are wrong," Rolando said with a higher-pitched voice. "I don't care for the guy at all, work or not. Still...this might seem strange, but when they arrest one of your own, it's different. It's like they indicted our whole profession."

I'd heard cops express similar feelings about their fellow officers of the law. Even if a colleague had committed brutal crimes, the whole group felt a combination of disappointment and sympathy. "By the way, Rolando, we're picking up any stories you write and running those in our paper, part of our southwest alliance," I said.

"Thanks...I guess. There's nothing easy about any of this."

Brandon gestured that he had a question.

"Hey, Rolando, one thing doesn't add up. The murdered girl, Ariel, had supposedly spelled out F-O-X to Patricia. Did you ask your source about that?" Brandon's brow was furrowed from his intense focus.

"I didn't have to. Bruce's last name is Foxworthy."

I shot a glance at both of my guys. The FBI might have just hunted down a serial killer.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

An unseasonal warm front had swept through the area, and temperatures soared into the upper seventies. I pressed two buttons and my car windows glided downward. I took in a deep breath, catching a distant scent of a skunk, as I wended through our neighborhood, unconvinced that in early February we'd seen the final freeze of the winter. A few years ago at this same time of year—when the Dallas Cowboys played Super Bowl host—over a foot of snow fell in two days, leaving a two-inch sheet of ice and temperatures no higher than the teens. The high-dollar tourists thought they'd accidentally landed in Detroit instead of Dallas.

The news from Rolando had been swirling in my mind ever since our call earlier that morning. Part of me believed the arrest of Rolando's editor was a personal attack on the press, and one that should not go unanswered. The other part of me—the logical me—heard the information provided by Rolando's police source and believed there was a strong possibility that Bruce Foxworthy was indeed the sick bastard who killed two college girls in Baton Rouge. But was he Yours Truly? Maybe multiple perps were involved. It was possible the murders and the emails weren't even connected. The questions outnumbered the answers, and I knew my best shot at working through the puzzle was to take a long run. It had been weeks—maybe since before Christmas—when I'd last fit in a decent workout. My lungs, muscles, and even my joints begged for physical exertion, and my cluttered mind needed to find the purge and reboot button.

I drove by the front of the house and slowed to a crawl, stunned to see someone trimming our hedges. The shirtless man with sweat glistening off his broad lumberjack shoulders was, purportedly, my brother—from another father, of course. I cruised around the back to the garage, my internal temperature rising at the exact rate my mood was dropping. Not a good sign for my next conversation.

I strode into the house and saw two ladies drinking tea, leering out the window and giggling like teenage girls ogling a poster of Zac Efron.

"If you take a picture it might last longer," I said with a hint of attitude.

"Oh baby, glad you're home...I think." Marisa took three cautious steps my way, then wrapped her arms around my neck and planted a kiss.

That helped.

My wife turned back to Carrie, her neck still arched to take in as much of the outdoor scenery as possible.

"Hey, Carrie. Why don't you take Jeremiah some ice water? I'm sure he's thirsty."

"Yeah, maybe we can get him to pour it over his chest, and we can watch a hunky waterfall." Carrie roared with laughter.

"I'm sure he'd love to put on a strip-tease show for you, Carrie." Marisa looked back at me and rolled her eyes at her hormonal friend.

"Now you're talking. I think I have a few one-dollar bills." She touched her finger to her chin. "I'm just kidding."

Marisa's shoulders relaxed a tad.

"We can save that for after we've gotten him liquored up. He can use your coffee table." Carrie looked at me like she'd forgotten any male was still in the room, especially one casting an annoying glare. "Michael, do you have any errands that you need to run later?"

Marisa put her hands on her hips and released a breath. "Go." She flicked her wrist, shooing Carrie off. I dropped my bag and coat and sat at the kitchen table. Marisa circled behind me and began to rub my shoulders.

"My, you are tense." Her thumbs rolled over a couple of knots that felt like two rocks embedded under my skin.

I leaned to my left. "I'm not sure that's working." She began to massage each shoulder blade, and slowly the knots seemed to turn into dust.

"How's that?"

"Better, thanks." My eyes had shut, and my calm had returned.

Determined to not let the good weather go to waste, I gave Marisa a thirty-second synopsis of our conversation with Rolando while I changed into my running clothes. I grabbed my stopwatch, iPhone, and earbuds.

"Are you saying they've arrested the Baton Rouge murderer?" Marisa had been confused by my quick summary.

"He's only a person of interest right now. We can talk more once I get back."

I flew out the front door, waving at Jeremiah in passing. A bit surprised to see me, he turned and raised his hand. I think I saw Carrie nearly faint as he flexed his pectoral muscle, but I ignored the adolescent drama and set course on my six-mile path.

The first half mile was torture. My breathing was erratic, my joints and leg muscles unaccustomed to the pounding. My right ankle twisted running through a gully, but I caught myself before falling to the ground. I trudged up a slight incline, and my pulse started climbing. A neighborhood dog—looked like a bloodhound—caught wind of my scent and lumbered after me, showing considerable endurance. The chase lasted a good quarter mile, and by the end of the sprint, my heart had redlined. I considered walking, but I fought through it. Slowly, by mile four, my limbs felt like they were attached, working mostly in tandem. I pushed myself all the way to the end, and then stopped, my hands propped on my knees and my lungs gasping for extra capacity.

Sweat dripped onto the concrete, but I quickly realized I'd spent the entire run focusing so much on staying upright that I'd expunged all the drama at home and at work. I pulled out my earbuds and wiped my wet forehead.

"Get a good workout in?" asked a man's voice behind me.

I swung around as Jeremiah circled from behind his pickup, slipping a tight, black T-shirt over his head. "Uh, yeah. Twisted my ankle, chased by a howling dog, but I kept going. Nice to finally have time for a workout," I said.

I let out another deep breath.

"Just to let you know I'm not pushing myself on your family. I happened to drive by, and I saw Marisa out front getting the mail. Before you know it, she and Carrie were talking my ear off. I escaped by asking if there were any things I could fix around the house."

I gave Jeremiah a thin smile. I wasn't exactly Mr. Handyman, but I'd always done our yard work, and spending summer after summer putting up a fence on Pop's farm had ingrained in me a work ethic that I'd never forget.

"Thanks for whatever you did. Wasn't necessary," I said as we walked through the front door.

"Boy, someone cleans up nicely." Carried looked past me to Jeremiah, who apparently had done nothing more than put on his black T-shirt. Maybe he'd sprayed himself down with a lustful pheromone.

I told Carrie that Brandon was working late tonight, but she hardly noticed. The four of us ate pork loin, veggies, and rice pilaf as I tried to relay the updates on the murder investigation.

"It's chaos in Baton Rouge right now. The public is probably happy they have someone, but like I said earlier, it's only a person of interest. No formal charges yet." I stuffed a chunk of pork in my mouth, my body craving protein.

"Have they connected this sicko to the emails you guys received?" Carrie asked. I eyed her back, wishing she hadn't shared information that I'd wanted to remain private.

"Uh, no," I said abruptly.

"What emails? Or is that a taboo subject?"

Almost-tall, somewhat-dark, and apparently quite-handsome had seen something in my nonverbal response to Carrie, who continued, as unaware as ever.

"The *Times Herald* and the *Baton Rouge Examiner* received these emails from this complete pervert, saying he had killed animals as a kid, then essentially said he could kill a woman whenever he got the urge. Just disgusting," Carrie said, taking a bite of pilaf.

"Who knew being a journalist would bring you so close to danger, huh, Michael?" Jeremiah said.

"Who knew?" I said, eyeing Carrie again.

"But they think they've got the guy, which is good," he added.

"Yep." I didn't want to get into the editor's proclivity for college girls or all the questions that still lingered in my mind.

"So, where are you headed next?" I asked little brother.

"Good question. I might take it all the way to the west coast, or I could just turn around and retrace my steps back home. Gotta see where the gut tells me to go."

Hell was the first place that came to my mind.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

"Andi, I've got the password. Do you understand what that means?"

Sitting in her six-by-six blue cube, Andi listened carefully while speaking through the office phone anchored to her desk.

"I can only imagine, Jenny," Andi said. "By the way, before you start sharing the world to me, where are you? It kind of sounds funny, with an echo."

"I'm sitting on top of a toilet in a stall in the ladies room here at Big Heart."

Andi's stomach jumped into her throat.

"Jenny, do not say another word. Someone could be listening to you at this very moment. I don't want to freak you out, but before you share anything with me, you need to leave work and get home, or at least far away from the office." Andi ran her fingers through her long hair.

"I thought I was being careful by calling you from here." Jenny had a concerned tone.

"You might be, but the information sitting behind this password might be everything we need to put this operation out of business. I don't know," Andi said.

"It's about lunchtime. I'll go home and call you from there. It's only six blocks from the office."

"Cool. That's smart."

"By the way, have you figured out how to help me and my son yet? Once I walk out that door for good, I've got to have everything lined up. This isn't a game I'm playing."

"I get it. I'm working on it, but before you share anything else, please leave the office," Andi nearly pleaded, hoping, praying no one was overhearing Jenny.

"I'll call you back in thirty minutes."

Andi hung up and stared at her cube wall, a blue canvas of nothing. Finally, her eyes focused on a thin, silver-framed picture: her and her father arm in arm, standing in front of a large, white building. Her father's eyebrow was raised as he pointed with his free hand toward a sign that said "The Watergate Hotel"—the scene of one of the most notorious crimes and cover-ups, all connected to the highest level of the government. The college senior chuckled, recalling something her father told her.

"Ever since Watergate, 'gate' is now a suffix for any investigation that purports to hold a smoking gun. Where's the imagination in that? Surely the media can do better." *Dad had a point*, she thought.

She snatched her insulated water bottle off her desk and zigzagged through the maze of cubes to the break area on the other side of the newsroom. She filled up on ice and fresh water then grabbed a nutrition bar for her late-morning snack. She saw an open box of cookies on the main table, knowing one of the photographers had brought those in to share with the whole crew. Nice gesture but too tempting. Way too tempting. She paused for a second then grabbed a double -chocolate chip cookie—still warm. She turned to the door and took a bite, melted chocolate dangling from her lips.

"Hey, look out, turbo," Michael said.

"Oh sorry...I wasn't watching where I was going." Chocolate dripped to her chin. She dropped her water bottle to try to catch the next drip, but she wasn't quick enough. Brown goo landed on her blue blouse.

"Great, Andi. Very nice," she said to herself. She looked up and Michael was holding a wet paper towel.

"In the past, I found these very useful whenever I was near you," he said, laughing. Michael was referring to her knack for running into him and spilling food or drink all over her boss—actually, her boss's boss.

"Thanks."

"Hey, I've been meaning to tell you, I've been thinking more about the entire adoption series you put together. If I didn't know better, I'd say I was reading a feature from a full-time, paid journalist."

Andi stopped dabbing her blouse with the paper towel. "Are you trying to tell me something?" Her mouth became dry.

"How many hours do you have left?"

"Just this last seven. Done in May," she said with an uptick in her voice.

"Come see me the day after you graduate. Maybe we'll make this official."

Andi couldn't wipe the smile off her face.

Brandon stuck his head in the break area. "Speaking of official, your expense report was approved. Drop by my office, and I'll give you the check. While there, why don't you update me on your excursion to Houston last week?" Before Andi could answer, he'd already headed down the hallway.

"Houston? Chasing anything meaty?" Michael asked Andi.

"Maybe. Dealing with lots of emotional women right now, but we might have insider information on some type of fraudulent business that—"

"Oh, Andi, my cell phone is buzzing. I gotta take this. Sounds like you might be on to something. Keep me updated." Michael exited, leaving right on the heels of Brandon.

Andi took a deep breath, realizing the inner workings of a newsroom didn't exactly lend itself to spontaneous discussions that lasted longer than a bite of a cookie. In one quick fly-by conversation, though, she received praise on her first-ever series of feature stories and her associate publisher essentially said she'd earned a full-time gig once she graduated in May. She felt like leaping into the air or screaming out, "Hell yeah!" Instead, she confiscated another double-chocolate chip cookie and ate it on the way back to her cube.

With five minutes to spare before Jenny was to call her back, Andi opened a browser on her computer and began digging. She reviewed the official Big Heart website and found a list of executives buried three layers deep. She then took the top five names and Googled on each of them individually.

A lot of typical links you'd expect to see—LinkedIn profiles, Facebook pages, and two of them even had Pinterest pages. Andi made note to review their LinkedIn contacts at a later time.

The owner and CEO, Donovan Miller, had given three speeches that showed up in the search results, two in Houston and one in Paris. The one in France was dated October thirteenth of last year. He could have been simply searching for an avenue to take a

European vacation. *We should all be so lucky. Just another perk for the rich and famous,* Andi thought.

Andi checked the clock. It was now thirty minutes past Jenny's target time to call her back. A tinge of anxiety crept through her stiff neck, and she forced out a breath. She shook her head and ran through the worst possible scenario—someone overheard Jenny talking to Andi on the phone and things got ugly. But, with this business, what did that mean? Fire her on the spot and march her out the front door? That would devastate Jenny, Andi knew, and blow any chance they had at exposing any illegal or immoral activity at Big Heart.

Then, her mind went where she didn't want it to go—but she had to, if she was to protect her source. With the kind of insane money being tossed around—negotiated—for a baby, and with accusations of child trafficking, the stakes in this game could create a cataclysmic response if they truly believed their operation was in danger of being exposed. Intimidation? Most likely. How far that would go and what it would involve scared Andi...for Jenny's safety and the well-being of her five-year-old son.

The ring startled her. She quickly picked up the office phone.

"*Times Herald* newsroom, this is Andi."

No response.

"Hi, this is *the Times Herald* newsroom. Can I help you?"

A snuffle. "They know, Andi." It was Jenny.

"Jenny, are you at your apartment?"

"They know."

"Jenny, are you okay? Are you alone?"

"Somehow they saw me snooping around the owner's office. They think I'm up to something."

Another snuffle.

"Did they threaten you?"

"I saw fire in his eyes."

"Whose eyes?"

"Dmitri. Dmitri Orlov. Their top lawyer. I think they call him general counsel."

Andi recalled seeing that name on the executive list.

"Jenny, I think we need to call the police. Given the international implications, we might also need to contact other organizations, starting with the FBI."

"No, we can't do that. They said if I gave confidential information to anyone outside the company, then Nicholas would never get health care and I'd never work again—anywhere." Jenny's intensity and emotion increased with each word. "I'm putting us in danger by just talking to you. Who knows?...they could be listening to our conversation. Jesus."

Andi closed her eyes. Her stomach churned as she tried to morph her contempt of the Big Heart executives into an action that would benefit Jenny *and* get a hold of evidence that would expose the company's illegal activities.

"Do you still have a job there?"

"Yes, though I don't want it. They put me on probation. One more slip up, and they said it would cost me."

"Okay. This won't be easy, but I think we can get what we need. Listen carefully."

Chapter Thirty

I stared at the headline and waited for the phone to ring. Brandon checked email on his phone, while Stu read a beat-up paperback.

"What you reading, Stu?"

"Ah, just some old classic. *To Kill a Mockingbird*." He removed his reading glasses and chuckled. "I think I've read this one about ten times."

Outside of a page turn by Stu or seat shuffle by Brandon, the only sound in the room came from my laptop, a constant purr. I took in a deep breath, trying not to let my mind wander. Carl had reached me on my cell phone an hour ago, but the connection sounded like he was calling from the moon. He said he'd call me back as soon as he had Guidry on the line.

The FBI didn't exactly give me a warm-and-fuzzy.

I looked down at our main headline for the Tuesday edition: *Person of Interest Picked up for Double Homicide*. Sub-header: *No Charges Filed Yet against Baton Rouge Examiner Editor*.

It was strange seeing a different byline in our paper, especially the lead story of such a salacious, public murder. Rolando Davis, special contributor from the *Baton Rouge Examiner*. Fortunately, in the last year we'd signed an alliance with a number of other papers in the region, allowing us to share reporters, pick up stories, even photographs, as long as we gave attribution back to the home paper.

I read the first few graphs, knowing how difficult it must have been for Rolando to "sell out" his former boss. Still, Foxworthy hadn't been charged. Evidence pointed that direction, but something hadn't hit just right...or the legal authorities were waiting on DNA...or something else. Maybe that's why Guidry wanted to talk.

"Hey, Brandon, you want to grab a late lunch after this, catch me up on the upcoming Sunday features?"

Before he could respond, my phone rang, and after I nodded to Brandon and Stu, I punched up the line.

"This is Michael, Brandon, and Stu."

"Michael, Carl here. And I should have Guidry on too."

"Present."

"You still enjoying the spicy Cajun cooking?" I asked, wondering if the FBI special agent had regained all the weight he'd previously shed.

"I wish."

"Michael, Guidry left Baton Rouge yesterday evening. He's in Oxford," Carl said.

My entire body stiffened, and a shot of adrenaline caused the base of my skull to tingle.

"Guidry, tell me you're there for another case, maybe something connected to the rebel flag still flying above the capitol," I said.

"The capitol is in Jackson, two hours south, off I-55. The FBI doesn't mess with state flags anyway."

I held my breath, waiting for the inevitable.

"We found another dead body—and it could be connected to this case," Guidry said.

I shouldn't have expected anything less. The FBI cyber unit had traced the recipients of the Yours Truly emails to three other areas besides our home turf: Baton Rouge, Oxford, and Tallahassee.

"You said *could* be connected?"

"At this point, we can't be certain one way or another unless he leaves a business card."

Brandon chimed in. "What does this victim look like?"

"Looked like. She's been dead a while, at least a week, maybe two weeks," Guidry explained. "We've had a team on the ground here ever since the cyber unit had determined the Yours Truly email also landed here. We heard friends were looking for this girl—a Whitney Mayfield—and we assisted in the search."

We heard a siren, some people shouting, and a dog barking.

"Are you at a pet store?"

"No, the scene of the crime, or at least where we found the body. Middle of a cornfield, east of Oxford. We'd been using helicopters, cops on bicycles, feet on ground. But we finally found her once we got the dogs out and they picked up a scent. Flies were buzzing everywhere, even when I got here last night."

Brandon looked annoyed. "Guidry...the victim, Whitney. What is her normal appearance?"

"Right, sorry. Similar to the Baton Rouge vic. College student at Ole Miss, in the graduate program studying some type of hydroscience or some such. Long, flowing blondish hair, about five-six, five-seven, very pretty. Like I said, you couldn't tell squat if you saw her now. I'm getting all of this from an old picture."

I popped two knuckles and put my hand to my chin, looking at both Brandon and Stu.

"Guidry, this is Stu. Have you looked at any connections our Baton Rouge editor might have to the Oxford area or the university itself?"

"Good question, and yes, we're chasing that down. We don't like dead bodies, but it would be helpful if this editor, Foxworthy, had killed this Oxford girl a couple of weeks back and then murdered the two girls in his hometown."

"Why?" asked Brandon

"Why? Because we already have Foxworthy in custody. He might be a serial killer, but he's behind bars. If we can't make the connection, then it suddenly gets tougher to piece any of this shit together...the murders, the emails from Yours Truly, including the last email where talks about being Mr. Nasty. We're crossing our fingers. We should be able to verify Foxworthy's whereabouts over the last two weeks by close of business today, as well as narrow down the time of death."

I leaned back and heard my spine pop against the chair. A little relief. I tried not to immediately jump to illogical conclusions.

"Guidry, do you guys have a team on the ground here?"

"You're right outside of Dallas, a major hub office for the FBI. There haven't been any missing persons that come close to this MO."

"In our last conversation you advised me to keep a close eye on Marisa. Has that changed for some reason I'm not aware of?"

"If she was related to me, I wouldn't let my guard down. I just can't go on TV and ask every blond-haired lady in Dallas under the age of forty to carry pepper spray and not go out at night. We're not in the panic business."

I realized Marisa was thirty-three, a full ten years older than the oldest of the victims. But—and I knew I was at least slightly biased—Marisa was stunning. An extra line here or there couldn't mask her beauty...or her blond-highlighted hair.

"Stu, let's work this like Baton Rouge, at least initially. Look into your bag of contacts and see what you can find at the Oxford paper."

"It's the *Oxford Messenger*. I think one of my old schoolmates might have a beat on that paper. I'll look into it."

"I feel like we're listening in to your conversation through a wiretap," Guidry said.

"That's the NSA."

"Good one, Michael. I appreciate you going the standard press path for your information and not simply relying on us to feed you the story. That just won't happen."

"You can't forget we've helped you out, as well. I located the girl at the café who knew Ariel, and she gave us the F-O-X clue. By the way, did Patricia ever ID Foxworthy?"

Guidry coughed. "We put him in a lineup, and she picked a different guy. Not surprising, given she only caught a quick glimpse. But we're still hoping other evidence comes through."

My team exchanged glances, all of us realizing that the failed identification threw the whole case back into uncertainty.

"Look, my peers are looking at me kind of strange, so I need to go pretend I'm adding value to the crime scene. Anything else?" Guidry yelled over a new round of dogs barking.

"You never said how the vic, Whitney, died," Brandon said.

"Slashed throat. A chunk of it was cut out, just like with Ariel in Baton Rouge. Never can get used to seeing that kind of brutality."

We disconnected. "I think I need to pass on lunch. I just lost my appetite."

Chapter Thirty-One

Marisa thought about answering her vibrating cell phone, but instead reached her hand inside her oversized, tan leather purse and pressed the lower of two metal buttons, forwarding whomever to voicemail. She'd had one of those mornings at the bank—histrionic customers, moody boss, peers and her team members just not on the same page. If ever she needed one of those infamous two-martini lunches, today might be the day.

She wasn't a lush, and she wasn't about to start now, just six months after her promotion to manage the bank's loan business. She couldn't move any higher without them placing a VP title before her name. Not that her life would end without it, but the recognition would be nice. She'd worked long hours, put up with her fair share of good ol' boys, fending off a few wayward advances—nothing to worry Michael about. She waved across the restaurant and walked over to her lunch date. Jeremiah got up and gave her a warm hug.

"Oh, so nice of you to meet me for lunch, Marisa."

"Of course. Believe me, I needed a break today," she said, zipping up her purse and tossing it next to her on the blue leather booth.

Jeremiah didn't look anything like the rugged handyman who'd now visited their home twice—the last time creating a bit of a frenzy. Carrie was captivated by his masculinity, his ability to use his hands, and especially his appearance minus the T-shirt. Marisa thought she might have had to put a paper bag over Carrie's nonstop trap to fend off hyperventilation. Then again, Marisa wasn't blind, and blood still ran through her veins. Admittedly, the speed of said blood might have increased just a smidge when Jeremiah had tossed his shirt off to the side just before clipping the hedges.

"Would you like some bread? I understand it's fresh out of the oven." Wearing a warm smile, Jeremiah extended the basket. She reached in and grabbed a biscuit, which appeared to have peppered spices mixed in.

He reminded Marisa of someone, she just couldn't put her finger on it. Not anyone she knew, but possibly an actor or singer. He had star looks, no doubt. It would come to her.

Jeremiah's tan blazer nearly matched his golden hair. A collared, sky-blue, button-down shirt complimented his hazel eyes. Flat-front brown slacks and leather, buckle-strap shoes rounded out the ensemble. This man knew how to dress. You would have thought he was interviewing for a VP job at one of the New York equity firms.

"So Jeremiah does have a different look than rugged and outdoorsy?" Marisa smirked and raised an eyebrow.

Jeremiah's hand had been sifting through the bread basket, but it paused for just a second. Then he chuckled.

"I thought you said you'd take any job as long it didn't include an office," Marisa said.

"I did say that. And I believe it. Just because my parents taught me how to dress, doesn't mean I enjoy working in that environment," he said. "I've tried it before. Too much politics, too much ass-kissing, excuse the language."

"No apology necessary. I've been there. It's hard to escape."

"I literally felt my airways constrict when I walked through the office door. After six months of it, I retired most of my fancy clothes and instead got a job at the millwork shop. Just what I love doing."

He nodded his head and looked off to the corner of the restaurant, as if he was lost in his own dream, like a sailor who couldn't live without the sea.

"It's great to have a passion. I can't say mine is my work," Marisa admitted. "Maybe mine is reading books...of all kinds. I can live vicariously through any number of characters, risk my life, eat the forbidden fruit, die, and come back to life."

"But I hear you're doing great at the bank, just got a promotion, moving up the chain. Before you know, you'll be running the place." They both chuckled.

Lunch arrived. Marisa had ordered a simple avocado salad, while Jeremiah went with a grilled pancetta and arugula sandwich, with a side of tomatoes and cottage cheese.

He doesn't come by this physique by accident, she thought.

Marisa touched her napkin to her lips as her eyes reviewed the décor—subtle lighting around the ceiling, dark material on the walls, carpeted flooring, hushed voices.

"How did you know about this place?"

"It's kind of strange, I just have this knack for picking unique places. Probably says something about me."

"That you have good taste?" Marisa asked.

"No, I think I'm just lucky."

Marisa felt refreshed by Jeremiah's seemingly positive outlook on life. He drove an old pickup and was a carpenter by trade—not a lot of money in that business—but he seemed to look at the world through an unblemished lens. Still, he looked like a million bucks. Maybe his parents left him some cash. That type of cushion would allow anyone to chill out and stay clear of stress.

"Marisa, I don't mean to put you in an awkward position, but do you know why Michael is...well, why he isn't happy to know I exist? Really, I feel hostility from him," Jeremiah said, sadness in his eyes.

A deep breath. "Jeremiah, I really don't think it's you. It could have been anyone who showed up at our door, and Michael would have questioned it, resented it."

"I keep telling myself that. Maybe I should have called ahead." He tilted back his head and took in a mouthful of iced tea, then set down the glass laden with condensation. Marisa thought she noticed a glassy eye, and her heart sunk for her brother-in-law.

"Look, last year Michael and I both went to hell and back, all because of this horrible drug cartel that invaded our lives. It killed people very close to us," Marisa swallowed hard but held back any tears.

"Oh, Marisa, I'm so—"

"There's more, and I realize now that it impacts you." She pursed her lips.

"After years of denial, even with his father, Michael admitted that his mother was a meth addict. In fact, her death—falling down the staircase—happened only because she was high."

Jeremiah's head dropped, his long fingers encasing the cold, icy glass. She wondered if he was holding back his own set of tears.

"All these years, I'd been wondering what it would have been like to know my mother, to be raised by her." He bit his lower lip and exhaled. "I guess things happen for a reason. I was raised by two upstanding people. They were my mom and dad."

Marisa instinctively reached out and put her hand on top of his. Jeremiah then squeezed it and released an appreciative smile.

They made small talk as the waiter cleared dishes, and then they ambled out of the darkened restaurant. Marisa dug for her sunglasses when the day's glare hit her in the face.

"I lost track of time in there." She searched her purse for her keys.

"Thank you, Marisa. For opening up, sharing everything with me."

She leaned in and felt his chest against hers, his protective arms wrapped around her body. She thumped his back, and then she was able to breathe.

As he slung his jacket over his shoulder, the images finally flashed into her mind. The face of a young Kris Kristofferson—back when he starred in the romance of the decade, *A Star is Born*, with Barbara Streisand. *That's it*, she decided, the scruffy look, the high cheekbones and chiseled chin. His body? That was Brad Pitt all the way.

She got in her car and drove back to work with the air conditioning on high.

Chapter Thirty-Two

"Final numbers are in for fourth quarter. You ready for this?" Our director of advertising and sales, Walt McCutcheon, pushed his brown, square glasses up the bridge of his nose.

"Hit me." I swiveled in my office chair, feeling like a child on Christmas morning. But I wasn't kidding myself. In this industry, two pieces of coal were just as possible as a stocking full of gadgets and candy canes—in fact, that was the trend for newspapers across the country, even the ones attached to larger conglomerates where they pinched pennies just to make ends meet.

"All the numbers are year over year, keep that in mind."

I waved my wrist.

"Print advertising, including classifieds, was up 2.3 percent." Walt looked up, waiting for my approval. Just then, he sneezed all over the report he was holding. He wiped his nose with his sweater sleeve and his hand. He then blew on the report, trying to dry the spit spray.

I nodded and checked the edge of my desk to see if the mucus had made a splash landing. No visible evidence. "I'll take that number. Keep going."

"Print circulation, up 2.5 percent." Another look, another nod.

"Digital advertising...you ready for this one?" He couldn't contain his smile.

"Holding my breath."

"Up 6.8 percent. That's where the money is, Michael. Go digital or go home." That was Walt's way of suggesting we drop our print editions and switch to online only. He had a point, but our numbers said we were holding our ground in both areas.

"Great, Walt. You and your team are doing a fantastic job. Take the team out to lunch and expense it. They deserve it, and so do you."

The little man, who appeared to have dandruff flaking onto his sweater, leaped up and stuck out his hand. I hesitated, wondering how I could avoid the germ transfer.

I saluted him. "Thanks again, Walt." He didn't seem to mind, and he stood at attention and saluted me back.

Stu, moving twice his normal speed, nearly knocked over little Walt, squeezing through my office door.

"Did you hear?"

"What?"

I looked down at my computer screen and spotted an IM from Brandon. "*Just received email from YT. Meet you in glass house in 10.*"

I typed in a quick response. "*Better make it 5.*"

Stu and I headed west to the meeting room with nothing but glass walls. "I guess Arthur got the note to find someone to clean up the smell in the attic," I said to Stu, touching my nose.

"That or the wild varmint dropped a deuce and left the building with the warm weather. Just wait until it turns cold again, and we'll know for certain."

I didn't have time to deal with it, so I assumed the best.

Seated in our regular chairs, Stu and I clicked our pens and glanced at the clock, about five times each. Where was our editor?

"Sorry, guys." Brandon nearly stumbled into the room. "Damn printer got jammed. Then I had to change out the ink. Doesn't anyone notice this stuff besides me?" Brandon slid hard copies to both Stu and me. We took our time reading it—I read through it twice.

"Make any sense to you?" I looked at Stu.

"No more than the last one. Yet, they are really different, like it might have been written by a different person."

"It's gotta be a response to the latest murder out of Oxford, don't you think?" I held up a folder copy of today's edition, where we'd included a small story below the fold.

"A different personality perhaps?" Brandon tossed in his opinion.

I nodded. "Let's get the good guys on the phone and review it with them, just like the first round. Then, they can give us an update on what the BSU has come up with from the first post-murder email."

Five minutes later, the three of us popped open carbonated beverages. I took a loud slurp.

"Hitting the hard stuff early?" Carl asked from the Polycom sitting in the middle of our meeting table.

Guidry got straight to the point as usual. "Have you sent the email yet, Michael?"

I nodded at Brandon.

"Give me one minute to log in and forward it," my editor said.

"No need to wait, Michael, You can go ahead and read it," Guidry said.

To whom it may concern:

It was a million tiny little things that, when you added them up, they meant we were supposed to be together...and I knew it. I knew it the very first time I touched her. It was like coming home...only to no home I'd ever known...I was just taking her hand to help her out of a car and I knew. It was like...magic.

Yours Truly

I moved my chair left and right, all kinds of theories and questions bouncing around my mind. But I wasn't the expert. We needed the people with the knowledge and the know-how to step up and start putting their stamp on this case...quickly, before someone else came up dead.

Silence followed more silence.

"Well?" I prompted.

"I'm thinking," Guidry said.

"Can you think louder?" I responded.

I exhaled deeply.

"I'll give everyone my two cents," Carl said, like he was auditioning for the FBI.

"The one after the Baton Rouge email sounded remorseful, like he was trying to explain what caused him to kill those girls. This second one is the polar opposite. In this one, in a strange way, it sounds like he's being interviewed and he's responding to some questions, sharing all of the things that made this relationship with...what was her name, Whitney, special."

"Glad to see you have a softer side, Carl...albeit one that relates to a serial killer," I said, drawing a smirk from my two journalists.

"Frankly, Carl's analysis makes a great deal of sense. But you know my answer to all of this," Guidry said.

Brandon spoke up. "You've got to get this to the BSU and the cyber unit."

"You got it," said Guidry.

I bit the inside of my cheek, annoyed at more red tape and the lack of progress from the Feds.

"Guidry, don't you guys have anything substantive on all the other emails? Savvy email hacking aside, don't the BSU guys have some type of profile they can share?" I asked.

"I've seen an initial report. Let's just say the net is too wide right now. They use a lot of computer programs and such, and it's not a perfect science. They need more data. Maybe this love-struck email will put us over the edge and narrow it down."

"The real question is, how could Foxworthy have sent this email? He's in custody." Stu pointed out the obvious, but it needed to be said. So many presumptions and theories were polluting the black-and-white facts. I wondered if the authorities could keep it all straight.

"That was really my first thought. Analyzing the emails...that's hit or miss. But Foxworthy couldn't have sent this. Damn it!" Guidry sounded pissed. "Hold on a sec."

We heard voices, shouting, then what sounded like the phone brushing against clothing.

"Okay, I'm back...and it's not good news, at least not the news we were hoping to see."

"What's that?"

"Just got a personal update on Foxworthy's whereabouts the last two weeks. We have verified accounts of him being at work each day then at home each night. A neighbor, church friend, or golfing buddy vouched for him on every other non-work day. We even checked the times of day to see if he had enough time to drive or fly to Oxford, commit the murder, and get back. Just not possible. Damn it!"

I wondered how long Foxworthy would remain in custody. "Next steps?"

"Keep hammering on the BSU and cyber team. Something will break," Guidry said.

"Let's hope it happens before another dead body shows up."

Chapter Thirty-Three

"This shit is the bomb," the talented programmer said to Andi, both of them hunched over a bright, twenty-inch flat screen—one of three monitors that bordered the workstation.

Andi had first met Satish during her freshman year at UNT, both enrolled in a required math class. The miniature teen with baggy pants and peach fuzz dotting his boyish face, never listened to the monotone professor and rarely lifted a pencil during class, unless he was taking a test. Then he always finished first. Andi had assumed he was just wasting his time and his parent's money until he flunked out. It appeared he had the ultimate *who gives a shit* attitude. Until they got back their second test.

Walking out of the theatre-sized hall, Andi had run her thumb across circled red ink: 67. Disheartened at of her inability to pick up and apply the math concepts flying at her faster than gnats on a summer night, she had trudged over to the student union and ordered a cold drink. She stared at the constant movement of bodies and wondered if she was really cut out for college. "I can help you," a boy's voice said.

Andi opened her glassy eyes and brushed her ruffled hair out of her face.

"You're that boy in class that never pays attention. You don't care about your own grade, so how can you help me?" She took a drink, her brow furrowed with doubt.

The boy opened his notebook and pulled out the math test, looked at it for a second then turned it around for Andi to see. The ink was green: 100.

"So you've come to gloat. Great, just what I needed." She crossed her legs and began kicking the top leg rapidly, hoping this boy would remove his smug face from her view.

"Wait, you don't get it. I can help you...if you can help me." She stared into his oak-brown eyes.

"Let's start with hello. I'm Satish. Satish Rajkumar." He extended a hand. She hesitated, then gave it a quick shake.

"Andi."

"I know."

"So I guess you pay more attention than it appears."

"Not really. I'd already learned most of these concepts in high school. It just comes naturally for me."

She shook her head and looked away. "You said you'd help me. Why?"

"Well..." He couldn't contain his wide grin. Teeth as white as rice glared back at her.

"You want to get in my pants?"

"You can't blame a homie for trying."

She picked up her folders and books and scooted back her chair.

Satish held up his hands to stop her from running away. "Hold on. Look, while I was hoping you'd find my body and charm undeniable," he said with another grin while extending his puny arms, "we can still make this a mutually beneficial relationship."

"How's that, shorty?"

"You're in my English 101 class, which starts at eight a.m. Way too early for my taste," he said.

"I don't recall seeing you in there," Andi said.

"You sit in the front row. You act like the teacher's monkey."

"You mean pet."

"Whatever. I sit in the back, hiding in my sweatshirt hood. It's torture, man. I can't stand the class. It's boring, and I just don't get it. I'm flunking, but I know I have to pass it if I want to get out of here with paper."

"Paper?"

He rubbed his fingers together. "A degree. Then I can go bank some real paper." He laughed. "So, if I scratch your back, will you scratch mine?" He leaned forward, prepared to strike a deal.

"Just know that if you truly ever try to scratch my back, or touch me in any way, I'll take your balls and stuff them down your throat. Got it, runt?"

"I think you just turned me on."

She cracked a smile. This little wiseass actually did have a certain charm about him, although she'd never tell him.

A deal had been born, and a friendship made. They both passed their required courses and then moved on to focus their studies on higher-level courses, ones that actually related to their future careers. Satish had developed a rock-star reputation for his programming skills, and he knew it.

Andi pointed at the monitor. "I know we went over this with Jenny last night, but now that I'm sitting here looking at your screen, give me an idea what we can expect."

Satish clicked four times then brought up a window where lines of data popped up every few seconds.

"This is a log of data. It's just simulated, but this is one of the views we'll see once we install SpyAgent on Jenny's computer," Satish explained. "Once I send her the email, she only has to double-click on the icon, and it will load. It will be like we're essentially sitting at her computer, seeing what she sees. In fact, if I wanted, I can operate her computer, look for files, whatever, while she's gone."

"But what if someone walks by and sees the pointer moving around on its own? Won't they suspect something?"

"It's possible, yeah. But here's the cool part. The absolute bomb." Satish moved his mouse to the screen on the right, then clicked twice and dragged it to the center monitor. "Check this out."

Andi leaned forward. "I don't see da bomb." She tilted her head.

"It's all right down here, under the features of their new version, R4.0." He looked back at Andi, her eyes squinting to read small print, searching for anything that made sense to a simple layman.

"Let me sum it up for you. If her computer is fully operational, we can pull up a screen that allows us to see through her webcam and listen to any audio from near her computer. It's like a spy camera, and no one will know it."

"That *is* the bomb." Andi smiled and patted Satish on the shoulder.

"Let me pull up my email software that I'm going to use to send to Jenny's work email."

"I guess this isn't a Microsoft product?" she asked.

"Hell no. One hundred percent custom. I wrote it. This will look like an email from someone living in Pocatello, Idaho. Untraceable...well, I'm sure the FBI could eventually figure it out. But not some generic IT schmuck working at Big Heart. Give me five minutes."

Satish clicked his mouse and pecked away on his keyboard like nothing Andi had ever seen. She sat back and thought through the risk they were taking. Technically, Satish was a magician. The guy who said he once hacked into the White House website had it all covered, and then some. She was more concerned about Jenny's emotional stability. If Dmitri or any other Big Heart executive even sensed that Jenny was sneaking around, even virtually, she might be in danger. Andi didn't get the feeling that Jenny could mask her emotions very well. And this was just step one.

If this access didn't provide definitive evidence into the Big Heart's illegal activities, then they would need Jenny's help to set up SpyAgent on the computer of someone important—Dmitri, or the CEO, Donovan Miller. Andi made a mental note to review the executive list again.

"What time is Jenny supposed to get into work and boot up her computer?" Satish asked.

"She said no later than nine a.m." Andi glanced at her watch. It was ten minutes after nine.

"We agreed on no communications while she was at work, not even a text, unless she was in real trouble. So I think we're safe. You ready on this end?"

"You want to push the magic button?" Satish asked, still clicking away, his head swiveling back and forth to each monitor like he was the conductor of a technical orchestra.

"I'll let you."

"Sent."

"Now what?" she asked.

"We wait on Jenny."

Chapter Thirty-Four

"You're losing the board. You do realize that?" The scowling man with thinning, gray hair, combed to one side, stood above the so-called senior executive, looking down on Vincent like he was a peasant begging for two bucks to buy dinner.

The thirty-five-year-old CEO, whose soft hands had been covering his face, slowly released them and placed them on the massive desk—*his* desk, he had to remind himself. He pushed back his thousand-dollar leather chair outlined with brass rivets and swung around to stare out the fifth-floor window of his downtown office, his eyes holding back a flood of emotion.

Another anxiety attack, no doubt. He breathed in through his nose and then slowly emptied his lungs. He knew he was an inch away from having a complete nervous breakdown. His pulse had to drop to a controllable pace before he could talk to David, his capable but thorny CFO. If pushed, he would barely be able to speak a comprehensible sentence. When he got in this type of panic state, he couldn't even write his own name, his hand shaking like he had Parkinson's. But if you looked at his annual physical, his health wasn't bad. The doctor had said he just didn't want Vincent to fall into the black hole every other young executive did—it would take years off his life, on the back end. But Vincent could feel it deep within his body—his organs operating like they were coated with black tar, his skin flaky, pressure surging within his head with no apparent release. He put his hand to his chest and felt the pounding thump reverberate throughout his inner core.

"Which board member is it now?" he finally asked with as little invested as possible.

"Ron Riffmeier, CEO at VF Industries. Says you're not cutting costs fast enough during this growth spurt we're experiencing. Actually, he said you have your head up your ass, if you want to know the truth."

Vincent forced his eyes shut and tried to recall a better time in his life. That was easy—any time he wasn't leading a two-hundred-million-dollar construction company. The business had been started by his father from the ground up, literally, starting with its first custom-built home. His father had hammered the nails, poured the concrete, plastered the walls, worked side by side with the plumber and electrician, helped install the vents, the AC unit, even put in gutters, then finally painted the home to the new owner's specifications. His father had framed that first canceled check, which he proudly displayed in the corporate headquarters to remind everyone the type of gritty, hard work it took to plant the seed for what would become the region's fourth-largest homebuilder.

If only Vincent could turn back the clock six months, to his last vacation, a soothing, but scintillating trip to Puerto Rico with his longtime partner Juan. They'd danced in the streets, shopped the street-side market, watched powerful waves crash against the rocky north shore, and sipped ten different brands of tequila.

Vincent could hear his CFO babbling away about this possible threat and how it could be thwarted by pulling this lever, thereby impacting this other set of numbers. His

mind drifted away to lying on the beach, soaking up the sun. He and Juan made a promise to rid their lives of stress, and set a course for their lives together that would bring fulfillment, peace, and eternal joy.

Vincent had a vision—they would use their remarkable, creative talent to open an art studio in South Beach. Juan was a master at sculpting, using metal, glass, even clay to create unique images. Vincent's talents were with watercolors and charcoal and he recalled Juan once saying, "Your sunset scene is so authentic and real that I just want to reach out and touch the rippling ocean water."

A smile parted Vincent's lips. He reached his hand toward the thick office window, hoping that it would somehow pull him through a time warp back to the beach that day, erasing the unyielding anxiety that had sucked the life right out of him. His fingers hit a solid surface, triggering his mind to refocus on the man in the room.

"Riffmeier is furious. He wants your head on a platter, do you hear me, Vincent?"

The oldest son of Stephen Clancy had a moment of clarity. "That fat fart looks like Penguin from one of the first Batman movies. You know, the one with Michael Keaton as Batman. I think Danny DeVito played Penguin. DeVito was so believable, it almost gave me nightmares. That's Riffmeier."

"What are you talking about, Vincent?" The executive number cruncher, who wore suspenders to hold his suit pants at least halfway up his gut, leaned his hands on Vincent's desk, creases riddling his forehead.

Vincent turned to face the man who supposedly worked for him. "Listen, David, I'm sure it's not as bad as Riffmeier thinks it is. And I would imagine the rest of the board can see through his fog of bullshit. He's just doing this to get back at my father for handing over the company to me."

David turned away, possibly agreeing with this theory. Vincent didn't understand all of the numbers and levers, and even when he did, he seemed to always make the wrong move at the wrong time. But he could read people and their motivations. The couple of times he'd interacted with this Riffmeier asshole were pure hell. The man was a disturbed, angry person who seemed to have made his life's mission to knock Vincent off the CEO perch.

If it wouldn't give Riffmeier so much self-satisfaction, Vincent might have already walked out the door and never come back. *Ah, to be free again.* Free of the burden of every decision, free of scrutiny about each phrase he uttered, free to regain the meaning in his life, which he'd had to reject to enable this transfer of power and have any chance at being successful. The construction business just wasn't ready for an openly gay CEO—Clancy Construction would go belly up.

Vincent dreamed again, wondering if Juan would take him back. His shoulders dropped.

Why did Father have to die, especially at the exact moment I finally become a man with real convictions and meaning for my life?

Vincent felt guilty for thinking about the pleasure of his own life, knowing his father had died prematurely at the hands of a murderer who was high on some type of drug. *Father was thrown out of a plane like a piece of discarded trash.* Vincent couldn't think of a more terrifying death. He felt a familiar lump in his throat, then crossed himself and looked up to the ceiling, realizing his father had counted on him to not be selfish, to put

his own desires aside and lead this company, carrying the torch of the family name. He'd said as much in a private letter Vincent received during the reading of his father's will.

"I don't know about movies, or the Penguin, but Riffmeier is serious, and I think he's making inroads with every other board member. I know he's trying," David said, now pacing back and forth across the expansive office, his fancy leather shoes squeaking at every turn.

Vincent got up from his chair, paused, then walked over to the bar.

"Would you like anything, David?"

"Uh, sure. Bourbon, neat."

"I'll join you."

The pair of unlikely business partners sat back down, their eyes occasionally locking on each other. Vincent could feel the effect of the whiskey, a welcome stress-reducer. He could now breathe.

Vincent opened his cigar holder and held it up to his nose, taking in the rich tobacco scent. It was his last gift from Juan.

"Want to join me?"

David's face looked like crumpled newspaper, and he didn't respond.

"You only live once, right?" Vincent lit the Cuban cigar and took a puff.

"Firemen might bust through that door any moment, you do know that," David said with a gruff tone, as if he didn't want to be burdened with further complications.

Vincent ignored him and pulled out his smartphone. He opened his text messages and reread the last one from his brother. He knew he needed a miracle...to save the company, to save his life from falling into a million broken pieces. He'd send another message tonight and hope that his brother would finally come to the rescue. That was his only hope.

Chapter Thirty-Five

I slapped down a twenty-dollar bill, said goodbye to Arthur, and walked out of our favorite pancake house. Breakfast for lunch on a Friday. Couldn't beat it, although I could certainly taste it...again. A stack of fluffy blueberry pancakes, two eggs sunny-side up, and three pieces of crispy bacon. Once in my car, I took a hard swallow then pulled the jar of Tums from the glove compartment and popped two chewables in my mouth. Fruity, chalky, but they did the trick, and I tried to purge my mind of the two thousand calories I'd just inhaled. I figured it would take a twenty-mile run to counter the fat intake.

I thought about my morning—and the last couple of days. Something wasn't sitting right, outside of the grease settling in my gut—it was Marisa. She wasn't her usual spontaneous, fun-loving self. I must have asked her four or five times if she felt a bug coming on, or if something at work had thrown her a curve ball. She denied any issues, other than the normal crap that is attached to work life. Maybe she just needed to relax—in our own intimate way. Yep, I'd make it a priority once I got home, starting with a deep-tissue massage, using some of the soothing oil that she likes.

I walked into the office five minutes before my one o'clock meeting, feeling more like a stuffed walrus, wishing I'd exercised a bit of self-control at lunch. Arthur didn't exactly set a good example. But his genes were foolproof. My boss, the *Times Herald* publisher for over thirty years, couldn't get fat if you gave him reverse liposuction. I dragged my laptop into the glass house, anticipating I'd be able to conduct some multitasking during our upcoming meeting, which had a real possibility of being uneventful. While I'd hoped for information—even tangible evidence—from law enforcement or one of our media allies in the last two days, the chatter had been deafly silent.

Stu was the first to arrive, but my head was buried in email. It appeared I was in the middle of a department battle—photographers were trying to claim unused space in the northeast corner of the newsroom. They said they'd outgrown their studio and digital media workstation, and needed that extra square footage to take in-house mug shots. The assistant sports editor shot back, saying the master plan showed that area belonging to sports. There must have been ten emails volleyed back and forth, full of edicts and threats.

It's great to have passionate employees, but isn't this an adults-only working establishment?

"Can't we just all get along? Jesus!" I said out loud.

"Did another civil war break out between the photogs and sports?"

I lifted my head and watched Brandon shut the meeting room door, his iPad attached to his hip.

"Another civil war? When was the first?"

Brandon slid into his chair and clicked on his iPad. "These guys go at it like they're siblings. If it isn't space, it's an argument about who makes the call on chosen photos and how each photo should be cropped."

"Huh. I guess I've been lucky enough to miss the fallout."

"Yeah, it usually lands at my desk. Referee is part of my title now," Brandon said.

I clicked the email shut, ready to start our Friday afternoon meeting. Stu took that as his cue to provide an update.

"Well, I did get hold of my old college buddy. He is working at the *Oxford Messenger*, the city beat, my old stomping ground," he said. "We discussed the crazy emails from Yours Truly, and he's thinking..."

Stu stopped talking, likely because neither Brandon nor I were listening.

"Did you just get the same email from Rolando?" I asked Brandon, who nodded, his eyes wide and not blinking. "Sorry, Stu."

Stu held up an understanding hand.

"Stu, the Feds released Bruce Foxworthy, the *Baton Rouge Examiner* editor."

The three of us each stared into a different corner of the room, contemplating what this meant.

"From what Rolando is saying—which he'll put in his next story that we can pick up for tomorrow's edition—the FBI is trying to save face, saying Foxworthy has not been ruled out as being a suspect."

"But if they let him go, most likely they hit a dead end. I'd bet that Foxworthy was lawyered up, and he, or she, wasn't going to let him sit in a cell without real evidence," Stu added, his experience shining through again.

I shook my head. "Man, I'm losing faith that the FBI is any better than a one-man sheriff's department."

I clicked my pen twice. "So, where does this leave us?"

Brandon approached the whiteboard. "Too much hearsay and hope. I think we need to parse fiction from fact."

Brandon drew four columns—one for us, one for Baton Rouge, one for Oxford, and one for Tallahassee. He wrote down an event, then a date next to it. Logged across all four columns were the three emails on successive Fridays. He added the double homicide in Baton Rouge and its date, which we knew to be Thursday. Then he included the arrival of the email that seemed to be commenting on the Baton Rouge murders a week later. Three days later (Sunday), Foxworthy was arrested and held as a person of interest. Three days after that (Tuesday), the FBI discovered the murdered girl near Oxford. Only one day passed (Wednesday) and then we received the email responding to that murder. Finally, today (Friday), Rolando documents Foxworthy being let loose in Baton Rouge.

"Stu, your thoughts?" I could see the wheels in his investigative mind spinning. The question was...were the wheels catching any turf?

Stu scribbled a few notes on his pad then put his pen to his mouth.

"It helps if we can walk through this together."

"Shoot."

"First, we get three emails—the third one practically telling us this person has killed before—albeit animals—and could possibly kill again. He gives us a description of his potential victims."

"Next, two girls are killed in Baton Rouge. One fits the description, the other doesn't. The FBI thinks the second girl, the roommate, interrupted the killing of the real target."

I nodded.

"We receive an email from Yours Truly, which seems like a justification for the Baton Rouge killings, then a few days later Foxworthy is picked up."

"This is where the whole thing breaks down, as Guidry said," I added.

"Only if you're the FBI, and you need the case wrapped up in a pretty little package," Stu said.

"I'm following you."

"Back to the timeline. Three days later they discover the dead body in Oxford—same description from the third email: pretty, blond hair. But she'd been dead for one to two weeks. Likely, her murder had occurred before the Baton Rouge murders. But Yours Truly doesn't send the email for that murder—the one expressing how smitten he was—until after the body was discovered and the news was public. Finally, the FBI releases Foxworthy."

I nodded. "Nice summary. It seems like the killer is playing games, while the Feds are chasing their own tails."

"My thoughts exactly," Stu said.

Chapter Thirty-Six

"Here we are, standing in line with our salmon, mixings for a nice salad, and a ten-dollar bottle of chardonnay, and we look over to see him just standing there all alone." Carrie took a bite of the salmon I'd grilled on the barbeque. She rolled her eyes and groaned like...well, it was like listening to a porno movie. "And there he was holding a loaf of bread and his bologna. Bologna? Did I just say that?"

Carrie's white face turned rosy red, and she reached for her wine while fanning herself and half-laughing at the same time.

Marisa's overly social friend was replaying the scene at the grocery store when she and Brandon had run into my newly anointed, younger sibling, Jeremiah. To give him credit, he seemed a bit embarrassed, or at least taken aback, by Carrie's story, and her constant gushing of attention. Possibly because her boyfriend was sitting across the table, or perhaps he wasn't fond of this clingy, ditzzy girl, regardless of her double Ds. While Marisa swore that Carrie's intelligence was apparent at work, tonight's performance would eliminate all hope of convincing me—and likely Jeremiah—that she could add more than three single-digit numbers. She wore a button-up, pink cardigan—one that had the first four buttons unlatched, while the others were stretched to their limits trying to hold in her boulders.

"When we found out Jeremiah was leaving town tomorrow, we thought, what the heck, we can't let him get out of town without a going-away party," Carrie said looking at each of us. She picked up one of the plastic blow horns and honked twice. She took another deep drink of her wine. She held up her glass to Brandon, and he knew it was his cue to fetch the next bottle. *Sucks to be him*, I thought—on many levels.

Outside of Brandon's shoes squeaking on the floor, silence enveloped the room. No one could think of a response to Carrie's circus act. Her spiraling tease-fest with Jeremiah had created an uneasy vibe for all of us. Marisa interrupted the uncomfortable hush by asking Brandon about his cousin who was working his way through the Texas Rangers minor league baseball system.

"Brad's a mad man at short. You should see that guy. He's like a vacuum." Brandon popped the cork on the bottle of wine but kept his stride.

Brandon continued detailing all of Brad's stats at each level of ball he played, adding in his own analysis. I think it was his escape from Carrie's not-so-subtle play on Mr. Perfect. *I personally appreciated it.*

Marisa brought a fork of salad to her mouth, and her eyes caught mine in a strange way...like she was trying to read me without me knowing she was sneaking a peek at me.. That wasn't Marisa. I thought we'd dealt with this awkward, slightly chilly vibe when I'd gotten home earlier.

I had entered the back door happy to have the week behind me, looking forward to unwinding with my wife-for-life.

"Hey, baby," I said, while dropping my things in the kitchen. She didn't get off the couch. She'd just waved her hand, her head looking downward to her Kindle. I came up to her from behind the sofa and kissed her cheek. She patted my head like I was a dog.

"Everything go okay today at work?" I'd asked that question all week, but each time the answer was brief, distant, almost insincere.

"Fine. Same old thing," she said with little energy, her eyes still glued to the eReader.

"You feeling okay?" We'd rehearsed this same routine most of the week, since Tuesday I think.

"Feeling fine, Michael. Just a little tired, that's all."

I pursed my lips, then walked around and scooted up the burgundy ottoman, and noticed she still had on her work clothes, along with a pair of blue fuzzy slippers. Her legs were folded under her body, her left elbow propped on the arm of the couch.

"You're not having any more nightmares about last year, are you?"

"No nightmares."

I paused. "If something's bugging you about us, I hope you know I'm open to talking about it." She raised her head, her honey-brown eyes empty of emotion and life.

"Well, it wouldn't hurt if I took a bath. Might help me to relax," she said, looking away.

"I'll go start the water. I'll let you know when it's ready."

I went back to the bathroom and started the water, then thought better of it. I shut off the faucet and then searched for the accoutrements.

Wearing my green bathrobe, I walked out to the living room and held out my hand.

"Oh, hey, you changed fast," she said, taking my hand and walking down the hall.

"You going to join me in the tub?"

I could see she'd rather read a book, but I didn't let it sway my goal. "Something like that."

We entered the bedroom, and Marisa took in the full scene. "Wow."

I'd lit every candle I could find. The flickering shadows and scents played with our senses. I'd removed all the extra pillows off our bed and covered the spread with a tight sheet, a small head pillow at one end. The bedside table was cleared of everything except my tools of choice: a warm, wet rag, and a variety of massage oils that Marisa had picked up during a couple of trips to the spa. This massage would be far more personal.

I led her next to the bed, and slowly, carefully removed each article of clothing. I guided her to lie down face first. I put my lips to her back and gave her one single kiss, then I went to work. Using a touch of coconut herbal therapy oil, I started gently kneading the back of Marisa's neck, her frizzy hair occasionally getting caught between my fingers. I rubbed her shoulders and outer arms, and I heard the first tiny moan.

I peeked and noticed her eyes had closed. I found pockets of stress at her shoulder blades. She grunted twice then said, "That's it. Perfect. Keep going." Her voice was mellow.

I slowly made my way down her back, using different patterns in my massage technique. As much as it pained me, I skipped her luscious derriere and started back in on her upper thighs using a different lubricant, an organic grapeseed oil. I focused both hands on one leg at a time, fingering each muscle. Finally, I reached her feet. I rubbed the soles with my thumbs then used the ends of my fingers and gently squeezed each toe.

"Michael, you really know how to get a woman to relax," she muttered, her face so relaxed her speech sounded slurred.

"Not just any woman. My wife, my love."

She turned over and brought my face to hers. We kissed, the first true expression of love I'd felt from her in days. It was real and sincere.

"You know I love you," she said.

"Always."

She untied my robe and grinned, pleased to see I was prepared for the next level of relaxation. She tugged at me to get on top of her then guided me up her torso until our lips met again, our bodies moving as one symbiotic lovemaking cell.

Ding dong! I hoped that Marisa didn't hear it. Her head moved to the side. The interrupting doorbell struck twice more, then Marisa slid off the mattress, found some sweats, and headed toward the front of the house. She arrived at our door, turned to me with a warm smile, and winked. No words had been spoken, but none had needed to be said.

Brandon snapped his fingers to get my attention back to our dinner. "Michael, you know how the Rangers operate. Any chance the Rangers trade Elvis Andrus to give Brad the starting job at shortstop this season?" he asked.

I'd probably missed a plethora of data points proving that Brad was indeed the better defensive and offensive player, so I avoided what could have been an elongated debate. "Brad's got all the tools, from what I'm hearing. Maybe they could trade Elvis for a front-line pitcher, then they could stick Brad at short."

Brandon nodded and then cracked a smile. "Yeah, that makes sense." He then looked at Jeremiah.

"I don't really follow baseball that much. If Michael believes it, I'm sure it will happen." All heads turned to the thick-chested man as he drank from his wine glass, his eyes peering across the table at me. I returned the stare, wondering if that was a dig of some kind...although I couldn't understand the timing. Maybe he finally realized, I didn't want him in our house, half-brother or not.

A glass dinged against a plate, ending the stare-off, and Marisa led the platoon into the kitchen to clean up our collective mess.

Carrie couldn't let twenty seconds pass without filling in audible space.

"Jeremiah, have you decided if you're heading out to California?"

"I've got some unfinished business back home, so I'll be traveling east."

Brandon raised an eyebrow and mouthed the words "about time," so that only I could see him.

"Amen," I said.

"Sorry, did you say something?" Jeremiah asked.

"Private conversation with Brandon."

Carrie continued to play conversation facilitator.

"Marisa, aren't you dying to go on another cruise, maybe even take the same one?"

"Where'd you go?" Jeremiah asked.

"Well, we started in Miami, then where was our first stop, Marisa?"

"Grand Cayman Islands." She continued scrubbing a pot. Short and to the point Marisa again.

"Right, then we went to Nassau, then Half Moon Cay in the Bahamas. It was quite a memorable trip," Carrie added.

"How long was it?" Jeremiah asked.

"Six nights. That moon at night shining across the ocean water was just beautiful."

"Sounds expensive."

"It was a present from Michael. I just tagged along to keep her company."

Normally, Marisa would have chimed in with a funny quip about all the company Carrie kept, but she stayed mum.

"Not sure why a husband wouldn't want to take his own wife on a cruise," Jeremiah said while drying the top of a pan. All heads turned to me.

A warm sensation crept up my spine, then a cold patch of sweat formed on the back of my neck.

"I was working, leading our newspaper to meet its commitments to this community. I didn't have the luxury of just picking up my tent and traveling the country," I said without moving.

Jeremiah paused then took two steps in my direction. Brandon predicted his move and cut him off, then patted him twice on the upper arm.

"You got a problem with how I live my life?" the bushy-haired sibling asked.

"I really couldn't give a shit, just don't comment about mine or my wife's." My heart was pumping like I was running a sprint, but I didn't move a muscle.

"Anyone want a final send-off drink?" Brandon asked, but no one answered, and tension eased a bit.

Ten minutes later—not soon enough—the crowd migrated toward the front door. A few handshakes and best wishes.

Marisa leaned in and tried to give Jeremiah a quick hug. He held on too long, maybe an extra ten seconds, his arms completely wrapped around her. Just before she pulled away, he turned her away from me and moved his face toward the side of her hair. I could have sworn I saw his chest and back expand. I moved right and saw his eyes closed.

"Have a safe trip," she said without looking him in the eye.

Jeremiah took one step through the door, then flipped around and stuck out his hand.

"No hard feelings. It was still good getting to know you and your family."

I gave him one firm shake. "No hard feelings. Be safe."

We said our goodbyes to Brandon and Carrie, then finally turned out the lights for the night and went back to the bedroom.

I thought about bringing up Marisa's odd mood around Jeremiah but knew it wouldn't get us anywhere.

An engine coughed then roared back to life. I peered around the curtain and saw an orange light appear from the darkness of Jeremiah's pickup.

"Strange. I think Jeremiah is still sitting in his truck out front. I think he's smoking a cigarette," I said.

"I had no idea he smoked," Marisa said while washing her face.

"I wonder what else we don't know about the guy."

The engine rumbled twice more, then rubber burned the concrete, and the sound disappeared into the night.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Harold Burns turned the leather-covered steering wheel with a single finger. His Infiniti Q50 Hybrid—decked out in a mesmerizing liquid-platinum color—drew looks like a bikini model strutting down Main Street. The crisp Saturday night air wasn't cold enough to keep him from rolling his windows down halfway, allowing him to take in the sheer energy and coolness emanating from Uptown—the true definition of Dallas chic.

Tires gripped the brick surface as he maneuvered around the cove of restaurants, independent movie houses, and upscale bars. Unseen smells of Italian, Greek, American, and Japanese foods swept by his nose. But he wasn't searching for the best food in Dallas. Harold's craving had nothing to do with food or drink. He wasn't like every other guy in the area putting on a show, trying to land the hottest chick around. At least not in the typical sense. His primal urges were far different, and while at one point in his life he felt confused by those feelings, he now beamed with self-confidence. He was unique, special, in every facet of his life.

As cool as he looked on the outside—mousse-induced tousled black hair, steely oak-colored eyes, a sculpted chin—recent events had initiated a surge of indignation, an irritation that quickly festered like an infected cut, oozing an impatient fury that begged for a release. The ultimate release that he'd perfected over the years.

He slid the gear into park and tossed his keys to the eager valet.

"Here's your ticket stub, sir," the teenager said, his eyes wide with anticipation of taking the car for a joy ride.

"Don't scratch it."

"No problem. We always—"

"Or I'll have to tear you apart." Harold paused, glaring at the youth, then gave a chuckle and a wink. The scent of perfumes led him down the sidewalk, with five bars to select from. The Twilight Lounge was calling his name. With the swagger of a European model, Harold strutted into the swanky bar. Subtle glances by both men and women—he was used to it by now. Harold wore a charcoal Ludlow sportscoat made from Italian cashmere over a slim, blue-dot chambray shirt, with gray cotton twill slacks resting comfortably on black, longwing blucher shoes.

A man with bushy sideburns played at a grand piano, flanked by a female singer wearing a sequined, red dress, showing one too many bulges.

He ordered a whiskey martini from his corner two-seat table, and slowly scanned the bar, laden with pink and red decorations. It struck him like an arrow shot from Cupid—Valentine's Day was just three days away. Lots of couples giggled, and Harold wondered if he'd picked the wrong night to conduct a search-and-slash routine. A few groups huddled together at the bar so closely it looked like they were drinking from the same glass. Must be a mobile orgy.

Moving in from behind his left side, he heard laughter from young ladies. He shifted his eyes in that direction and spotted two exiting the restroom. Both were brunette, one of

whom was begging to be picked up. Her chest was a full zip code ahead of the rest of her body. The third girl seemed more at ease with a confident, carefree gait that was at the same time graceful. Her gray and silver dress clung to just the right places, yet still flowed like a breeze had passed. Probably no more than five-five, her fluorescent-purple heels spoke volumes for her audacity to be unique—just like him.

Brushing by him, they both locked eyes for a split second. He looked down, acting ashamed to be looking at such beauty. In that split second, he'd caught a waft of her scent, a refined sweet perfume. Her hair was natural, dirty blond, full of curls and frizz. He could tell she'd spent some time caging her wild head of hair.

He pulled out his phone and checked for any late messages. He had just one, but would review it later—he didn't want an emotional reaction to upset his rhythm of the night.

"I'll have whatever he's having." He heard the pleasant voice before he saw her slide elegantly into the seat opposite his. "Just go on now. I'll talk to you ladies tomorrow." She actually dumped her friends to make a play on Harold. Wow, the world was finally coming around.

"I haven't seen you here before." She set down her purse. One of the spotlights caught her face, and her blue eyes popped. But Harold found himself moving down the side of her face, stopping at her neck. He was in awe of the perfect female body, especially the slope of the neck to the shoulders, and how her hair tickled her skin—his skin eventually.

"Just hit town a couple of weeks ago. Moved in from the west coast, LA."

"Harold, Harold Burns. It's a pleasure to meet you..."

"Hi, I'm Jordan." They shook hands. He grazed the top of her hand with his thumb. Her eyelashes batted twice.

Could it be this easy?

Her drink arrived and they both raised their stemmed glasses.

"What should we toast?" she asked.

"Well, there are so many things to be thankful for.

"Good health."

She nodded. "No doubt."

"Good fortune."

"That's the goal," she said with a cute smirk.

"Good company."

"Always."

They clinked glasses. Harold let the game come to him.

They commiserated over the lack of dates near Valentine's. She'd just broken up with her college boyfriend. Apparently, he was still busy playing drinking games and increasing the size of his beer-can collection.

"So, are you in the modeling industry?"

"Hey, I'm not a ditzy blonde waiting for some slimy guy to take my picture and splash it across YouTube." She winked after she said it.

"Far from it, I'm sure. You sound quite educated. I'd imagine if you were associated with the industry, you'd be the one calling the shots."

Another smile. How sweet and semi-sincere.

"I'm actually still in school," she leaned in and whispered. He gestured for more information.

"Well, I'm getting my MBA at SMU. Just spent a semester in China. My focus is macroeconomics."

With the flip of a light switch, his urges felt a shot of adrenaline. He wanted to begin the more serious game soon. Maybe too soon for his own good. They ordered more drinks.

"Is it safe to say that I'm looking at the future Federal Reserve chairperson?"

"All in due time," she said with another wink. Her neck just twitched. On the right side. Odd, he'd never seen anything like it.

"I graduated from UCLA, no grad school for me. I've been out three years."

"Still getting by on that entry-level job?" she teased.

"Not exactly. They moved me out here. Just got named VP of marketing and sales." Her pupils just expanded. The blood rush was on, which made him laugh inside.

"You must be doing something right."

"Well, my father owns the company, so it's all in the genes."

"Oh." Her cheeks lost some color. She looked disappointed.

"Just kidding." He touched her hand, and she nearly shot out of her chair.

"I wouldn't mind getting in your jeans. OMG, did I just say that?" She blushed and thumbed her necklace.

He leaned back and laughed. "As long as you play nice, I'll let you go anywhere you please."

She put her hand on top of his and gave him a seductive smile.

"I'm ready. Are you?" she whispered, her lips puckering for an extra second.

"Check please." He raised his hand to no one, and they shared a laugh.

They waltzed along the sidewalk. She rubbed her arms, and Harold removed his thousand-dollar coat and cloaked her body. He pressed a fifty into the palm of the valet boy.

Once the vacuumed doors of the Infiniti shut, Jordan touched every knob, button, and touch screen in the luxury car. She might be intelligent, even worldly, and well on her way to attaining her MBA, but Harold was certain she had her eyes on the ultimate prize—an MRS degree.

They traveled south on Turtle Creek, took a slight left on Maple, then turned right onto Crescent Court. Her face was calm, her body relaxed. He could see this five-star hotel was not virgin territory for Jordan.

"Let's go up, shall we?" he said.

She took his arm and looked into his eyes, the look of youthful trust. For him to accomplish tonight's mission, she had to trust him.

Before he locked the door to the two-thousand-square-foot suite, he could hear her dancing around, jumping on each piece of furniture. He just shook his head. She really thought she'd made it. Maybe she'd fallen and hit her head and awoke thinking she was Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman*. But he didn't have a million dollars in jewels, and he certainly wasn't going to pay her to have sex with him. That would defeat the whole purpose.

He decided to go the extra mile, and he popped the cork on a bottle of champagne.

"Another toast?" she asked.

"Only if you need it."

"Oops." She purposely dumped the glass on her dress then playfully touched her lips. "I guess I need to get into something more comfortable." Off she skipped to the bathroom.

He went up to the second floor, where floor-to-ceiling windows provided a majestic view of the skyline. The world could watch.

"Where are you, Harold?"

"Up here, Jordan."

She pranced up the carpeted steps, giggling like they were playing hide-and-seek. He faced the world a foot from the window, cool air escaping through a vent on the floor, touching his genitals. He throbbed for her...really more for the moment. He heard two footsteps hit the plastic, then she smacked his ass, which caught him off guard. They could get rough. He'd once played that game when he was much younger. But that wasn't built into this script.

He turned to face her. She was full monty. She couldn't hold back, and she attacked him like her life would end if she didn't feel his body immediately.

"Let's slow it down just a tad."

Her tongue licked every bit of his skin. He was covered in slime.

"Can you turn around for me?" he whispered. "I like it better that way." She grunted like he was already inside of her. *Tsk, tsk.*

His hand touched her ankles then slid up her calf to her thigh. She quickly grabbed his fingers and pushed them toward the warmest spot on her body. Too eager. He moved his hand to her hip, then slowly up her torso. She took his arm, bit it, then pressed his hand to her breast and massaged it.

"My, you're a voracious little thing, aren't you?"

"I just need you. I have to have you...now!"

He kissed her neck, but his lips felt a bump, like something had come alive under her skin. It was that twitch. He saw it move again. Disturbing. Jordan had so many good qualities, but perhaps he'd acted too hastily. He was losing his erection. What now? He needed options.

Before he could think, she turned and leaped like a gymnast, her toned legs now locked around his waist. She certainly got an A for effort.

"Jordan, let's take this a step at a time." He tried peeling her off his body with one arm still hidden behind his back.

"Damn it, Harold, don't pull away from me."

"Jordan, please. I can't continue like this."

She hit her knees and tried arousing him with her mouth.

He looked down and put his hand on her hair. "If only I was a normal guy, you'd be a dream come true."

"What?"

She lifted her eyes, perplexed.

"But since you don't listen any better than a petulant child, I'm going to have to ruin this moment for both of us."

With sweat now dripping down his nose, he raised his blade and swiped down with all his might, slicing off the front of her nose. She released a piercing scream, fell back and rolled, blood spewing everywhere. He pounced on her and slashed wildly, grunting

with each thrust of his arm, until there was no movement. Then he extracted her larynx and that pesky twitch—what he thought was her tendon.

Bitch.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Andi hummed along in her pale-green Mystery Machine at sixty miles per, knowing she could drive the commute blindfolded, if needed. She'd spent the night at Lindsey's for the umpteenth time, realizing she'd have an early ride back to UNT to catch her journalism law class. She couldn't wait until these mindless classes were over, and she could finally focus on her real career. Just three more months, a couple of passing grades, she reminded herself. With this bizarre situation in Houston, it felt like her career had already started. She had to remember though, as much as Big Heart smelled liked rotten eggs, at this point she only had accusations. If only she could find that key piece of evidence that linked the company—its management team—to all of those gut-wrenching accusations.

"If *ifs and buts* were candy, my what a Christmas we'd have," her auntie back east used to say.

The former lonely stretch of highway separating cornfields and an occasional power line now was littered with too many miles of strip centers, discount gas stations that were as large as regional airports, and dozens of gated communities. In other words, the concrete jungle had finally begun to invade northern Collin and Denton counties.

Her stomach grumbled for what must have been thirty seconds. She'd taken a six-mile jog the night before and blew off breakfast this morning. Not smart, especially for someone training for a triathlon. She knew one of the few remaining original mom-and-pop country stores on 380 was up ahead about a mile, just around the bend. She'd heat up a breakfast sandwich, grab a banana, and then top it off with a homemade protein smoothie—Miss Caroline made them right on the spot.

She turned into the gravel-and-dust parking lot, tires crunching and popping until her squeaky brakes brought the old minivan to a stop. She took hollow steps on a raised, but sagging, wooden porch, then pulled back the warped door, which wailed in return.

"Hi there, Miss Caroline."

A plump, sixty-something woman with a hairnet and a gap between her front teeth smiled and waved from behind a counter. "I hadn't seen you in a while. I assumed you'd just gone off and graduated, and we'd never hear from you again."

"I've got three more months, but I can't be late for my nine o'clock class," Andi said, crossing her fingers, then glancing at the time on her phone. "As long as you're in business, I'll be dropping by at least every now and then, even after I graduate. I can't resist your homemade smoothies."

"They do seem to keep the customers coming back for more."

"Not surprising," Andi said with a smile, her stomach grumbling for sustenance.

"I'll give you an extra large one today. Lickety-split, since you gotta make class and all."

Andi picked out a bacon, egg, and cheese sandwich, the wrapper still warm, then found the ripest banana, although it still had a bit of green on one end. Miss Caroline met

her at the register, and Andi took a bite of the sandwich while handing over her debit card.

The portly storeowner slid the card and punched the buttons three times. "These darn machines just aren't reliable."

Andi took another bite of the sandwich, and then drew a quick slurp of her smoothie, feeling instant fortification. Still waiting for her debit card to go through, the college senior looked out the cracked front window.

A quick flash and she glanced left. A rusted pickup tore into the parking lot, skidding, fishtailing across the rocks. The bed of the truck strained from the pressure and shimmered violently until it ceased moving sideways. A combination of parking lot dust and polluted tailpipe smoke created a hazy barricade around the vehicle. One door opened and a girl in blue jeans, boots, and a green sweatshirt jumped out, yelling and shaking her arms. A boy emerged from the other side with a phone to his ear, which he then pulled away to look at the screen. He was bare chested, his unbuttoned shirt clinging to both arms. He also had on jeans and boots.

Andi watched as the pair seemed to talk to each other and themselves, agitated about something. More arm motions. Boots attacked the porch planks like a herd of horses. Then the front door was thrown open.

"Call the *PO*lice, call the *AM*bulance." said the cowboy who looked no older than twenty, shaking his phone.

"No sense in calling the *AM*bulance," the cowgirl said. "That woman isn't going anywhere. She's dead." The girl put her hands to her face, forcing back tears.

Andi dropped her sandwich and drink at the counter and quickly approached the young couple.

"What happened? Where were you?"

"I can't describe it. I..." the cowgirl's voice trailed off. She wiped away tears, perhaps recalling the scene.

"Our damn phones won't work. Battery went out," the cowboy said, his face contorted with fear and anxiety.

Andi could see this couple had been through some shit. She glanced back at Miss Caroline, who already had the phone to her ear and gave a knowing nod back to Andi. *Cool, cops are on the way.*

Andi put her arm around the girl. "What's your name?"

"Tammy." The girl, who probably wasn't any more than five-two and a hundred ten pounds, looked up at Andi with wet eyes.

"It's okay. The police are coming now. What did you see? Here, take this napkin." Andi smelled weed but didn't let it distract her.

Tammy snorted and then shut her eyes.

"Me and Bryan were out camping for the night, down this dirt road over here. We got up a little late." She looked over at her boyfriend, who was still playing with his phone. "Well, I had to...you know, take care of some business. I found a quiet place in the field about fifty feet or so from Bryan's truck." She began to breathe in stuttering gusts.

"It's okay, really. Keep going."

"I, uh, pulled down my jeans and moved back, and tripped. Fell right on my bare ass. I thought I'd stumbled over a dead tree. I turned around, and I saw a rolled up rug, with a head sticking out." Her voice rose in pitch with every few words, nearing hysteria.

Tammy put her head against Andi's chest and sobbed. "It was the most awful sight. I gagged when I saw the face. It was all bloated and discolored. And her neck was at this strange angle." She shut her eyes, and Andi held her.

Two black-and-whites with Denton County Sheriff etched on the side pulled up to the store. Two officers in fatigue-green uniforms and wearing cowboy hats barged through the door, wasting no time getting to the point.

"Who saw the dead person?"

Tammy raised her hand. "We were just out camping. I think she's been dead a while."

"Take us there. You can ride in our car." The four of them exited the parking lot, and Andi followed close behind in the Mystery Machine.

The road was full of ruts and large branches. Orange dust made visibility difficult, but they couldn't drive any faster than ten miles per hour because of the rough terrain. About fifteen minutes down the twisting path, they came to a stop. Tammy got out of the marked sedan and pointed to the left. Andi watched both officers high-step through weeds and brush, then stop and look down. One put his arm over his face, turned and acted like he might puke, while the other flipped his head around, apparently trying to purge the snapshot from his memory. He brought his shoulder radio mic to his face and started barking out orders.

Andi could see something blue and gray through the brush—the rug Tammy had described. She thought about the lifeless body that had been tossed away like this. Her gut began to churn. This was no accident. She grabbed her phone and dialed the newsroom. Brandon didn't pick up, so she called the big man himself.

"Michael, I'm at the scene of a crime. A girl has been murdered."

Chapter Thirty-Nine

"Can I see the body?" I asked.

Carl removed his gold-rimmed shades, revealing his intense, dark eyes. The sun flickered across the field in waves, hiding behind spotty, white clouds. He turned back to the crime scene, about fifty feet away, which was surrounded by yellow tape and a gaggle of officials in one uniform or another. He kicked away weeds that had dusted up his brown leather shoes.

"You're already the only members of the press here. No one else even knows about it," Carl said with his arms spread wide, frustrated. "I don't want anyone messing up my crime scene."

"I thought it was the Denton County Sheriff's crime scene."

"Whatever. Doesn't matter anyway. It's all going to belong to the FBI soon enough."

Off to my right, Stu—whom I'd literally grabbed by the collar on my way out the door—wasn't wasting time. He was casually shooting the breeze with one of the techs from the CSI unit. Maybe he had a connection...or was in the process of making one.

Carl and I locked glares. Finally, he looked away with an exaggerated sigh. "Shit. You aren't going to leave until you see the body."

"That's right."

"Why do you want to see a dead body? It's not pleasant in the best of circumstances. And this is at the opposite end of the spectrum."

I licked my lips, realizing I was asking to dredge up old, even painful memories. But this crime scene wasn't about the past. The emails from Yours Truly, the murders in Baton Rouge and Oxford, the follow-up emails that tried to justify homicide—all these things had touched my colleagues and me in some disjointed way. If this girl was murdered in the same fashion as the others, then I needed to see it for myself.

"Carl, we've been attached at the hip throughout this crazy odyssey. If a murderer—attached to the emails or not—has invaded our area, then I feel like I owe it to everyone to not turn away when it's distasteful. I want to feel what it was like—what she went through—and this is the closest I can get to doing that. I just hope that I can protect anyone else this pervert might be targeting."

"Marisa?"

"Her included, yes."

Andi looked down and shuffled a running shoe on the dirt, as Carl twisted his mouth, apparently studying his options.

"Give me a sec." Off he went, swatting at three-foot weeds. He whispered in the ears of two officers and a CSI tech. Stu had just walked up, discussing with Andi the first two people who stumbled over the body.

"I'll get you their names and numbers. I also jotted down a couple of quotes you might want to use," Andi said to Stu.

Carl ambled back toward our group. "Sorry to interrupt your media meeting, but they're ready."

I looked at Stu, who shook his head and held up a hand that signaled he'd seen far too many lifeless bodies. Andi's eyes were stuck open, her head leaning forward. "Do you mind?" she asked Carl.

"Sure, we'll just create a nice procession. Please pay two dollars and keep moving." Carl rolled his eyes and led the way. "You've got two minutes."

The wind blew wafts of something foul—the smell of death—as Andi and I stood side by side, staring down at the naked girl laying on top of the unrolled rug, her top half discolored from all of the blood that had drained from the body, or the girl...what was her name? Brown flakes of dried blood stuck to her bloated body. She'd been dead for several days, it was obvious.

Ground zero of the gory mess was at her neck and right shoulder. It would need to be cleaned to see the detailed work of the killer, but we knew two of the three other murdered girls had their carotid arteries severed and their larynxes extracted. This girl looked to be about the same age, early twenties. Her chin angled backward, exposing a gash in her neck. Her tongue sat at the edge of her mouth, almost like a prop in a movie. Her face was more blue than white, and severely swollen. A trail of blood snaked down her torso ending at her thigh. Her distended body had the shape of an alien being, possibly not even human.

Could this be the work of someone in the medical field, even a surgeon? Maybe someone who'd broken the rules at some point and had his license suspended?

I kneeled down, trying to hypothesize what this girl was thinking when she'd interacted with her killer. I assumed this girl hadn't been raped, just like the others. Yet she had no clothes on. What was her purpose the day or night they met? Pure lust? A hitchhiker trying to catch a ride into town? Had she trusted this man? I wondered how long before he killed her that she knew she was going to die. I closed my eyes and forced air through my nose.

Carl approached us.

"Did they find any clothes in the rug?" I asked.

"Not a stitch."

Carl extended his arm, and we followed Andi back to the cars, then he broke off to take a call.

"Do you think you'll have any nightmares?" I asked Andi.

"I'm usually a big horror-movie watcher. But when you see the real thing up close, it changes your perspective." She looked over to the scene. "I haven't been in all the meetings with you guys, but I know about the murdered college girls. You read about it...that's one thing. But to see it, smell it...it's just so disturbing. Human killing human. It's not natural." The wind blew hair in her face, but she didn't bother brushing it aside. She just stared off into the distant sky.

Andi's poignant words triggered a lump in my throat, and I coughed.

Stu double-checked his notes from Andi as Carl walked back over, flipping his phone in his coat pocket.

"Talked to Guidry."

"Yeah? What did the Ragin' Cajun have to say about all of this, besides offering up his cyber unit and BSU?"

"He's jumping on a plane. He'll be here in six hours or less." Carl looked at his watch, ignoring my opinion on the FBI's plethora of resources.

I turned to my right and saw Andi getting into her van.

I hollered to her. "Hey, thanks for everything...working with the couple that found the body, asking questions, taking down important information for Stu," I said. "And it took some backbone to look at the dead body."

She exhaled and let out a thin smile. "No problem. This is going to stick with me for a while. I feel like I'm invested in this whole case."

She put her keys in the ignition and closed the door. I approached the van. "You late for a class or just ready to get the hell away from this scene?"

"I missed my class three hours ago."

"Do you need me to call your professor and let them know you were working a real crime scene? Your teacher is a journalist."

"She's more concerned about her academic world, but I'll figure something out. I have to if I'm going to graduate in three months," Andi said. "Right now, I've got a date with a computer geek."

"Yeah? Love at first sight?"

"Something like that."

Chapter Forty

"Sorry I'm late, Satish," Andi said, setting her purse and jacket down on a padded metal chair next to his suede, purple couch.

The little man with the intelligence of the Google search engine propped his neck against the back of his chair, his eyes fixated on the far left monitor. "No problem. I've been involved in this wicked game of War Games XXV. We've got about sixty people online, and we're in a battle to save the free world."

He jerked the controller right, his body leaning at a forty-five-degree angle, then pressed the red and black buttons, toggling between two fingers.

"Oh, you think you can sneak up on our unit? Say hello to my little friend," he said in an Indian-influenced Hispanic accent. Beads of sweat formed on his veiny forehead. "Die bitches die. Do you hear me? Die!"

Andi jiggled her legs impatiently, wondering if Satish's maturity level would ever come close to his IQ.

She snapped her fingers. "Helloooo, Satish, I'm still here. Do you think you can break away from your toy soldiers? We've got business to attend to." She tapped her wrist, where there was no watch.

"Uh, sorry, let me just...." He leaned left and lunged forward. "Let me just get out of this pickle and—"

"Satish!"

"And I'm out without suffering a fatal injury, just a flesh wound to my right shoulder. Whew. And now I just need to save." He clicked the mouse then spun his chair to face Andi.

He clapped once. "How may I help you?"

"You know why I'm here."

He twirled back around and clicked three times and typed in a user name and password.

"There you have it," he said. "Far left, we're looking through the camera lens at Jenny's computer. Audio is turned off...that's pretty typical in an office setting."

Andi studied the scene. Jenny, wearing a black pantsuit over a white collared shirt came into view, her eyes focused on paper work to the right of her computer. It appeared she was talking to someone.

"Not much to see there," Andi said. "What else you got?"

Two clicks. "Wallah."

"What am I looking at?"

"This center screen is showing the logs of every keystroke, document, and website that hit Jenny's computer. I've scanned it a few times and nothing alarming so far. Not surprising since it's Jenny's computer. Now, if this were on someone else's computer who we suspected was involved in the illegal activities, then we might find something."

"Okay. What's behind door number three?"

Satish smiled then clapped again like he was a game show host.

"I got this program to scan her entire hard drive, looking for certain key words I entered. Also, if she ever opens a shared drive, then it also scans that set of folders. So far, we're coming up empty."

Andi huffed. "Geez, I was hoping we'd find something without Jenny having to take more risks."

Just then, Andi looked to the left monitor and saw Jenny picking up her purse and waving goodbye. Must be lunchtime. Andi gave her five minutes then sent a text.

Call me.

Sixty seconds later, her phone chirped.

"Hey, Jenny. I'm here with Satish. Let me put you on speaker phone."

"What's up, little lady?" Satish said. Andi gave him the eye.

"Are you in a safe location to talk?"

"I'm walking through this park area about three blocks from the office. No one around except squirrels searching for food."

"Good," Andi said. "We've been reviewing the logs and—"

"Did you get anything you can use?" Jenny asked eagerly.

"No, not really. We have that same email you mentioned where they gave you and your peers incentives to speed up the process. But we need a lot more than that."

"Damn." Jenny sounded dejected.

Andi said, "Jenny, I've done some more searching on the execs. Do you know Florence Wilcox?"

"Yeah, she pretty much runs the day-to-day things here. She's constantly in meetings, on site, off site. And, from what I hear she even travels to Russia—but we're not supposed to know that."

Andi felt a knot forming in the pit of her stomach and realized her anxiety was connected to what she was about to suggest to Jenny, an innocent young woman caught up in a desperate situation where even younger lives—those who had no voice—were impacted every day. She bit the inside of her cheek. "Jenny, we can wait this out. It might take a week, a month, or even a year. I'm okay with waiting until your computer is exposed to a document or email that we can use to put these assholes in prison."

"I can't hold out that long," Jenny said. "And I can't imagine how many more kids would be harmed, and parents swindled. It's just all so wrong, it makes me sick to my stomach every time I enter the building."

So they all agreed to take the next step. Satish explained that the software download process would work the same way it did on Jenny's computer. Jenny would need to open the email and double-click on the attachment to load SpyAgent—all from Florence's computer. Brief text messages would be their communication method.

Andi paced the room, waiting for the first note from Jenny. Finally, it came through.

Opening at 2:30. Will send u next text as I get to her office. Jen

For the next forty-five minutes, Andi stared at three monitors. Satish broke the silence by jumping back into the online fray with his comrades. He captured two enemy soldiers without giving up his location. He was a video game pro—and he said as much over and over again.

Finally, at two thirty-three p.m., Andi's phone chirped.

Walking to office. Send email.

Satish clicked send, and then they waited for the right monitor to light up. If all went well on Jenny's end, they should see her face on their monitor within three minutes. Andi started the stopwatch on her phone.

Sweat formed on Andi's back. She flapped her oversized T-shirt then lifted her hair off her neck. She checked the phone: one minute forty-five seconds had passed.

She started second-guessing herself, thinking she shouldn't have put Jenny in this position. She tried to keep her pulse in check, in case she needed to think on her feet. The phone now read three ten, three eleven, three twelve. "Something's wrong. Where is she?" Andi stared laser beams at the right-side monitor.

"Three minutes forty seconds and counting," Satish said.

"I can see that. Damn it!" Feeling absolutely helpless, Andi ran her fingers through her hair. She was winded, like she had been jogging uphill, the weight of the heavy air pressing against her lungs.

"Four ten." His voice raised an octave, Satish looked at Andi, then he shook his head.

"Five minutes five seconds," Andi whispered, dread in her voice. She tried to think of something, anything they could do to help Jenny. She thought about calling Jenny's cell phone but worried it would only deteriorate the situation if anyone was around.

When another forty-five seconds had passed, Andi slammed her hand on Satish's computer desk.

As if on cue, Jenny's face popped to life on the monitor. Andi pumped her fist then put her hand over her chest, trying to calm her rapid-fire heartbeat.

"Whoop, whoop, you go girl," Satish said. "Whoop, whoop." He gyrated in his chair and began tapping his keyboard.

Andi lowered her head for a few seconds, allowing some of the anxiety to drain from her body. She looked back at the monitor then saw a short, round woman in the frame shaking a sausage-like finger six inches from Jenny's face.

"Holy shit."

Jenny's eyebrows shot up, her eyes wide with bewilderment.

"What do we do?" Satish rubbed his face so hard it almost took off his humped nose.

Andi grabbed her phone, scrolled to her browser, and found the Big Heart website still open. She dialed the main number.

"Big Heart Adoption Ag—"

"Florence Wilcox, please."

"Please hold."

"Here, Satish, take this." Andi put the phone in Satish's face. "Once the lady answers, start talking in your native Hindi. Get mad at her about...whatever."

"But I hardly ever speak Hindi."

"She'll never know the difference. Take it!"

Five seconds later, the woman with a fire-hydrant body suddenly stopped talking to Jenny and reached for the desk.

Andi leaned toward her partner and listened to the receiver, while watching the woman speak into the phone on the monitor.

"Florence Wilcox's office, this is Pam, her admin."

"Her admin," Satish whispered and shoved the phone back to Andi.

"It doesn't matter who it is, talk to her!" Andi pushed the phone to Satish's ear.

Satish spread his arms at Andi, who punched his arm. Satish turned his body and unleashed a Hindi tirade, sounding as if he was delivering an emotional ultimatum that threatened Florence's job and her life. Meanwhile, Jenny disappeared from the screen.

Satish ended his soliloquy in English. "And I will never do business with Big Heart again!" He punched the line dead and handed the phone to Andi. Perspiration bubbled on his upper lip.

"Damn, Satish. What did you tell her?"

"My mind went blank. I panicked. I just started repeating my favorite Bruno Mars song."

"Seriously?" Andi shook her head, relief allowing her lips to curl into a smile.

"You're one strange dude."

Andi's phone buzzed.

"Jenny, are you safe?"

"I left early for the day. I'm in the park now. I think everything is okay." Jenny sounded strangely calm.

"I'm glad you're safe now, but I think we need to get you out of there...now. They're on to you." Andi felt her pulse increase again.

"Really, I think I'm good. Before I went into Florence's office, I found out today is her birthday. So, I sent her an email with a link to a page that displays fireworks and says happy birthday in the sky. I just told her admin that I was in her office to open the web page so Florence could see it when she got back from her meeting."

Andi and Satish looked directly at each other, shaking heads.

"Wow, Jenny. I think the FBI might be interested in you."

Chapter Forty-One

The rain had let up, but midday traffic still slowed my return to the *Times Herald* newsroom, following the early-morning FBI press conference in their downtown Dallas office—off Justice Way, no less. Annoyed and hungry, I exited the highway when I spotted the yellow and red sign of In-N-Out Burger. I drove around back and let out a huff. The line went around the block. I pulled behind a loud diesel truck that spewed a rank smell. Thirty minutes later, I was still at least twenty cars from the window, and I'd developed a headache that seemed like it might turn into a migraine—something I experience only once a year or so. I spun the car to the right and hit the highway.

Almost immediately, red lights popped up and cars jerked forward. I took in a deep breath, knowing a quick trip back to work wasn't in the cards. I recalled the barrage of questions thrown at FBI agent Tucker, as Guidry and others huddled behind him.

The fifty-something man in charge, his mustache appearing more white than brown and far bushier than just a couple of weeks ago, handled the press corps like a pro. As the alligators snapped at him left and right, it was obvious he had a purpose to the proceeding—he needed help from the public, and it wasn't just a call to be vigilant.

He told everyone about the emails, which sent shock waves through the sea of reporters and photographers. "We have received some communication from a person or persons who could be associated with these murders."

I remember glancing at Rolando and Stu. I think all three of us were thinking the same thing: a coordinated group could be behind these murders. I'd never heard of such a thing. The worst serial killings in American history were typically tied to men, loners, emotionally unattached to the rest of the world. But with the Internet allowing people with fringe, even crazy thoughts and beliefs to congregate and manipulate, I wondered if the incredible technology innovation we'd experienced in the last two decades had enabled such a group to evolve—or devolve, as the case may be.

The traffic began to lighten up, and I stepped on the gas. I wasn't sure which was growling louder, the engine in my Accord or my stomach.

I thought more about the families impacted by this wave of brutal murders in college towns, and I couldn't imagine their grief; their little girls seemingly all grown up, yet their lives cut short by some sick bastard...or was there more than one? Tucker had reminded us of the most recent person whose life had ended before it really began. The victim found in Denton County, Olivia White, was murdered with a straight-blade knife. Olivia had been a music major at UNT, where Andi was finishing up her degree. That didn't sit right with me. Everything about this situation—these murders, the personal, even taunting, nature of the emails, and now the proximity of the latest killing—seemed like a runaway train that couldn't be stopped.

The first sound I heard entering the back door was a chorus of straws slurping from nearly empty cups. I walked to the break room and found Stu and Rolando sharing war stories. While walking out of the FBI press conference with Rolando, I offered our

newsroom for his use while he was in town. He'd jumped on it. "Good to see the press corps isn't going hungry." Media folks, especially print, usually ate anything and everything, especially if it was cheap, and fast.

"Found this new fried chicken chain going up the tollway. Can't beat it." Stu picked food from his teeth. My head throbbed so much from hunger, I began looking for bread crumbs on the table...anything to fill my stomach. "No lunch for you?" Rolando asked.

"Dude, I'm about to eat my left arm."

Turning to leave, I spotted a pizza box next to the coffee pot. I made a beeline for it. Chewed-up crust was all that remained. I picked up a piece, actually thought about gnawing on it, then dropped it and wiped my hand on my pants. Desperate for anything nontoxic, I found loose change scattered throughout my top desk drawer and settled for a plastic container full of pretzels and humus and a bottled water from the vending machines. At least my headache seemed like it was retreating a bit.

I spent the next hour sifting through invoices and signing my name, making a separate stack for those requiring follow-up. A couple of flashing images lured my eyes upward. I saw Stu and Rolando striding down the hallway—Rolando taking two steps for every one of Stu's longer strides. A minute later, the pair came back, Brandon not far behind, his head down reading a piece of paper. All three entered my office and just stood there, seemingly holding their breath.

"Yours Truly sent us another note." Brandon flipped a copy down on my desk then handed copies to Stu and Rolando.

I took a breath and read the email. Much shorter than the others. I read it again and curled my lips, trying to draw a picture of the person on the other end of the note. Pushing back my chair, I got up and paced behind my desk, nearly forgetting I had three of my staff staring at me for the next move—until I heard a forced cough from Brandon, never bashful.

"Oh sorry, guys. Let's move to the glass house and dial up our favorite law-enforcement friends. We'll share it with them, learn they haven't made any progress but then they'll say they're getting closer and closer—you know, kind of how the earth is moving closer to the sun?"

Brandon and Stu smirked. Rolando appeared uncertain how to take my extreme sarcasm, and he paused at the edge of my door, looking the opposite way from where we were walking.

"Rolando, you joining us?"

"Sure, I just didn't know if I...you know."

"You're in this as deep as we are. We just need to figure out a way to shovel some of this shit out." He nodded and tagged along into our transparent meeting room.

Five minutes later, the conference phone blinked and came alive.

"Carl, Guidry, do you have us?"

Carl responded, "Roger."

"Here and accounted for," was Guidry's response, sounding tired and irritated.

"Long time no see, Guidry." I needed some type of intro.

"Yeah, well, those press conferences take it out of me. We give out nothing, you guys hammer us, and then we walk away acting like we won a battle. Just a waste of time—that's off the record, by the way."

"No problem." We all needed to vent, but it was obvious the stress and pressure of the case was mounting.

I asked Brandon to forward the emails to Carl and Guidry, and he slid his finger across his iPad screen.

"You want to wait, or have me recite it again?"

"We love hearing your voice, Michael."

"Thanks Carl, I feel the same way." I paused then read the email.

To whom it may concern:

Oh, but I love you, my little lamb. I must have you. My love is throbbing at quite a fevered cadence.

Yours Truly

"That's it?" Carl asked.

"Yep."

"I just don't get this cat. These emails are all over the place."

"Especially the ones that have hit right after we find another body," Guidry said.

I clicked my pen twice then tossed it on the table. "They're so random. But then again, we're not in this guy's head."

"Could be more than one person, right?" Rolando chimed in.

We all stared at the phone, waiting for an official response.

"Guidry, Carl, you still with us?"

"We've started looking at the possibility of this being a multi-person operation. We alluded to that in the press conference," Guidry said. "The theory came up after we released Foxworthy."

Rolando shook his head. I held up my hand, hoping he'd be able to contain his emotions.

"More people involved means it's more complex," Brandon said.

"True, but it could also provide an opportunity for a slip-up, or someone starts feeling guilty and wants to talk."

"Good theories, but your BSU hasn't narrowed it down at all?" Brandon rested both elbows on his knees, almost like a baseball catcher.

"Nothing definitive. These emails don't seem to help. Once again, it's causing us to look at the multiple-person angle.

"The group theory," I said, eyeing each of my team members, who looked as perplexed as I felt.

"Forgot to mention. Tucker left this out, but something different about Olivia, the latest vic. She had a square cut out of her lower back," Guidry offered.

Stu shook his head and dropped his pen.

"Tramp stamp, possibly?" Brandon tossed out there.

"Could be. Something might have offended the guy."

I sat back and popped a knuckle, disgusted at the never-ending cycle of violent acts, and frustrated that it felt like we weren't any closer to catching him...them.

"Before you ask, and because you guys have been good partners with us up to this point, I'll share one more little tidbit that adds to our latest theory." A heaving growl

popped out of the Polycom. "Sorry, had a frog in my throat. Anyway, the cyber unit has narrowed down the sending location of the email."

"And?" I prompted, wanting to choke the Polycom.

"Get this—somewhere in China. Haven't pinned down the province or city."

Sounded like to me the net just got very wide—one-billion-people wide. My headache returned, with a vengeance.

Chapter Forty-Two

Gotta stay at work later than hoped. working the case with team. Stay warm. Luv Michael

I hit send on the text to Marisa, then turned and watched the glass house transform like it was being featured on an HGTV remodel show. But this makeover wouldn't add color or space or better entertainment. Following our call with Guidry and Carl, I decided we had to develop our own theories, based upon all the data and opinions. While I'd been able to push any specific concerns for Marisa's life to the back of my mind, I didn't feel confident the authorities would figure this out before another girl was killed. I wasn't even sure our efforts would stop anything, but doing nothing was no longer an option. So we transformed our conference room into our own version of a cop war room.

Two more magnetic whiteboards were rolled in. Adding to the timeline Brandon wrote the other day, we pinned up hard copies of each email, as well as mug shots of each of the dead girls, and the mug shot of Rolando's editor. We had to make this more personal.

Still thinking about the lunch that never was, I spotted Andi in the newsroom and asked if she could order up four large pizzas.

With my stomach growling, I took a swig of water and surveyed our handiwork.

"Nice job, guys. Now we finally see everything that relates to this case. Theories, ideas, questions...nothing is off limits. Brandon, you capturing this?"

Brandon held a blue, dry erase pen and stood at a blank whiteboard, jostling around like he needed to use the restroom. I tried to ignore his hyperactivity.

"Let's start with the obvious," Stu said, both arms splayed wide. "The FBI may not be telling us everything. We probably know more than every other media outlet, but that doesn't mean we know everything."

I nodded. "Duly noted, but what does that tell us?"

"They could have some real evidence, DNA. We know the last girl was murdered with a straight-blade knife, but who knows about the others. We're not sure about other crime scene evidence, or even if the girls are linked."

Pepsi dripped off Rolando's chin, and he used his denim shirtsleeve to wipe away the mess. "I spent hours looking into any connection between the girls. Of course, the two in Baton Rouge, Ariel and Erika, were roommates. But in working with a colleague in Oxford, we found no connection between them and Whitney. Nada. Now we have this last girl from UNT, Olivia. Not sure if she's connected to the others, but my gut tells me 'no'—at least if we're dealing with the same perp or group of perps."

Brandon jotted down a bullet point related to the link—or rather lack thereof—between the murdered girls. He had this nervous energy about him. He removed his cap, exposing a dark mound of matted, hat hair, and toyed with the brim, then reset it on his head, backward. I wondered if I could slip him some valium, then steal all of his caps while he was knocked out.

"We don't know the exact weapon, but all indications are that it's a knife of some kind, which he...they used to carve out the larynx," Stu said. "All except for Erika."

"Motive. That's got to be the key. Why college girls, most of whom were blond? Why slash their necks and extract their larynxes?" I shook my head, frustrated I couldn't piece together the puzzle, but also questioning if we were missing that one clincher thing...or a million things, and we were just spinning our wheels.

I lowered my head and massaged my temples, wondering if there was something else gnawing at me. I pushed aside whatever it was. A knock on the door. Four heads turned to the glass window to see Andi's head perched just above four pizza boxes and three smaller boxes. Brandon walked to open the door. From inside the room, we watched as one box slid in one direction, then Andi overcompensated and the tower of boxes began to topple just as Brandon opened the door. He threw out his arms and caught two, while Andi saved the rest.

I almost applauded.

"Seven boxes?" I asked.

"They threw in pepperoni rolls and cinnamon sticks for just two bucks more. I didn't think anyone here was training for a marathon—other than me—so I agreed."

I pondered my lack of discipline in the workout department.

The ravenous reporters attacked the free food like it was their last meal. I slid a slice of veggies and extra cheese onto a paper towel, then wolfed down half of it with one bite. I didn't notice that half the cheese hung from my mouth down to my lap until Andi said, "Uh, you know you got..." She pointed at my chin.

My fingers grabbed for the melted strings, and within seconds, I felt ensnared by a web of cheese. Andi offered me a towel. I wiped my mouth and dabbed at my stained shirt.

"Feel free to take some pizza, or anything else," I said, still cleaning my face.

"That's okay, I grabbed a turkey sandwich." She panned left and right, her dark eyes scanning all the data surrounding the meeting table. "I guess I need to leave, huh?" She looked over at Rolando.

I uncapped my water and took a swig.

"You probably feel like an outsider." I looked at Andi.

"I know I'll get my chance. I recall that third email...it was so authentic and creepy. Then I saw that dead body. What was her name, Olivia, right?"

I nodded.

"I just have this real passion to be involved, be part of the solution, not just sit on the sideline and hope that another girl isn't murdered." She looked off to the corner.

Voices interrupted my thought, and I peered at the rest of the group—Stu, Brandon, and Rolando—all demonstrative in their opinions, while remnants of pepperoni rolls and cinnamon sticks scattered all over the table and floor.

I said to Andi, "I know you've got your hands full with this thing down in Houston, and you're trying to finish up your degree, but do you want to sit in? See if you can help connect the dots?"

Stunned brown eyes stared at me. Then she literally leaped a foot in the air. "I can handle everything else, not a problem. Where do I sit?"

"Anywhere you want. Why don't you take a minute and review all the material first?"

We needed new eyes on all of this, and I realized that we'd completely left out a key demographic during all of our meetings and brainstorming sessions: female, especially young female.

I sat back and ate more pizza, my fortification growing by the minute, and studied Andi, who was studying the evidence boards. My mind drifted to last year when we first brought in the journalism student to go undercover at the local high school, hoping to find out who'd dealt the drugs that killed Stu's teenage daughter. I laughed inside at our untimely run-ins—actually, it was her clumsily running into me, creating a food or drink disaster. I recalled the strange feeling of seeing her as an attractive, even desirable woman—especially when she fell on top of me in her bikini down in Mexico. But I realized in the end, she was a young girl—attractive, yes—but a girl who hadn't yet lived life. She saw the world differently than I did. Which was fine with me...it helped clarify and strengthen my love with Marisa. Thinking of Marisa, I was reminded that she'd been acting a little strange lately, and thanks to my asshole half-brother, my attempt to bring her around with my massage therapy was thwarted. I needed to try again. Andi was looking at all the data. I wanted to get to the brainstorming, so I prompted, "So any initial thoughts or theories, or do you just want to sit down and listen in?"

She brought her long finger to her chin. She moved from one email to the next, then she stopped in front of the section dedicated to the Baton Rouge murders.

"This email sent after discovering the Baton Rouge murders...on one hand, it reads like someone is opening their soul and giving us justification for why he killed those girls, Ariel and Erika."

"Just what I said." Stu raised a hand that held a frosted cinnamon stick.

"But if you take a step back and look it as a whole, it reads more like a script."

I sat up in my chair and set down a piece of crust.

"A script from...what?"

"It sounds very familiar to me."

I glanced at Brandon, who wrote "Script?" and circled it next to "Murder response email #1."

Andi stepped back to the board and tapped her hand next to the name and mug shot of Rolando's editor, Bruce Foxworthy.

I noted, "You seem focused on F-O-X."

She turned and pointed at me. "F-O-X. That's it."

"That's just three letters of the man's last name."

She ignored my comment and looked to Brandon, pointing at his iPad. "Can you search for a website that shows quotes from a movie?"

Brandon started tapping letters, while Andi nodded. "It's got to be."

"What?" I almost shouted.

"F-O-X. That's how Tom Hanks communicated his character's last name in the movie *You've Got Mail*."

My eyes looked down. I recalled that movie. And I think Marisa had the DVD stored under our home TV.

"Joe Fox, that's his full name," Brandon said from the other end of the room. "Give me the quote out loud and let me see if it's in here."

Andi took the lead. "*Do you feel you've become the worst version of yourself? That a Pandora's Box of all the secret, hateful parts—*"

"Found it." All of us raced over to Brandon and looked over his shoulder. He set the iPad on the table and we stared at the quote, verbatim to what was in the email.

"Shit. It was right in front of us the whole time." I popped a knuckle.

"And his co-star? Meg Ryan." As soon as the words left Andi's mouth, we all traded purposeful stares.

We drifted around the room, eyeing the evidence, eventually finding our chairs.

"So, this means that the guy who sent the email is into romantic comedies. Is he just playing us?" Rolando questioned.

"We can't forget that my source at the café, Patricia, felt certain that Ariel's spelling of the name, F-O-X, was associated with her new male friend."

"The one she didn't get a good look at," Brandon reminded us, now back out of his chair and wearing a hole in the carpet. "What can we do with this new...what do we call it?"

"Data. It doesn't point us to a specific person...yet. But it's a damn good start." I turned to Andi. "Welcome to the team."

Chapter Forty-Three

A burst of cool air shot through the crack in the window, triggering an instant gush of water from his eyes, but it also sharpened his mind. He took in a deep breath and thought about the purpose of this jaunt. His pants swelled, and he began to envision a successful evening. He knew that was the key—envision success, and it will happen.

The man drove east on I-10 then exited at Highway 90, which turned into West Tennessee Street. He meandered southeast about six miles, right into the heart of North Tallahassee, home of the Florida State Seminoles. He found a lot near a two-story bookstore and parked his old pickup. He turned the rearview mirror downward, and eyed his complexion. He lightly touched both cheeks, then his chin, covered in dark-brown stubble. He opened a green knapsack and pulled out a pair of black-rimmed glasses—nerdy but chic at the same time. They fit his sculptured face perfectly—like everything else in his bag of tricks. He brushed his hair to the left side then paused, thinking he'd spotted a discolored root. It was night, so one hair wouldn't be noticed, certainly not by a college coed whose sole focus was to get laid. He brushed twice more and tossed it in the knapsack.

Using new shoe insertions the man stood about six one—he'd heard Tom Cruise used the same method. *Great minds think alike*, he thought. *What about insane minds?*

Standing next to his truck, he buttoned his gray vest, noting his bicep hugging his light-blue, button-up shirt. "Nice guns," he said to no one. He kissed both guns and threw a one-two punch into the air.

He adjusted his collar, pulled down his vest, and hit the sidewalk on Railroad Avenue. Confident and cool—that was his aura, that's what drew the looks and desires of women, at least the coeds who had a hint of intelligence. He just couldn't take the complete ditz—he'd rather screw a four-legged animal than be forced to have sex with a stupid bimbo. Then again, this excursion wasn't about sex. It hadn't been about sex in a long time.

South of Gaines and Bloxham, the man found a bar with a cool-green tone—in the lighting, the glasses, the walls, everywhere. A mysterious, haunting green. It gave him goose bumps.

The man sat at a corner table. "What are your drink specials tonight?" The brunette waitress wearing a green skirt gave him a quick, not-so-subtle once-over, then looked into his eyes—a respectful brown. He chuckled.

"I know just what you need." She lifted both eyebrows, her eyes staring blatantly at his crotch. She walked off, and he studied this prospect: about five-seven, toned legs, a thin waist, and a large bust escaping her Spandex top. He stopped at her neckline and inhaled a slow breath. The skin and slope were perfect, the size just right. But her hair was cut short—butch short—and brown with streaks of pink. That was a showstopper.

The waitress soon returned with a drink in hand. "Here you are. It's our own version of a screaming orgasm." She put a foot on his stool and winked at him suggestively. He shook his head. "What, I'm not good enough for you? Are you gay or something?"

"No, but my brother is."

She grabbed her tray and marched off.

"Hey, don't worry about her. She's got more moods than Cybil." A throaty voice approached from his right side.

"I just saw two of them. There are more?"

The voice turned out to be an attractive young lady, a blonde with beautiful skin and a hell of a neck. Then the man noticed her outfit. Green skirt with a Spandex top—another waitress.

"You work a shift with her and you'll lose count. You don't have enough fingers and toes." She giggled at her own joke.

Her laughter was infectious. Demi Moore—that was the voice. Sultry. The waitress had all the right tools to be a top-notch prospect. He decided to probe a bit more.

"Are you a Seminole?" He motioned his arm like a tomahawk, copying the tradition repeated by so many FSU fans.

"No, not this semester at least."

A dropout. Not good. He looked beyond her, scanning the bar for another specimen.

"Just saving a little more money to get my law degree. One more semester is all I need—then, of course, I have to take the bar."

His dark-brown eyes lit up.

"I'm really interested in law school. I'd love to hear more," he said.

She hesitated, likely wondering if she could trust this man who looked to be in his mid-to-upper twenties.

"I'm actually off the clock in fifteen minutes. Want to wait and we can share a drink?"

He took her hand and kissed the top of it. "It would be a pleasure..."

"Vanessa."

"Terry, Terry Thorne."

Vanessa floated away and reappeared a few minutes later. They ordered two more screaming orgasms. The moody waitress served them—with a scowl on her face.

"Better watch out, she might make a voodoo doll and do all sorts of things to you," he said with a wicked grin.

"Vanessa's voodoo doll. Kind of has a ring to it."

She grabbed her full-length, golden hair and attempted to put it up in a bun.

"Hope that doesn't ruin the look for you." She winked with confidence. Terry enjoyed her playfulness.

"You haven't told me your life story, Mr. Terry Thorne." She put a hand on his.

"Well, I live a pretty ordinary life in Miami. I'm a marine biologist," Terry said, slurping down the last of his drink.

"So, you play with Shamu the whale and Flipper the dolphin all day?" She nudged his arm then realized its girth. She tried to put her hand around even half his bicep.

"You're like the man of steel."

"Just parts of me."

Another wink. "I like that. Good one." She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. *She knows how to play the game. She's a keeper.*

"Last call for alcohol," a voice called out.

"What do you say we do a shot? I know it's a little immature, but you only live once." She cocked her head to the side.

Indeed. "I'm game. What's your weapon of choice?"

Five minutes later, they both slammed the miniature glasses of straight Tequila down to the table.

"Oooh, I haven't done that in a while." Vanessa wiped her lips.

The pink brunette came by and picked up the glasses. "Thank you," he said, but got no response.

"Terry Thorne thanks you." Vanessa snorted at the back of her colleague.

Her magnetic, throaty voice created a yearning from deep inside. Terry wondered if it could be butterflies.

A bald man wearing a nose ring shuffled a broom by their table.

"I think that might be our cue." Vanessa squeezed her shoulders, creating a mouthful of milky-white cleavage.

This girl was such a playful tease. He could play this game all night—up until a certain point.

Terry smacked his hands to his lap, indicating he was ready for the next step but not wanting to push the agenda.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

"I'm not sure we have a choice."

But Vanessa didn't budge. She pulled her smart phone out of her purse and scrolled through a feed of some kind, Facebook, Instagram, he couldn't be sure. Then he saw her thin thumbs clicking tiny letters. He stood to the side of her chair, obviously waiting for them to leave, but she continued on, seemingly in her own world. She mouthed a few words, then smiled. She was actually conversing with another person, virtually.

She'd either done a complete one-eighty on him, or she was purposely sending him a mixed signal.

Had Vanessa been able to use her own tricks to exchange who held the leash?

The law student pushed out her chair but held up a finger. Almost like herding cats, Vanessa tried to pull dangling locks of hair into her bun. She reached into her oversized bag and grabbed another brace. "This is the mother of all clips."

How could he have been so naïve? Despite her playful demeanor, Vanessa was a future lawyer, a person who wanted to feel in charge, and likely a master manipulator.

Terry could relinquish control, even outwardly show her he could be subservient. Vanessa, was, after all, a hot-blooded, young woman, and ultimately, she'd succumb to the same lustful desires as her collegiate peers. Rah, rah, sis boom bah!

He pulled out her chair and followed her toward the door. Her gait was confident, her flats tapping the stained concrete floor. She gave a quick nod to a couple of friends, but her chin remained at the proper authoritative angle.

Outside, they stood halfway facing the other, each waiting for the other to lead. Or perhaps to beg. Terry was okay with either. He clapped his hands and rubbed them together, while Vanessa crossed her arms, their chilled breaths curling into the starry sky.

"Well, I guess it's getting late." Terry looked at his watch and turned his head. "Can't miss my late-night SportsCenter."

The bait.

"What are you talking about?" Vanessa grabbed his left hand and yanked, and she strode down the sidewalk.

He finally caught up. "You're not a sports fan?"

"You can turn around and go get your jollies watching sports highlights, or you can hang out with me." Her eyes stared straight ahead.

He paused.

She turned and grabbed his shoulders. "Before you answer, just know that I give the best blow jobs in Florida. Best. Ever."

Terry watched her lips, her facial muscles, how they extended down her neck, ultimately landing at her bubbly chest. "I think that's called an irrefutable offer."

She let out that Demi Moore laugh, and Terry reciprocated. "Isn't that one of your law terms?" he said playfully. She grabbed his shirt and jerked him closer, planting a full-mouth kiss. "You're pretty fuckin' cute, you know?" She swiped his hair like he was a puppy.

"Talkin' dirty. I like it."

She popped both eyebrows. "Oh, we're just getting started."

They walked four blocks, hung a left, then three more blocks.

"Welcome to casa de Vanessa."

Lots of open space in the living room, Terry noticed.

"Why don't you run off to powder your nose and I'll, uh...get adjusted." She bit his earlobe and patted his ass. "Run along now."

Terry hopped down the dark hall, feeling the wall for an entrance to the bathroom. He shut the door, washed his hands, and looked in the mirror. Vanessa might be the most unique girl he'd ever met. Definitely worthy of his time. She had major-league balls. He hadn't been this stimulated since his journey through Ireland. Not enough time to relive his coming-out party.

He opened the door and saw a flash of light from the living room. He stepped slowly.

"Ah-hah, gotcha." Vanessa jumped from around the corner and cracked her black leather whip. Terry nearly swallowed his tongue.

"Surprised, I see. They all are." She raised her chin then did a quick pirouette.

Terry nearly laughed out loud, but his excited heart rate kept his focus intact. Vanessa was clad in leather—boots, garters, and garter belt. For once, his eyes didn't immediately pan to her neck. She was clean-shaven and had a ring inserted into her clitoris. He looked up and saw two larger, metal hoops piercing her nipples.

She cracked the whip. "You do want to be my bitch, don't you?"

"Vanessa, I'll be anything you like."

"Good. Call me Miss Vagina and put these on." She turned around. He paused, thinking he could easily take this opportunity to pull his scalpel from his back pocket and impose his will on her. But why end the night of his life early? He slipped on a bulging black jock strap and a black leather harness with metal studs crossing his chest.

She guided her sex slave over to the wall, and he inserted his hands into leather grips, then she slid a mask over his eyes.

"This won't hurt...too badly. He-he!" She cracked the whip, and this one connected to his upper thigh. He winced, but adrenaline quickly replaced the pain.

"What do you say?" she asked. He turned just a bit. She snapped the whip again, leaving a red welt on his left butt cheek. "What do you say, Terry Thorne?"

Her husky, sexy voice fit this show perfectly. "Thank you. Thank you. Miss Vagina."

Vanessa then unleashed a flurry of whip cracks. He jerked left and right, and felt certain blood was oozing from his damaged skin. Suddenly, she grabbed his crotch and rubbed hard and fast.

"Before you go too far...here, you put on the mask."

She squinted as he slid the black mask over her seductive eyes. He turned her around to face the wall, her hands now in the leather restraints. He cracked the whip a couple of times to keep her focused, in the moment.

"You know how much I appreciate everything about you, Vanessa?"

"Miss Vagina! Do you miss my vagina?" She laughed. "Whip me, Terry. I want blood, then I want your semen."

"Sorry, I can only give you one."

Her head twitched, but she said nothing. Even when her risk-compass fluttered, she didn't back down. Impressive...and sensual.

"I wish this could last forever." He took two steps forward and put his arm around her chest, accidentally tugging her nipple rings.

"Pull, Terry. Yank them off, if you want. I want blood!" She yelled so loudly her voice cracked.

"And you will have it."

He exhaled and slashed her neck, then ripped out her beautiful larynx.

He closed his eyes and bowed his head, honoring the greatest gift any girl had given him.

With Miss Vagina still dangling from the leather restraints, Terry hosed off in her bathroom and changed his clothes. He pulled out his phone and typed a text message:

Set it up in 2 days. Ready for final step.

Sent. He scrolled to another recent contact and typed a note:

Have 1 more stop...home soon:)

Sent.

Chapter Forty-Four

The white-painted stairs creaked with each plodding step, as Andi balanced two large coffees, a jelly donut, a bag of Funyuns, and a banana in a wobbly, cardboard tray. Coffee smoke bellowed through the small cup holes, and her breath emitted a rhythmic fog as early sunrays crept over the rooftop of the nearby house. Finally at the top of the fifteen steps, Andi had no option other than to use the toe of her Nike running shoe to tap the hollow door. It practically caved in.

The door slung open, and Satish clapped his hands.

"Where have you been all my life?"

"Running errands for you." Andi stepped through the doorway of the garage apartment situated just behind one of the nicest homes in the area, only two miles from the UNT campus.

Satish grabbed his donut and coffee, not noticing the resulting chain reaction from the lack of balance on the tray. Andi quickly snatched her coffee, just a tad sloshing out onto Satish's shag carpet, a mixture of teal and navy blue. She rubbed her sole on the stain, but she knew he'd never notice anyway in this dark, groovy abode.

Andi rubbed her swollen eyes. After a late night at the office working through connections in the series of murders, she fit in a bit of studying before sleeping all of three hours. Outside of a couple of late-night phone calls, Trevor had, unfortunately, slipped off her priority list for now. She felt a few butterflies dance when she thought about him—and it wasn't because he was doctor.

Satish had sent her a text last night saying new technical scripts he'd written on top of SpyAgent were beginning to pay dividends, and he believed they'd complete their scan and report by seven a.m. She looked at her digital watch: 7:04.

"What you got, Satish?"

He took a bite of his donut, and purple jelly squeezed between his lips. Andi pointed at his mouth.

"What?"

"You have a little..."

"Right." He looked around aimlessly for a napkin. Andi handed him one, and he caught jelly just before it dropped to his white Bruno Mars concert T-shirt.

"I have this kick-ass program that's able to scan the content in voicemail files. It should be finished in just a moment." He glanced at the left monitor. "While we wait, let me show you what we have thus far."

Not a huge coffee fan—especially when it was brewed in a gas station—Andi drank two large gulps of the warm brew, fully expecting a jump-start to her mental engine.

"Okay, check this out." Satish pointed to multiple windows open in the middle monitor. "We have a ton of invoices that show these crazy-ass prices couples are paying for these kids. Check this one here: a hundred twenty-five thousand. Then they add this

next number: seventy-five thousand. The line item says it's for birth mother counseling, but that seems crazy high. Total: two hundred Gs."

Andi nodded. "This is good, Satish. And there are others like this?"

"So far I've found at least seventy like this or worse, going back two years."

"What else?"

"Hold on." Satish tapped the keyboard then exhaled slowly. "For a moment there, I thought my voicemail scan had frozen up and I'd have to start over. But we're good. Should be done in five."

Andi gestured for the Indian braniac to continue, then took a bite from her almost brittle, green banana.

"I found this email from Dmitri Orlov, their general counsel, copying the CEO, which provides specific instructions on how to evade government agencies. He even says they purchased a list of social security numbers for new babies they're smuggling in from Russia."

"This makes me sick, but it's good stuff, Satish."

"That's not all. This dipshit Dmitri says this list of social security numbers are mainly from dead soldiers."

Andi put her hand to her face. "These people are scum, absolute bottom-of-the-barrel scum."

The student/reporter stood up and stretched, then took another bite of her banana.

"Your voicemail scan done yet?"

"One minute. Almost forgot, I found this icon that opens a secured database. Get this, old Florence actually has a spreadsheet on her computer that lists all of her user names and passwords. It's a treasure chest. It lists every kid who goes through their system. Most go through their Russian office in Moscow. The spreadsheet lists all of their information—date of birth, weight, any issues with the child, any issues with the mother. Then there is a new set of information once they get in the US." Satish sipped his coffee, eyes bugging out with excitement at the find. He added, "The term they use is 'cleansed.' Once a kid is 'cleansed,' then they're ready to be sold, or adopted legally."

"What are they doing to 'cleansed' these kids?"

"Everything. Anything. If it's minor, then it might say they saw a doctor about ear infections or put the baby on non-dairy diet. But they show a pattern of completely ignoring any issues with the birth mother that might affect the kid's long-term physical or mental health. Meth addict? They act like it never happened."

"Holy shit, Satish. This is the mother lode. We can get copies of all this, right?"

"I'm saving it to my hard drive, and I've opened a Dropbox so you can grab any file that I've copied down there."

"Damn. Thank you."

Satish beamed with pride. "Give me a minute."

He spun around in his chair and slipped on a headset. His recessed brown eyes didn't blink for sixty seconds, and his hands tap-danced across the keyboard and mouse. "There are more to review, but listen to this voicemail from the manager of the Russian Big Heart office."

"Hello Florence. Just wanted to personally thank you for recent guidance. We've been able to increase headcount twofold by hitting up halfway houses, drug-rehab centers, and even prostitutes on street. Typically has only taken a small payout or a small

baggie of drugs. What can you do, you know? Anyway, a new shipment of assets should arrive through the normal shipping channel at the Houston dock next week. One less nanny on this trip. She got upset about the treatment of the little brats, and she decided to quit. We couldn't let her speak to authorities, so, you know, we had to take care of some business, old Russian style. Talk to you soon. Thanks."

A plethora of emotions rushed through Andi. Her stomach twisted, thinking about how these executives knowingly abused kids, adults, everyone touching the system. A tear bubbled in the corner of her eye. Then her resolve kicked in, her inherited instinct that swore to take down this type of scum.

Andi grabbed Satish and hugged him through the back of the swivel chair. "You rock, Satish. You freakin' rock."

"Kiss on the cheek?" he asked coyly.

"Don't push it, Satish."

"Can't blame an Indian superhero." He popped a muscle pose. They both looked at his skinny arms and laughed at the same time.

"Jenny," Andi said suddenly, reaching for her phone. She punched in a text, asking Jenny to call as soon as she could.

While they waited, Andi called Brandon and reviewed the bounty of proof, and Satish continued reviewing and saving files that could be used for the stories.

"You're going to be famous, Satish." Andi clicked the phone off.

He jerked his head back. "Me? I'm just a humble computer programmer."

"You're a freakin' genius, who will likely help save lives."

"Well, it does come naturally." He fixed his shirt like it was a tuxedo.

"Humble you aren't." She grinned at her friend.

Andi went to her car and grabbed her computer bag and then began assembling the key pieces of the top story that would run in tomorrow's paper. After a couple of hours, she looked at her watch. She needed to let Jenny know—now was the time to walk.

Andi's stomach growled, which ignited a thought. She picked up her phone and called Trevor. He'd just completed a twenty-four-hour shift, but said he was now off for three days. She asked if he'd like to pick up some sub sandwiches and meet over at Satish's apartment. He sounded energized, which warmed Andi's heart. He also said he had some good news related to Jenny's future.

Trevor arrived with twelve-inch subs and chips, and Andi did the introduction.

"So this is the man whom you've been spending every waking moment with?" Trevor grinned and extended his hand.

"Satish is in the house." The computer whiz spun around and danced to some unknown tune, then finished with a fist bump.

"More Bruno Mars?" Andi asked.

"Something like that, whoop, whoop."

Trevor smirked at Andi, and their eyes stayed locked an extra few seconds.

The three amigos ate every last bite of the subs. Andi then realized she'd yet to hear from Jenny, voice or text.

"Shit. Do you think they know Jenny has been involved?" She looked at Satish. "It's after one o'clock. Lunch is probably over, don't you think? No communication."

"Let's check her computer." Satish crunched a chip and clicked the mouse. Inside the SpyAgent window in the right-side monitor, a blue screen appeared with a message on top: *Access has been shut off.*

"Shit."

"What is it, Satish?"

"Someone must have found the software. It had to be a top IT firm that specializes in spyware. No one else would have found it. Sorry." Satish dipped his head.

"Not your fault. But I'm really worried about Jenny."

"I'm sure she's okay and she'll call." Trevor put his arm around Andi and squeezed her toned shoulder. It felt comforting.

Andi's phone buzzed and she punched the speakerphone button.

"Jenny?"

"Oh my God, you've got to help me," she said, huffing in the phone, obviously on the move.

"Jenny, where are you?"

"I'm on the street, running to Nicholas' daycare. They found out, Andi, they found out."

Andi looked at Satish and Trevor.

"Look, Jenny, we've got everything. Satish found invoices, a database, emails, a voicemail. These assholes are going down."

Jenny ignored the good news. "They put me in a room in a chair and questioned me for two hours. Dmitri came in and started threatening me and my child, can you believe it?"

"Dear God, Jenny, I'm so sorry."

"Look out, sir, get out of my way," they heard Jenny say, her phone not near her mouth.

"Jenny?"

"I got up to walk out, and Dmitri grabbed me and started shaking me. The others pulled him off me." More heavy breaths. "I said I had to go to the bathroom. I picked up my purse and ran down the back stairs into the alley. I really think they might harm me."

"Jenny."

Loud breathing, nearby voices, and heels hitting concrete.

"Jenny?"

"I just got to my son's daycare." They heard deep, panting breaths.

Trevor nodded at Andi.

"Jenny, get your son, pack a quick bag for both of you, then go straight to Hobby Airport and take the next flight to Dallas Love Field."

"But where do I go? What do I do?" Jenny's voice pitched higher, near a panic level. They heard sniffles.

"Jenny, it's all going to be okay. Trevor and I will be there to pick you up."

"Who's Trevor?"

"He's my friend, just like Satish."

"I guess I can do that."

"Don't waste time, Jenny. Go straight to the airport and text me your flight number." The line went dead.

Chapter Forty-Five

A half-eaten, soggy meatball sub sat to the right of my keyboard, along with an open bag of sour cream and onion chips. I was either uninspired or my stomach was too gnarled to digest food.

I yawned, realizing my lack of sleep was catching up to me. That and a lack of intimacy with my lifelong partner. I'd come home late last night, then awoke and showered just as Marisa was rolling over. We exchanged a warm kiss, but it was more of a grandmother kiss. Marisa had been cordial, even loving at times, but over the last week, her mind seemed elsewhere. Aloof was another word that came to mind. Once we got past this story and life returned to normal, I knew that I owed her—us—a mini vacation to a warm, sandy beach with plenty of fruity drinks and no Wi-Fi connection.

I scratched my chin and felt stubble—I'd run out of the house without shaving—and shuffled folders looking for the emails from Yours Truly. I placed them in chronological order on my desk and read them. Then I read them again, looking for a pattern, something to jump out and tell me who wrote these emails, who killed these girls. Were the emails and the murders even connected? Even with the Joe Fox quote from *You've Got Mail*, what did it really get us? I took a deep breath, knowing it was a piece of the puzzle. I huffed, feeling as though a strange ticking clock was running in my mind, and the alarm was set to go off sporadically, whenever the killer or killers struck. Each death felt like a blow to my kidney. Was I worried about this network of lunatics somehow touching Marisa? Yes, but all the killings appeared to have been so random, so I knew, logically, there was little reason to be on high alert on the home front. I think the most pressing concern was our responsibility to the community. We'd been sitting on all of this information for weeks, and because of our partnership with law enforcement, we'd been unable to report a damn thing.

I glanced at the clock on my computer and realized I was ten minutes late to my own meeting. Holding folders and loose papers, a bottled water, and my open bag of smelly chips, I raced into the glass house. "Sorry guys." I started to close the door, but a shoe slipped in at the last second.

"It's me, sorry. I'm running even later." Andi waved a hand of relief. She quickly walked in and sat next to Stu, across from Rolando and Brandon, all of whom were either working email or a story.

I glanced around the room still lined with whiteboards full of notes, pictures, clippings, theories, and yes, the emails.

"Our goal today is to try to piece all of this together, based on what we've got so far. I know we've all been thinking it about since we broke off late last night. Any new thoughts, ideas, theories?"

Four blank faces looked at me then panned the room. Apparently, there had been no dream-induced discoveries.

"I know I'm saying the obvious here, but I'm getting concerned about not sharing any of this with the public." I held my arms up to the data points scattered around us.

"But if we do, we'll be cut off from the FBI. They'd probably say we were impeding their investigation. Could get ugly," Brandon said.

"That's our dilemma." I rolled my fingers on the table a few times.

Andi arched her neck and looked out into the newsroom.

"We keeping you from something?" That sounded harsher than I'd intended.

"Uh, no. Just checking to see if Trevor is still sitting at my desk."

"Trevor. New intern?"

"No, yes. Well, not an intern here. He works up at Denton County Regional Medical Center, and he's been helping me on the Big Heart story. Brandon's aware of the latest on all that." She nodded toward our editor.

"Andi gave me the scoop earlier this morning. Unbelievable shit. She's already started writing the story."

"Cool. I look forward to reading it."

My phone buzzed. It was Guidry. I gave a quick wink to Andi and opened the line.

"Ears burning?"

"Uh, if you're part of the FBI, your ears always burn. Love us, hate us, it really doesn't matter."

"Mind if I put you on speaker?"

"Sure. Did you guys ever sleep last night?"

"Enough. What good news can you share?" I twisted the cap off my water and took a swig.

"I do have some good news. But—"

"What now?" I rubbed my stiffening neck.

"We found another body, last night in Dallas."

Andi let out an audible gasp. The others just shook their heads.

"It's a girl, same basic MO. Young, pretty, rolled up in a rug, naked. Throat slashed, but a lot of other damage as well. This perp is starting to lose it—if it's one guy."

I pounded my fist on the table, surprising myself and everyone else in the room.

"What was that?"

"Jesus, Guidry. When are we ever going to get in front of this?" I released a forceful huff. "Forget it. I know you have no answers. Shit, we have no answers."

"Michael, I get it. It fuckin' sucks. But we have no options other than working the case, piecing together evidence, using our resources. The case *will* break. I just want it to happen before another one is killed. I know we all feel that way."

It felt like the pace of the killings had increased. "What's the good news?" I asked with little energy.

"Hold on, Carl's calling me on the other line."

I tried to regain my focus, realizing others were watching and reading my signals.

"Hey, Michael I'm back. Carl's listening in too."

"What's up?" Carl's baritone was a sharp contrast to the Guidry's Cajun twang.

"Guidry has good news, and we need it."

"Right. The FBI cyber unit has identified a tagged photo on Facebook that someone took in an Oxford bar called Proud Larry's." Guidry paused—was he combing his greasy, black hair? "In the background of the photo you can see a man talking to Whitney. It's

fuzzy, and it only partially shows his face. It was taken the last night anyone saw Whitney."

My heart felt like I'd just received a jolt from two electric paddles.

"The bartender who took the photo actually says he recalls overhearing the man introducing himself to Whitney. Said his name was Sam."

I nearly winced, realizing the name didn't match our Joe Fox in Baton Rouge.

"Here's the funny thing. The man in the photo worked at the bar briefly, and the name he put on the application was Joe Fox."

I took the opportunity to explain our breakthrough the previous night, connecting the Baton Rouge murder email to a quote from *You've Got Mail*, recited by the character Joe F-O-X.

Guidry was appreciative. "That definitely helps. I'll get this to our BSU right away. Maybe this will spark a broader connection."

"Does this add or take away from the multiple-killer theory?"

"Hard to say. The use of Joe Fox and Sam by the same person is a definite plus. We never got much of a description in Baton Rouge from the café barista. I'll send you the link to the Facebook photo, and you guys can mull it over.

"I think I hear Tucker yelling my name. By the way, I appreciate you guys playing ball with us, helping us out. You may not think it, but you *are* helping the community...just in a different way than you're used to."

Still, it didn't give me great confidence that we'd been a step ahead of the FBI.

Chapter Forty-Six

Along with the Facebook link, Guidry had sent us a mug shot of the latest victim in Dallas, an SMU graduate student named Jordan, and within minutes Brandon had developed a new section in our glass house dedicated to her brutal murder.

I spoke into the green lights on the Polycom. "Andi, can you hear us okay?" Andi had received a text, and she and her friend, Trevor, had jumped into her car to head down to Love Field.

"Hear you just fine."

"If you think this might distract you from driving, just drop off. We'll muddle along somehow." I knew we needed her input to make headway.

"Not a problem. Trevor is driving."

I raised an eyebrow, then got up and walked the room. I stopped in front of Whitney's mug shot.

"I know you can't see me, Andi, but I'm re-reading the email we received after Whitney's body was found in Oxford."

I heard papers flap.

"Yep, have it right here. Reading it again too."

I glanced around the table to see if I noticed a light above anyone's head.

"Rolando?"

He shook his head.

"Stu, what're you thinking?"

"I keep reading this email, things like, '*It was like coming home...only to no home I'd ever known...It was like...magic.*' I'm probably too old, take things too literally, but it seems like he either knows this person, or is familiar with her in some way."

I nodded, attempting to follow his logic, any logic to find the answer.

"It's gotta be in the name," Andi said through the Polycom.

"Which name? If this is the same guy, then he's using all sorts of names. Maybe they're all fake?"

"Brandon, can you search—?"

Brandon cut her off. "Andi, if you're wondering if I've taken this Oxford email and looked for a match in the quotes from Joe Fox in *You've Got Mail*, the answer is yes. And no...no match."

"Not exactly," Andi said. "Can you bring up all Meg Ryan movies and search for leading men characters who have a first name of Sam?"

"I'm on it."

I ate two leftover sour cream and onion chips and pondered how Andi—maybe girls in general—think through problems and come to conclusions or theories that we men would never have considered.

"Okay, I see two movies who have a character named Sam. *Addicted to Love...*"

We all looked at each other. Rolando shrugged his shoulders.

"Stars Matthew Broderick. Not sure you want me to give you the summary," Brandon said.

"No, that's okay."

"Second one is—"

Andi jumped in. "*Sleepless in Seattle*."

"If you already knew it then why didn't you just speak up?"

"I wasn't a hundred-percent certain, and I really didn't know how many Sams would be out there in her filmography."

"Filmography? Is that a word?" Stu asked.

"It is on this website. The Internet speaks the truth," Brandon joked.

"Always. What are the quotes for *Sleepless in Seattle*?"

"Checking." Brandon held the email in one hand and clicked his iPad with the other.

"Got it...in black and white."

"Cool. Nice work, Andi," I said. The connection felt like a giant leap for mankind, but it still didn't prove anything.

I summarized, "So, if we take this in chronological order, we've got a fake Joe Fox bartending in Oxford, then telling Whitney he's Sam. We're presuming it's Sam Baldwin from *Sleepless in Seattle* because of the quote we got once the body had been found." I ate another chip. "Then, we have a reference to F-O-X in Baton Rouge, then later get an email that connects a quote from Joe Fox in *You've Got Mail*."

"That sums it up," Brandon said.

"The more we learn, the more it sounds like none of this involves my editor," Rolando muttered under his breath, with a hint of uncertainty.

I nodded, but my mind was taking the next step. I asked Brandon to pull up the Facebook photo from Guidry.

"Make it full screen."

All of us in the room gathered around Brandon. "Hold on, Andi, let me forward you this link."

Guidry was right. The photo of the man in question was out of focus. And you could only see about two-thirds of him, and he was sitting down. It appeared he had on glasses of some kind, and his hair was on the light side and sticking up on top, likely from hair gel.

We needed confirmation one way or the other, and I wasn't going to travel six hours to Oxford or play games with the FBI. I pulled out my cell phone, searched for the mega bookstore in northeast Baton Rouge and tapped the phone-number link.

Fortunately, Patricia, my original source, answered the phone, and I gave her a brief update of where things stood in the investigation. I then texted her the Facebook link to the photo of Sam Baldwin...who was hopefully Joe Fox.

"So, what do you think, Patricia?" I put her on speakerphone, motioning to everyone in the room to zip it. "Uh, hmmm. I only saw the back of the Ariel's friend here in the cafe." You could hear the wheels turning. "My recollection is that Ariel's friend had dark-brown hair, and it wasn't spiky. He might have had a beard. I didn't get a full look, but I caught a quick glimpse of one side of his face, and I think I saw a brown beard."

I coiled my lips and exhaled. Was this another dead end? Or did a door just open, albeit one that created far more complexity? I started thinking through a theory. Maybe

one person was orchestrating everything—and flaunting it through his fantasy emails—but he had a network of killers carrying out the insidious acts.

Plausible? Yes. But what would the director of this sick play stand to gain?

Chapter Forty-Seven

"Check your text again. It looks we've gone through a full wave of passengers, and no sign of Jenny and Nicholas." Trevor dodged people getting off the bank of escalators, his bright-green eyes looking for a young, petite Asian woman with a five-year-old boy.

"Flight 46. Left Houston Hobby at five thirty p.m., scheduled to arrive at Love Field at six twenty-five p.m., landing at Gate 3." Andi eyed the horizontal flight status board mounted above the descending escalators. "There it is. On time. Landed fifteen minutes ago.

"Where could she have gone?"

Sleep deprivation had begun to invade Andi's body. A resonating ache permeated her core, and her eyelids felt like ten-pound weights. This tension wasn't helping, and she now wondered if Jenny and Nicholas had ever made it to their scheduled flight.

She'd been running nearly nonstop since the pickup had skidded into Miss Caroline's parking lot carrying the two kids who found Olivia's body early Monday morning. Working with Satish and Jenny had been tedious and—she hated to admit it—emotionally draining as well. Finding all of this evidence had been an enormous boon, but Jenny's uncertain status and the threats, even actions, from the Big Heart execs had created tremendous stress for Andi. She knew if anything happened to Jenny and her son, she'd never forgive herself.

"Jesus, Trevor, I'm scared. I got this bad feeling that Dmitri and...I don't know, his Russian mafia, hunted down Jenny and did something bad."

"Call her."

The number went straight to voicemail. Andi raised a hand to her head, her hair a scattered mess. A tear escaped the corner of her eye.

Still wearing blue scrubs from his twenty-four-hour shift, Trevor put an arm around Andi, and slowly she let her tired head feel the comfort of his chest.

"I know how tough this is on you. I hate seeing you like this." He kissed her forehead through her bangs.

She wrapped her arms around the young doctor and closed her eyes. The hospital smell still lingered on his scrubs, but a dash of his scent—some type of subtle cologne or just Trevor—infused her body.

"Let's go to the counter over here and ask the agent if she was on board or not," he said.

"Right. Makes sense." She shook her head, realizing her brain wasn't operating in full capacity right now.

Andi stopped and looked around. "Did you hear something?" Trevor's eyes looked toward the escalators.

"Andi, Andi!" A petite woman with black leggings, a white shirt, and a long, black blazer ran down the last few steps, dragging a black-headed boy behind her.

Andi turned and ran toward Jenny, her arms extended. They hugged each other like long-lost sisters. In some sense, they were.

"I thought something had happened," Andi said, holding Jenny's head in her hands.

"We missed our first flight. Nicholas here had to go potty." She smirked at her young son, who gave a slight nod to his mom. "They were able to move us to the six p.m. flight. Just got in a couple of minutes ago. Sorry I didn't text you. All the chaos started to upset Nicholas.

They hugged again, and then Andi introduced Trevor as the group ambled toward baggage claim.

"Nicholas, can you say hi to Trevor?" Jenny mimicked a little kid wave, hoping to encourage a response...any reaction from her autistic child. He didn't respond, and Jenny appeared to take in a tired breath.

Trevor leaned down and talked to Nicholas about all the bags that were streaming in on top of the motorized conveyer belts. Slowly, the two boys walked closer to the looping mechanism.

"Jenny, you've been through so much. I just can't thank you enough for everything you've done." Andi touched Jenny's arm and both ladies watched the boys interact.

"It had to be done. I couldn't live with myself. Those poor kids are being treated like pieces of meat, even worse. And all the parents, real or adopted, are getting screwed by everyone at Big Heart." Andi could see Jenny's emotions begin to bubble up.

Jenny pointed toward her one enormous suitcase popping through the flapping plastic, and the ladies wandered up to the carousel.

"There are big bags and small bags." Trevor altered his playful voice for each item, and Nicholas appeared interested and more at ease in this strange place. "There are blue bags and brown bags and even green bags. What color is mommy's bag?"

Nicholas ran five steps and put his hand out. "Red. This is Mommy's red bag." He patted it twice and smiled. Jenny picked up her son and kissed him on the cheek. He mostly ignored it, then pulled a Lego spaceship from his mother's purse and began making swooshing sounds while twirling around with his favorite toy.

The sliding door shut on Andi's Mystery Machine. They'd purchased a kid's seat at the airport and Trevor spent thirty minutes figuring out how to attach it. He only let out a few mumbled curse words during the process. They exited the garage and took a left onto Mockingbird.

"Well, I guess this is our new home, a new life," Jenny said staring out the window like a little kid herself. City lights blinked and jets rumbled low across the dark sky.

Andi nodded at Trevor, who was feeling more like an actual boyfriend, dare she say.

"Jenny, we know you're worried about piecing together a new life here, so I'd like to put your mind at ease." Andi saw Jenny's eyes get wide with anticipation.

"You have an interview set up for Monday to be a social worker up where I work, at Denton Regional Medical Center."

Jenny sat up and grabbed the headrest. "Really? Oh, Trevor, Andi, thank you. I hope I'm prepared."

"With your experience, I'm sure you'll be fine. I know the lady who heads up that department, and I have a feeling she's going to love you." Andi noticed Trevor's cheeky grin highlighting his two dimples...cute, bordering on sexy.

"By the way, I understand you're also a burgeoning artist?"

"Well, I've done a little here and there. Always wondered if I had something inside, you know?"

"My doctor friend at the hospital...her husband is a professor at UNT, and he said he can get you into the school with your previous art school credits, and you should be able to start taking part-time classes this summer."

Jenny made no audible reply. Tears streamed down her face. Andi handed her a tissue.

"Jenny, this is what you've wanted. After everything you've been through, you deserve this, for yourself as much as for Nicholas."

Jenny nodded and put a hand on both Andi's and Trevor's shoulders. "I've never had help like this." She giggled through tears. "One more thing, then I'll shut up," Trevor said. "Through my network of doctor contacts, I know someone who's been involved in research showing a possible connection between autism and Lyme disease."

Jenny twisted her head. "I think I read an article about this."

"Well, I know the doctor. And he's open to seeing pediatric patients. I told him about little Nicholas."

Jenny leaned back and wrapped her arms around her five-year-old treasure, who continued flying his spaceship like no one else was around.

Chapter Forty-Eight

Weary from a long road trip and then standing next to the outdoor grill for the last ninety minutes, Gerald decided to sit down in the ergonomic poolside recliner. If he was any more relaxed, he would fall asleep. Bullfrogs croaked and flying bugs caromed off the metal screen that enveloped the small outdoor pool. Gerald felt a bite on his arm, and he smacked the mosquito. He winced, aware of the noise it created and paused his breath, looking right toward the home's sliding glass door. Still no signs of life.

Gerald peered toward the nearby golf course, a couple of landscape lights illuminating a tee box perched next to a small pond. Fresh water, salt water... it mattered not for alligators in Naples. They'd even take a dip in your pool, if not for the man-made barricades. As a fellow Floridian, he'd heard dozens of stories of kids being plucked off their yard by the piercing jaws of one of the fiercest creatures that walked the earth. He wondered if one might be eyeing him right now.

The salty, humid air filled his lungs. Here it was almost midnight and he'd hardly budged, yet he oozed a light coat of perspiration. He hadn't brought the proper attire for this leg of the trip. He nudged his plaid shirt up his arms another couple of inches and thought about the purpose of this destination.

There are some things in life that you can't avoid...you must face them head-on, even if the task doesn't bring immediate gratification. Gerald huffed and knew this, indeed, was one of those tasks. Roy Dixon had served a purpose, a most important cog in his plan to trigger the transfer of power in his father's company. Gerald had hired the hijacker—a college dropout toiling away at some greasy fast-food joint, making just enough cash to feed his heroin binges. He threw enough money at the greedy little bastard to kill the pot-bellied, golden-cuffed man lounging in seat 5A: Gerald's dad. Not by knife or gun, but by shoving his ungrateful, fat ass out of the plane as it was descending into Miami. A two-thousand foot plunge...more than enough time for dear old dad to beg for forgiveness for all his life's sins, most importantly how he'd mistreated his second son—the physically-flawed, adopted son.

A gush of adrenaline raced through Gerald's bloodstream, and he felt goose bumps on his forearms.

Roy had waited to the right moment, then shot the drugged-out hijacker with one shot to the head. His sharp-shooting skills were only outmatched by his own lustful desires and his ability to justify his actions. Killing that little punk had vaulted Roy to hero status, not just from fellow passengers, but also management. But his sudden retirement and irresponsible spending habits had drawn second looks, then an internal investigation. This story would have no fairy tale ending.

Gerald touched his face, feeling undulations, a void of skin and meat in both cheeks and along his chin. He briefly closed his eyes, and powerful, sensual images flashed through his mind from his recent conquests.

He felt a vibration. An automated garage door rising. He twisted out of his chair and stood on the other side of the wall next to the sliding glass door. He heard drawers shut and a glass cling against a counter. Gerald picked up a pebble and tossed it at the steel grill on the other side of the patio. The outside light popped on; the door slid open. He saw a cowboy boot and starched, creased jeans, then the back of Roy Dixon.

"Hiya, Roy."

The former federal air marshal jerked his hand toward the spot where his pistol used to reside. Old habits die hard...but no harder than Roy would.

Gerald took a step forward, his face illuminated by the yellow light.

Roy tilted his head, his mouth wide open. "Who are you? What happened to you?"

Like so many others, Roy gazed nervously at something he'd never seen, never imagined. It wasn't the sunken face with a nub for a chin, although those features weren't exactly attractive, Gerald knew. The eyes stared at Roy. One eye so blue, it didn't look real. Not the kind of blue that anyone found handsome. This blue glowed like a mineral from another planet, another world. The pupil was tiny and the white background nearly nonexistent. The other eye was brown, with a wide rim of red. Gerald called it devil red.

"I'm here to complete our business transaction, Roy." Gerald tapped his instrument on his left hand and shook his head.

"What transaction?" Roy couldn't stop staring at Gerald's eyes, but he leaned back as if trying to escape their deathly glare.

"I think you know. You've been a bad boy, Roy. Very bad."

"What are you talking about? I'm a former federal air marshal, retired with honors."

"Oh, don't feed me that line of bullshit, Roy. I know who you are, what you've done. I paid you, dumbass." Gerald shook his head, annoyed at the man's attempt at fooling him. "The question is, do you want to die quickly, or take up a lot of my time?"

Roy raised both arms, his body rigid with unmitigated fear. He glanced around, obviously looking for a weapon, a way out. He had neither.

"Roy, I'm stronger than you, quicker than you, and smarter than you. But I've also got this mean streak that tends to rear its ugly head at the wrong time. Which one is it, Roy? Die quickly, or die slow and suffer?"

"I—" Roy touched his head.

"Roy, answer me." Gerald moved closer, his blade flashing off a neighbor's backyard spotlight.

"I can't—"

"Nothing I hate worse than a mumbler."

Gerald could see Roy eye the latched screen door ten feet away. So predictable. Roy jolted left, and Gerald simply stuck out his foot. The former federal agent wasn't as spry, and he stumbled like a drunken sailor, his forehead and face skidding to a stop on the brick poolside tumblers.

"That's all you got. Really? Not very impressive from the former air marshal of the year."

"You don't have to do this." Roy's voice cracked with emotion. He raised a shaky hand, and Gerald almost felt a tinge of sorrow for the old bastard.

"I think we need to look at this situation through a scientific lens. For every action, there is always an equal reaction. You know, like physics and shit."

Confusion overtook panic and dread on Roy's creased, tan face.

"You don't have a clue what I said, do you?"

Roy slowly shook his head, his eyes pasted to the scene before him.

Gerald belted out a huge laugh. "Here, let me help you." He methodically took Roy's hand. Roy slowly returned the grip and began to get up from the ground.

"You see, this has all been a misunderstanding," Roy said, just rising to his feet.

Using Roy's weight as leverage, Gerald swung his right arm with all his might and jabbed his scalpel into Roy's eye socket. Roy let out a blood-curdling scream.

"No, I don't see," Gerald said between his teeth. He then sliced downward, gashing Roy's face.

In five minutes flat, Gerald ripped Roy's entire body to shreds. Then he removed his own bloodstained clothes and jumped in the pool for a quick refresher.

Reinvigorated, Gerald stood naked next to a circle of blood, pool water dripping onto Roy's mutilated carcass.

Oh, how the mighty hero has fallen. But one will rise to the top.

Chapter Forty-Nine

"Any word from your long-lost brother?" Brandon chewed a bite of a breakfast sandwich, and crumbs spilled onto my desk.

"Half-brother."

"I'm not sure I'd claim that high of a percentage."

I wasn't surprised with Brandon's opinion of Jeremiah, especially since Brandon had led the interrogation during our last night together—a supposed going-away party.

"We haven't received a thank you card or towering gift basket from Harry & David," I said.

Brandon picked melted cheese off the wrapper. "Thank God that tool left town. I know the girls...well, Carrie was all enamored with his quiet personality and studly body, but he seemed off-kilter. No offense."

I held up my hands as a way to disassociate myself from Jeremiah, although I knew the bloodlines still existed.

"There was something that didn't click about that guy. He tried too hard to be pleasant...until he had that strange passive-aggressive departure from your house."

I thought more about the aftermath of Jeremiah's visit, and Marisa's odd detachment that had morphed into the slightest of wedges in our relationship. Nothing confrontational, just a little annoyance on the bottom of your foot that once you finally look at it turns out to be a black, fuzzy wart.

I popped a knuckle. "Key word there is departure. Gone. Behind us."

Brandon nodded. "Couldn't agree more. Life has returned to normal...if a relationship with Carrie can be normal. She's never boring, but she's certainly frisky."

"TMI, dude."

Brandon turned a shade of red then stuffed the rest of the biscuit in his mouth. "See you in ten for our brainstorming session."

I gestured then picked up today's edition of the *Times Herald*. I touched the newsprint, and my fingers turned black.

Headline: *Big Heart Steals Lives, Money*

Sub-header: *FBI Raids Offices, Execs Arrested for Russian Kid-Trafficking Operation*

I read the entire story, including the jump page. Must have been sixty inches or more. Our college intern had freakin' knocked it out of the park.

"Andi Osborne, what the hell have you done?" I slapped the paper on the glass house meeting room table.

Her brown eyes got wide, her face full of trepidation. "Uh, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to. What did I do exactly?"

"You nailed this story like a twenty-year pro. You just reset the standard around here. Congratulations." I walked around and extended a hand. She stood up, looked around, and shook it.

Brandon and Rolando whistled and clapped, and I even joined in with the applause.

"Nice job, Andi." Rolando shared a fist bump with her.

I just noticed we were minus our elder statesman. "Anyone seen Stu?"

Rolando lifted both arms, and Andi shook her head. Brandon had his head buried in his iPad.

"Earth to Brandon."

"Huh? Sorry. We just got another email."

"Yours Truly?"

Brandon nodded.

"No doubt an email related to the Dallas murder...Jordan." I ran my fingers through my hair. "Let's get Carl and Guidry on the phone right away. And print copies for those of us in the room and our evidence board."

Minutes later, the Polycom chimed, and two voices came alive.

"We've got to stop meeting like this," Carl said.

"You guys stop the killer, or killers as the case may be, and we'll stop calling," I said, then looked at Brandon. "Did you send it?"

"On the way."

Just then, Stu flung open the glass house door. "Sorry I'm late. Been in Denton. Share my info later." He sat down and grabbed a hard copy.

I took a deep breath. "Okay, this is my first time to read it. Here it goes."

To whom it may concern:

What I'm saying is—and this is not a come-on in any way, shape or form—is that men and women can't be friends because the sex part always gets in the way.

Yours Truly

Carl jumped in with his two-cent analysis. "So far, none of the ME reports show any semen or sexual assault. This email talks about how sex gets in the way. Gotta be a connection there."

I didn't want us spinning our wheels, so I tried to move it along, knowing we usually did our best work without the FBI looking over our shoulders.

"We'll put this on our list to evaluate, as I'm sure you'll do the same with the BSU." I miraculously contained my sarcasm.

"You know the process," Guidry said.

"We did make a connection on Sam/Joe in Oxford—not the Facebook photo, the email. Turns out that quote was from Sam Baldwin in *Sleepless in Seattle*," I said.

"Shit. Another Meg Ryan movie," Guidry said. "I'm sure our BSU was just a step away from that."

I was beginning to wonder if they could find their asses with both hands.

"That'll narrow their focus for this last one in Dallas," Guidry said.

"Just to be transparent, we spoke to Patricia, the Baton Rouge barista once more."

"Shit, Michael. Do you carry a badge I'm not aware of?" Carl inquired.

"Free world and all. Anyway, we had her look at the Facebook photo, hoping she'd see a resemblance to F-O-X. Even with a couple of leading questions, they sound like different people, hair color, glasses, facial hair, everything."

"We'll follow up."

Guidry sounded annoyed. So be it.

"Any other news you guys can share...will share?" I asked.

"Cyber team pinpointed exact location of the email sender. It's in the Pudong business district in Shanghai. A small office in the Jin Mao Tower, one of the tallest buildings in the world, I might add. Apparently, some of the world's most prominent hackers have worked out of this office. Global operation. We're working with Chinese authorities to raid the office, confiscate computers. We're hoping to get a list of their customers, find out who hired them."

I breathed a sigh of relief. The power and reach of the FBI had finally been felt. We hung up and tried to continue the momentum.

Stu cleared his throat. "Before we dig in for the day, let me share some information I just learned." He put on reading glasses and opened his notepad. "Olivia was a music grad student, and she was at this bar watching an Eagles cover band."

"Too bad it wasn't the real thing." Brandon looked at me, but I ignored him and nodded to Stu.

"I got a name and a description of a guy she was seen leaving with. The name was Sam."

Everyone looked up, and Andi flipped open her laptop and started clicking.

"His description is the bad news: clean-shaven, blond ponytail, black-rimmed glasses."

"Not a match to either guy," Rolando said, shaking his head.

"One step forward, at least one step back." I picked up the email Yours Truly had sent after Olivia's corpse had been found. I thought about the gory scene in the field, her bloated, discolored body resting at such an awkward angle, yet so still.

Andi put her finger to her screen and moved her lips.

"You got anything?"

"I automatically guessed Sam Baldwin again, but this quote—"

"The one where he talks about his love throbbing at a fevered cadence?" Brandon rolled his eyes.

"That's the one. It isn't from *Sleepless in Seattle*. Apparently, this is from that other Sam movie, *Addicted to Love*."

Brandon made the appropriate updates to Olivia's evidence board.

"We're on a roll now," Rolando said.

I got up and walked the room, studying each section, looking for a common thread, or, frankly, anything we hadn't considered.

"I'm not sure we can get much headway on this email from today, about men and women and sex. We have no name," Brandon said.

"Forget the name. Let's split up the Meg Ryan movies and start searching through quotes," Andi said.

It was cool to see her take the lead. They divided the flicks and each began searching on their respective laptops. I continued walking the whiteboards. I stopped in front of Whitney, the Ole Miss grad student murdered in Oxford. Brandon had printed off a copy of the Facebook photo of Sam/Joe. I held the copy of the photo, then stepped to my right and reviewed the physical description Stu had just given us. "Strange to look at a photo, knowing that person is likely a murderer, huh?" Brandon had come up beside me. He pulled up the same photo on his iPad.

I was too deep in thought to answer. Between the various witnesses' descriptions and the actual Facebook photo, the appearances of these men were different, certainly, but

there was something about the Facebook photo that looked strangely familiar. My mind battled with the descriptions written in words versus an actual photo, even one out of focus. Taking the photo off the wall, I tried to ignore the words, carrying the image to each murdered girl's mug shot, reviewing pertinent details.

"It's got to be here in front of us. We're holding countless emails, a lot of them quoting fictional characters from movies."

"But who said this movie crap, all of these emails, are actually telling us anything? Could be a complete farce, either to confuse us, take us in another direction—" Stu said.

"Or to just fuck with our minds." The room went silent, all heads turned to the youngest. "You know, playing games with us."

"At times it feels like we're being played." I tuned back to the boards, pacing. My mind was processing information over and over again, hoping a nugget would stick.

Now everyone was standing, Rolando carrying his laptop, others holding hard copies. The team looked like a theatre group deep in thought, trying to learn their lines for opening night.

"We might just be wasting our time. The FBI has analysts, computer programs, databases, so many resources. They've been working this case since...when?" Stu threw up his hands, disgust painting his face.

"The Federal Bureau of Incompetence?" Brandon said. "Screw them. They haven't found diddly shit."

"Can someone review the timeline with me? Being late to the party and all, it might help me visualize some things." Andi ran fingers through her hair.

Brandon took the honor as the rest of us listened. I actually zoned out for a minute then caught the end.

"Wait. Did you say Olivia's body was discovered on a Monday morning?"

"Uh, yeah. The previous Friday night we had that so-called going-away party for brother Jeremiah, then two days later you guys get a close-up of a corpse."

I turned to Andi, then I walked back to the whiteboards and pushed through the timeline in my head, studied the photo again.

"What're you thinking, boss?" Brandon asked.

"You have a brother?" Stu asked

I exhaled then popped a knuckle. "Brandon, look at this photo and try not to look at the face. I know this is strange, but try to imagine this Sam/Joe guy without a shirt."

The group broke out in laughter and razzed Brandon for a minute straight. Rolando's scrunched face was so red, I thought he might have a seizure.

Brandon knew I was serious. His brow furrowed, then he looked up at me and turned his head.

"You never answered my question. Who is this Jeremiah, your brother?" Stu asked.

I glanced at Brandon, who was still focusing on the photo. I turned to Stu. "He's my half-brother. It's complicated, maybe a little embarrassing. My mom had another baby while living with my aunt in Corpus and put him up for adoption. I never knew any of it. Then he just showed up on our doorstep thirteen days ago."

Stu nodded then looked down without saying a word.

I glanced back at Brandon, whose face contorted.

"Michael, are you sure you want to go there? I know he's kind of a prick, maybe a lying prick, but you think he's—"

"I have no idea, but he hit town, and two girls died. You and I know that he thinks he's a real player with women." Blood raced through my veins and cool sweat tickled the back of my heated neck.

The entire team stared at me, likely wondering what I was getting at. I swallowed and looked back at the photo.

"Jesus, Brandon. Look at these hands!" I smacked the picture. "I can't explain it. But I think this is Jeremiah."

"Holy mother of God," Rolando said.

Stu tossed his pen and put his hand to his face.

Andi stood up and eyed each of us. "Michael, if Jeremiah was adopted, we can learn more about him. We need to take a road trip to Denton. Now."

Chapter Fifty

"David, I want to see three options by Monday on how to retire this debt we've...uh, Clancy Construction has built up."

The seasoned CFO jotted notes in his leather portfolio.

"Ten percent cuts across all support departments, and don't let that weenie in HR talk you down. You're the CFO, and I expect you to protect the financial stability—growth—of this company like your life depended on it."

David lifted his head, his face stoic. He licked his lips and put pen back to paper.

Gerald gently squeezed the burgundy leather armrests on the biggest chair at Clancy Construction.

"Innovation, that's what it's all about. But to reinvent this company, it's going to take cash. I'm not going to rebuild Clancy Construction on debt. That's like a noose around our neck."

He chuckled at the irony of his recent road trip, then adjusted the lapel on his Armani Collezioni pindot suit jacket.

"Anything else on your mind on your first day?" David attempted a slight sarcastic grin, but it was lost in a sea of loose wrinkles.

Gerald withheld the impulse to touch his flawed complexion. That would be a sign of weakness. He glanced out the thick glass window from his fifth-floor office, white swells rippling across the blue Atlantic Ocean. He recalled the last eight hours—his first full day as CEO of Gerald Construction. Feeling like a Supreme Court justice who'd just been sworn in to lead an impoverished third-world nation into the twenty-first century, Gerald strode into the boardroom. Each of the nine members of the board, as well as their ass-kissing support staff, stood and applauded the anointed one who would rescue the wounded business—a hero's welcome. Gerald actually felt a tinge of emotion, not from their appreciation, but more of an internal admiration, a true sense of achievement for pulling off the greatest coup in modern business history.

After meeting with the head of the board's compensation committee to sign paperwork on his compensation package—seven hundred fifty thousand for base salary, performance-based bonus up to three hundred percent of his base salary, fifty thousand for clothing allowance, use of the corporate jet, a special assistant dedicated to managing his personal financial assets, and a hundred thousand for any personal parties thrown at his own residence—Gerald joined Ron Riffmeier in the executive dining room, and the two unlikely allies toasted the removal of Vincent as much as the arrival of the Clancy's youngest son.

"May the tide of fortune float us in the harbor of content." The rotund Weeble curled a crooked smile and raised his glass.

"Good one. May the most you wish for be the least you get." Gerald lifted his glass.

"Here, here."

The pair drank Camus Cuvee 3.128 Cognac. Gerald eyed the abrupt beveled edges on the unique crystal decanter, now almost two-thirds empty. His father, the late Stephen Clancy, only pulled out this liquor for the most special occasions. Fire burned within Gerald's belly, as he thought about his late father, who undoubtedly cried like a little baby just before being shoved out the door of the airborne jet. He tried to imagine the gelatinous splat his father's body made after his half-mile fall to Earth. *Serves him right*, Gerald thought, as air hissed through cracks in his teeth. Stephen had purposely left his adopted son out of his will, although they all knew Vincent had as much business knowledge and desire as a five-year-old blowing bubbles in the backyard.

"Hey, Gerald." David paused to make sure his boss's hazel eyes were focused. "Glad, actually, ecstatic you're on board. We haven't had leadership like this in a while. Since...you know."

Gerald nodded a solemn reply. "Life is too short to not remember the ones you love, which is why I had to get away and reflect on what is truly important."

"Indeed. We're on our way back. I'll start on these important changes, and I'll get with what's-her-name and put a meeting on your calendar for Monday morning."

David exited and Susan, his young, blond-haired assistant, walked in, adjusting her eyeglass frames. Her silky hair was pulled back in a refined ponytail, the neckline of her yellow button-down tastefully opened three buttons, a hint of cleavage poking through. She stood five-eight, not an ounce of fat on her lean body. And the neck was flawless.

Gerald could see that Susan, a former swimmer at the University of Miami, was eager to learn the business and move up the chain.

"Just providing a quick update. I noted six items from our quick walk around the HQ building earlier. We'll change the décor to a sleek, modern vibe, and I've asked the director of marketing to work on the new logo. Keywords: progressive, bleeding-edge, market-shifting."

Impressive. And her brain isn't bad either. He smirked.

A prurient, twisted yearning flickered to life.

Chapter Fifty-One

Two vehicles rocked to a stop just in front of the white, wooden garage that served as the anchor to the apartment for Andi's computer friend, Satish. Rolando sat in the passenger seat of my Accord, while Stu and Brandon had hitched a ride in Andi's Mystery Machine.

Sounding like a herd of horses, we clamored up the stairs, and I glanced over at the main house, wondering if the homeowners might think their tenant was throwing a college rave. A door to the second-story apartment flew open, smashing into wooden posts. The Indian young man, who wore a black, short-sleeve T-shirt with a green and gold dragon on the front, seemed oblivious.

"I've got three types of beer, a bottle of gin, and a bottle of a Bacardi 151." His long, bony fingers spread apart. "Who's up for a quick game of quarters?"

"Seriously, Satish?" Andi shook her head.

"Hey, I know we've got some business to complete, but it's Thursday night. It's the unofficial start to the weekend." His voice had a pleading tone, and he followed Andi into his apartment, ignoring the rest of us.

The large main room was dimly lit until a round disco ball came to life, rotating, flashing symmetrical shapes of light off the ceiling, walls, and carpeted floor.

"Let's break out the Bee Gees," Stu said, hands in pockets.

"Nice one." Satish turned and acknowledged the rest of the group. "Satish is in the houssssse." The pencil-thin collegiate bounced down the procession, fist-bumping each of us. He finally landed in Control Central—a high-back mesh chair facing a bank of monitors, an ergonomic keyboard, a wireless mouse, two laptops, and a plethora of white and gray cables attached to six tablet-like devices. A constellation of lights twinkled under the U-shaped desk.

Brandon's eyes lit up, as he scanned the mother lode of computer geekdom.

"Down, boy," I said.

Satish turned his chair my way. "You must be the boss, the big man."

"Michael." I extended my hand.

Satish smacked it and made a swooshing sound. I never saw it coming.

"Listen, Satish, let's cut all the boyish rituals," Andi said. "When we talked on the phone you said you had gold. Dish it up." She motioned with one hand to hurry up, the other hand planted firmly on her hip.

The playful grin vanished, and Satish swiveled around and rubbed his hands.

"We've lost all access through the SpyAgent software. You see?" Satish pointed at the middle and right monitors. "But that's expected."

"You have everything saved down to your hard drive?" Andi asked.

"No worries. Everything."

"Spy what?" I looked at Andi.

"Nothing. Satish...the gold?"

He clapped twice, almost like he was smacking his intellect into gear.

"If you recall, Andi, Florence Wilcox kept all user names and passwords in a spreadsheet, which I used to access the national adoption database."

All of us leaned closer. Satish could feel us around him, and he flicked his head left and right, although it didn't appear to rattle him.

"I accessed the database and found a Jeremiah Weldon from Greensboro, North Carolina." Satish looked back at me, and I nodded, my heart palpitating at a quicker pace.

"I then did some searching on this Jeremiah Weldon from Greensboro, North Carolina."

"And?"

"He's no longer alive. He died in a train crash eight years ago."

I looked down at shag carpeting, trying to process what he'd just said, and recalled Jeremiah telling us his parents had died in a train crash eight years ago.

"So, Michael's brother—" Stu started.

"Half-brother," I reminded everyone.

Stu continued, "Is dead? Then who's the guy who showed up at his house?"

"Still working it here." Satish motioned his arms like a movie director wanting to keep the scene rolling. "That's when my skills were put to the test." He stretched his fingers, creating a flutter of knuckle pops. "I could walk you through all the technical steps I took, but essentially I was able to view previously purged—deleted—records. I have this program I created..."

He paused as if he might receive an applause. He got none. "Three months ago, this record right here was deleted."

Satish enlarged the view.

"Gerald Clancy. Parents are Stephen and Barbara Clancy, formerly of Naples, Florida." Rolando read aloud.

"If you click through all the links, it shows that Jeremiah was 'transferred' to this agency in Naples, Florida."

I eyed the screen trying to decipher all the data, verbal and graphical.

"I'm not getting it. Why's that important?"

"He was transferred—"

"Probably sold," Andi interjected. "We found in our research that at times Big Heart acted more like a distributor to other agencies across the country."

"Right. Anyway, Big Heart in Houston was the original adoption agency."

My hands gripped the back of Satish's chair, my legs a little wobbly, knowing Houston was just a stone's throw away from Corpus Christi.

"This is something, but still a lot of questions," I said. "I'm not sure I can, or maybe I've put up a filter to block the logic, but can someone make sense of all this shit?"

"I think Jeremiah, or someone who knows him, hacked into the system and tried to make it seem like Gerald Clancy never existed. Then, he assumed the name of Jeremiah Weldon, and got away with it because he shared the original first name. With the real Jeremiah Weldon dead, unable to refute your brother Jeremiah's story, it was the perfect shell game." Satish nodded, his eyes squinting.

I felt a burning sensation inside my gut, rising into the back of my throat. "Any way we can validate all of this?"

"Typically, they put the birth mother data behind another firewall," Satish added.

"A what?" Stu asked.

"Using my superior skills, I was able to, uh, access the next level of the database."

My eyes squeezed shut, unsure if I wanted to hear the outcome of Satish's data mining. The mouse clicked three more times.

"Take a look for yourself."

I glared at the center monitor and read: Teresa Gilbert.

"No, Doyle," Andi attempted to correct Satish.

Shaking my head, I crossed my arms and rubbed my face.

"Gilbert was Mom's maiden name."

Chapter Fifty-Two

Standing on the planked landing just outside of Satish's apartment door, I inhaled the misty midnight air. Two coughs escaped, jarring my torso while I attempted to tap the button to dial Guidry's phone number. After four attempts, my forefinger finally hit its target.

Burning phlegm clung to the side of my throat, and my eyes watered like an onion was crammed up my nose. All of this because I thought I could turn back the clock and down a double shot of Bacardi 151. It was my own way of dealing with the shock of learning my own blood relative might have been involved in murder. Satish had offered and I didn't blink—I just drank like a college freshman.

On the fourth ring, I began to think Guidry had turned off his phone, at least the audible part, for the night and gone to bed.

A raspy voice finally answered. "Guidry here. What's up, Michael?" "Did I wake you up?"

"I wish. Sitting on my bed, pouring over all the data, or lack thereof. Tucker's been all over my ass. But enough of that...what's going on?"

An owl's throaty hoot interrupted my thoughts. I turned right—a camouflaged bird sat somewhere within a sprawling, leafless red oak.

"Michael, you there?"

"Uh, yeah." I wiped my eyes. "Listen, Guidry, I think I have something here, and it might be big."

"Big as in important information related to this...this freakin' case?" I heard papers snap.

"Yep." I paused, knowing that communicating this would feel like I'd helped slit those girls' throats.

"Jesus, Michael, don't be bashful. Every day that goes by is another day a girl could be brutally killed. It's got to stop."

"Almost two weeks ago, a man showed up at my home. My half-brother that I didn't know existed."

"Shit. That must have felt like a kick to the jewels."

"We saw him, Jeremiah, two or three times, but he and I never quite clicked. He was a hit with the ladies though...I think Marisa and Brandon's girlfriend, Carrie, were smitten with his sculpted body."

"Sibling rivalry?"

"Not really." I struggled with how to get to the point.

"Guidry, you know we've been invested in this case from day one. We've found witnesses, made connections to those emails from Yours Truly."

"I know, I know. A true partner with the FBI. And the press no less. Who woulda thunk it?" He chuckled.

"Guidry...shit." I choked on my words and pounded the railing.

"What?"

I let it go. "I think my half-brother, Jeremiah, is mixed up in all of this...these murders, somehow, some way."

The owl hooted twice more, but I heard nothing on the other end of the line.

"Guidry?"

"Sorry. Multitasking. Just got an update from the cyber unit. I'm reading it as we speak. Anyway, what gives you the impression your long-lost half-brother is involved in these murders?"

"A gut feel mostly, but also some information we just came across tonight. Let me give it to you quick and dirty. He arrived in town just before the two local murders in Denton and Dallas. On top of that, Jeremiah is a lady's man, but in the most subtle way, almost where they don't notice it—although Brandon and I did.

"Yeah..."

He didn't sound convinced. "I kept staring at the Oxford Facebook photo and then read all the descriptions we'd gathered. They didn't... they don't go together. But, if you don't look at the face, and think about the torso, his hands, there's a similarity with Jeremiah."

"Okay..."

Still not convinced. "Andi knows this brilliant computer programmer, Satish. He accessed the national adoption agency database. The person who visited my home was not who he said he was. Jeremiah Weldon was adopted by two people in North Carolina, but they all died in a train crash eight years ago."

"Hmm. I'm listening."

"Satish kept digging, beyond what a normal person can do." I coughed to release more phlegm. "He determined that three months ago someone deleted a record...the boy's name was Gerald Clancy. Again, Satish did his thing—"

"Is this kid a hacker?"

"He's...gifted."

"Yeah. Okay..."

"Gerald was adopted out of an agency in Naples, but we learned he was transferred or sold from Big Heart down in Houston, where his original first name was Jeremiah."

"That's the agency you guys, Andi, just exposed. An FBI team raided their offices yesterday, right? Assholes."

"The kid's birth mother was Teresa Gilbert. My mom used her maiden name."

Finally, it was all out. I leaned on the rickety, wooden railing.

More silence.

"You there?"

"Shit. Double shit!" Guidry screamed. "The note from the FBI cyber unit?"

"Yeah?"

"The Chinese computer hacker sent one final note to all of their customers just before officials raided the office. It was sent hastily, without all the encryption, and it didn't bounce off hundreds of servers worldwide. The note said all emails should be deleted and they should take the necessary precautions. One of the recipients was to an IP address in Miami, the Clancy Construction office building!"

"Good God." I closed my eyes. More evidence that pointed to Jeremiah...Gerald... my half-brother.

"Guidry, we still don't know what Jeremiah...Gerald has done."

"We'll figure it out on the way. He's involved in some way, and we don't have the luxury of waiting to figure it out. I have to make a call. I'm taking the FBI jet down to Miami first thing in the morning."

"I'm going with you."

"Michael, you've been a great help. But—"

"I'll write a scathing editorial tomorrow blaming the FBI for everything, and I'll put Tucker's mug right next to it. I'll make sure all of our partner papers carry it, and I'll ping CNN and Fox to see if they want me to jump on their news shows and discuss it."

"Damn, that came a little too easily."

"I'm serious. I want to be there. I've got to be there when you pick him up. I gotta look in my half-brother's eyes and see if he's really a cold-blooded killer."

The call ended, and I vomited over the side of the railing.

Chapter Fifty-Three

Spears of sunrays pierced early morning clouds and bounced off nearby buildings, as I looked east through the oval window of the FBI's quickest mode of transportation. According to an otherwise mute pilot, I was sitting on a Gulfstream V, the engine purring as they finished pre-flight checks on the tarmac at Love Field Airport. Guidry was roaming around outside, demonstrative arms moving this way and that, his slicked-back hair still a shell on top of his growing frame.

I pinched the corners of my eyes, hoping to infuse a second, possible third wave of adrenaline in my tired body. After my call with Guidry last night, I went through a late-night fast-food drive-through and downed a greasy cheeseburger and onion rings on my way home—just to put a topper on my college night out. Knowing I'd do nothing more than flip over a hundred times and keep Marisa from getting good sleep, I slipped into the bedroom and felt the side of her face. Her legs shuffled, and her shoulders bunched up. I kissed her cheek, then her forehead, and whispered where I was going, although I was unsure if that registered. I wrote her a note in the kitchen with a high-level summary of where I was headed, then I told her how much she meant to me, and once this was over we'd take a getaway trip. I finished with *I LOVE YOU! Yours Forever, Michael*

I sipped a bottled water and popped a knuckle, knowing my job—once again—was getting in the way of the most important relationship in my life. Marisa was more than supportive, but for her, for us, I'd need to reassess my approach to this part of my life once we arrested this killer—my half-brother—which could be in a matter of hours.

"Saddle up." Guidry said, entering the plane.

I nodded then sat quietly as the jet ascended above gray and white clouds and banked east, directly into the sun. I lowered the window shade, then stretched out my legs and crossed my arms. My eyelids grew heavy.

I awoke to a thick Cajun accent speaking in an animated tone.

"We're thirty minutes outside Miami." Guidry read his computer screen. "Need any coffee, anything to wake up? Hot, cold beverages are over there." He pointed but kept his eyes locked on the screen.

I went for the cold side and twisted the cap off a beverage with plenty of carbonation and caffeine—I was just the picture of health the last few days. I found a package of saltine crackers and scarfed down the carbs.

"Found another body overnight." Guidry glanced at me, his emotions in check, then back at his laptop. "Waitress from local bar in Tallahassee."

"Florida State."

"Yeah. This one was ugly, vile, from our reports. Seems that the girl, Vanessa, was into some type of S&M, and our killer went along with it, for a while anyway. Found her hanging by her wrists, a nipple ring yanked off her body, larynx cut out from her neck. Lots of blood. Good news is that they think they might have two types of blood—maybe a chance to get DNA on this bastard. If it's the same guy."

My gut twisted into a knot so tight it made me feel like I had a six-pack. Then I thought about the night I got home from work and Jeremiah, rather Gerald, put on the rippled muscle show for the girls. I really just thought he was a brainless cheeseball, all brawn and no brains. It seems likely I'd underestimated him. Then I wondered if who I met was actually the same person. So many names, different looks, I wasn't sure who we'd find in Miami.

"One more thing. Found a story online. Your little brother—"

"If you don't mind, stop referring to him as my little brother. If he had anything to do with this shit, that's the last thing I want to hear."

"Sure. Gerald was just named CEO of Clancy Construction. Two hundred million in revenue last year, fourth biggest homebuilder in the southeast." Guidry raised an eyebrow.

I shook my head, baffled that the person I met—the same guy who wanted nothing to do with an office—was named CEO of anything.

We landed at two thirty p.m. then met briefly with a team of FBI agents, all of whom had matching dark suits. I wanted to make a joke about Will Smith and *Men in Black*, but I thought better of it. Six, black SUVs tore out of the airport going east on Airport Expressway, no lights and wasting no time. We took I-95 south, passing a huge medical complex on the right. We exited at 2nd Street, then hooked a left onto Flagler and stopped in front of a glass building.

Guidry made me put on a Kevlar vest, and I instantly thought about Richard Castle, the sarcastic writer and part-time sleuth from TV. Guidry was no Beckett, that much was certain.

Guidry marched with more authority and purpose than I'd ever witnessed. I almost had to jog to keep up, adrenaline pumping energy into my body. The building seemed new, clean, very Miami-like. Lots of metal and blue. Badges flashed at every turn, and the procession of FBI agents didn't stop any longer than a few seconds at each checkpoint. We exited the fifth floor and saw an assistant running around her desk to get to us.

"I'm sorry, what I can do for you?" The attractive blonde adjusted her glasses.

Guidry ignored her and strode directly for the double doors down a hallway. Perspiration formed on my forehead, and I swallowed once, knowing we'd finally look into the eyes of the person associated with all those disturbing, perverted emails, very possibly the person who killed all of those girls. I nearly held my breath as Guidry opened the door, hand on his holster.

The office was enormous, and the views through its glass walls breathtaking. But it was empty.

"If you'd listen to me, Mr. Clancy is not in the office," the admin spat at us, hands on hips.

"Where is he?" Guidry said, while looking through items on Gerald's expansive desk.

"He left early. He had a fundraiser cocktail party to attend."

I caught a waft of a familiar scent, and I wondered if my nose had already made the connection to the Jeremiah at our house.

The blonde gave us the name of the hotel.

"Don't call him and tell him we're looking for him. Got it?" Guidry warned.

"What's wrong? Is Mr. Clancy in trouble?"

Guidry ignored her, but left two agents, a CSI team and cyber team to begin dismantling his office, starting with his computer.

On our way out, I spotted a framed picture—a person holding a drink next to a fat, balding man. The nameplate said CEO Gerald Clancy. I stared so intently I forgot to blink. The stature looked familiar, but the face was deformed or not developed all the way. I wasn't sure how to process it. The person wore an expensive suit and smiled, but I couldn't stop looking at the nonexistent chin and flawed cheekbones. That was Jeremiah...Gerald. The face of a perverted killer.

"Take that with us," Guidry ordered, pointing at the picture.

Five black SUVs pulled up to the Four Seasons Hotel. More orders were barked out. We found a marquee that listed a banquet room hosting a fundraiser for the Abused Children Foundation. I recalled the first three emails from Yours Truly, his stories of abuse as a foster child. Jeremiah...Gerald was an actual child at one point in time. Adults might have really hurt him—physically, his psyche. I considered how much that had influenced what he could have done these last few weeks.

Wide-eyed stares met us when we marched in. All agents had hands on their exposed guns in their holsters, and I heard a few gasps. I looked at each face to see if I recognized Gerald. Nothing. Guidry and team asked a lot of questions in a not-so-pleasant tone and had to threaten to arrest one couple who demanded the FBI leave the hotel. Four agents remained to continue the questioning. Guidry snapped his fingers and six agents and I followed him into the lobby. "I'm concerned he's on to us. Maybe he saw that last email from the Chinese hacker. I got his home address. Let's move."

I realized I didn't know Gerald any more than I knew Jeffrey Dahmer—but they both might be wired the same way. I'd heard the debate for years. Are serial killers born with a missing link, or are they a product of their environment?

We hauled ass north on Brickell, turned right, then a quick left on Biscayne. We took the elevator to the ninth floor of a building with condos priced at one million-plus, from what the sign in the lobby said. The mammoth knot in my stomach seemed like it was being pulled into my chest as Guidry knocked twice on the door and announced himself with the FBI.

"Do you hear someone screaming?" He looked at me, then at his fellow agents. "I thought so." Two agents appeared and, with two swings of a flat-edged, black steel pole, demolished the front door. We stepped in. Besides another amazing view and a few pieces of modern furniture and boxes, Gerald was nowhere to be found in the condo. Guidry called in a CSI team, who arrived in minutes.

"In here," a female agent called out.

I followed Guidry into a swanky bathroom. The counter was filled with face prosthetics and makeup. It looked like a movie set, a sci-fi movie set at that.

"Son of a bitch." Guidry picked up a piece of fleshy silicon rubber.

I spotted a plastic case with labels on it. Each of the labels had names of colors. I opened one and found a pair of contact lenses. .

I whispered, "The eyes. He must have been changing his eye color." The story grew more disturbing with each stop, each piece of news. Gerald was a conniving, cold-blooded killer. Then I thought about the photo, the expensive suit, his role as CEO. I wondered: *why?*

At this juncture, did it really matter?

A parade of agents and specialized FBI teams marched into the condo, carrying metal boxes and wearing rubber gloves. Dozens, if not hundreds, of pictures were taken. Evidence was bagged and labeled and carted away. They looked like a colony of ants, each performing their assigned task as quickly and efficiently as possible. I stood in the main area, as Guidry talked on his phone in the kitchen area. He hung up, took another call.

He jogged back into the living area, calling out names of his comrades. "Agents are following a red Ferrari with two men inside."

I panned the other faces. They looked serious, but confident, ready for any twist or turn. I wished I was as prepared.

"The car is registered to Gerald Clancy," Guidry said as we marched out of the condo.

We hit the road again, moving north on Biscayne, then we took MacArthur Causeway east across the ocean toward Miami Beach. Small islands dotted both sides of the roadway.

Guidry's radio crackled, and he exchanged status updates with his colleagues who had found the car in question. Then he glanced at me, while keeping one eye on the road. "Apparently, every time the agents catch up, the Ferrari pulls away. I think he's toying with them."

"Turning left on Collins. Suspect will not pull over. He just sped up and ran a light." A voice provided updates through the radio. I listened intently.

A minute later, our SUV screeched around the corner, heading north on Collins.

"We're not letting this sick fucker get away." Guidry slammed the steering wheel and gunned it.

"Just passed the museum. Suspect moving at accelerated pace," the voice said. "Suspect just turned left on to 21st Oh wait, now turning back south on Washington. He's hauling ass. Shit!"

I looked up and saw the sign for 17th Street pass over the hood. Guidry slammed his right foot and the SUV squealed and twisted until it faced the opposite direction. I smelled burning rubber, and Guidry laid some more and clipped the curb while turning west onto 17th. Within seconds, out of my peripheral vision, I spotted a red car approaching the intersection. Guidry looked right and didn't slow down. *He's going to freaking ram it!* I gripped the handle next to the window and tensed every muscle in my body.

Just before impact, Guidry hit the brakes, and the Ferrari swerved and skidded right, fishtailing into the pristine, green lawn surrounding the New World Symphony. Smoke and dust drifted around the scene, and agents jumped out with pistols aimed at the car.

"Get out with your hands in the air," a booming voice barked from my right.

The passenger door opened first, and a man who looked like a Latin model got out. The driver's door opened, and a man showed his hands then stood up. I stared intently, wondering what disguise Gerald had on this time. Agents rushed him and took him down to the roughed-up turf. I couldn't get a close look, but the pounding in my chest slowed. I knew the killing had finally ended.

A few minutes later, Guidry walked back to where I sat in the SUV, a perturbed look painted on his square head.

"That's not Gerald. It's his fuckin' brother Vincent."

My head started spinning, and I grabbed the dashboard. "What?"

"Apparently, Vincent had been the CEO, ever since his father died a few months ago. Something happened and Vincent was replaced by Gerald."

"Why is Vincent in Gerald's car?"

"The Ferrari is Gerald's new toy, and he let Vincent take it for the night. He was running from us because he and his boyfriend had been smoking a little weed."

Guidry mumbled something under his breath, possibly a string of Cajun curse words.

"What does this mean?"

"We have a killer on the run, that's what it means." Guidry kicked the side of the SUV.

All air was sucked out of my lungs. I felt certain we'd capture Gerald and put an end to this deadly charade.

"Where to now?"

"This guy's a freakin' chameleon. He could be working as a cashier at a Miami car wash, or he might be half a world away by now."

I exhaled and suddenly had a thought: did I fit into Gerard's master plan?

Chapter Fifty-Four

The freezer dropped ice, causing a slight palpitation in Gerald's regular heartbeat. He opened the freezer door and let dry air cool his face and chest, his purple, silk shirt draped open all the way down to the top of his six-pack. His five-hundred-dollar shoes tapped the kitchen tile, then he sauntered through the rest of the dark, empty home.

Gerald came upon a large bookcase. Rows and rows of hardbacks and paperbacks. He picked up one and ran his fingers across raised red lettering. The room smelled like a musty library. He moved further and touched the edge of a frame, a picture of an older man standing in snow with horses on either side. *Must be Michael's old man. Looks just like him.* Gerald squeezed the fabric on the chair he'd sat in just a week prior and recalled all the stories he'd consumed about his older sibling. Michael rescuing Marisa and the community from a group of corporate thieves. Michael uncovering a drug-smuggling ring. Michael the hero. Michael, Michael, Michael.

"Ahhhh!" Gerald screamed and dug his nails into his skin. He didn't stop until he felt puncture wounds and blood oozing onto his blemished face.

Gerald heard breath leave his nostrils, and his eyes narrowed. He searched for more evidence of a perfect life, with a perfect wife—salt to throw into his wounds. A spark to ignite fury—the kind of rage he'd felt only twice before. The first time came when he was just eighteen, and he'd snuck into the home of his former foster parents. He'd walked through the home, similar to this evening's patrol. He found pictures that showed a happy, well-adjusted family. He wasn't in them. He never existed to them, except when they made him do those awful things with the animals. And his foster mom...she'd tortured Gerald like a slave. He wasn't allowed to utter a word, unless he was spoken to. And she never shut the fuck up, always babbling to her fake friends; then when she'd see Gerald, she'd rip into him for just being a little boy, cursing his very existence. He hated her. He loathed the sound of her voice. Perhaps she was the seed that spurred him to be the man he now was.

Gerald licked his lips, tasting a hint of copper from the blood that had trickled into his mouth. He swallowed it. He recalled the grip he held with each end of the pliable wire, wrapping it around the neck of his foster dad. The wire ripped flesh, arteries. Gerald screamed and pulled until metal hit bone. His foster mom fainted. He sat on top of her and pummeled her with blow after blow after blow. He took a kitchen knife and cut her open like a deer, then stuffed her organs down her mouth and her husband's.

Gerald ran his fingers across his rippled muscles on his stomach, and his mind wandered to his journey through Ireland, a college trip that had redefined his purpose in life. *How many people can say they know who they are and what they're all about at the young age of twenty-one?* He'd finally acknowledged his desires and set course to express himself in a way that brought about the ultimate fulfillment. His fetish du jour was strawberry redheads with skin as white as linen tablecloths. But it was their perfect necks that aroused him, drove him to commit all of the acts that he considered intimacy. He

touched his face and knew the success of that trip was only made possible because of the knowledge he'd gained through his involvement in the theatre department at the University of Miami. Open-minded, smart as shit, a body like a pro athlete...he *was* quite the catch.

He spotted a folded *Times Herald* newspaper sitting on the coffee table and thought more about his latest excursion. A college road trip of the most luscious variety. Had he taken too many risks? He simply expressed himself, in the most personal ways. He couldn't extricate his urges any more than he could alter the path of his life when he was seven years old and bouncing around foster homes. He exhaled and realized fate had caught up to him, but it wasn't a complete surprise. He wouldn't be allowed to sit atop the Clancy Construction mountain, living the life of a filthy rich executive. Yet, he'd always learned to look at life as a glass half full. He'd made some modest advanced plans, and now he'd be able to be himself all the time without faking it for anyone. And with his skills and craftsmanship, he could be anyone he wanted, imposing his will on any girl he desired.

Gerald's head jerked left. He heard a car door shut, then heels clapping pavement. He moved into the kitchen, and causally leaned against the counter.

"Bye. Thanks for everything." Marisa closed the front door and turned the deadbolt, then walked into the kitchen and set down her bag.

"Please don't be alarmed, Marisa. It's Jeremiah." He wondered how much she'd learned from her idiot husband.

She jumped six inches and grabbed her chest. "Jesus. Jeremiah, what are you doing? Just standing in the dark?"

"I've been upset." He sniffled. "Please don't turn on the light. I don't want to be seen like this." Another sniffle, followed by a heaving breath.

"How did you get in here? Where did you come from?" She took a step closer.

He raised a hand to his eyes, wiping imaginary tears. "I think it all just hit me. How much I'd missed out by not growing up in a normal family. A brother to play ball with, my real mom to put me to bed at night, my dad to tell me stories. It's just all imploded. I have none of that, and I never will." He released a soft cry. "I've been driving for days, then something led me back here. No one was home, so I just came in the back door. It was open."

Marisa's head turned.

Did she believe him? It would be so much more fun if she did.

"Jeremiah, I don't know what to say." She took a step closer.

He knew the window behind him created a silhouette, outlining his V-shaped body.

"You just wouldn't believe the pain, the unbelievable torture I was put through," he said, as his head rocked from the muted sobs.

Not really thinking, but instead just reacting, Marisa approached Jeremiah one step at a time, her heart full of empathy. She slowly reached for his hidden face. He took her hand and moved it to his chest. Instinctively, she kneaded his bulging pecs. His hands touched her shoulders. Was he going to kiss her? She purposely didn't look up, but her hands couldn't stop. They traversed the outside of his torso then followed the trail of muscle down to his ripped stomach. She skimmed the bulges back and forth, her heart

starting to beat faster, her heaving chest now leaning against his. She inhaled strong aftershave, and her eyes rolled. She hadn't been with a man built like this in...ever.

For a brief moment, he actually considered the act of sex with this woman. His brother's wife. He outwardly shook his head, unsure about the origin of his thought. Did he lust after Marisa? She was sensually attractive, beautiful in a way that college girls couldn't replicate. Her confidence was natural, self-assured. Maybe this is what he'd been missing his entire adult life?

Gerald searched his soul for an authentic emotion, any inkling of kindness, caring for another human being, a lady. Nope, it simply didn't exist within him. He couldn't create a feeling from nothing. Yes, Marisa was stunning in every sense of the word. Her curly hair tickled his neck, and he became aroused. He quickly recalled why he'd made this trip, why he longed for girls like Marisa. Knowing she was Michael's wife might vault this moment to the top of his illustrious career.

Marisa squeezed her eyes, remembering what true love was all about. Michael meant everything to her, a best friend, a confidant, a partner in life that no one could match, and an amazing lover. Michael had been emotionally absent recently, but it was warranted. A murderer preyed on young girls. She jumped back two steps and flicked her hands, wishing she could take a shower, wash the thoughts away. She'd had way too much to drink on her girls' night out with Carrie. What was she thinking? She wanted to slap herself.

"Look, Jeremiah, I don't want you get the wrong impression here. I love Michael, and I'd never cheat on him. Ever. He's the best thing that's ever happened to me."

Jeremiah didn't respond, didn't move. Silence engulfed their space for seconds, but it felt like ten minutes. She questioned everything she'd just heard and felt. Finally, she walked to the side of the room. "I think it's best that you leave." She flipped on the light, and bile exploded into her mouth.

"*Tsk, tsk*, Marisa. We had such a moment going there, and you had to ruin it."

Marisa just stood there, her eyes stuck open, nasty chunks still clinging to her lips.

"Cat got your tongue?" A blue eye and a red eye glared at his next victim.

He removed the scalpel from his pocket and tapped his hand. Suddenly, she bolted from the room, moving a lot faster than he'd expected. He leaped over the counter and lunged for her heel, clipping her foot. She dropped like a rock, her chin popping off the tile. She moaned and held her bloody jaw. He gripped her ankle and slid her closer.

"Please don't do this, Jeremiah. You'll regret it. You're too good of a person." Her head turned, and tears bubbled in her recessed eyes. Her hands protected her private parts.

He was offended. "Do you even know who I am? I'm not going to rape you."

He leaned forward and gently felt her hair, then stroked her neck. He could see the wheels turning. Her eyes looked away, then back at him. Her head swiveled slowly back and forth.

"No, no, nooooo!" she cried out.

It meant nothing to him. Not a stitch of sympathy or regret.

Gerald grabbed her by the neck and stood her up, blood trickling off her bruised chin. He whipped her around and buried his face in her hair, taking in her unique scent, her body quivering like she was packed in ice. His heart raced with excitement, his primal urges on cruise control. He wrapped one arm around her chest. She tried to squirm loose, but it was futile. He rotated the gripped handle and moved his right arm in front of her neck.

Seconds before he struck, Marisa released his arm and relaxed. She could feel her heart beating against her chest, her breath slowing to a normal pace. She felt Michael's touch, and a flood of images darted through her mind. She wanted to hold on to each one like a precious jewel, but she couldn't stop the light-speed slide show documenting every expression of love they'd ever shared—the purest form of love anyone could imagine. She'd been lucky. Most people lived eighty or ninety years and never felt it for a day. She thanked God for Michael entering her life, and prayed that he would never forget what they shared together.

Marisa grasped the diamond around her ring finger. "I'll always love you, Michael." Then a flash of silver, and she fell asleep for the last time.

Chapter Fifty-Five

Unable to reach Marisa before Guidry and I boarded the FBI jet back to Dallas, I called Carl and asked if he'd make a swing past our home—for peace of mind, if nothing else. He grudgingly accepted.

Tires squeaked, and the nose of the FBI jet touched concrete in the softest landing I'd ever experienced. I hadn't been able to fall asleep on the way back. Something was chewing at my mind, and it likely started with Gerald's photo, then it segued into a plethora of data, mounting evidence that pointed at Gerald for the killing of at least six college girls. How many more were out there? Corpses rotting in a field...or some other horrific ritual.

"We've got a boatload of evidence, computers, his home, people who knew him...we will piece this together into a cohesive case." Guidry plodded down the last two steps from the jet.

"But will you guys find him?" I hated doubting Guidry, knew he was being torn apart by this case as much as I was, but so far, I'd not been impressed with the FBI's results.

I had called home twice with no pick-up; now I saw my phone light up with three voice mails and two text messages as I stood next to Guidry, my hair blowing from a stiff northerly wind.

"Eventually, we find everyone. He knows we're after him, so he might be out of the country by now. You guys going to break the story in tomorrow's paper?"

I didn't hear a word Guidry uttered.

"Michael, what's wrong?"

I lifted my head, unsure if words were leaving my mouth. "Carl called and texted me. He just says: *Get home quick. There's been a problem.*"

Guidry didn't respond. He just ran fifty yards to his SUV, and I was right on his heels. He flipped the gear into drive and shot out of the garage. We reached the Dallas North Tollway in five minutes; then my Cajun friend gunned it, climbing above ninety, his knuckles white, which likely matched my facial color. For the first time in my life, I tried not to think about the worst-case scenario and instead forced into my head thoughts of fun, loving times with Marisa. I hummed out loud to drown out the swell of doubt swirling in my gut.

The SUV leaned so hard I thought it might tip over as we turned right into our neighborhood. No more than forty degrees outside, sweat poured out of my pores, clinging to my shirt. Before our final turn left, flashing lights splashed across houses and spilled into the nighttime sky—red, blue, white, all in different cadences.

I spotted a fire truck first, parked in front of an ambulance and there were three cop cars and one unmarked car with a red flashing light spinning on the roof. Carl stood on the lawn, a phone to his face, which was blank. My chest pounded—I just wanted to see that Marisa was okay, breathing, smiling, and full of life.

Dread engulfed my cavity, but I blinked my eyes and gritted my teeth.

I jumped out of the SUV before Guidry had stopped the vehicle. Weaving through cars like I was running an obstacle course, I heard Carl call my name. I leaped onto the sidewalk, but I missed and fell face first onto the unforgiving concrete.

"Jesus, Michael. You okay?"

I felt Carl's grip on my shoulder, and I winced in pain. Both elbows and knees bled and my left shoulder felt dislocated. He continued talking, but I didn't hear it. I dragged myself up and ran past two more uniforms through the open front door. There was a crowd near the kitchen table.

"Marisa!"

Everyone stepped back, and I collapsed next to her.

She was wearing the green V-neck sweater that she looked so good in, and tight jeans. All of it was coated in her blood. A stiff hand clutched her ringed finger. I put my hand on hers, then dropped my head and cried.

I wiped my face, leaned over, and inhaled the last remaining coconut scent from her tousled, beautiful hair.

I could no longer ignore the worst moment in my life.

Chapter Fifty-Six

I asked Arthur to read the eulogy. My boss and good friend had a way with words that would accentuate the most endearing qualities that Marisa offered this world. I was numb through most of the service, although I broke down near the end of Arthur's touching tribute. I'm not sure I actually heard the words, I just felt the emotion and then the pain devoured me like a man-eating beast.

Teary-eyed half-smiles greeted me as I shuffled through the home I shared with Marisa. People held plates of food and drank punch and wine, a well-done event put on by Arthur and his wife Trudy. Marisa would have been proud. My shoulder was slapped about a hundred times—a form of condolence for people who couldn't find words to express their sorrow or shock at what happened, how it happened.

I didn't blame them. I couldn't find words either.

I took in a deep breath. My chest ached like I had permanent heartburn. Actually, it felt more like a rusted, metal pole had pierced my cavity and stuck all the way through my back. I couldn't breathe right, I couldn't eat, and I wanted no liquid.

I scratched my chin, hadn't shaved in forever. Why bother? I'd been sleeping the last seven nights with Marisa's robe wrapped around her pillow. I spent hours in bed, but real sleep was hard to come by.

Mired in a catatonic, depressed state of mind, I stared blankly at the throng of visitors wearing black. Suddenly, music shot from the speakers in the living room. Initially annoyed, I realized it was a nice change of pace for the morbid scene.

Pop appeared out of nowhere.

"Michael, I know how much you loved Marisa. Everyone knew. You couldn't hide it. She couldn't hide it." Pop rubbed away a tear and he grinned.

"Yeah." He got me to smile.

"Loss is hard. You don't want to live without her, I know."

"I'm not sure I can." I looked down, wondering if my heart had any desire to continue beating.

"You can. You will."

I raised my eyes, a bit taken aback by his directness.

"Shed your tears today, let them flow like a flooding river. Then, do what Marisa would want you to do. Live your life, and live it with no regrets."

I nodded and dabbed my swollen eyes with a tissue.

"Marisa is watching you. Don't ever forget...she will always be your angel."

I hugged Pop with every ounce of strength I had. Then I went into the bathroom and doused my face with water.

What would Marisa want? I knew...she'd want me to remember the good times, the joy and laughter, and yes the incredible connection we shared. Self-pity wasn't in her vocabulary, and I couldn't—wouldn't—let it eat me alive. *Get your shit together, Doyle.*

I opened the door and didn't just see faces. I saw loving, caring friends. I went up and gave them hugs, shared stories, and laughed. The whole vibe of the place had changed, thanks to Pop. I had a drink and loosened my tie. Everyone wanted to get in their silly stories about Marisa, how the two of us were so in love it nearly made them sick. I let the positive support soak into my skin.

Guidry and Carl arrived. I thanked both of them for all they'd done to help. "Vincent told us he suspects that Gerald was feeding him bad data so that he would get removed as CEO," Guidry said. "We found numerous text messages between Gerald and this board member, Ron Riffmeier—they'd been plotting the takeover."

"But Ron had nothing to do with these murders, right?" I asked.

"Amazingly, it appears to be a solo operation by Gerald, at least the serial killing."

"Am I missing something?"

"We've found a number of emails between Gerald and Roy Dixon, a federal air marshal, as well as with some punk who hijacked a plane recently. In piecing it together, we figured out that Gerald hired this Dylan kid to hijack the plane, throw Gerald's father, Stephen, out of the plane while still airborne, and then Dixon stepped up and shot Dylan."

"Unfuckingbelievable." Carl tipped back his glass.

"Gerald paid them both. Dixon got careless and started flaunting his money. Gerald killed him in his last stop before returning to Miami."

I shook my head, amazed at the nonstop brutality. The guy was a freakin' animal.

Brandon and Carrie came up, and we shared a few laughs, mostly at Carrie's expense, allowing me to put Guidry's update in the back of my mind. Rolando joined us, then Stu, Arthur, and Trudy. Finally, Andi, flanked by her new boyfriend, Trevor with the green eyes, slid in through the throng now surrounding me.

She whispered in my ear. "Marisa was the best."

"I know."

"I'm not sure you do. She was the kind of lady we all strive to be, but probably never will."

Her dark-brown eyes penetrated through all of my pain. We hugged, and I felt a hint of relief knowing someone else got it.

Hours passed and no one seemed fazed, the music only got louder. I meandered down to our bedroom and peered at pictures, bottles of perfume, even her clothes that I'd taken out. I knew I couldn't continue living in this house, with her stuff ready to uncork my tear box. I had no kids, and I felt little obligation to my current job—the one that only stole more moments with my Marisa.

I knew what I needed to do, and I wasn't going to wait until it was socially acceptable.

I pulled out two suitcases and packed everything I could fit, including just one picture of Marisa. I walked out into the living room.

"I'm leaving. I'm not sure when I'll be back...weeks, months, who knows?"

No one pushed back. They all hugged me more. I asked Arthur to take care of everything at the house, and I'd be in touch about selling it and moving my things into storage—if I decided to keep anything.

I walked outside and tossed my bags into the trunk, then slid off my tie and took off my coat. Pop came up for a last goodbye.

"Feel free to drop by the ranch sometime."

"Thanks, Pop."

"I'll always love you, Michael. Just remember—"

"I remember, Pop. Live my life and live it with no regrets." I tipped a pretend hat at him and hopped in the car. Nodding and smiling, he waved.

I coasted through the neighborhood then pulled up to the first four-way light—it was green—but I stopped anyway.

"Marisa's watching you. Which way now, Doyle?" I stared in each direction.

I followed my gut.

No regrets.

Acknowledgements

I wrote the first draft of *WICKED GREED* in twenty-eight days. Up to that point, it was the most fulfilling creative period of time in my life. Ever. I lived the story day and night, mining over how to mold certain characters, where to take them, when to hit the gas on the storyline and when to tap the brake.

When it ended, my body buzzed like a high-powered electrical current. I'd never wanted to share my creative work more than at that time. After finishing two more run-throughs, I sent it on to my editor, the talented Jan Fix. While I had a steady stream of confidence, anxiety huddled close by. Her feedback would either validate my continued hard work and evolution as a writer, or chop me off at the knees, reminding me I was still a literary neophyte.

The email arrived and I read the feedback. It floored me. The editing process ran its course and Jan's input certainly helped take it to the next level. But I knew from that moment on what I'd be doing the rest of my life.

Thank you to all the readers who take the time to read my work, to share the peaks and valleys of the storylines and characters I love, or love to hate.

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[For an excerpt](#) from the fourth novel in the Greed Series, GREED MANIFESTO, please see below.

Chapter One

Today

I'm conscious...I think.

A brisk, cutting wind slapped my left side, churning in my ear like I'd been engulfed by a giant wave. Thumping heartbeats hammered my chest cavity. Sticky eyes peeled apart, unsure what I'd see, where I was.

Shooting a glance left and right, I leaned against a wrought-iron railing, my back wedged against a massive stone building, my butt planted on a city sidewalk, legs splayed out like I'd been taking a nap.

I shuddered and felt a biting wind penetrate my core. I rubbed both arms. No coat, only a green, ribbed sweater. Then I felt the top where a thin T-shirt clung to my neck. I had on jeans, looked like designer, and some trendy brown shoes, a couple of minor scuffs.

I squeezed my eyes shut for a second and tried to recall how I got here. I couldn't focus, and I touched my chest. My heart felt like it had just been shot from a cannon, and quivers began to rock my core.

A throng of young people skipped my way, full of energy and enthusiasm, the opposite of my current state of mind. Arching a stiff neck with the support of an unsteady hand, I found a black sky. It was night, but a street light illuminated my space like it was two in the afternoon. Something wasn't right. Beyond the tremors, I hurt like I couldn't recall hurting before. I couldn't recall much of anything, actually.

Giggles, laughter, and flamboyant voices filled the air that still swirled in my left ear. A shaky fist rubbed blurred, watery eyes, then I zeroed in on the person closest to me—a young girl, maybe in her early twenties, bleached hair so blond it was almost white. She moved closer, her feminine stride confident, full of life as she told some animated story to her friends.

"It was like so...how should I say? Lame. After that, he just couldn't get it up." Screaming laughter followed. I tried to roll my eyes, but realized my head throbbed.

The girl's straight, blond hair fell down to her shoulder blades, the last three or four inches a rainbow of colors. Pink and purple, and I think I made out blue on one side. Pink-fingernailed hands gripped a waist-high jacket, which she constantly flapped open. Underneath was a purple half-shirt that exposed her flat stomach. She wore a gray

miniskirt with gray fishnet stockings and matching gray leather boots. Or was that faux leather?

The group moved closer. Not a single head turned my way. I must have been invisible. It seemed strange, sitting on a city street, observing people. The girl was only a few feet away. All I noticed was the hair. The platinum-blond base looked frayed, frizzy, almost lifeless.

I wondered if she ever noticed me, or cared.

They skipped away, and I realized I'd let their presence distract my thoughts, and the pain. Shit! I brought up a jittery hand and touched the back of my head. It felt matted, like I'd taken a shower and gone to sleep. Had I simply dosed off on a cold slab of concrete?

How the hell did I end up here? I looked around again and realized my surroundings were unlike any I'd ever seen. The streets had sloping, dramatic hills, although I couldn't see too far in the nighttime sky. I only leaned against the iron railing because of the severe angle of the hill—my entire balance was off-kilter.

My brain became more lucid, but I still couldn't get my bearings. What the fuck was going on? I felt dizzy, heard my stomach growl. For some reason, fluffy pancakes flashed in my mind. I craved pancakes, with melted butter, drowning in syrup.

I glanced away, finding a substantial crack in the sidewalk and began to pepper myself with more questions...*where am I...how did I hurt my head...why had I fallen asleep on a city sidewalk?* I couldn't answer a single one. I realized I'd stopped breathing, and I forced out a breath. A cloud of smoke brushed my hand and disappeared. *Keep breathing, everything is okay...*

What? I couldn't recall my name!

Now I wasn't sure if my shaking had more to do with my inability to decipher my surroundings than the teeth-chattering cold.

Another thought. I fought through the shakes and touched each pocket. I found an iPhone with a metal casing in my back pocket, pulled it out and tapped buttons to find my contacts. I thumbed through dozens of them, but nothing connected. An Arthur, a Brandon, a Carrie, a Marisa. No name looked familiar. Whose phone was this? I was getting fucking annoyed.

Intense pressure plowed through my veins, which sent a lightning strike of unbearable pain into my skull. I touched my head again, on top, and found a knot the size of an egg. I squeezed clumped hair. Dark burgundy smeared between my fingers. The smell of copper. *Is that blood?* I winced, struggling to recall...anything. I must have been in a fight, or just flat-out assaulted. It was all a fucking guess. I had no clue. Was anyone else hurt? Another waft of blood passed my nose, this wave combined with salt. Panic gripped my gut. As my breathing picked up and my pulse raced, a tingling sensation crawled up my spine. Attempting to keep it together, I swallowed hard and bit down on my lower lip.

A single thought consumed me—I'd literally lost my mind.

Chapter Two

One Month Ago

Stuffed into a body-molding silver dress on four-inch fuck-me pumps, a voluptuous waitress sauntered past my table, shot me a glance, and even gave me a quick wink.

"Too obvious," I said, then turned my head without acknowledging her overt flirtation. I jiggled ice against a crystal glass half-full with whiskey and Coke and took a sip, feeling eyes glaring at me from across the table.

"Seriously?" Marisa sat back in her chair, arms folded, her leg kicking like a Rockette. Her crazy chestnut hair, expertly highlighted with subtle blond streaks, was corralled into a large bun, a plethora of curls dangling around her face.

I peered into Marisa's honey-brown eyes, and my heart paused. Looking down at the plush carpet, I thought about why I was at the Fairmont Hotel, lounging in the piano bar late on a Friday night.

I licked my lips and took another fortifying swig of my drink, searching for the courage to continue. I raised my head and saw two girls walking directly at me, both wearing long, flowing gowns like they'd been performing in one of the banquet halls. They even wore silk gloves pulled up to their elbows. Their gait was so smooth it appeared they hovered over the salmon rug. The Alpha of the pair, a sultry-looking redhead, eyed me. I looked down, then shifted my eyes just enough to see if she was still staring my way.

They moved closer, and I saw a handkerchief flutter to the ground. Instinct took over. I picked it up and handed it to the redhead, who was only an inch shorter than me. Her face was so coated with makeup she looked like a clown, one that might make kids cry.

"I knew there were still a few gallant knights left on this planet." She closed her eyes and brought her hand to her forehead.

I just stood there and tried to muster some semblance of a conversation.

"Uh, yeah, I guess there are."

"Would you like to buy a lady a drink?"

The direct question caught me off guard. I wasn't ready to play this game, not this quickly. I think she sensed my hesitancy.

"Oh, I get it. You must hit from the other side, right?"

"I, uh...what?"

Before I could catch up with her quick assessment of my sexual persuasion, she and her follower had glided away.

"Gallant knight, my ass." I plopped down in my chair, and wished I was at home, vegin' in my sweats, tuned into a mindless ESPN event, one hand holding a beer, the other a remote.

"Michael, people aren't perfect. Everyone has flaws. But once you open up and get to know them, you accept their flaws, even love them for it." Marisa put an elbow on the table and raised an eyebrow, followed by a knowing grin.

My heart fluttered. "But no one has all of your qualities. You're the perfect combination of sexy, cute, compassionate, beautiful, open-minded, confident, witty. And did I say sexy?"

She giggled in her special way, her dimples lighting up the room. "You said sexy and beautiful. Kind of the same thing." Marisa winked, and I could feel the warmth of her love from the inside out. Her bronze skin reflected the soft lighting in the bar at one of the swankiest hotels in the city by the bay. I wanted to eat her up, to make love to the only woman I had ever loved—*could* ever love.

But I knew that would never happen again. My Marisa had passed away eighteen months ago at the hands of a conniving, murdering animal—my half-brother.

I guess she read my thoughts.

"Don't feel sad, Michael. We all have our time, and my time ended. It's so unpredictable, you know."

A lump formed in my throat as I ogled every inch of her, admitting to myself that I could see what no one else in the room could.

"Unpredictable, as in you being murdered by my brother?" My anger swelled like a torrent river.

"Life. None of us can ever determine how we go, or when we go. So you've got to make the most of it while you're here."

I drew in a deep breath. "But I've tried. I'm just not sure I can do this without you. I don't want to."

"Oh, Michael, you just turned thirty-seven, but you sound like you're three years old."

I chuckled so hard I rocked back in my seat. An older couple sitting two tables away turned my direction.

"I just can't look at another woman like I look at you."

"I would say I'm flattered, but it's been eighteen months. You've grieved far too long. We had a love no one can replicate. But I can't keep you hostage the rest of your life. That's not fair. I will always love you, Michael. And I know you will always love me. Open your heart, and you'll feel alive again. Pop said—"

"I know...live your life and live it with no regrets."

"It's time."

Suddenly, a splintering crash. I snapped my head left only to see a red-faced bartender with scrunched shoulders looking like he'd just peed his pants. He must have dropped one of their expensive bottles, maybe a Dom Perignon, given his stressed expression. The bar patrons offered him a light applause, and I turned back to Marisa to share a laugh.

She was no longer there. I bit the inside of my cheek and sipped my drink.

Off to the side, I spotted a youngish-looking woman in a sequined, slate blue dress moving toward the bar. I think she looked my way. Or did she just adjust her earring? She had that look. She was naturally pretty, with wavy, golden blond hair that hung just below her shoulders, and a flawless complexion. Jennifer Aniston, maybe ten years ago.

She seemed pleasant, approachable even. There was something there. Some substance, and a pretty face.

How should I introduce myself? I can't just walk up and say, "Hi, I'm Michael Doyle, what's your major? Or, what's your sign?" I literally had no clue how to approach another woman.

I closed my eyes and heard Marisa's voice: "She's not *another woman*. She's just a woman. It's okay. Let it go. Let me go."

I could just sit and wait for the place to clear out, and maybe when there are only two of us left listening to the piano, she might wander over and ask me if I'm free for coffee tomorrow.

Man, I was either desperate or clueless. *How do you expect to meet people, dumb-ass?*

I chuckled at myself and decided to observe a while longer. Surely, a woman with her confidence and beauty wasn't alone. Essentially, I gave myself a good excuse to do nothing. Wait for the inevitable reason to *not* act.

Ten minutes passed, but she only sat there—alone—and drank a glass of red wine, occasionally glancing at her cell phone. She was maybe thirty feet away, but I could see she had on very little makeup, certainly not like that redhead or the many waitresses patrolling the scene.

I tried not to gawk, but her simple look was radiant. Small ripples of muscle covered her shoulders. She crossed a leg; an open-toed, blue heel dangled off her smallish foot. She seemed playful. The blue dress wasn't form fitting, but I could tell she was petite, at least smaller than Marisa. *Dammit, stop comparing everyone you meet with Marisa!* I chided myself.

Meet? Who was I kidding? I was only a step above a peeping Tom right now. Actually, I could hear my buddies calling me a chicken shit, or worse.

"The Natural," my quick nickname for the cute blond sitting at the bar, toyed more with her phone, possibly reading text messages or posting this or that to some type of social media site. I was, after all, living in San Francisco, Silicon Valley a stone's throw away, the heartbeat of American innovation. Here, most people under the age of forty don't follow new trends, they establish them.

Fortunately, I'd been able to land a job at one of the newer high-tech startups funded by a couple of former executives at Google and three former NFL players. Our company was called Playa—as in the slang term for "player."

A handful of former Stanford graduate students had been able to take old film footage, digitize it, and then give users—rather "playas"—the ability to manipulate any player on the field, call a new play, even change the outcome of a play. Essentially, it allowed for lazy humans sitting in their living room to play puppeteer in a game setting with real humans, not some cartoonish figures. Our latest innovation actually placed a camera on the helmet of the real-life quarterback, allowing the playa to feel like they were dropping back for a pass, scrambling for their lives, and over the outstretched arms of a six-five, three-hundred-pound defensive end, connecting with a receiver in the corner of the end zone to win the 1983 NFC Championship game.

We—actually the real technology experts in the company—had truly blurred the lines of make-believe games and reality, at least compared to games played in the past.

We'd formed a partnership with the NFL and had visions of expanding our technology into the NBA, MLB, and even FIFA, the international governing body of soccer.

Life on the West Coast had grown on me, a far different day-to-day existence than my previous life back in Franklin, Texas. Then again, life back in Franklin was all about my partnership with my lifelong partner, Marisa.

From the moment I'd rolled out of the driveway following Marisa's funeral, I'd only had limited interactions with friends from my former adopted hometown. I traded a few phone calls with Arthur—just enough for him to sell my house and give away the furnishings. Brandon and I exchanged a few text messages, discussing the splashy headlines he'd written for a few salacious stories published in the *Times Herald*—where I formerly held the associate publisher position.

A small piece of me missed the hustle and bustle of the newsroom, and the hunt for the truth. But when I dug deeper into my professional motivations and desires, the memories only uprooted sadness and guilt that I'd allowed my job to interfere in my relationship with Marisa. Sometimes, I could even make the leap that I was the reason she'd been murdered. In our "talks" since her death, she tried to convince me differently—both when I was inebriated and completely sober—in a setting much like tonight. She always had a way of calming my nerves, releasing me from a guilt trip, boosting my confidence.

Damn, she was the absolute best.

I had to move beyond this mental or emotional barrier, to figure out a way to live my life with no regrets. While I'd been mildly successful in carving out a new routine in this foreign world, I knew I had only a single toe in the frigid Pacific Ocean. I had yet to go all in—in my new job, even with my new work buddies. The lady department was a complete disaster, and I did nothing about it. Whispers from my guardian angel reminded me that I couldn't sit on the sidelines for the next fifty years.

Remnants of whiskey and melted ice swirled in my glass, and I wondered if I'd seen Marisa, spoken to Marisa, for the last time tonight. Was I prepared to leap headfirst into chilly, turbulent waters, a vast sea of uncertainty, to find another mate? I wasn't sure if I deserved happiness, at least not in the category of relationships. *Shit, there I go again.*

The same busty waitress dropped off a bowl of mixed nuts, but this time she made no eye contact. I ordered another drink and popped a couple of cashews in my mouth.

Without warning, screams rippled through the hotel, bouncing off scenic ceilings, massive columns, and enormous tiled floors. I glanced all around me and saw nothing, then jumped up to look beyond the bar. Heads swiveled, everyone searching for the source of the medical emergency or drunken fight in progress. A nearby agonizing groan jolted my senses, and I swung back to see a man in a white tuxedo shirt lunging, or falling over, the decorative railing next to my table—his eyelids flickering like a candle about to be extinguished.

I jumped back a couple of steps, and he crashed chest-first into the table, sending nuts, glass, a candle, a drink menu sailing. The man slid right and face-planted on the floor next to me. The table teetered for just a second, then slammed onto the hairy man, the stone edge crunching his head.

More screams, high-pitched and otherwise.

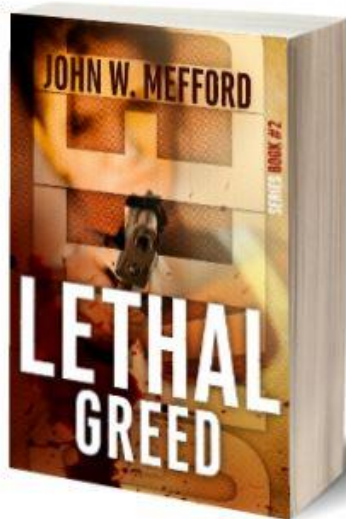
"Holy shit!" I yelled.

It wasn't the blood trickling down the side of his temple that created the stir. Nor was it his nearly unconscious state—his arms twitched slightly.

We were all frozen, staring at an ax buried between the man's shoulder blades.

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